

Ensuring rural health must be a priority for Digital India campaign: ASSOCHAM

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As one of the immediate possible deliverables to Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi's Digital India programme, an ASSOCHAM sectoral Paper has suggested Tele-medicine be reached to a vast population of the country which is still not covered with the basic health amenities.

The key issues which can make the programme a big success would be costs and adequate availability of Internet bandwidth, the paper has said.

With 68 percent of India's people living in rural areas, telemedicine is seen as a means of improving the quality of rural healthcare. In countries like India, the national healthcare systems are still struggling to deliver affordable access to healthcare to all of their citizens. With limited resources and much of the population living in remote rural areas, Telemedicine has the potential to revolutionize the delivery of healthcare in the country, the paper said.

"For telemedicine to be widely implemented, it has to be profitable to both; vendors and patients. Bandwidth costs, training and maintaining personnel at the point of care centre increase costs while confidence of the patient is low when the doctor untrained in tele-health attends to them," the ASSOCHAM Paper noted.

The Chamber Secretary General Mr D S Rawat said, "Reaching health to the rural areas by leveraging the Prime Minister's ambitious Digital India Programme would be one of its major measurable deliverables".

Telemedicine has huge potential in India because of the severe shortage of doctors, especially in rural areas; high patient volumes; widespread availability of mobile networks; rapid growth in the availability of low-power, hand-held medical monitoring devices, and the shift away to a networked tele-enabled system.

However, enough availability of Internet speed via bandwidth remains an area of concern. Even though low-cost telemedicine applications have proven to be feasible, clinically useful, these applications are not being adopted on a significant scale due

to a variety of barriers.

"Telemedicine usage is limited in scale in the country. Urgent action is therefore needed to break down barriers to the widespread adoption of the technology in healthcare. These barriers include regulatory hurdles, in particular clarifying the legislative environment relating to health data privacy and security and personal identity regulations", the paper said.

A lack of computer literate workers with expertise in managing computer services, combined with the lengthy process required to master computer-based peripheral medical instruments can hinder the adoption of telemedicine in the country.