

Technology-driven healthcare entrepreneurship

In order to support healthcare entrepreneurship, several things will need to be done

Last Published: Mon, Feb 03 2014, 10 47 PM IST

✉ Sunita Maheshwari



Healthcare entrepreneurship in the past in India was typically associated with doctors setting up their nursing homes, diagnostic centres and hospitals. Photo: Mint

It's a great time to be a healthcare entrepreneur in India. While not great statistics for the country, 1.2 billion people translates to a combination of patients needing disease diagnosis and treatment and an even larger group needing disease prevention and wellness, thus opening up a myriad opportunities.

Healthcare entrepreneurship in the past in India was typically associated with doctors setting up their nursing homes, diagnostic centres and hospitals. This progressed to private enterprise, not necessarily physicians, setting up healthcare chains.

With rising incidence of lifestyle diseases, more people living in the ripe old age generation need home health services. And with the spread of the Internet, this decade has begun to see a new type of healthcare entrepreneur. These are driven by technology—from electronic medical records (EMRs) to telemedicine to apps to monitor your health at home.

The problems are many, the solutions few, so it's a great time to be a healthcare entrepreneur in India.

In our own entrepreneurial journey starting with teleradiology services and progressing to, among other things, teleradiology software product (RADSpa) development, the pros of setting this up in India were essentially manpower-related—great doctors and great engineers, in addition to the support of the government-run Software Technology Parks of India.

However, while getting radiologists a decade ago was relatively easy, this has changed over the years. Training of specialist radiologists has not kept pace with the healthcare boom, leading to a shortage and rising cost of the existing doctors. The cost advantage India had is very quickly eroding.

The opportunities in teleradiology are new, the rules archaic. For instance, to train a radiologist, the country's rules say that an organization needs a 100-bed hospital. This automatically limits the number of training centres. However, since teleradiology is an IT-enabled service, one does not really need a hospital to practice or train in. New opportunities, old rules.

The other challenges in India have been mainly infrastructural—long commutes for staff due to traffic issues, and electricity and Internet outages needing heavy-duty backup. Additionally, India-specific problems such as general strikes have been difficult for us to handle. To deliver a 24/7 healthcare service delivery from India is not an easy task and *bandhs* and road blockages make it even more challenging.

India has a huge potential to deliver healthcare services and solutions locally as well as globally. In order to support healthcare entrepreneurship, several things will need to be done. At a government level, a rapid increase in the number of training positions for specialist and general doctors; reliable and low-cost electricity, real estate and bandwidth, and a stable working environment.

From a private angle, training of healthcare engineers and allied services; better salary structures for personnel such as nurses and medical technicians to prevent the going-abroad drain; bringing in professionalism, transparency and accountability into a relatively under-regulated field and more collaborations and partnerships to leverage the amazing silos that currently exist.

Funding has dramatically increased with multi-million dollar investments in healthcare. While money is always welcome to grow an industry, entrepreneurs must not lose sight of the fact that for any healthcare venture to be successful, ultimately the patient must benefit.

Unlike some industries, spending money on swanky infrastructure, high-cost administrators and glitzy marketing is not as necessary to grow a successful healthcare venture as well-trained and caring doctors, well-paid and motivated paramedical staff, operational efficiencies, streamlined processes, an obsession with quality and of course, an idea and a service or a solution that fills a need and touches lives.

Sunita Maheshwari is a co-founder of Teleradiology Solutions.

First Published: Mon, Feb 03 2014, 10 47 PM IST