Indian government constitutes a National e-Health Authority

New authority is a ray of hope for healthcare in India

The healthcare system in India is complex, fragmented and very unique with the predominance of the private sector, which has led to a highly inadequate record of data and poor accessibility of doctors to patients. The situation is even worse in rural areas.

It is very rightly said that technology can be a differentiator. Proper and judicious use of information and communication technology ('ICT') is possibly the best answer to resolve the issue of poor accessibility of doctors to needy patients. ICT intervention would enable healthcare providers to manage the data of all patients, making it easier to treat them, and patients would avoid multiple investigations when they happen to visit more than one doctor. Though there is some application of ICT in the present eHealth system, it lacks coordination due to the fragmented approach taken by stakeholders.

Considering all these issues, the need for a consistent and well-connected eHealth system in India that provides uniform standards was felt and as a result the National e-Health Authority ('NeHA') has been constituted. NeHA is constituted with certain specific objectives such as providing efficient and good quality healthcare delivery with the right interventions at the right time, providing better access and more accurate information to patients.

NeHA will be the nodal authority that will develop robust integrated health information systems along with the application of telemedicine and mobile health ('mHealth') by collaborating with all stakeholders. It will be vital for NeHA to work very closely with policymakers and regulators as regulations will play a pivotal role in the implementation of NeHA.

NeHA has been set up with certain specific goals, which include guiding the adoption of eHealth solutions in every area of the nation for meaningful aggregation of data, developing health information exchanges for the integration of health IT systems, and ensuring proper maintenance of security, confidentiality and privacy of patient data.

However achieving these goals may not be easy as NeHA will have to formulate necessary policies and statutory provisions as well as develop strategies for implementation. The main challenges will be to make all stakeholders adapt to eHealth systems especially where there is dominance by private players, the development of a network of institutions, the formulation of standards for informatics, and the setting up of health record repositories and data management as well as privacy.

The concept paper of the NeHA published by the Ministry of Health lays down specific functions that the authority will perform, which include the development of a robust policy for eHealth that is best suited for India, the creation of a roadmap for all stakeholders to embrace eHealth implementing legal and regulatory provisions, the creation of awareness through various educational programmes and the provision of thought leadership to take eHealth to the next level.

No authority can function properly without certain powers that facilitate functions through the implementation of policies and regulations. In order to achieve this, NeHA will be set up through the appropriate legislation that will be passed by the parliament as an Act. The legislation will address all the issues relating to privacy and confidentiality of patient data and records. With this power NeHA will act as an enforcement agency too. NeHA will work very closely with the various government agencies and industry players and will prepare documents relating to architecture, standards, policies and guidelines for all stakeholders.

The application of eHealth in the healthcare system is the need of the hour in India not only for the benefit of patients but for healthcare service providers and various other stakeholders for ease of functioning that will lead to proper access for doctors as well as the best medical care for the patients.

Though setting up NeHA is a welcome step, it will have to navigate various procedural hurdles as the healthcare sector in India is highly regulated. The doctors too will have to abide by the code of ethics prescribed by the Medical Council of India. India also has data privacy laws that restrict the sharing of sensitive personal information with third parties in any electronic form without prior express written consent from the person whose information is obtained. Proposed telemedicine law in India is another important factor that will play a significant role in the development of a robust eHealth system in India. Since NeHA will be set up through an act of parliament there is the possibility of delays.

But, NeHA is definitely a ray of hope and will go a long way to revolutionising India's healthcare system. That said it will be very important for the government to create a proper balance between existing realities and the new law that must be developed.

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