COVID-19 and the rise of telemedicine in India

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a surge in global demand for remote care. With the Indian government's recent notification of guidelines for telemedicine, empowering doctors to consult patients via audio-video and chat applications, will virtual care become the mainstream of healthcare?

By Jisha Krishnan

"The delivery of healthcare services, where distance is a critical factor, by all healthcare professionals using information and communication technologies for the exchange of valid information for the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease and injuries, research and evaluation, and for the continuing education of healthcare providers, all in the interests of advancing the health of individuals and their communities."

That's the definition of telemedicine, as per the recent notification of the Telemedicine Practice Guide by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India.

In the wake of COVID-19, there has been a global surge in demand for telemedicine. When the outbreak was first announced in China, virtual healthcare platforms such as Ping An Good Doctor and Alibaba Health Information Technology were flooded with appointment requests and customer queries.

Over the last three months, countries like Australia, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines have been ramping up virtual healthcare on a war footing, while the US government has earmarked USD 500 million exclusively for the use of telemedicine in the fight against the pandemic.

Pandemic push

When India announced its nationwide lockdown starting 25th March 2020, the panic among expectant mothers, parents of infants, and couples seeking infertility treatment urged Dr. Kishore Kumar, founder chairman, and neonatologist at Cloudnine Group of Hospitals, Bengaluru, to kick-start teleconsultation services. "It took us about two weeks to get the technology and doctors on board as well as to sort out teething troubles of the new system. We have been able to connect virtually with patients across the country…I'm certain telemedicine will revolutionise care in India," he says.

Old challenges

While most private healthcare centres in India are adopting the virtual care model in the current scenario, the Indian government has also launched an app – eSanjeevani – to digitally connect patients with doctors in the public healthcare sector. The real challenge, though, will be to expand the telemedicine network across tier-II towns and rural areas to address healthcare needs beyond those posed by the current pandemic.

The Telemedicine Practice Guidelines place the onus on the doctor to decide whether teleconsultation will suffice, or if an in-person review is needed, based on factors pertinent to each case. "The guidelines state that technology platforms based on artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) cannot replace the doctor. However, they will need to be further refined to address concerns regarding data privacy, insurance coverage, and the like," contends Dr. Vinita Sharma, a general practitioner, who is unsure about undergoing the online training for doctors on the telemedicine guidelines.

"It is not easy to convince doctors. You have to give them time," admits Dr. Kishore Kumar of Cloudnine Group of Hospitals. Also, it's a myth, he says, that the technology is unaffordable. "Once you establish the backend operation, the technology pays for itself in the long run. It's a worthwhile investment," he affirms. In time, data analytics can help improve care from super-specialised tertiary care centers to secondary and primary health centres. Telemedicine can make valuable insights available at the point of care, leading to accurate diagnosis, enabling timely, preventive actions, and improved clinical outcomes.

"In India, we have been discussing telemedicine guidelines since 2005, but only now has the procedure been fast-tracked. This is only the beginning...the guidelines must evolve to help garner more public trust and pave the way for personalised treatment based on data analytics," says Madhusudan Chauhan of Jiva Ayurveda.

The way forward

According to industry reports, Asia Pacific will account for nearly 30 percent share of the global telemedicine market by 2025. This prediction is primarily driven by the expectation of a reduction in the cost of primary care and improvement in the delivery of quality healthcare to the last mile in China and India.

China has already made good progress in terms of ramping up telemedicine infrastructure and setting up dedicated chat and video healthcare services to help its citizens recover from the effects of the pandemic. In India though, the process has been off to a slow start.