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Effective patient education leads to better clinical results

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Healthcare challenges in India and in majority of developing economies revolve around three key pillars – Affordability, Accessibility and Quality. Navigating the heterogeneous and complex healthcare eco- system could be intimidating even for the educated let alone the hardships faced by the common man. Many remarkable initiatives have been taken over the years to make it easier for the patient community to connect with the right healthcare providers. Technology has also played a key enabler in establishing this connection. However, there's another aspect that's vital to a patient's health journey and has largely remained unexplored. This fourth pillar is the patient education.

There's a general consensus that patient education is central to improving patient outcomes and has been proven by various studies and research. However, what we find lacking is the structured and focused approach towards patient education. In majority of cases, patient is left to explore information on their own using internet or word of mouth.

Our compromised doctor-patient ratio does very little to support the patient community in this journey of information discovery. A well- informed patient will utilise the consultation time in the most optimal manner and ask more pertinent questions. From a Gallup survey to a group of patients in United States, they observed that those patients who knew what to expect after surgery (ie. they received effective patient education), 72 per cent were satisfied with their results after device implantation. For those who didn't know what to expect, only 39 per cent were satisfied. An effective patient education not only helps in dealing with chronic illnesses but also goes a long way in reducing post-surgery readmissions thereby containing healthcare costs. In United States alone, readmission costs to the government stands at roughly \$17 billion each year. In another research conducted in the United States, it was observed that a hospital would reduce its readmission rate by 5 per cent on average by focusing on communication with the patients while complying with evidence-based standards of care.

Patient education can't be decoupled from effective patient engagement and outcomes. It plays a major role in transitioning to a value-based healthcare model than a traditional fee for service model. With value-based care, the focus shifts from volume and prescribing tests and procedures irrespective of cost to a more holistic, evidence-based and tailored treatment path based on effective patient education. It helps build trust in the healthcare provider and system, in taking preventative steps to avoid other complications and above all to a higher quality of life. Realising the benefits and its far-reaching positive consequences, Medical Council of India in 2019, included a communication curriculum in the medical courses and launched a course around Attitude, Ethics, and Communication Module (AETCOM).

The subject of patient education is wide-ranging and the industry needs to adopt a cohesive and inclusive approach to ensure effective outcomes. Along with clinical training, creation of a 'credible digital knowledge hub' is critical. Such a resource will work as a complimentary service and the doctors can easily direct their patients to seek credible medical information from such an information base. Currently, the patients are trying to fill these gaps via generic blogs available on hospital portals, news articles, collation of random studies and surveys and in certain cases even sources like social media posts and WhatsApp forward messages, which can be extremely detrimental. While the various medical industry bodies and governing councils have realised the power of effective doctor patient communication and health literacy, efforts should be to formalise channels of patient communication and encourage the flow of credible information.

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