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A Study by National Knowledge Commission

A Journey in Medical Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurs of the New India



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You are over qualified; there are no jobs for you here'. Circa 1999.

My husband, Dr Arjun Kalyanpur, and I returned to India in 1999. He had trained at AIIMS, New Delhi and I at Osmania Medical in Hyderabad. After nine years spent in training and working at an Ivy League University in the United States — Yale University — we decided to return to India to work as doctors and do good where there was the chance to do the greatest good. On returning, I (a Pediatric Cardiologist i.e. a heart doctor for children) got a job at a local cardiac hospital whereas Arjun (a Radiologist i.e. an expert in CT scans and MRIs) could not get a local job in Bangalore. This was 1999.

Fortunately for us, Yale University had kept Arjun on as faculty in the hope that we would change our minds about living in India and would return to the United States. This saw us through the first two years of his 'Indian unemployment'. On one of his trips back, an ex-American colleague told him 'If ever you move back to the US come and join our group and work with us'. As a joke, he said, 'Richard, I'll work with you from India!' This was 2001 and no one had ever done international teleradiology i.e. report scans from India for American hospitals.

As it was, he had no significant opportunities in India and he was working for Yale on a part-time basis, so we decided to look into the feasibility of this 'joke'. We did a trial study with Yale University on this concept of a doctor in India in the day-time reporting CT scans for patients in American emergency rooms at night — i.e., using the night-day time difference to provide seamless coverage to emergency rooms. Interestingly, the concept worked and the research was published and presented at American medical meetings. Arjun began working for Yale University from Bangalore from a home office. Within six months, the programme with Yale fell through — there was too much opposition to such a concept. 'Why are our scans going to India? Is there no doctor in America who can report them' were the nature of questions asked.

However, we had seen the future. This could be done. There was a shortage of radiologists for the night shift in the USA. Why not fill that need by having

daytime fresh doctors in India? We set up a company in India — Teleradiology Solutions — from our home and, with Rs.1000, paid a nephew to design a website. In 2002, we put ourselves on the World Wide Web and got our first hospital contract!

I think we represent the new Entrepreneurs of opportunity of the new India — no business background, no finance knowledge, no idea of how to run a company, no inclination to run one, until the opportunity presents itself.

The first few years were challenging — bandwidth costs were high, our high speed bandwidth lines would get cut by linesmen digging the roads, the electricity would go off for eight hours and we would be unable to provide service to the US hospitals; we were inundated by paperwork involved in running a company in India and so on. Above all, we were a brown company in a very white space!

2002-2004: India was getting known for BPO work. However, such high-end medical work — i.e., doctors in India directing patient care in America — had not been done or heard of. We began to get hounded by the US press, especially at the peak of the anti outsourcing tirade in 2004. We had to deal with stories about poor quality, Indian 'radiology sweatshops' and the like.

However, we decided to dig in our heels and work away to prove them all wrong. We focused on quality and became the first Indian healthcare organization to get the JCAHO seal (Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations) from the USA in 2005. We focused on training within our organization and processes to provide superior quality diagnostic reports to the US. Currently, our quality is 99.7% versus a US national average of 96%. We decided we were going to prove to the Americans that an Indian company can provide high-end high-quality medical services to American patients at a lower cost and on time. It was our aim to put India on the global map of telemedicine and by God's grace, we've done it!

There are some factors that helped us grow, number 1 being the STPI — thanks to the benefits offered to companies such as ours we were able to save money and reinvest that money in building infrastructure (we now have a beautiful 70000 sq ft campus in Whitefield, Bangalore) and in improving our technology. Additionally, we used the manpower in India to optimize delivery to the USA. Every report on a patient is called in by our call centre team; our IT team has built a world-class radiology information system that we are now selling to US clients and so on. We also learnt how to proceed within India's infrastructural chaos — we invested in a Rs.80-lakh generator, overcame redundancies in bandwidth, installed invertors for each computer, set up offices outside Bangalore (e.g Delhi, Mumbai and China) All this would not have been possible without STPI support and the tax holiday until 2009.

Our company grew from a two-person operation in 2002 to a current strength of over 180 employees. Since we had no business preconceptions, we instituted

HR practices that an HR consultant later told us were all wrong! We incentivized employees with negative points for drop in quality, paid them to work on Sundays, created a fun atmosphere (our office in Whitefield now has a slide from the 1st floor to the basketball court), invested in training so that every member of our telrad family felt they were growing. These efforts have worked. Our attrition in employees over a year is less than one%!

Having been bitten by the entrepreneurial bug, we got hooked to the new buzz that is there in India. We expanded into several related areas of healthcare. For example, we do high-end medical research with the Jack Welch GE Centre in Whitefield. Earlier, they collaborated with American Universities on these projects, now with us. Additionally, we do consulting on JCAHO for medical groups, IT consulting in the health care space and training at our very own 'Rad Gurukul'. We built and run a multi-speciality acute care (pre-hospital) centre called RXDX and we now have employees all over the world, including a doctor in China. All this has been recognized within the medical community and Arjun received the 'Entrepreneur of the Year Award' from Modern Medicare in March 2008. Welcome to the brave new world of Indian medical entrepreneurs!

Although we started off by providing teleradiology services to American hospitals, we were approached by the Singapore government and became the first Indian healthcare organization to be accredited by the Ministry of Health of Singapore. Our Indian doctors sitting in Bangalore report on X-rays and CT scans of Singaporean patients. We reduced the turnaround time on a report from three days to one hour in Singapore. We currently cover nine medical centres in Singapore in a programme initiated and blessed by the Health Minister of Singapore. In February 2008, we set up a company in Europe to tap the European need for telerad services — Telerad Europe. And we signed with a group in Puerto Rico and Oman to provide telediagnosics.

Unfortunately, we have not been successful in doing much on a large scale in our own country for our own people. We do run two radiology departments in Bangalore and are training students and technologists in radiology. However, in the grand scheme of things this is on a small scale. We are passionate about giving back to our country. We feel God gave us this company for a purpose-to use the technology and domain knowledge and expertise gained via running this company and to put it to good use for remote parts of India. Without good diagnosis in rural India, the health care plan for a patient cannot be made. Getting a high quality diagnostic report to rural India will change the way healthcare is delivered there. We have set up a Telrad Foundation that aims to take high quality diagnostics to remote parts of India where there are patients and scanners but no radiologists. We have been covering Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Arunachal Pradesh gratis for over six months now. And hope to expand this coverage to other areas and hospitals that need it.

Apart from Telerad, we are also involved with a trust called People4people that builds playgrounds in poorer sections of Karnataka, primarily in government