

Experiences with Online Services in Homoeopathy: A Government of Delhi Initiative

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Introduction

Internet has transformed the world into a global village. The present user base of broad band services in India is about 440 million and is growing at the rate of 20-30% annually. It has become a handy tool for providing services to the remote areas without much human interface. India is facing a challenge of ensuring health services for rural population, as only 27% of doctors are available for 80% of rural population. Changing patterns of information sharing and patient- doctor relationships due to the telecommunications has brought fundamental changes to health organizations. Initiatives in tele-medicines have grown, in the field of Homeopathy also; web portals are being used for disseminating information and providing e-consultation.

Eight years ago, Delhi Homeopathic Anusandhan Parishad (DHAP), an autonomous organization of Govt. of Delhi, had launched www.delhihomeo.com to provide vital information and greater access to its service through e-consultations. The website contains information about Homeopathy, its history, activities of Govt. of Delhi and the research activities being undertaken by the Government. So far, it was accessed by more than 0.5 million persons. The demand to these services is estimated to grow exponentially in coming years due to increasing penetration of broad band services. Therefore there is an urgent requirement to assess the efficacy and impact of these services. The objectives of this paper are to undertake the anamnesis of user base and ascertain their satisfaction levels.

Methodology

The website is giving general advice using open ended form and e consultation in Homeopathy through a structured form. As a policy, the reply to the treatment query is being given within seven days after proper analysis and to the advice within three days. A feedback questionnaire was sent through e mail to all the users (1298) and the response has been received from 370 users. The profile of the users and their feedback has been analyzed on various parameters.

Results and key lessons

Geographic coverage

Table No-1: Anamnesis of Hits worldwide

Region	Asia			Europe	USA	Middle East	Australia	Africa	Polar
	Asia	India	Other						
Hits	3355	3258	107	69	88	52	11	8	2

The services were accessed from all over the world, though majorities were from India and Asian countries. USA citizen have shown greater interest than others.

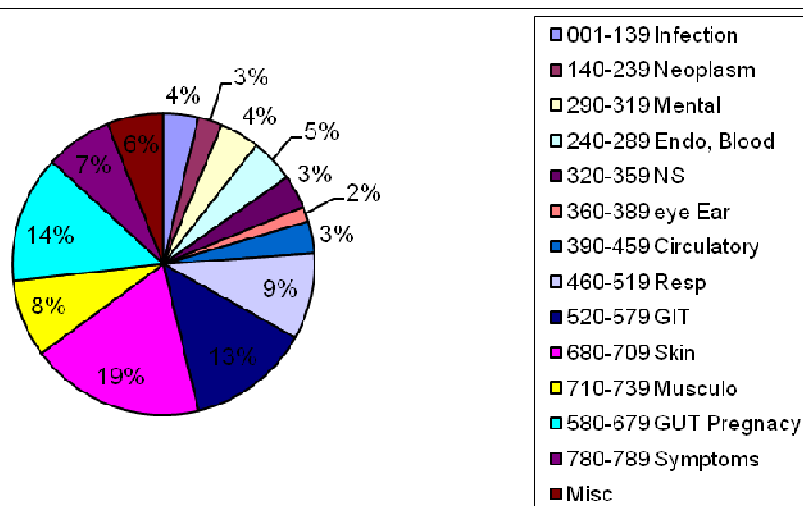
Table No -2: Regional Distribution of Hits within India

Regions	North	South	West	East	Central
Hits	1440	467	364	227	67

The services are popular in Northern states, may be due initial media coverage of the launch. It is being accessed from all over India, poor response has been received from UP and Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, obvious reason appears to be low levels of Internet literacy and penetration.

