



DOCTORS@ CLICK AWAY

With so many health and medical sites already registered, it seems that online medical consultation is a sizable market, which is expected to grow exponentially. But are there any set of guidelines to keep a track on the information, content and authenticity of these web portals?

BY DEEPIKA KHURANA

You're headed for your office but right then your daughter complains of severe stomach ache. Taking her to a hospital at peak office hour would mean beating crazy

traffic, waiting for your turn at the clinic, stopping at a pharmacy to get the prescribed medicines and then driving her back home safe. But if you wish to avoid all the stress, just log on to

any reliable online medical portal and ask for a doctor at the comfort of one click. In fact, the rise of internet users and IT penetration in India on desktop and mobile devices has increased a

number of online health consultation portals and e-clinics, which has opened new doors of information for patients, at the same time, giving busy doctors a new platform to interact with their patients.

"Such e-clinics are not just informative, but are the need of the hour. Right information at the right time not just save lives, but saves money and energy as well. And there is absolutely no dearth of information on the internet these days for people to get educated about various health-related issues and then, accordingly, make a choice," says Dr Amit Gawande, general physician at Seven Hills Hospital, Mumbai.

Gawande, at 28, is a full-time doctor and despite having hectic work schedules at the hospital, he doesn't mind spending another two hours on the internet

to reply to the health queries that often pile up in his mailbox.

"Besides replying to emails, I also make an effort to take health related questions on different forums like Yahoo etc. And I do it

with an intention to help people," he says.

Agrees Dr Amitabh Gupta, a neuro spine surgeon working

with Indian Spinal Injuries Centre at

Vasant Kunj,

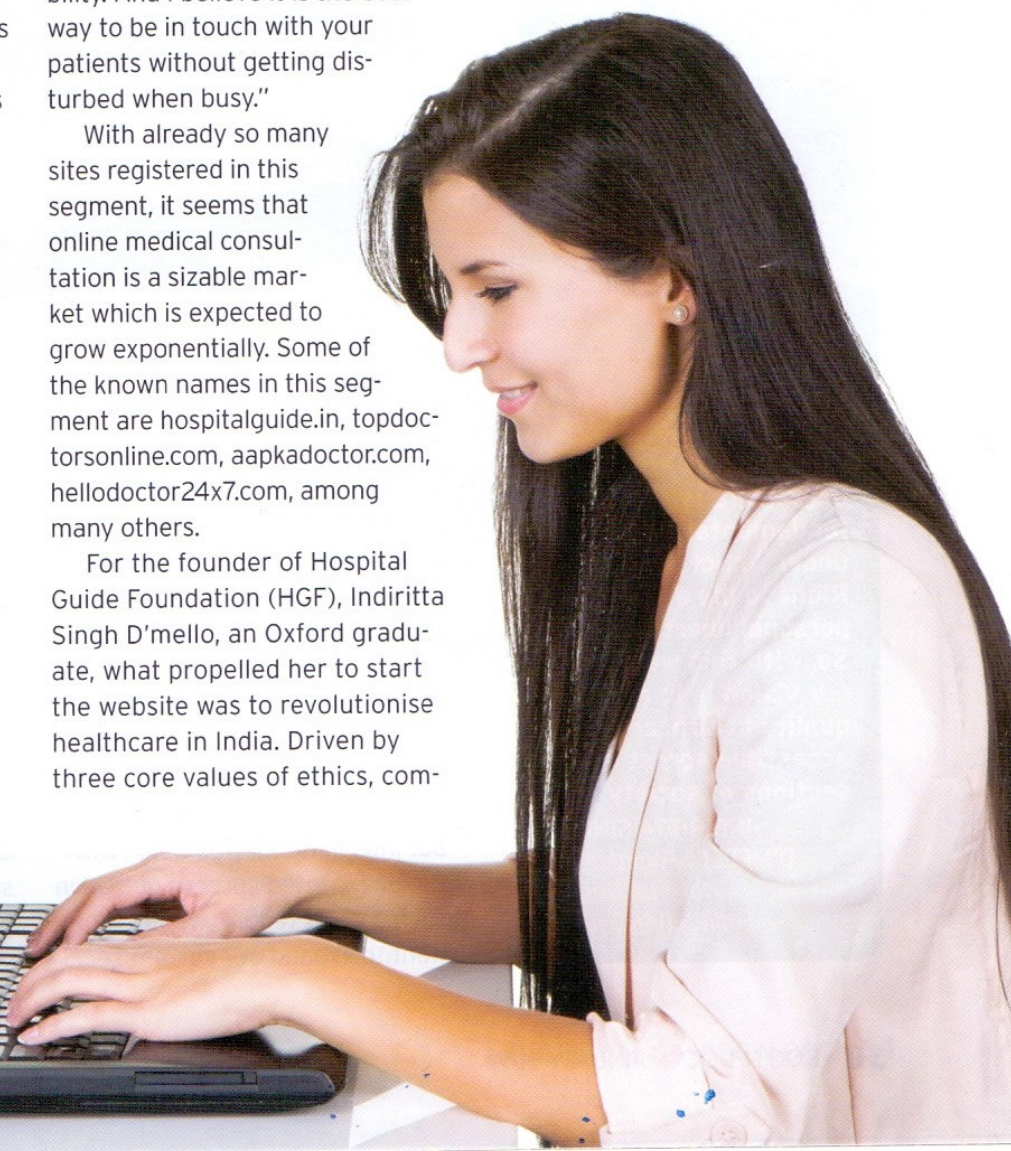
New Delhi, "Being part of health portals or forums etc. definitely increases visibility. And I believe it is the best way to be in touch with your patients without getting disturbed when busy."

