

The Changing Role Of A Doctor Amidst The Evolving Health-Care Scenario

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Over the last one decade or so, no other professionals have perhaps faced the challenge of dealing with a drastic change of scenario as much as the medics.

To appreciate the present, one needs to look through the 'rear view mirror' into the methods of medical practice not too long ago.

Medicine, down the years has been clinical based, meaning that the traditional doctors would 'read' their patients using their eyes, ears and hands, super-impose symptoms and findings against the background of medical knowledge, finally arriving at a plausible diagnosis. Treatment modalities offered were not usually questioned and final outcomes - favourable or otherwise, accepted with grace. 'Trust' was the 'key player' of the entire drama!

Now, let us try and find out what has changed during the recent past, what is this "evolving healthcare scenario" that we are talking about?

Besides newer day-to-day developments in medical science which doctors are expected to get updated with, a whole new spectrum has unfurled in parallel and these evolutions have necessitated the “changing role” of medical practitioners. Three main factors will be in our focus.

First and most important has been the judicial declaration bringing medical services under the ambit of Consumer Protection Act. It was a literal jolt to the Indian medical community and sort of shook them out of their wits! The implications were enormous! Mere ‘trust factor’ wasn’t enough any longer! The concept of ‘evidence based medicine’ came into the picture, meaning that diagnosis and treatment would need to be based upon clinical assessment, ably supported by adequate relevant investigations as confirmatory evidence. Doctors were expected to justify and defend every step taken during the course of treatment, in a court of law, if occasion demanded. The entire approach to medical practice, which they had been hitherto accustomed to, needed a thorough re-orientation. It necessitated, in addition to actual treating, an enormous amount of documentation work, record-keeping, seeking legal advice on proper consent-taking prior to any procedure and numerous other such technicalities. All of these, compounded with the sometimes-unpredictable behaviour of diseases and their treatment-response, increased stress levels of doctors sky high! In addition, every medical practitioner needed to have

an indemnity insurance cover. And what did it mean for the Patient? Henceforth, they would be viewed upon as a 'client', everyone a potential litigant (if outcomes were to go unfavourable); a battery of investigations prescribed to ensure absolutely nothing was missed out, so as not to catch the doctor unaware while facing an investigative panel. Quite naturally, treatment costs escalated!

The second factor has been the advent of large corporate houses into healthcare; virtually turning it into an industry. And like every other business, this too was profit-driven. True they have invested in infrastructure, thus providing state-of-art medical services and amalgamated the 'art' of patient care into the 'hospitality industry.' And what was the role of the doctors in this entire scenario? They were just another 'cog' in the huge wheel! They were no longer their own 'lords and masters' and needed to be adjusted into their new role. Henceforth, they were answerable not only to their Patients, but to the administrative teams managing such hospitals as well!

The third factor, though apparently amusing, has posed a serious challenge to medical practitioners. It is the advent of the Internet and an entire world of information available at our fingertips just at the click of a button! Now, Patient and family can choose to arm themselves with all available medical knowledge about their disease when facing the doc

across the table and shoot off their queries with impunity and deadly precision! And how is the 'good doctor' supposed to react? Should he blow-up in anger at his expertise being put under scanner or keeping himself calm even under extreme provocation, patiently answer each and every one to satisfaction? I hear that some of our colleagues have taken to chanting of Buddhist hymns every morning to hold on to sanity!

The legendary English cricketer, W.G.Grace, happened to be a doctor with a busy practice. On days when he couldn't turn up at the Lords cricket ground for a match, being held up at the bedside of a very ill patient, the crowds that turned up to watch him play would often turn hostile and vent their anger. Finally, a notice was put up at the ticket counter saying " Ticket price 2 shillings; if Dr. Grace does not play, 1 shilling will be refunded".

Taking a cue, will it be fair if medical practitioners today hung up a somewhat similar board declaring "consultation fee Rs 500; Rs 250 if assured, in legal bond, of no libel or Dr. Google's questions"?