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Medical lockers to radically change healthcare landscape

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While India has been increasingly making its mark on the world map for the exponential growth it has recently achieved, there is plenty to be achieved for the country to be considered as a progressive nation. One of the asserting parameters which ensure a country is perceived as a developed economy is when the citizens can rely on its healthcare ecosystem that is well equipped to fulfill all medical requirements for sustainable living.

COVID-19 pandemic has even more exposed the weakness in India's public health system and established that a lot is to be desired for its betterment. At the basic level itself, India has a shortage of an estimated 6,00,000 doctors and 20,00,000 nurses. The government is now looking at technology and digital access to bring health care to individuals and still keep the costs low.

To kick start a robust healthcare ecosystem, the government has launched a visionary reform - National Digital Health Mission (NDHM), that has the potential to radically transform the healthcare system of the country. The NDHM lays out broad objectives of establishing and managing core health data in a standardized form, and the infrastructure for its exchange along with a unique health ID (UHID) designed for all Indians, a personal health record (PHR) system with a federated architecture for sharing health data within the ecosystem, and a citizen health locker with complete individual health records sharable only with citizen's consent.

The health lockers are also envisioned to work like a health repository containing details of medical tests, illnesses, doctor visits, medicine prescribed, etc. of individuals. They will provide access to anyone who wants to see the data post individual's consent. Health lockers will be the gateway for the citizen to connect with the ecosystem like health ID, virtual doctor, health facility registry, personal health records, e-pharmacy, and telemedicine, empowering citizens to access an organized and self-consented health data management system at the click of a button. Additional features would be added with time to come. The implementation of the reform is expected to considerably improve the efficiency, efficacy, and transparency of health service delivery overall.

The NDHM will ensure private players' participation, which has a crucial role in connecting small clinics, and hospitals to subscribe to the authorized repository providers to participate in the system seamlessly with minimum discomfort to the caregivers. They will also be providing medical lockers with facilities set to change the ground realities for the positive. The goal of this concept is not only to consolidate data but to ensure affordable and accessible quality care along with predictive analysis is provided to individuals.

Acceptance and adoption of medical Lockers will help the healthcare ecosystem to grow. The administrative and regulatory effort would drastically become redundant, and medical practitioners would be able to focus on their core job of providing medical assistance. Consolidation of records will not only help patients to receive timely treatment but would also augment stakeholders such as doctors to share knowledge, insurance companies to curate policies, and government officials to support infrastructure and norms.

Since the concept of the medical locker is in the nascent stages, there are plenty of apprehensions about its true potential. But medical lockers have the likelihood to overcome many dark areas.

Seamless handling of medical records

It is a common sight to see patients or family members carrying huge files of medical records while visiting a doctor. Often these documents are in tatters, misplaced, and are not chronologically arranged, which adds to the last minute panic and stress. Medical lockers would store the medical history of patients and could be accessed by doctors (on consent) and individuals at the click of a button. The positive outcome of such a mechanism is not difficult to comprehend.

Assist in creating the UHID

To avail the facilities of medical lockers, users would need to create a health identity number. This number is essential to collate all the medical history of the individual. Medical lockers could aid in creating these unique IDs of the patients.

Digital consultation is the future – But are we prepared?

Technology has undoubtedly been a boon to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Imagine a pandemic without having internet access and with all the restrictions to move out of your house. Physical appointments with doctors turned to video calls, and long queues turned to digital waiting rooms. Technology, when used appropriately, can save a huge amount of time, effort, and resources. This digital revolution is now the new normal. Doctor consultation (online OPD) through a video call at the comfort of your home or your office cabin could soon be a feature provided via medical locker.

Need a second opinion on the diagnosis, but whom do I consult?

Since medical lockers would have a repository of healthcare professionals, the applicants could be assisted with options of doctors and hospitals with unbiased opinions at the click of a button.

Insurance claim settlement – a headache or a seamless process?

The average time to settle insurance claims in our country ranges between 15 days to six months. When documentation goes digital, there would be no need to request physical reports from the hospital, followed by a personal visit to hand them over to the insurance agent or company in a stipulated time frame. Case files would be accessed by the Insurance agent and companies at an instance, thereby reducing a great deal of hassle and stress.

Online pharmacies the new normal

There has been a surge in e-pharmacies in the recent past. While this phenomenon is majorly common in the urban markets, the next logical step would be to extend this facility to the rural or developing areas. After a consultation, the physician would have the option to provide an e-prescription, and the same could be used by patients to order medicines online with a click of a button. No longer would people have to remember to take medication on time. Based on the requirement, they could set reminders in their health locker to consume their medicines and re-order the same once the ordered stock nears the finish.

Quality healthcare facilities to reach remote areas

Medical practitioners who were earlier restricted in their movement due to geographical constraints will provide their services to remotest locations through digital mediums. Access to quality health care counsel remotely would directly reduce travel costs and out-of-pocket expenses, which currently accounts for a whopping 70 per cent of the total health expenditure in India.

Crisis/Outbreak preparedness and predictive analysis

Data about individuals and their medical history, once collected, can be used to be prepared and predict large outbreaks. The platform will contribute to the treatment, speed up the process of detection, and better manage non-communicable and chronic diseases. This rich data can help the government to draft policies and render in formulating decisions. It also has the potential to provide insurance companies to offer customized policies. All this will happen with the patient's consent.

Consumer-tech connect and self-monitoring

Medical lockers could be integrated with med-tech and consumer tech devices like pedometer used by patients for self-check-up. Patients will also be able to upload their own information and health data directly into the app.

Plenty of industry veterans have expressed that the medical lockers have the potential to radically change the country's healthcare landscape, and this could be an important step towards achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal of Universal Health Coverage by covering financial risk protection, increasing access to quality of essential healthcare services, medicines, and vaccines for all.

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