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LEADER'S INSIGHTS

## Telemedicine Innovation: How it can Keep up with the Rural Health System and Keep People Alive at Lower Costs

Dr. Malini Saba, Founder & Chairman,  
Saba Group & Anannke Foundation

**I**n the wake of the gradual shift of the pandemic from urban to rural India, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi emphasised on the importance of expanding telemedicine to the rural and other inaccessible parts of the country, while appreciating the efforts and dedication of medical teams who are working in these underserved regions.

Telemedicine has been a part of the medical system for quite a few years now. However, never before, its vitality and importance has been brought to the forefront as the current pandemic. With more than 75% of the Indian population residing in the rural regions and more than 75% of doctors residing in urban regions, telemedicine might be a boon for many.

### Can Telemedicine Bridge the Gap?

India is one of the biggest players in the information and technology sector with a panache for highly qualified doctors making strides in the medical field. Telemedicine is the blend of the brilliance from

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both ends and can be, without understating, one of the cheapest ways of imparting healthcare to the underserved regions.

Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) is one of the prime examples of the efficacy of telemedicine that enabled 22 super speciality hospitals to connect with 78 rural and remote hospitals across the country with the help of its geo-stationary satellites.

New and improved telemedicine applications are not only making medicine cost-efficient but also removing the language barriers that also prevent remote residents from availing the medical aid they deserve in other cities and towns.

Payment options are now becoming easier as digital wallets and payment platforms like PayTm and Google Pay respectively are joining the ranks of modes of transactions that are allowed for medical aid. This can be an ideal model for many tier 2 and tier 3 cities but in rural areas, there needs to be an extra reinforcement when it comes to the payment factor. Until digital awareness comes up in these areas, local NGOs can intervene and help cross the language and transaction barrier.

### **How Can Telemedicine Help Medical Infrastructure in Rural Areas?**

In recent news, Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences (SGPGIMS) Lucknow and IIT-Kanpur joined hands to boost the national medical infrastructure and it is no surprise that Telemedicine will be an integral part of the mission.

Some of the distinct advantages of telemedicine are as follows:

**Bridging the Access Problem:** Telemedicine's main idea is to curb the inaccessibility to medical facilities. India is a vast country with a rich yet differing diversity. Telemedicine helps overcome the vastness, allowing people to receive the right medical advice as well as their medication on time. In case of severe cases, they can regulate the situation till the patient has the means to visit an actual multi-specialty hospital for better care. Electronic communication and the most recent robotic intervention will help a lot simplify telemedicine for many rural dwellers and healthcare providers.

**Sensitivity to Cultural Aspects:** Cultural norms often play an important role when people come in for check up or for medical concerns. Some of the most common routines might feel like a blatant disrespect of their cultural, social or religious sentiments. Telemedicine

offers a bandwidth to offer medical aid without hurting sentiments. Of course, several cases do not offer a similar flexibility and in such cases, telemedicine offers a solution to help the patient in need.

**Medication Adherence:** Medical intervention is not much help if there is no medication adherence. Checking the patient's vitals and regulating them for further signs (in case of any) is important to keep chronic illnesses at bay. This is especially difficult for the rural population, making the journey to the big cities can be arduous for them but grave for their health. Telemedicine yet again offers a resolution remotely to track the patient's health via numerous health tech devices at their behest. This ensures that the patient receives timely medical advice in order to prevent recurring illnesses or long-term illness.

**Comfort to the Patient:** Telemedicine saves the patient the trouble of traveling long distances and as a result, undermines their health. Easy to access consultations from the comfort of their neighbourhood allows them to save time as well as money, ensuring their enthusiastic participation and a better outcome as well.

### **Technologies for Telemedicine**

New technologies are always on a rise and telemedicine, especially in the pandemic era has a lot of scope to introduce new technology to cater to the rural population. Some of the upcoming technologies in telemedicine:

**Artificial Intelligence:** AI is a part of almost every sphere today and medicine is yet another sector with tremendous scope for AI. Telemedicine can be greatly advantaged by AI-driven smart technologies like predictive algorithms to enable remote screening or care-assistive apps that reduce redundant tasks like filling out prescriptions and generating medical reports.

**Augmented and VR:** Great for real-time information on the patient's vitality, virtual reality allows the doctor to check the patient without being present in the physical vicinity. This has a greater scope for accuracy when it comes to remote diagnostics.

**Tele-robots:** Call them the new assistance, tele-robots can monitor health stats, offer basic medical advice and of course, alert the medical expert in case of any discrepancy with the patient's health.

India is still at the cusp of telemedicine and medical innovation. However, the pace has been amped up, courtesy the pandemic and will witness an exponential change in the way we view health-technology in the coming times. ■