NDHM will radically transform health care

The creation of a digital health identity card will help patients, without compromising on their privacy

AMITABH KANT

With the launch of the National Digital Health Mission (NDHM) on August 15, India has ushered in a new era of technology-enabled health care delivery. The prime minister's vision of an *Atmanirbhar* Bharat (self-reliant India) can only be realised by a "*Swasth* Bharat", which, in turn, requires data integration and standardisation as critical health ecosystem enablers.

NDHM is built on the principles of ensuring greater inclusivity, efficiency and transparency in the health sector. For patients, the mission aims to simplify access to their records and enables them to share digitally-stored comprehensive health profiles with providers for treatment and follow-up purposes. Currently, people find it difficult to maintain long trails of paper-based records for health interventions like immunisation, especially over long periods of time, or when they move from one part of the country to another. Yet, these records are critical for monitoring an individual's health status and ensuring continuity in treatment.

Undoubtedly, the availability of health care infrastructure and service delivery needs to be strengthened across the country. However, technological empowerment and digitisation can most certainly enable more effective and efficient utilisation of existing facilities. The days of people standing in long queues at health facilities carrying multiple medical reports will become a thing of the past in this digital- and patient-friendly ecosystem, empowered by world-class technologies. Access to patient records will now be just a click away for doctors.

Of course, participation and sharing of data are voluntary and all efforts have been made to keep the rights of citizens at the core of the mission's design and objectives. It is understood that maintaining security, confidentiality and privacy of health-related information is vital. The mission's health and data policies have, therefore, been formulated to ensure privacy and data security. The digital identity of patients will be shared with certified doctors only after they provide their informed consent. The NDHM architecture, by default, ensures that health data is encrypted, and that there is no opportunity for anyone to access the records or modify them without the explicit consent of the concerned individual. Patients can determine the time period for which they grant consent and can also revoke consent anytime they wish to.

Under NDHM, all Indians can get access to a unique and easy-to-remember health ID carrying details of their health and treatment history. Through this ID, indi- viduals will not only be able to search for verified hospitals and laboratories, but can also evaluate the quality of services, on the basis of feedback shared by others. This feature can greatly enhance the accountability of health service providers as well as promote the delivery of high-quality services to patients.

In addition to individuals, all doctors, hospitals, diagnostic laboratories, and pharmacies will also be given a digital identity. This, in turn, will enable a single and standardised process for completing their identification, certification and audit formalities, allowing providers to focus on the actual delivery of health services, instead of expending time and resources on undertaking administrative proce- dures on multiple occasions through dif- ferent channels. Of course, similar to the mechanism for patients, participation in NDHM will be voluntary for providers as well; however, needless to say, the more participation there is, the stronger and more integrated the health ecosystem will become. Participation for health care pro- viders and establishments under NDHM will also be completely free of cost and the use of Aadhaar for health ID will not be mandated.

Apart from the multiple benefits for patients and health care providers, NDHM will offer services such as telemedicine as part of its digital suite. The utilisation of telemedicine has gone up significantly in India following the Covid-19 outbreak; however, there are opportunities to pro- vide services for a range of health condi- tions by connecting doctors with citizens even in the most rural and remote parts of the country, beyond the Covid-19 era as well. By being able to access quality health care advice remotely, travel costs will be saved for patients in several parts of the country and ultimately help to reduce out-of-pocket expenditures, which currently account for nearly two-thirds of the total health expenditure in India.

NDHM is initially being rolled out in six Union territories — Chandigarh, Pondi- cherry, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, Ladakh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Lakshadweep. The rest of the country will follow soon. Tech- nology is a powerful disruptor that has revolutionised and accelerated the growth of a large number of sectors such as bank- ing. Through the adoption of digital tech- nologies, NDHM will empower the health sector to cater to the country's large popu- lation in a far more efficient manner, through the standardisation of health records, the creation of a unique health identity, doorstep delivery of quality med- icines at affordable prices as well as tele- consultations with verified medical pro- fessionals.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that with the launch of NDHM, we are wit- nessing a new beginning for India's health sector. It is a visionary reform that has the potential to radically transform health care delivery in the country.

Amitabh Kant is CEO, NITI Aayog
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