

Health Equals Wealth for Drugmakers

GAURI KAMATH : The Economic Times

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MUMBAI

Last July, Purvi Shah, a 24-year-old playgroup teacher in Mumbai, learned she was diabetic and would need insulin shots daily for life. Shortly thereafter, her doctor sent a counsellor to her home. Awmi, employed by Sanofi, which made Shah's insulin brand Lantus, explained diabetes and the value of insulin, gave her useful reading material and a pair of diabetic-friendly shoes since high blood sugar tends to deaden nerve endings on the feet. Awmi visited Shah monthly for six months and stayed in touch on the phone thereafter.

Sanofi, the Indian subsidiary of the European drugmaker, assigned Awmi to help Shah. She had to ensure Shah took her insulin injections regularly, which also meant there was no revenue leakage for Sanofi. Patients of chronic diseases like diabetes and cholesterol — also the fastest-growing segments of the pharma market — sometimes avoid treatment, stop it midway, or skip some doses leading to "revenue leakages". By one estimate, even a 10% improvement in 'adherence' to treatment with a billion dollar drug can jack up sales by \$30-40 million.

Sanofi and Merck India, and at least five other MNC pharma companies are using 'health managers' just as banks use 'wealth managers' to help patients and earn revenues. The companies give patients more than just the daily dose, helping them with counselling, diagnostic tests, freebies, diet or exercise advice.



All of this at no charge.

"Given the competitive scenario, this is seen as a good way of developing brand equity," said Manish Gupta, CEO of Indegene Lifesystems, a marketing services company which manages seven large programmes for drug companies that it did not name, citing confidentiality. Hundreds of drugmakers joust for share in the Rs 57,000-crore Indian market. This is emerging as a win-win-win model for companies, patients and doctors.

When a patient adheres to treatment, the resulting improvement is not only a relief for the doctor but it also results in the patient speaking well of him to others looking for a reference. Many busy doctors might appreciate this and the added support their patients get. It helps protect revenues for drug makers and improves patient health. "A patient who knows more lives longer," said Susheel Umesh, senior director (commercial operations, diabetes and tier 1) at Sanofi.

Saath-7 Covers 35,000 ►► 8

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Nearly 40% of patients on insulin drop out after two months of therapy, said Umesh. "When a patient is prescribed insulin injections, he goes doctor-shopping because he wants someone to tell him he can get his sugar under control with pills," Umesh said.

A type-one diabetic can only manage blood sugar with insulin because his body doesn't produce any.

"We need to get him upfront

and tell him the value of insulin."

Sanofi's programme, named Saath-7, has touched 35,000 patients, it claimed. Indegene claimed to have reached out to an equal number on behalf of its various pharma clients, all of them multinationals (MNCs).

Sanofi's Saath-7 is not managed by Indegene.

Since 2009, US drug maker Merck's Indian subsidiary MSD Pharmaceuticals runs Sparsh a multi-lingual helpline service for diabetics on its drugs Januvia and Janumet providing diet, exercise, and adherence advice. "Patients on Sparsh are remaining longer on therapy, and this is good for the doctor, the patient, and the company," said Sanjiv Navangul, director (sales and marketing) at MSD.

It has extended Sparsh to patients on an osteoporosis drug and plans to do so for cholesterol patients on its drug Zocor this year.

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