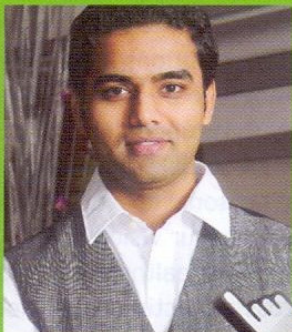
With already so many sites registered in this segment, it seems that online medical consultation is a sizable market which is expected to grow exponentially. Some of the known names in this segment are hospitalguide.in, topdoctoronline.com, aapkadoctor.com, hellodoctor24x7.com, among many others.

For the founder of Hospital Guide Foundation (HGF), Indiritta Singh D'mello, an Oxford graduate, what propelled her to start the website was to revolutionise healthcare in India. Driven by three core values of ethics, com-

petence and compassion, HGF's current core service is providing healthcare solutions by referring its members to doctors. "Right to healthcare is fundamental, covered under Article 21, i.e. Right to life and personal liberty. So, with this website, our vision is to make quality healthcare accessible across all sections of society. About 70 per cent of our population is in rural areas and only 26 per cent doctors are present there. It is paradoxical that India is emerging as a hub for medical tourism and we cannot even provide basic healthcare to many of our people. Working in rural areas is an integral part of our future plans," she says.

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D'MELLO, Founder of
Hospital Guide
Foundation (HGF)



HGF stands for a cause and is not driven by profit maximisation, insists D'mello. It is a free service with no commercial transaction with suggested healthcare providers/doctors, hence ensuring unbiased suggestions. Being a stringent form of an NGO, a company under Section 25 for charitable purposes, gives HGF credibility not only domestically, but internationally as well. "With the unexpected success of HGF in such a short tenure, we would want to expand our current serv-

ices from Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai to other parts of the country now."

While some of these portals keep doctors and patients connected round-the-clock through live chats, electronically maintained health records and open forum discussions, others provide them with services that may help locate an authenticated doctor, fix appointments and send doctors at their doorstep. These websites not only direct a patient to the closest doctor, but



also connect them to an international specialist for a second opinion. Dr Belal Bin Asaf, thoracoscopic and robotic surgeon, consultant at Center for Thoracic Surgery and Lung Transplantation, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, New Delhi, concurs, "Actually, now-a-days people are informed and educated about their health miseries. And they just don't stop with what one doctor has to say. Therefore, their search for the second and third opinion till they are really convinced is what

APOLLO PRISM – A WEB BASED PERSONAL HEALTH RECORD

Apollo Hospitals in collaboration with HealthHiway, a cloud based Health Information Network, launched its highly secure, web-based Personal Health Record (PHR) - Apollo Prism recently. Apollo Prism lets patients receive, create and manage their health information, such as lab test results, discharge summary, medical history, medications and other health interventions. The patients can then choose to share all or part of their health information with their loved ones and Apollo Hospital.

