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8 startups strive to provide quality cancer care in India

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With a predicted 12 per cent rise in the number of cancer cases in India by 2025, the innovation of new technologies and services decided to the care of cancer patients is crucial. By incorporating the latest scientific knowledge and a more holistic approach to cancer care, these cancer start-ups are serving to improve the quality of life for all cancer patients in the years to come.

Carer:

A first-hand experience of the difficulties cancer bring's one family and the loss of her mother to this fatal disease led Samara Mahindra to establish Carer in 2018. Based in Bengaluru, this start-up focuses on improving the quality of life of each cancer patient in the comfort of their own homes. The founding philosophy stems from the lack of importance given to a patient's lifestyle, nutrition, level of activity and emotional well-being while undergoing harsh treatment. Thus, it strives to provide the highest level of support and therapy to patients both during and after treatment to aid recovery. A great advantage in their therapy lies in the fact that it can be customised to each patient's diagnosis, past health issues and preferred lifestyle, making it more sustainable in the long run. This is done through their three pronged focus which includes a nutrition protocol, a movement and meditation protocol and mental well-being protocol that educates and inspires patients as well as their caretakers to make impactful changes in their lives for more effective healing.

4baseCare:

Based in Bengaluru, this company was started in 2018 by scientists Hitesh Goswami and Kshitij Rishi, spurred by their common passion for genomics. By studying the genes in one's body, the technology provided by 4baseCare allows treatment to be developed into one which is more specific, thus allowing it to be completely customised for each individual. While initiating this technology, the founders uncovered the lack of representation of Asian populations in genomics data from existing databases. To overcome this setback, they tied up with various hospitals to create a new manner of approaching cancer treatment. The tests provided by this start-up aim to improve accuracy in treatments at a lower cost by supplying gene based tests that can be performed at one fourth the normal rate of Rs 1.5 to 2.5 lakh. Helped greatly by the funding from Illumina, based in San Diego, 4baseCare allows patients to receive a more comprehensive treatment due to their online platform connecting them to a number of reputable oncologists, nutritionists, psychologists and more. Thus through the common theme of genomics, this company has intertwined numerous disciplines of science to maximise patient care.

Dignite:

Founded on the principles of dignity and 'igniting a passion for life', Dignite, headed by Raghuveer Surupa, aims to create a novel method of easing cancer patients into their treatments. Started in Mumbai as a platform for e-commerce, firstly, it provides these patients with special products which include a cancer care package. The products in this package are tailored to ensuring a better transition into a life of treatments and medical visits. For example, many times, chemotherapy causes a bitter aftertaste that is extremely unpleasant. Hence, Dignite created a package for oral care which consists of toothpaste, mouthwashes, ginger gum etc. To set itself apart from the numerous companies already established in the market, it also has 'Cancer Talks with Dignite'. In these videos, the founder interviews and has conversations with cancer survivors, authors of books on cancer, doctors and caregivers of cancer patients. Accompanied with the blog section as well, this platform creates awareness in the minds of the patients and their families, making this journey less daunting. Thus Dignite is an all in one platform, catering to each and every need of a cancer patient, be it more information or even organic oils and shawls to combat hair loss due to chemotherapy.

Hospido:

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic deterring patients from visiting hospitals and receiving the appropriate care in May 2020, Hospido was born in Gurugram. With that came the innovation of the Cancer Dost, an AI chatbot. The founder, Karan Chopra, saw it as a method of making care more accessible. To combat the lack of oncologists in many parts of India, the chatbot will provide information regarding treatments and the contact information of numerous doctors to ensure that each one is given an equal opportunity to receive treatment. To spread its use, Hospido also made this technology free of cost. Apart from AI technology, this company also focuses on training nurses with the appropriate tools to provide care at home.

