

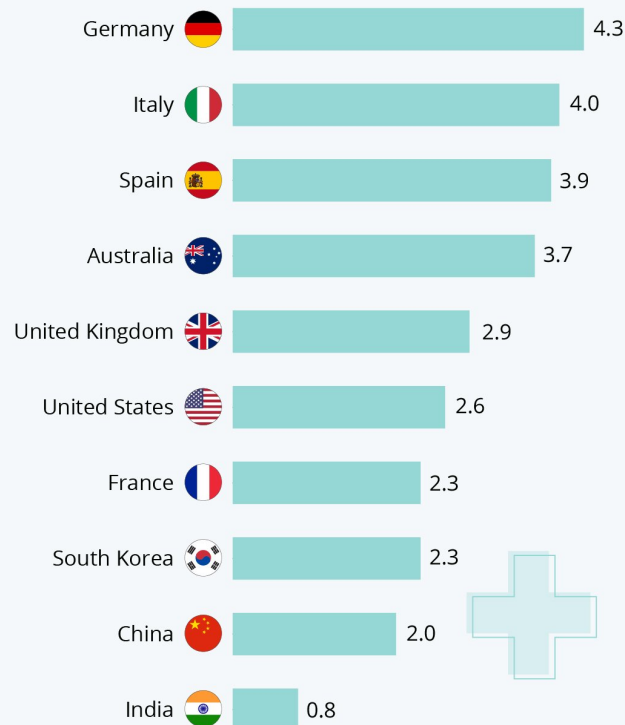
Upscale healthcare workforce with right training

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Education and training are options that can help overcome the shortage of skilled healthcare workers

The Countries With The Highest Density Of Doctors

Number of medical doctors per 1,000 inhabitants in selected countries*



* 2018 or most recent year data available
Source: OECD



statista

COVID-19 has reinforced the need for better overall healthcare infrastructure. There is not only a shortage of healthcare facilities but also the availability of doctors and skilled allied healthcare workforce. The current healthcare infrastructure has done a commendable job when it comes to handling the second wave of COVID-19.

In a developing country like India, there is still a significant lack of medical professionals and the doctor to patient ratio also is not reassuring either sad. During this pandemic time, the healthcare professionals have set themselves as a huge example of

sacrifice among the nation and have undergone a great risk. The healthcare system of a country during the COVID-19 pandemic is a testament to its strength.

With the advancements and breakthroughs in technologies, education is no longer limited to four walls of a classroom. While we celebrated Doctor's Day on July 1, we must look at the various initiatives that have been undertaken by the government as well as private organisations to up-skill, upscale and strengthen the healthcare workforce in the country which was much needed for a very long time.

Recently NATHEALTH-Healthcare Federation of India signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with The American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE). As per the agreement, both federations will mutually strengthen healthcare systems by developing and providing leadership education and development experiences that will help in preparing healthcare professionals to become clinical leaders and improve patient care. The collaboration will bring in educational opportunities through in-person interactions, such as the Annual Congress on Healthcare Leadership.

Dr Harsh Mahajan, President, NATHEALTH, Gurugram comments, "The second wave of COVID-19 has been an eye opener for the medical fraternity. As we are preparing ourselves for a possible third wave of the pandemic and its subtle shift to an endemic, a lot of focus is on strengthening our systems to deal with the surge in cases- both for COVID and non-COVID. Challenges that we are currently facing of bed and oxygen shortage, non-availability of essential drugs can be resolved with necessary interventions at central and state level but addressing skilling and manpower crisis amidst these tough times will greatly help providers give better care."

Skilled youth in healthcare

Tata STRIVE and Wipro GE Healthcare have also collaborated to skill youth for jobs in the healthcare sector over a period of three years. The agreement aims to skill 6,200 candidates in various technical and operational areas of healthcare.

As part of this partnership, Wipro GE Healthcare will design, develop and implement industry-relevant, hands-on training with a goal of achieving gainful employment for these students, many of whom belong to underprivileged sections of society. These collaborations are very crucial in the current scenario.

Shravan Subramanyam, Managing Director, Wipro GE Healthcare, South Asia, Bengaluru says, "Building a strong pipeline of allied healthcare professionals can be a strategic intervention in the healthcare sector. This partnership focuses not only on employment but also focuses on bridging the skill gap prevalent in the healthcare sector along with upliftment of women in the society."

Govt's initiative

Assessing the current scenario and the strain on the healthcare infrastructure, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi has recently launched 'Customised Crash Course' programme for COVID-19 frontline workers'. The programme will be conducted in 111 training centres spread over 26 states. About one lakh frontline workers will be trained in this initiative.