Apollo Prism has been tightly integrated with hospital information systems across locations, thus providing clinically validated information to patients, who come to Apollo Hospitals. Information is entirely patient controlled and completely confidential. Patients can also download the mobile application of Apollo Prism that lets them receive their lab test results on their phone.

calls for the success of these web portals. And I believe these sites, if properly built and maintained, can prove to be the link between patients and sound medical advice."

And because these portals have a global reach, they are successful in reaching out to thousands of people from small towns and villages too. "Today, the doctor-patient ratio is 1:18000 and almost all super specialists are based out of metros and A-class towns. So, we believe adoption of new age phenomenon always helps a professional to be future ready," says Anand Chatterjee, CEO, topdoctorsonline.com.

■ The Way Forward

One of the most successful Delhi-based sites is topdoctorsonline.com which was started a few years ago, and then re-launched on a beta mode in August 2013. It aspires to be a billion-dollar company by

2020. "If we see the trend globally, developed markets are ahead and constantly moving. India is catching up at a faster pace compared to other developing nations. And if we talk of future, we believe e-clinics and their services will be best utilised in another two year's time frame. Telemedicine, remote patient management and remote

consultation will enable a surge by 2015," says Chatterjee.

"Such online services help in optimisation of available specialist resources. For instance, in a country lacking specialists and super specialists, with a vast population to cater to, the only way to enhance the reach for doctors is this.

Even at a doctor level, this helps in reaching out to individuals, saving his time and enhancing earnings."

Talking of the trend prevalent in India, he further says, "Since

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Shalimar Bagh

penetration of internet is higher in metros and A-class towns, current traffic is tilted towards the same, but we see approximately 30 per cent users from B and C-class towns as well."

Factors like bounce rate and average time spent by the visitor on the website, number of page views and others indicate the success of any website. "Through our website, users can not only consume content from top doctors, but also consult/seek advice from them and avail services such as diagnostic labs. Our web portal is not just for people who are unwell, but it's also for users who proactively live a healthy lifestyle. Similarly, our mobile portal created for Vodafone attempts to resolve health queries related to sexual and mental

health, etc.," Chatterjee adds.

Another such portal called hellodoctor24x7 is based out of Odisha. It was started in 2007 to help people who are being deprived of proper information and guidance. "Since 2007, we have been growing consistently. Today, on an average we get 80-90 calls on a daily basis. Our USP remains to be tele-health consultation, and the best part is that users keep coming back to us for further guidance," says Ashok Kumar, manager-HR Team, at the website.

■ Business model

Some of the services on these sites, such as the open forum discussions on symptoms posted by individuals, are free, whereas private chats with specialists can range anywhere from ₹200 to ₹2,000. Apart from the fee that the sites charge as a percentage of the doctor's fee, corporate clients, advertising, retailing and annual subscription by hospitals on the networks also help in generating revenues. "As of now, lot of training and push is required from our side to sign up and educate doctors for using such services. We provide content, consultation and services at pay-per-use or subscription-based pricing," says Chatterjee. "The number of paid transactions for a consultation is not so high and volumes are considerably low in order to operate with economies of scale, but yes, doctors are open

to experiment and to extend their support," he adds.

■ Caution is the keyword

With the sudden surge in upcoming medical portals, keeping a track on their information, content and authenticity is not easy. The problem lies in the fact that there is no quality control on these websites in our country and

most of these collect falsified data about doctors. Moreover, there is no check on the advice given to patients by doctors as well. "As an advice to patients, I would suggest that they should look for the credibility of the website, which can be assessed by searching for its association with a professional medical body, such as a renowned

hospital or professional organisations like the Association of Surgeons of India, Indian Medical Association etc.," suggests Dr Belal Bin Asaf.

Similarly, Dr Gawande believes there will always be a limit to e-clinics because everything cannot be done or diagnosed online. "Of course, online chats carry a risk of miscommunication and misinterpretation, which can cause problems at times. However, such e-clinics definitely help. They give faster, short-term benefits, but in the long run people should realise that personalised consultation is the best way to go about," he concludes. ■

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