Chemotherapy centres were also started in many metropolitan cities such as Amritsar, Agra, Gwalior, Kanpur and Jammu as well as reached out to doctors to teach those in smaller cities the correct procedure. This would prevent cancer patients from stopping treatment due to their inability to travel to bigger cities during lockdown. Moreover, by employing those who lost their jobs during the pandemic, Hospido has proved to improve the economic and health care status of multiple citizens in India.

Onward Assist:

Dinesh Koka, founder of Onward Assist, based on the belief that despite technological advancements of cancer care in India, the large quantity of patients posed a bigger obstacle to efficient treatment. Thus this analytics platform based in Hyderabad from 2018 works to help oncologists from across the country interpret large quantities of data and provide the most accurate diagnosis. The technology is able to examine any biological tests carried out on patients, recognise certain biomarkers for a large number of samples, most suited to the Indian population. In collaboration with Yale University, this company also worked to improve artificial intelligence technology and its role in creating models that could better analyse the data given. Another important aspect of their contribution to cancer care is their role in the development of imaging methods. A computer algorithm invented by them allows scientists and doctors to identify the exact ‘spatial position’ of the tumour. By comparing these scans over a period of time, one can have a better understanding of its growth or reduction in size after a particular course of treatment is administered. Thus it prevents unnecessary surgeries and medical procedures in these fatigued patients.

Sashakt - The Ovarian Cancer Foundation

With ovarian cancer being the third most prevalent cancer in females, Megha Anju found it pertinent to raise awareness about this potentially fatal disease. In 2018, Sashakt - The Ovarian Cancer Foundation was founded in New Delhi with the intention of providing each woman with the correct information to fight against this disease and to detect it at an early stage. Basic knowledge such as the common symptoms of ovarian cancer could greatly reduce the discomfort a patient feels as one would be equipped with the correct tools to ease them. To raise awareness, this non-profit organisation holds workshops in both cities and villages while explaining the potential factors, how to prevent its development in case of past family history, and a question-answer session with trained professionals. For diagnosed patients, support groups such as the Sashakt Hope Meet are organised to help instil a feeling of solidarity between past and present cancer patients. Finally, the use of social media to spread information regarding their own mentoring programmes, general information and specific tips for caregivers allows them to widen their reach, thus aiming to help each and every Indian women struggling with ovarian cancer.

Mammomobile:

Surviving breast cancer propelled Shadi Ganz, a philanthropist and artist, to start the Mammomobile as a means of improving the efficacy of testing for cervical and breast cancer in Tamil Nadu. Founded using her own Rs 2 core, Shadi Ganz remained unfettered when multiple banks and companies rejected her application for funding. Still, this bus service was created and made to travel around 92 villages in Tamil Nadu in 2018, conducting mammograms to detect breast cancer. An estimated number of 500 mammograms are taken each month. Designed in an effective manner, these buses have separate rooms for the testing and for procuring the results. Apart from this, a separate room is allocated for the testing of cervical cancer done by doctors at The Cancer Institute in Chennai. Since the unsteady road conditions prove to be a hazard for new equipment, this service relies on analogue machines in which results are recorded on CDs and then sent to hospitals via courier. This start-up aims to reduce breast cancer and treat it at an earlier stage by providing the women with results immediately after the test.

Oncophenomics:

The detection of cancer in an individual comes with great emotional and physical pain. To reduce these painful biopsies, Shibi Chakravarthy started Oncophenomics in Hyderabad as a simple and more comfortable way to diagnose cancers. It is the first company in India in 2019 to perform liquid biopsy tests by taking urine and blood samples from patients. Starting with tests for cervical, lung, breast ovarian and prostate cancer, it eliminates the need for surgical biopsies that could lead to extended periods of recovery after surgery. By reducing the costs of these tests from around Rs 1.5 - 5 lakhs to Rs 25,000, it allows a greater number of people to benefit from it and opt for a newer technology based on computer vision. Hence these patients are able to receive the most personalised treatment that focuses on using the immune system to find a drug suitable for them.

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