

'Dialysis centers should focus on cost efficiency without compromising quality'

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Seven and half years ago, when Mr Vikram Vuppula's uncle passed away because of chronic renal failure, he was utterly shocked to see the conditions prevailing in hospitals providing dialysis care.

He felt that dialysis care units in India needed a massive improvization through redefining the existing system. It was then he realized that professional dialysis services was absolutely needed in the country.

With more than 10 years experience in the US healthcare industry, Mr Vikram Vuppula, along with Mr Sandeep Gudibanda, and Mr Kamal Shah, founded the now four-year-old company, NephroPlus, a chain of kidney care clinics across India.

They started their first unit in Hyderabad in February 2010, with an investment of 1 crore rupees. Having received a good response, six months later they started their second unit in Hyderabad, followed by the third one in Mahabubnagar, about 100 kilometers away from Hyderabad.

Adds Mr Vikram Vuppula, founder & CEO, NephroPlus, "Today, renal care in India is in a bad shape. Dialysis centers run by hospitals do not tend to operate with real focus, since hospitals are more profit oriented. Hospitals know that dialysis care does not return much on investments. It is merely run by technicians."

On similar lines, Mr Sandeep Gudibanda, co-founder & director of business development, NephroPlus, feels that dialysis care in India is conducted in a disorganized way at dialysis centers, as opposed to in US, Australia and European countries.

Currently there are about 2 lakh dialysis patients in India. Out of which, only 70,000 of them have easy access to dialysis care. Most patients die because of inaccessibility of renal care in remote villages, or due to unaffordability factor involved in the treatment process.

Mr Kamal Shah, co-founder & director of patient services, NephroPlus, who is on dialysis since 1997, believes that the quality of dialysis centers in the country today do not adhere to basic hygiene.

He said, "At NephroPlus, we address both quality aspects and hygiene. Cross-infections are rampant in dialysis centers. Our USP is we steer clear of any possible cross-infections. Patients who are on dialysis end up contracting liver diseases because of cross-infections by Hepatitis C & B or even HIV, as a result of poor techniques followed by doctors and nurses. We manage to address this issue and identify possible dangers by introducing good processes and methods in our centers, where cross-infections are totally eliminated."

The country today has severe shortage of Nephrologists and trained technical staffs. "The government can help pay for some of the academic trainings involved in training qualified technicians. The awareness among the students is also lacking. The government, again, should help create awareness in funding and training fresh graduates. We at NephroPlus are willing to provide the training, but it has to be structured and funded by the government," expressed Mr Vikram.

Under chronic kidney failure, patients are either expected to get a transplant or be on dialysis for the rest of their lives. Dialysis at times can be a frustrating experience. At NephroPlus, the treatment is said to be more patient-centered.

Says Mr Sandeep, "You need to be on dialysis for four hours, for at least three or more times a week. During those hours, for entertainment we offer individual television sets along with a satellite dish connection and headphones to patients. We also provide a wi-fi connection to our patients so that they can surf the internet. Patients can come to our centre, either after or before going to work. After dialysis, if the patient feels dizzy or is unable to drive, we provide them with drop facility, including picking them up prior to dialysis, if needed."

Mr Vikram opines that hospitals realize that there is not much return for their investments and hence do not offer dialysis service. "We need a place where patients can avail quality dialysis services. Today, patients travel all over the country to get dialysis. The government should actually get involved in the forefront to ensure that dialysis is made available for the poor as well. We are working on a public-private partnership project in Hyderabad with the help of government hospitals, making dialysis affordable for people who can't afford regular checkups."

Today, dialysis centers should focus on cost efficiency without compromising on quality. Bringing in the best models and making it more affordable to patients will enhance renal care in India. "In the US dialysis costs about \$250 per session. However, it is a mere \$25-30 in India. We use the same machines and consumables as the west. However, currently India can't afford more advanced machines," said Mr Vikram.

NephroPlus looks forward to have hundred centers in the next three years, making dialysis affordable throughout India. The company has been funded by venture capital firm, Bessemer Venture, in 2011.