

## Tele-Medicine: Creating the Uber of Healthcare!

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Covid 19 pandemic induced cessation of routine life and services has affected everyone. The healthcare industry has been affected in a little weird way though, on one hand the pandemic is keeping Doctors super busy, with overwhelmed hospitals and on other hand the non-covid treating Doctor fraternity is idle.

The readiness of doctors, availability of snappy internet, acceptance of online interactions and the currently idling healthcare system has fuelled an exponential rise in online platforms for easy connect with Doctors, especially in India. The platforms provide video, audio and text-based opinions and consultations by Doctors for a fee. It has grown into a race to become the Facebook-of-Healthcare, considering this is a multi-level revenue generating venture across the services - Laboratory Services, Radiology Services, Pharmacy, Nursing and Care-taker Services etc.

All disruptive changes started with a beautiful intention at the outset - Facebook was supposed to be an interface for college students to interact and Amazon had intentions to just sell books. We know what these ventures have shaped up today. Telemedicine has been touted to help people in remote area, tide over the difficult times of social distancing and prevent crowding in hospitals. Give it few years and we'll see what this grows into. Doctors and Patients are both venturing into an unknown and potentially dangerous territory. There are some uncomfortable truths deserving attention here.

Issues are expected after the novelty factor fades and Tele-Medicine assumes a routine role. A privilege turning into service-on-demand kind of transformation - something we have started to witness. A Doctor search would match a product and service search, with rates and ratings being used to differentiate. Further when the convenience-addiction takes over, the decisions would narrow down to charges and availability. The available and cheaper option getting consumed higher and faster!

Lack of in-person interaction and talking to screens may translate to over/complete reliance on Laboratory and Radiological Investigations - the only available and safe objective cues to rely on. Medical data have consistently shown that a good clinical examination and history can match and even augment results from investigations. However, the business-school trained health care industry leaders care less and are busy in capacity augmentation for "testing services" making the "human" component cheaper, at times free and almost frivolous.

An addition to the worry is reduction of Medical Consultation to a Service A Doctor to a Provider! It's pushing a serious Healthcare business to go the Shopping way - a traffic/herd like behaviour, algorithm dependant, SEO motivated and IT driven!

Online interactions tend to be fluid and less dense. Internet has rarely succeeded in generating lasting bonds, even basic ones like friendship! A strong and a lasting Doctor-Patient relationship involves patience and time to develop. Online interactions fuel impatience and lack of faith with a tendency to Doctor Shop-Hop!

I envision a rise of #CloudDoctors and #CloudHealthcare - A team or an individual doctor without a physical set-up, providing only on-line consultation services from and to anywhere across the world! However, that raises possibility of poorly trained and less experienced doctors getting a platform to monetize without any major responsibility. Who monitors the quality of such care and the medico-legal issues arising out of the same? The answers lie in future.

For the comfort-zoned Doctors, it would be unwise to see Tele- platforms as an assured long-term source of revenue. We have some painful lessons from Radiologists, who were early adopters. As early as 2001, Radiologists in India saw a boom in Trans-Atlantic tele-reporting of CT and MRI Scans with each report earning at 1000-1500 ₹ (INR) 13 - 20\$. Currently the amount goes as low as 150 ₹ (INR), that's about 2\$!

A colleague shared a concern that soon doctors using online platforms would be equated to the drivers of Uber-Ola. I fear that even if a Doctor resists that path, the online platforms essentially puts Healthcare professionals up like products on Amazon or Flipkart!

Stay Safe.

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