Purpose of consultation

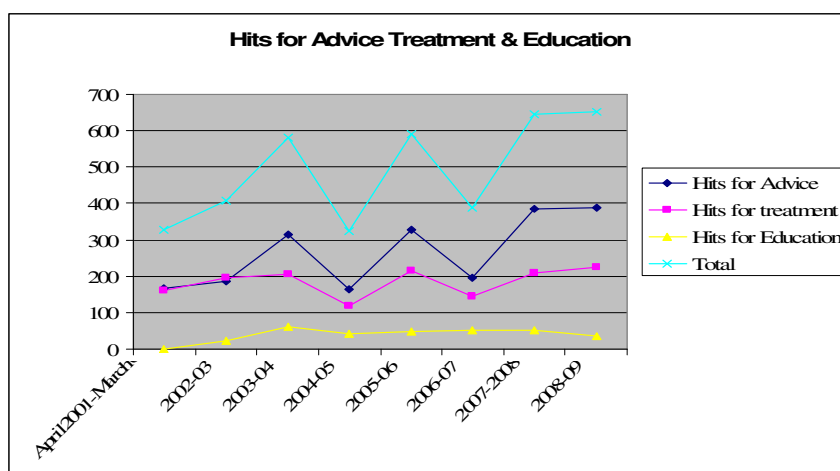
Figure 1: Morbidity Profile of patients



The consultations were majorly for skin (19%), genitourinary-GUT (14%), gastrointestinal-GIT (13%), respiratory (9%) and musculoskeletal systems (9%); and strikingly 6% for Swine flu this year. It also gave an opportunity to seek vital health information about HIV/AIDS, STDs (6%) and mental diseases (4%). Besides advice/treatment queries, 6% queries were for education.

Impact of disruptions:

Figure 2: Hits for Advice, Treatment and Education over the years



During eight years 2,095 persons had sought advice and 1,298 persons consulted for specific treatment. There is a marked increase over the years in number of e-service seekers (noted by hits) for advice as well as treatment. It has just doubling over these years but number reduced drastically during 2004-05 and 2006-07) when our website was hacked and services remained disturbed for about 2 months, so website security and confidentiality security to the information seeker is key for the success of such ventures.

Gender & age differentiation

The usage was considerably low by the females (28%) (1075), but there is rising trend in last two years.

Table No. 3 Age groups

Age band in years	Upto 20	20-40 Young middle age group	40-60 Higher Middle Age	Above 60 Old Age
No. of Hits	234	779	408	107

The age group of only 1528 users is known, majority were between 20-40 years, signifying that upcoming generation is having increased awareness about the technology, therefore the number of seeking help through internet is likely to increase exponentially.

Analysis of feedback proforma

The analysis of feedback received from only 370 persons (25%) reveals as under:

- 74% came across this service through internet, which is significant and explain that people tend to seek health information confidentially.

- Only 64% could be answered within the stipulated time limit of 7 days, which explains that the responsiveness is critical for the success of this venture. The time should not be more than three days, simple cases should be responded on daily basis.
- 75% rated the quality of response as ‘good’, which means that there is limit of providing net consultation, human interface is also important and can enhance the quality of care.
- 81% stated that they could comprehend the process of filling up the proforma but in actual practice, it was noted that not more 10% filled required information. There is need to make the format user friendly by including objective type information, wherein patient has to choose only the correct one.
- 85% stated that site requires further promotion and even agreed to recommend others.
- No patient reported any side effect or adverse reaction of the treatment given, this explains that it is good and safe to approach unreachable through net consultations in Homeopathy.

Cost-Effectiveness

The cost for online advice and treatment per patient was calculated. It was about Rs 40/- per patient, which can be further reduced if the number of consultations is increased. It has significantly reduced the cost towards the man power.

(vi) Downside of Free Access

In addition to 3393 persons, there were about 20% bogus loggers, which can be reduced by making it a paid service. The services can be further promoted through e-kiosks through a project like “Jeevan”.

Conclusions

This venture has been able to disseminate information on Homeopathy to more than 0.5 million persons without any commercial interests. It can provide quality health care in homeopathy, enhance faith in the system and maintains confidentiality. Though this paper does not advocate either/ or approach, the combination of online and clinic-based services can go a long way in furthering the cause of homoeopathy in India and abroad.

The services were found to be cost-effective in comparison to personal consultations. About 20% queries were found to be vague, bogus and non serious which can be minimized by making it a paid service through public facility/portal. This can even be run as Public private partnership project with software IT companies.

If various state Governments, voluntary organizations start replicating such efforts, it can make homoeopathy popular and can go a long way in promoting the interest of Homeopathy and taking it to remote and unreachable places.

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About the authors

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