

16 April 2014, Jamie Mullik

A guide through complexity of India's medical care

Amit Goel, a resident of Bordubi village in Assam's Tinsukia district, was shocked when his son was born with two serious medical conditions. Amit's son Darsh was not only born with a hole in his heart, he also had Down's Syndrome. A relative told him about an organisation called the Hospital Guide Foundation (HGF), which provides free-of-charge guidance to people who are confused and are in need of medical guidance. After talking to the HGF, he was put in touch with two doctors in Delhi where he travelled to immediately with his three-month-old son for surgery for the heart condition. Later, Mr Goel was also put in touch with multiple hospitals in the capital to receive therapy for the child's Down's Syndrome as well.



"I was more concerned about Darsh's Down's Syndrome than I was about his heart defect. Almost every doctor had told me that there wasn't much that can be done for a patient with Down's. But HGF put me through at two very good hospitals in New Delhi and they suggested a few forms of therapy for Down's. We were told about physiotherapy that would help with his condition. Thanks to the right advice from doctors, Darsh's quality of life has improved by as much as 80 per cent thanks to the therapy," said Mr Goel.

Yasub, a resident of Bengaluru, had been suffering from issue relating to hyper-acidity for a very long time. He had consulted many doctors, but no form of treatment had been successful in his case. Almost out of hope, a colleague told him about the Hospital Guide Foundation. After getting in touch with the HGF, he was advised to consider options other than allopathy. He was told that it was possible that homeopathy and naturopathy could be more effective in his case. "It was finally homeopathy that worked in my case," he says. After that experience, he has told many of his friends and family about the foundation's work and they have approached the HGF about issues ranging from chronic depression to orthopedic conditions.

In another case in Assam, a 53-day-old baby girl was born with a serious anorectal malformation called rectovestibular fistula. The couple, who do not wish to be named, got in touch with the Hospital Guide Foundation and were connected to a doctors in Bengaluru who managed to correct the malformation in the infant's colon and rectum in a single surgery. The couple had been told earlier that at least two surgeries would be needed to fix the condition.

"I think it's paradoxical that India is emerging as a hub for medical tourism and yet our own people don't have access to proper medical care," says Hospital Guide Foundation co-founder and director Indiritta Singh D'mello, an Oxford graduate who started the HGF with her husband Manu Tripathi. "We wanted to create a guide for healthcare in the country. A guide for the people who are looking for a specialist and have no idea who to ask. But most importantly, we wanted these services to be completely free and unbiased," says Manu Tripathi who also works as a programme director for a major radio channel in Bengaluru. Hospital Guide Foundation was started as a group on Facebook with a handful of listed doctors. The foundation has now grown to register more than 700 doctors on its database and are serving in Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru. Indiritta and Manu have also started citizen journal's forum with more than 50,000 members, including doctors. The purpose of this forum is to share experiences in the medical sphere, whether good or bad, says Indiritta. Members can seek opinions, suggestions on doctors in the forum. The forum also enables the HGF to get candid viewpoints from the patients about the doctors. "Once the NGO caught on, we were approached by many people with business proposals but Indiritta and I felt that it was best if we didn't stray away from the original idea of forming Hospital Guide Foundation — to help people. We will stick to not having any commercial transactions with hospitals and doctors and not charging patients as this is a social cause and not a business for us. And to our delight many doctors are supporting this social cause," explains Manu.

The patient starts off with the personal health request through the website www.HospitalGuide.in where they send a medical query. Then Ms D'mello makes sure she calls up each of the patients individually. She says that they manage to get a lot more information from speaking to the patient/attendant than through the query sent through the website. "For instance, there are times when people write to us wanting a doctor for the liver and when we talk to them we realise there is a bigger problem that needs to be addressed which is alcoholism. So the conversation with the patient/attendant is important as it helps them build trust in us and we get relevant information to guide them correctly. Of course this is kept confidential," Indiritta explains. After this, the cases are referred to a panel of 3-4 doctors who decide on the course of action and they give recommendations for the specialists that the patient should be taken to, which is then communicated to the patient. The patients are usually given multiple references so they get a better idea of the condition and the treatment options they can pursue.

"It is extremely important that we remain completely unbiased because we couldn't have a system where we are looking out for the best interest of the patients, if we were having any commercial tieups with hospitals or doctors," Mr Tripathi explains.

But the HGF's role does not stop with just guiding the patients to the doctors. "One of the best thing about the HGF is that Ms Indiritta, even after getting me the appointment with the doctor, made several calls to follow up on the treatment that was advised and she genuinely wanted to know how the treatment was progressing," Yasub said.

"The problem is not only about affordability but accessibility. India has a dearth of doctors on the whole. And out of these doctors, only 26 per cent of doctors are present in rural area with 70 per cent of our population residing there. We want to address this problem in the rural areas by connecting patients to doctors through technology — tele-medicine," says Indiritta.