

Future of Public Health: Is technology a solution?

On 28th of September , Sewa International organized a panel discussion on the topic- Future of Public Health: Is technology a solution?

There were two experts to share their views with the participants. The first, Dr Yogendra Malik, is currently Member, Ethics and Medical Registration Board of National Medical Commission (NMC). Previously, he was Advisor to the Chief Minister, Haryana for Beti Bachao , Beti Padhao Abhiyan (2015-20) with spectacular results.

He was joined in the discussion by Dr Aman Manchanda, Vice President - Business Development at AXA France Vie - India Reinsurance Branch.

Kumar Subham, Director- Communications & New Initiatives, Sewa International Bharat, set the tone for the discussion by referring to the increasing emphasis on technology in the field of public health as indicated by the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission, recently launched by the PM & the National Health Stack (to facilitate the collection of comprehensive health care data across the country) being discussed within the circles of Niti Aayog. He further added that the ground reality is that the share of telemedicine in India is miniscule - only .2% of public healthcare. As such, there is a tremendous scope for growth here.

To the question as to how technology will affect public health in times to come, the take of Dr Malik was that technology is the way forward but technology cannot operate in isolation & it has to be integrated with the existing health care system. Data sharing has become quite common these days and the quality of data has also improved a lot. A case in point is the National Digital Health Mission (NDHM), a Government of India initiative, aimed at developing the backbone for a unified digital health infrastructure.

Dr Aman Manchanda also agreed that technology is the only way we can scale Public Healthcare. In the rural areas, clinics are far away. There are 740 million people who access internet through mobile phones thus having virtual proximity with the doctors. The current pandemic has also given a boost to tele medicine.

Responding to the question if India is ready for tech-based health solutions, Dr Malik opined that it is only through the use of technology that we have moved from individualistic approach to targeted & collective approach like Poshan Abhiyan to tackle the problem of malnutrition. Our PM has given us an optimistic target of a TB free country to be achieved by 2025, though for the world it is 2030. All this is possible through the use of technology only. We are poised to achieve single platform reporting through NHA (National Health Authority) & NDHM (National Digital Health Mission).

Dr Manchanda also said that we have adopted technology very well. But we are still far from saturation. There is a need to advertise it properly so that more & more people adopt it. Currently, only Tier 1 cities are using tele medicine.

Dr Malik added that everything develops under stress. It was under the stress of the pandemic that people resorted to tele medicine. He also held the view that telemedicine is going to stay alongside visits to the neighbourhood doctor. Giving analogy from the field of education, he was of the opinion that online classes can supplement the physical lectures but not replace them. Both are going to exist side by side. Dr Manchanda's suggestion was that people need to experience, it to like it. Touching upon the importance of insurance, he pointed out that insurance takes care of more than 60% of India's health expenditure.

Earlier, health insurance used to be out of pocket expenditure for the people but because of Ayushman Bharat, half a billion people have been covered by insurance & have access to medicine.

When asked as to what was the biggest challenge for the proliferation of technology in the field of medicine - access, awareness & infrastructure, Dr Malik was of the view that ours is a multiple-choice world with a huge burden of diseases. That being the case, all three access, awareness & infrastructure are equally important. Dr Manchanda also opined that technology has got a big role to play to make health care available to all. Tele health & telemedicine have helped us reach the last person.

The discussion ended on a positive note hoping that the increased usage of tele medicine will help medical care reach every Indian. That the giant strides being taken by the government towards adoption of technology in all spheres especially public health will yield huge benefits in times to come.