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Teleconsultation or Telemedicine, a platform to provide health-related services via telephone or other digital communication gained a much needed momentum during the current pandemic of COVID-19. The pandemic situation has given a boost to the health-tech sector in the country. Post the lockdown, many government hospitals, e-pharmacies, and even corporates have embraced teleconsultation for wellness and care strategies.

The recent report on tele-consultation by a health-tech company revealed that at least five crore Indians opted for online healthcare during the national lockdown, thereby recording a 500 percent growth in online healthcare consultations. The report also revealed that 80 percent of them were first-time telemedicine users. In addition, 44 percent of the users were from non-metro cities that explains the rise in the degree of digital healthcare prevalence amongst Indian citizens.

The segment experienced a great surge after the Ministry of Health and family welfare (MOHFW); Government of India issued the guidelines on teleconsultation in March 2020. Teleconsultation allowed patients to interact to healthcare professionals even during the strict lockdown period. Delay in certain consultations due to restriction in physical movements could have otherwise led to many health complications. It ensured a sense of relief and security and helped to reduce the growing anxiety levels caused not only by the pandemic condition but also due to the other existing and underlying health issues.

Online medical advice along with the use of technology, which would help provide vital information to the doctors to judge and understand the actual condition of the patient, could simulate an actual physical consultation in many cases. In this pandemic, where ensuring the safety of both the patients and healthcare professionals became the top most priority, telemedicine came across the ideal option especially for non-emergency cases.

This platform also has the potential to enable health services to reach out to the rural and remote areas which presently do not have very updated healthcare facilities and has a financial advantage in terms of minimizing the costs of travel or establishing high end healthcare set ups in such areas. Utilizing the technological advancements to the optimal, this platform can enable saving the data digitally and later utilizing the analyzed trends from the available data for health planning purposes.

This allowed the registered medical practitioners to use teleconsultation and immediately pivot themselves to an online model and welcome the digital system. According to the latest guidelines, patients can now consult with doctors over chat, audio, or video for diagnosis. According to a 2019 report by McKinsey Global Institute titled, 'Digital India: Technology to transform a connected nation', it is estimated that India might save up to \$10 billion by 2025 if telemedicine services could replace 30 to 40 percent of in-person consultations.

This rapid growth in teleconsultation showcases its potential and presents it as the next frontier in healthcare. Moreover, it will provide a platform to source and study patient data that will help in identifying issues related to health and act as a medium to deliver decision support to several doctors.

This could significantly reduce the mortalities and morbidities in patients. Moreover, through IoT (internet of things) perspective medical emergencies like an asthma attack, heart failure, diabetes, etc. can be monitored via connected devices. However, a lot needs to be done before reaching this goal.

Furthermore, with the government's 'Digital India' initiative, teleconsultation can be the roadmap for improved medical care in rural areas. It has the potential to bridge the gap in healthcare delivery and achieve universal healthcare in an effective, efficient, and affordable manner. The growth in the adoption of digital tools such as medical booths and face recognition systems will enable people to walk in and discuss their health parameters with a medial chatbot anywhere. Already, some hospitals have installed such booths at their entrances to check the health conditions of visitors before allowing them in. Likewise, thermal screening systems at malls, community halls, airports, railways stations, etc. are also expected to become common. The COVID-19 pandemic has also accelerated the adoption of AI-backed digital monitoring systems in hospitals to monitor parameters like temperature, heart rate, oxygen saturation in patients. Such digitally automated monitoring systems are also likely to become the norm.

The current crisis is going to drive healthcare in a direction where the safety of both healthcare providers and consumers will be the key. Social distancing guidelines are here to stay for a while and hence, communities and healthcare organizations are working to change their daily functions to adapt to the new normal and make the overall healthcare ecosystem safer. The eventual motto of providing safe, accessible and affordable healthcare without barriers can now become a reality with the healthcare sector empowered with such a platform.

DISCLAIMER : Views expressed above are the author's own.

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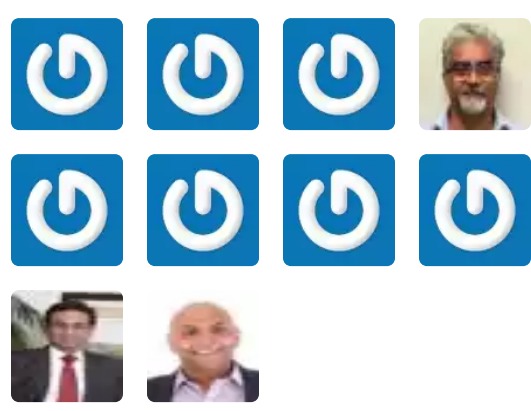
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