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Tele-medicine consultations in India witness remarkable surge during 2014

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Singapore: Close to 120,402 tele-consultations to rural communities in UP and Bihar, India, has been delivered by the World Health Partners (WHP), a non-profit organization which provides health and reproductive health services in developing countries.

With the increase in mobile and technology penetration and on-ground community connect & education initiatives WHP saw a spike in the requests for tele - consultations in the first half of the current year. The tele consultations ranged between 15,910 and 12,671 in the first half of 2013 and 2012. By June 2014 end, WHP had conducted 16,464 consultations ranging from ailment reporting, treatment prognosis, Diet and life counselling, updates on danger signs of the complicated diseases, Pre and Post treatment care, etc. Consultations to the patients and the health providers also included steps to monitor the patients during the treatment and counselling of the families.

WHP's network of 5,000 rural health providers as a part of its SkyCare program for tele-consultations, involving medical care and follow-ups. Often the first and only point of contact for the majority of patients, these informal rural health practitioners are equipped with low-cost mobile solutions to enable them to provide tele-consultations, referrals, diagnostics, and symptom-based treatments. They are backed by 110 tele-medicine provision centres, called SkyHealth Centres, which in turn are connected to qualified doctors at WHP's Central Medical Facility (CMF) in New Delhi and other nearby towns. The rural health providers are trained by the CMF doctors about how to monitor the patients during the treatment and counsel the families.

As per Mr Gopi Gopalakrishnan, president and founder, WHP, "Our objective is to harness local market forces to work for the poor by leveraging the latest advances in communication, diagnostic and medical technology. Combing tele-medicine with the infrastructure and manpower already available in rural areas, we have managed to establish large-scale, cost-effective healthcare networks that provide the much-needed health and family planning services in under-served rural areas. Millions of patients have already benefited from our program since it was launched as a pilot project in 2008."

With the announcement of Digital India program at the 2014 budget session, the government has reinforced its support to the ongoing initiatives to bridge the digital divide and ensure broadband connectivity at the village level and improved access to services through IT-enabled platforms which will strengthen governance and delivery of healthcare services in rural hinterlands. The reduction in duty on components used in manufacture of personal computers will encourage the technology adoption even at the grassroots level, helping in the proliferation of tele-medicine and improved healthcare services till the last mile.