Training will be imparted to COVID warriors in six customised job roles namely Home Care Support, Basic Care Support, Advanced Care Support, Emergency Care Support, Sample Collection Support, and Medical Equipment Support. It will also include fresh skilling as well as upskilling of those who have some training in this type of work. This campaign will give fresh energy to the health sector frontline force and will also provide job opportunities to our youth.

"Given the size of our population, it is necessary to keep increasing the number of doctors, nurses and paramedics in the health sector," stated PM Modi in a video conference during the launch.

The pandemic and the current state of healthcare infrastructure has created opportunities where technology companies, specialists and content creators are converging to create the infrastructure of the future for up-scaling of healthcare workers. This isn't going to be an easy task and there are several challenges that the healthcare sector is currently facing and will face in the future.

Challenges in bridging the shortfall

Education and training are options that can help overcome the shortage of skilled healthcare workers. Especially in COVID-19 wards, not all nurses are trained for the job. In such cases, crash courses for qualifying nurses to work in ICU wards will help curb the shortage.

Dr KM Cherian, Chairman & CEO, Frontier Lifeline Hospital, Tiruvallur asserts, "We need to look at the education and learning opportunities for aspiring professionals. The cost of education is so high, that only few are able to afford it. The infrastructure at Govt institutions teaching medicine, needs to be revamped. Also, documentation and preserving knowledge for future generations is very important, so future students and professionals can learn from it."

"It is imperative to make provisions in the annual budget to address this issue by providing funds for skilling in educational institutions- both private and public. An association should be formed with skill institutions to devise various programmes across all specialities to address the skill gap. These initiatives have to be conducted at district levels by every state to ensure that everyone has access to quality healthcare," concludes Dr Cherian.

Digital Health, including healthcare informatics, has a profound impact on the quality of care and efficiency of healthcare delivery. Consequently, there is substantial focus globally on enhancing Digital Health and Informatics. In India too, the launch of the National Digital Health Mission (NDHM) in 2020 is expected to drive Digital Health adoption at a national scale.

The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay has set up the 'Koita Centre for Digital Health' (KCDH) with a generous contribution received from its alumni Rekha and Rizwan Koita, under the aegis of the Koita Foundation. KCDH will be conducting industry / outreach programmes for healthcare and industry professionals in digital health and enable them to act as force-multipliers.

Founded in 2015, Virohan a tech-based company uses technology to train allied healthcare workers across the country, including lab technicians, operation theatre technicians etc. Using their ed-tech model, the company is providing hundreds of lab technicians, emergency medical lab technicians, operation theatre technicians in various districts of India every month.

Nalin Saluja, Co-Founder & Chief Technology Officer, Virohan, Gurugram is of the opinion that there is a need for trustworthy and reliable healthcare in India and it is needed today but healthcare infrastructure usually takes time to build.

Saluja states, "We are using technology to train the healthcare workers that doctors can rely on more and more because we provide trained allied healthcare professionals, that is how we are enabling each doctor to attend to more patients. In the crisis facing our country today this is the fastest way of scaling up the availability of healthcare workers to each Indian. Let's just not put beds but that there is a trained healthcare worker by each and every one of them."

The answer to creating a high scale workforce and in the numbers needed may well reside with new flag bearers. India is producing unicorns and successful online education companies by dozens. Edu-tech has arrived and it is the apt time to extend into the healthcare domain. With online, on demand and high speed access, upscaling of healthcare workers can be done with just a tap.

Ashvini Danigond, Executive Director & CEO, Manorama Infosolutions, Kolhapur, says, "Continuing medical education (CME), learning new skills and in real time will not just enhance people skills but may well change health outcomes in certain cases. The acceleration of technology adoption of augmented, virtual reality, artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain and IoTs means that up-skilling of healthcare workers will be driven out of innovative and new age companies."

She further adds, "The doctor to patient ratio is woefully low, just 0.7 per thousand people. The inadequate access of healthcare is further compounded by the fact that healthcare workers and Indian healthcare infrastructure are predominantly located in the large cities and large towns."

The healthcare sector has sacrificed a lot to save the citizens of the country, yet there have been multiple incidents of violence against healthcare providers. This action of violence, inculcates a sense of fear in people who want to pursue a career in this field. This could also be one of the factors that leads to shortage of skilled healthcare workers. There is a need for strict laws and policies for crime committed against medical professionals.

There should be a provision in place for compensation and morale boosting. In spite of saving people's lives, doctors and medical professionals such as nurses and diagnosticians are not compensated properly. Government should provide incentives to healthcare workers, especially to those who work in the COVID-19 wards to keep their morale high.

Prabhat Prakash

(prabhat.prakash@mmactiv.com)