

“There is a great opportunity for innovation to support the delivery of healthcare in India”

07 January 2019 | Opinion | By Milind Kokje

Future-Tech Festival (FTF) is a thought-leadership summit organised by the UK government in India in collaboration with the UK and India’s best tech innovators, companies and organisations. As a part of FTF, India-UK Healthcare Leadership Forum is also organised. Recently the 3rd edition of the forum was held in Mumbai.



Dr Mike Short CBE (L), Chief Scientific Adviser, Department of International trade (DIT) and Deborah Kobewka (R), Head Healthcare, Life Sciences and Bio-economy, DIT were in Mumbai to participate in the India-UK Healthcare Leadership Forum. BioSpectrum interacted with them to find out more about Healthcare UK’s plans for partnership with India

Edited Excerpts –

What is the purpose behind India-UK healthcare leadership forum?

Dr Mike Short- The aim of this mission is to look into the collaboration between UK and Indian companies. We have got the delegations from the UK. They are strong players in med tech and health space. They met very interesting Indian companies here, some of them they wish to collaborate with. Some might be involved in innovation. So, the point is to build on the

historical strength of both the countries and to find the complimentary points of interests.

Deborah Kobewka –India-UK technology partnership was agreed upon between India and UK during Indian Prime Ministers Narendra Modi's visit in April 2018. The objective is to jointly work together at government to government level to put in place Artificial Intelligence (AI) pilots from UK companies into India to try to look at how to solve some Indian primary healthcare challenges. It is believed that the AI companies have some very good diagnostic solutions which could be applicable in India where reaching large number of population, particularly in rural areas, is very tricky. So, it is an opportunity for some of the very leading edge AI companies in UK to bring their solutions to India and to see if they can support PM's ambition to bring healthcare to half a billion Indians, who currently do not have access.

What are the main objectives of the recently established India-UK Technology partnership?

Deborah Kobewka - DIT has an ongoing programme, working to explore possibilities of trade with India. Healthcare UK, which is a government organisation within DIT, is very much focussed on supporting overseas commerce from healthcare companies and organisations in UK, which includes NHS and also all the private sector healthcare companies that underpinned healthcare delivery in UK. So, these organisations look to take their services overseas and healthcare UK supports that activity. India is one of our key market where we think there is good opportunity for UK healthcare services to be utilised. FTF held in Delhi was the great opportunity to showcase what UK has to offer in healthcare, particularly in this case from the technology perspective. We will continue to utilise those kind of events to be able to continue to develop trade relationships and commercial opportunities in UK and India.

What are the current global healthcare challenges and how can those be addressed?

Dr Mike Short – The start point has to be unmet needs. When we think of some countries there are some unmet needs such as clinicians, drugs, solutions and others. Some solutions may emerge from India that might as well help several countries in the world. So, if we take the issue of health you can start imagining the way mobile can start contributing significantly to health, whether it is provision of information, access to internet, may be using telephony message, starting to use mobile camera & phone as a tool to do visual analytics. The display is in a mini computer in your pocket in effect so it can also be linked to wearables as well as apps. Quite a few companies on this mission come from these two directions, where they are helping clinicians as well as patients in the areas of healthcare.

Every economy is not of the same size and India is a huge country so it has a lot of capabilities on its own. But in some cases it may help to work with the people trying this thing somewhere else and then may scale them up here in India or export from India. We can also see that in rural areas where may be there are insufficient hospitals and clinicians getting better access to that information, for instance access to drugs will be really helpful through mobile. We can also see some of the innovations require start-ups and scale ups that might go overseas and might get transferred to other countries, from India to UK or elsewhere.

What are your views on the growth of healthcare innovations in India?

Deborah Kobewka - There is a great opportunity for innovation to support the delivery of healthcare in India. Clearly, as we just mentioned, access to healthcare is a real challenge, that well may be a combination of access and perhaps also cost of healthcare. Digital innovations particularly that enable healthcare to be delivered in remote areas will be very beneficial. Also, there are not large number of general practitioners who would be able to provide primary care locally. So, it is very much about utilising technology to support the profession of GP services from the remote perspective and again the use of technologies like AI to support the doctors in coming to a rapid diagnosis. About the devices those are remotely in health centres in villages are being able to provide feedback and data to a doctor which is able to make clear decisions about how a patient's treatment should proceed. Those kind of innovations are suited to Indian environment.

Dr Mike Short – One company in this mission is QuantuMDX and they specialise in point of care and equipment particularly for TB. It signed an MOU with an Indian company. It is quite interesting because they are looking for complimentary skills to come with the technology and knowledge those two companies have got. TB is an issue in India and new solutions to address that seems to me a very good development.

Though many technologies are available, one major issue, particularly in India is cost of treatment. How can this issue be tackled?

Dr Mike Short – I first came to India 30 years ago in connection with mobile telecommunications training and the world is totally different today compared to 30 years ago. One of the key lessons that comes with the mobile is economies of scale key to bring down the cost. What we see now are the benefits of mobile reaching to everybody in India. Think about the scale issues India has some inherent advantages because of the scale. But actually it may not have the understanding or elements in place whether it is the people or technology. So, actually some of the thinking is about how do you scale up some of these solutions to make them more effective in terms of reach to everybody and cost comes down with scaling up.

Deborah Kobewka I think it is important to think about innovations in a holistic way rather than point of solutions. So, when thinking about an innovation you have to think about how that innovation affects the whole outcome for the patient, particularly healthcare providers who need to think about innovations in that way. So, when adopting an innovation into a new pathway how does that alter the outcome for the patient, might allow him to spend less time in hospital and more time at home. This might prevent a long period of untreated disease that might in the end lead to worse to come. So, basically technologies like early diagnosis are enormously helpful in providing a much better outcome, for example for cancer patients, and overall treatment time reduced and in the long term cost for the patients as well as improving the outcome. So, it is important to view innovations holistically and not as individual points of solutions.