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Accenture MD: Only highly evolved nations spend on IT healthcare

November 5, 2012 | Influencers | By BioSpectrum Bureau

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Integration of information and technology (IT) in healthcare services and translating the potential into better delivery is a trend being witnessed across the world. Implementation of IT enhances clinical decision support, enables effective utilization of information and drives efficiency across healthcare delivery.

According to analysts at Accenture, two imperative developments occurring in Singapore are significant to the growth of this market. These developments include, the use of mobile phones and a more hands-on approach to supervision by patients of their own health. Also, taking a serious approach towards smart healthcare, is Singapore's 10-year master plan, called the Intelligent Nation 2015 (iN2015), which was started in 2006 by the government to help the country realize its growth potential through infocom technologies.

However, the rest of the Asian countries are yet to implement such proactive IT programs in their healthcare delivery systems and the challenge is not only for the government and health institutions, but also for the technology companies to integrate their solutions. Asian countries have their own challenges in delivering basic healthcare services to people, and hence IT implementation becomes a second priority. Accenture has been providing IT solutions to the healthcare system in Singapore, Australia, the US and many European countries, but when it comes to Asia, the company is yet to break the ice.

Dr Kaveh Safavi, MD, Accenture's health industry, in conversation with *BioSpectrum*, talks about the exposure of information technology in Asia's healthcare industry and what it would cost to have a smarter healthcare delivery system.

What is the trend in Asia for implementing IT in the healthcare delivery system?
The expenditure on information technology in healthcare sector tends to be strongly correlated with the percentage of GDP

spent on health. If Asian countries spend more money on health of their population and take care of basic needs such as doctors and nurses, hospitals and the diagnostic industry, then only they can think of strengthening the infrastructure by spending on IT. Only when a country is highly evolved can they spend more on IT implementation in healthcare management.

Which Asian countries are aggressive in implementing smart healthcare in their system?
Singapore is an exception where there is strong public sector orientation and has made some fairly aggressive investment on healthcare IT that typically can't be seen in other countries. Australia, New Zealand and Singapore are probably the largest Asian markets where IT implementation in healthcare sector is on. We are working closely with the Ministry of Health in Singapore to build electronic health record (EHR). We are using technology to connect public health in Singapore.

The vision of Singapore is one-Singaporean one-health record, and there will be electronic representation of each citizen in the EHR. We started to work on it in 2010 and the first phase of the program was in place in 2011. We have done a similar program in Australia, called Personally Controlled Electronic health records, which is a national healthcare record that connects across Australia. In these locations, we are working with hospitals for different kinds of clinical optimizations, automation and clinical processes.

What is the exposure of developing countries to IT infrastructure for healthcare delivery?
Information technology tends to be a lesser investment for developing countries as their first investment is on enabling efficient healthcare, diagnostics, medical imaging and building ability. However, developing countries that lack qualified clinicians are leveraging on mobile technology for sharing knowledge among clinicians.

There is a wide diversity within a developing country. For example, there is a gap between the wealthy and non-wealthy classes, so their demand and need also differs. The question is more about affordability and most of the effort is spent on access of medicine. Also, health is one sector which is directly related to government policies and service depends on how the healthcare is financed.

What are the concerns of IT companies while integrating solutions in a developing market?
The kind of solution we deliver involves lot of information and goes on increasing with time. Hence, data protection is crucial. So, we have to look at the regulatory environment on data protection in these countries before launching any major program. For instance, in Singapore, we have built the National EHR and the information comes from electronic medical records of various hospitals at different sites.

The captured data about patient healthcare status is then fed into the flow of information, which gets reflected at medical centers. Such kind of IT implementation requires a robust mechanism to update and protect information.

Do you see any change in the scenario that would eventually support faster integration?
The situation is changing very fast. The government is taking interest in building infrastructure and there is investment around healthcare information technology management. However, one trend occurring out of this is that countries that are new to information technology in healthcare tend to leapfrog in what they are doing. For example, use of cell phone-based technology to advance healthcare looks very modern and progressive in efficiency that you don't see even in the US, but countries that don't have an established healthcare system also tend to jump on IT implementation. This can pull them back in the longer run.

Most of the Asian countries are sensitive to pricing. Is there any relief for them?
Asia looks for low-cost solutions and the market here does not accept high-cost products from developed markets, so one has to build low-cost models for the market. This is very much happening in telehealth and it looks fascinating.

Our challenge is how we can bring solutions to these markets that are affordable and how to manage in a situation where there is a lack of local expertise. Most markets of the world are working on cost, quality and related issues. We are navigating though the process for building integrated healthcare system and managing health records through system efficiently.