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HEALTH

Changing paradigm of healthcare communications in India

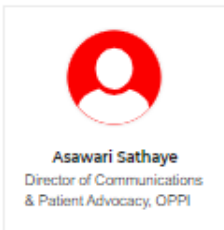
June 25, 2023, 3:15 PM IST / Asawari Sathaye in Voices, Health, TOI

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The last couple of years have seen a sea change in the way organizations communicate across the world brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and the healthcare and pharma communications globally have witnessed a paradigm shift. As the world embraced a far more virtual society, there has been an increasing need to expedite digital communications between organizations and their consumers. This transformation has had a profound impact on the pharmaceutical industry in India and around the world, highlighting the significance of engagement, communication, and collaboration. Multiple events in the past have showcased time and again the essence of healthcare communications for the public.

For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of communication was heightened throughout the world. Communication played a crucial role in sharing accurate and up-to-date information about the virus, prevention measures, testing protocols, vaccine distribution, and other critical information. Healthcare organizations and public health agencies utilized different channels, including social media, public service announcements, community engagement, and collaborations with influencers and celebrities, to encourage vaccine uptake, address vaccine hesitancy, and educate the public about the importance of vaccination in controlling the pandemic.

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What has panned out?

Healthcare communication holds immense importance in the current scenario. As the pharmaceutical landscape shifts towards a more consumer-driven and patient-centric model, organizations need to adapt to this changing ecosystem. Meaningful dialogue among various stakeholders, including pharmaceutical companies, medical research institutes, hospitals, and patients, becomes paramount. Healthcare communications specialists embody the critical role of facilitating collaboration and communication among these diverse entities.

In such a scenario, stakeholders such as The Organization of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI), have played a crucial role in driving the transformation of healthcare communications in India. Through its ***Bharat Ke Liye*** campaign, OPPI has been at the forefront of adopting innovative communication strategies that align with the evolving healthcare landscape. OPPI recognizes the importance of effective communication in fostering patient-centricity and places the needs of patients at the forefront of its initiatives.

Importance of Involving Patients/End Consumers

Patient engagement and value are tightly intertwined with healthcare communications. In today's era, patients are increasingly well-informed and invested in their health and well-being. Therefore, they need to be actively involved in defining and understanding how to maximize the value they receive. Healthcare communications specialists aim to explore novel ways of optimizing engagement to drive patient value, both through digital means and traditional approaches.

Over the past two decades, the pharmaceutical sector has realized the power of patient partnerships and the importance of patient centricity. These collaborations have yielded significant benefits for patients and patient groups, resulting in improved healthcare services and outcomes. Transparent and open communication, along with a clear understanding of each organization's role in the partnership, is crucial for fully realizing the potential of these collaborations.

The Indian Landscape

In India, empowering stakeholders in the healthcare ecosystem, including patients and consumers, is a top priority for health communication. Involving patients in healthcare decisions through various communication channels is key. Utilizing technology can help understand patients' problems and needs, blurring the boundaries between healthcare professionals and patients while facilitating faster delivery of healthcare processes. Establishing a dialogue with patients allows healthcare professionals to determine their agreement or disagreement with diagnoses and treatments, ensuring a clear path to recovery. Using simple language that patients can understand and feel comfortable with builds trust and confidence. Listening to and

empathizing with patients is of utmost importance, as it encourages open communication and supports patients in conveying their fears and concerns.

To create a better future for Indian patients, a customized human-centric model is essential. Pharma companies need to communicate with patients to understand their expectations and challenges, shaping the development of drugs and therapy delivery models accordingly. Healthcare communications should not follow a one-size-fits-all approach in India. It requires sensitivity and awareness of the realities patients face, bridging the gap between pharmaceutical MNCs and patients through integrated communication channels such as public relations, interactive sessions, workshops, handshake meets, digital platforms, community-based approaches, and partnerships.

