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The Health Guardians

Many patients are enrolling in new-age disease management programmes that go beyond prescriptions to help them conquer chronic diseases

NEHA BHAYANA
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Homemaker Jyoti Apte, who was diagnosed with diabetes three years ago, used to struggle to understand why her blood sugar levels fluctuated dramatically though she was taking her medicines regularly. The specialist she was consulting would simply say "it happens" and scribble a new prescription, leaving the 55-year-old Mumbaikar frustrated and with countless questions buzzing in her head.

But a lot has changed over the past six months. Apte can rattle off the A to Z of diabetes and has found answers to all her questions. The new-found awareness is helping her tackling the disease with more confidence and buoyancy. "I am not groping in the dark anymore," she says.

Apte has enrolled in a diabetes support programme run by Kartavya Healthon. The Mumbai-based organisation is among half a dozen or so disease management (DM) companies that have been set up in India in recent years.

These private companies offer to hold the hands of patients dealing with chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, asthma and traumatic conditions like cancer to help them adhere to the treatment with an aim to reduce complications and therefore prevent the loss of lives. More than 52 lakh people died in India of non-communicable diseases like heart disease, stroke and cancer in 2008, according to the World Health Organisation's latest report.

At a time when the good old family doctor has vanished and when specialists have little time or patience — doctors spend an average of only two minutes per patient according to one estimate — for their patients, these new-age companies aim to fill the crucial gap with patient support services. "The doctor's role is over after he writes a prescription. That's when we come into the picture," says Vikram Srivastava, CEO of Kartavya.

"Patients battling diseases like cancer are often in denial mode and tend to switch over to alternative therapies in hope for a cure. But consistency with the treatment is essential for a positive outcome. We educate, counsel and constantly monitor patients to ensure compliance," he adds.

Patients are not only happy to get the additional support but also to outsource their headache — the companies send them reminders to take their pills and even send doctors to their homes for check-ups. Around 10,000 patients across 21 cities have enrolled with Kartavya Healthon since it was launched in 2008. The two chains of DM clinics run by Apollo Hospitals — Breathe Easy for respiratory diseases and Sugar Clinics for diabetes — have got 14,000 and 12,000 patients since they started operations in 2005 and 2010 respectively.

Reliance Health and Nationwide are other players in the DM industry. Many health websites are also offering tools for management of conditions ranging from high cholesterol to infertility. While the concept of DM is new to India, such programmes have been popular abroad since the mid 1990s. In 2010, over 20 per cent of chronic disease patients in the US were using DM services. Indian companies expect the demand for remote-controlled disease management to escalate here too considering the growing burden of lifestyle dis-

orders and once a year more advanced tests such as funduscopy are conducted at the clinic itself to assess the impact of diabetes on the eyes at the clinic itself. "If we detect some retinal damage or any other complication, we immediately refer the patient to a concerned specialist so his vision is saved," says Dr Syed Moazam, a diabetologist who heads the clinical operations of Sugar Clinics.

The Sugar Clinics run a portal where patients can maintain their health records electronically and a 24/7 helpline. The call centre representatives call the patients twice a month to see how they are coping and enquire about the latest sugar count. Patients are free to call whenever a doubt is nagging them. "The call centre staffers are well-versed with diabetes-related issues but if there is a treatment-specific query or if they notice a drastic change in the sugar level, they immediately contact the doctor, discuss the problem and then call the patient back with the response," says Pati.

Counselling is just a call away for patients who sign up for Kartavya's programme, too. Plus the

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company has 'disease advisors' — usually retired nurses, doctors or psychologists — who visit the homes of patients once a month. The patients are also given literature on the disease in their mother tongue, and they are either enrolled for a free SMS alert service or gifted a 'pill reminder machine' — a special alarm clock that goes off when one needs to take medicines — when they join Kartavya.

ADDING CARE TO CARE

While Kartavya's DM programme is meant to be supplementary to the doctor's clinical treatment, the Sugar Clinics are a one-stop shop for diabetics as they combine the cure and care aspects under one roof. Patients who enroll here are treated by a diabetologist and have regular sessions with nutritionists, counsellors and diabetes educators who advise them on diet, exercise and behavioural modification to slow the disease's progression.

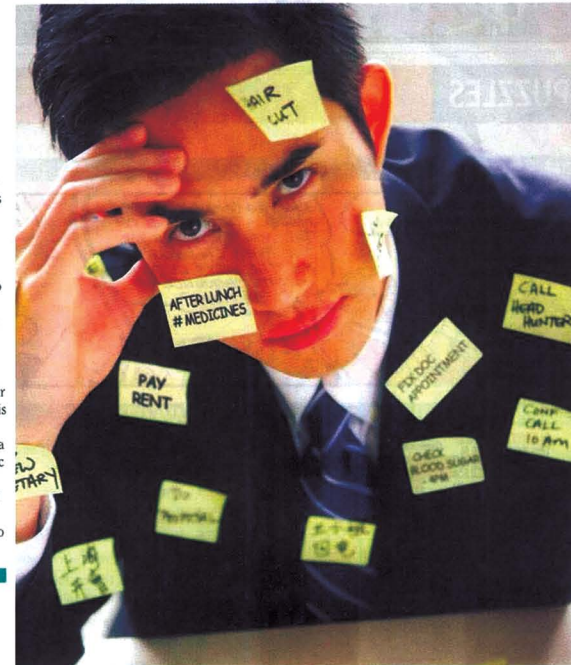
Moreover, the patient is put through a battery of tests — some are included in the package, others are offered at discounted rates — every quarter

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MUTUAL BENEFIT

Going to a Sugar Clinic works out to be a better deal for patients as they have to pay Rs 4,500 to Rs 6,500 for the all-inclusive one-year package. They would have to fork out the same amount for just four to five consultations with a specialist.

Kartavya, on the other hand, does not charge patients a penny. The company provides the service based on its tie-ups with pharmaceutical companies and diagnostic laboratories. Patients who



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roll get their monthly supply of medicines delivered to their doorstep directly by the pharmacy's local distributor. Though it is not mandatory for patients to opt for this drug delivery service, many do as it saves them trips to the chemist. For pharma companies, this means consistent orders and patients sticking to their and so they are happy to contribute to the running of the operations of the DM programme.

EFICACY NOT PROVED

any studies have been conducted abroad to gauge the efficacy of DM. While some have shown reduction in hospital re-admissions and complications among patients, most research found conclusive evidence of DM's benefits.

In India, the industry is too nascent to be evaluated. The companies, however, claim the feedback is encouraging. Dr Moazam says most

patients who had completed a year with the Sugar Clinics were doing much better — their glycosylated haemoglobin level had gone down from 10 or 11 to under seven, which indicates that the sugar levels had been in control for three months. "Half of the patients re-joined the Clinic because they were happy with the results," he says.

Apte, too, is all praise for DM and says she is much more motivated now. "As a diabetic, I knew that I had to avoid certain foods and exercise regularly but I was unable to put it into practice. Now I know why being disciplined is essential. So, if my children leave some junk food in their plates, I don't end up finishing it," she says.

Apte gets a call from the counsellors almost every week and is expecting a second home-visit soon. "They keep enquiring about my health. It feels nice. I have found a listener, a shoulder to lean on," she adds. ■