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Sreelatha Menon: Doc in a box

Tele-medicine initiatives take affordable health care to the door step of the poor
Sreelatha Menon / New Delhi January 25, 2009, 0:29 IST

A number of tele-medicine initiatives across the country take affordable health care to the door step of the poor.

Bangalore-based Teleradiology Solutions has been providing long-distance radiological services to hospitals in the US and Singapore. It does roaring business.

A few months ago, it was approached by the Ramakrishna Mission hospital in Arunachal Pradesh which has the lone CT scanner in the state but no radiologist to read the reports.

Teleradiology Solutions' charity arm, the Teleradiology Foundation, got linked up with the hospital and started reading the reports without charging any fee. It has done about 800 reports so far and wants to extend the service to other hill states or anyone who needs it, says founder-CEO Arjun Kalyanpur. The reason being that there are just 10,000 radiologists in a nation of one billion.

Apollo Hospital has its own tele-medicine networking foundation which works not to earn profit in 100-odd V-Sat-enabled centres in the country. It has done 55,000 consultations so far and is working on covering 53 countries in Africa.

In Andhra Pradesh, the government has tied up with the Health Management Research Institute (HMRI) Foundation to offer ambulance and tele-medicine services.

But it is western Uttar Pradesh that is about to witness the biggest initiative that would take the doctor to the door step of every villager.

The programme is being initiated by Gopi Gopalakrishnan of the World Health Partners, a non-profit organisation, under a model where a fee is charged for the service. He is the same man who led the establishment of the health franchising outfit, Janani, in Bihar. Today, Janani's franchisee health centres cover a quarter of the state's countryside.

Gopalakrishnan is seeking to replicate the model with tele-medicine and franchisee private doctors, with assistance from a mystery donor and a software company, Neurosynaptic, which won an award for innovation at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

His initiative will start at Meerut, Muzaffarnagar and Bijnor on January 27 and expand to 20 districts. There will be 100 tele-medicine centres, one catering to 10 villages. The centre would be owned by an

entrepreneur who would pay Rs 25,000. The rest Rs 1.5 lakh has to be paid in instalments. The entrepreneur will be free to use the centre to sell other e-services. The centre will charge Rs 50 per patient and help the patient get e-consultation with a doctor. If the patient has to be physically examined, he will be guided to a franchisee centre that has a private doctor.

The idea is to make private health care available to all who can pay a minimum fee. About 900 drug and diagnostic providers have been identified to go to the village centres to pick up samples for tests. Later, the really poor would be linked to a health insurance scheme that the state is about to unroll.

Gopalakrishnan is excited, especially because he did not have to beg for funds and can turn off the system if the entrepreneur does not pay him or follow the rules.

He wants to pack in preventive and curative care into the system, using the latter as a carrot to facilitate the former.

Telemedicine sure helps private enterprise. If it also helps the cause of health care, then why not?