Way Forward

Looking ahead, the relationship of collaboration and trust between pharma industry bodies and patients will continue to evolve, positively impacting the nature of communications. A strong bond and frequent communication among all stakeholders will enhance the understanding of data and clinical impact, leading to improved clinical outcomes. By aligning and connecting the different elements of the healthcare chain, including researchers, pharmaceutical developments can be better managed to benefit patients. This interconnectedness will strengthen delivery models and ensure the effective engagement of patient voices.

The healthcare communications landscape will keep evolving and shifting as we move forward. It will be characterized by a growing reliance on digital channels, increased patient engagement, and a continued emphasis on collaboration and trust-building. By embracing these changes, healthcare and pharma communications will contribute to advancing patient-centred care and achieving better health outcomes for all, in India and globally.

As G20 president, India has listed 3 healthcare priorities recently: tackling health emergencies, strengthening the pharmaceutical sector to improve access and availability of medical countermeasures, and digital innovations for universal health coverage (UHC) for all.

These priorities, in a sense, reflect the great strides that the country has made in both therapeutics and universal healthcare coverage in recent years as well as the growth opportunities and threats that lie ahead.

From expanding UHC to leveraging technology for digital healthcare services, from becoming the COVID-19 vaccine manufacturer for the world to production-linked incentive schemes for manufacturing active pharmaceutical ingredients in India, it's all happening in the Indian healthcare sector today – and it's all for Bharat ke Liye.

Accelerated pace of change

Undoubtedly, the pandemic spurred the pace of change. The \$42-billion Indian pharmaceutical sector was already known as the largest manufacturer of affordable generic medicines globally, but the pandemic further bolstered its reputation as the 'pharmacy of the world' as India emerged as the leading global supplier of COVID-19 vaccines. Collaborations between the global and Indian pharmaceutical industries and the government too strengthened as they joined hands to tackle the emergency.

The government has undertaken numerous enabling initiatives in the past few years that have made healthcare-for-all a more realistic goal today. India is committed to achieving UHC by 2030. The Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), the world's largest insurance/assurance scheme that provides cover to around 10.74 crore poor and vulnerable families, and the primary healthcare Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centers (AB-HWC), 150,000 of which are functioning today, will play a key role here.

In addition, the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission is promoting digital health solutions, which will increasingly help bridge the gap in healthcare delivery by providing access to affordable healthcare. The rise in digital healthcare is evident from the spread of telemedicine in recent times.

Growing pharma sector

On its part, the pharma industry too is racing ahead to leverage the growth opportunities. The Indian pharmaceutical market is expected to grow to \$130 billion by 2030, according to a recent EY FICCI report. Global and Indian pharma companies are collaborating and co-creating and they are also converging with each other and with the government to meet existing and unmet patient needs. Pharma companies are enhancing their research and development spending and manufacturing capabilities, and many more complex molecules are under development today.

Challenges ahead

While the country has come a long way both in terms of eliminating diseases like polio and building a globally competitive pharmaceutical industry, there's no denying the numerous challenges ahead, among the biggest of which is the growing incidence of communicable and non-communicable diseases in the country and the gap in healthcare infrastructure and services. The pharma sector will continue to collaborate with the government and hospitals, diagnostics, and other players in the healthcare ecosystem to address these and other healthcare challenges.

While the government must continue to strengthen healthcare infrastructure and delivery systems to ensure UHC for all by 2030, the pharmaceutical industry in India too needs to increase investments in R&D and keep upgrading its manufacturing and quality standards to provide access to affordable medicines for all. Favourable policies and stronger partnerships between government, industry and academia can help accelerate the pace of innovation and expansion of healthcare infrastructure, too.

Digital healthcare solutions will also enable the transformation of healthcare in India. For instance, digital data management and information systems and New Age technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning can help in treating and tracking lifestyle diseases, as is evident from the growing number of health tech start-ups in the country. The challenges are

numerous, but as both the government and industry have shown in recent years, healthcare for all is no longer a distant dream.