

GUIDING PEOPLE IN THEIR TIME OF NEED

ANGEL INVESTOR

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Disease, the one thing that can defeat every human being no matter how strong or powerful, can be very distressing when it strikes. With development giving birth to a multitude of illnesses and infections, the healthcare system boomed, becoming a labyrinth of specialisations and hospitals and doctors. Rushing around in a large hospital, trying to find one's way to the right department and the right person as a sick loved one waits, can be nerve wracking. Indiritta Singh D'Mello, founder of Hospital Guide Foundation, aims to make the healthcare system accessible across all sections of society, by providing information about hospitals and doctors.

Ms D'Mello grew up in a family that was always strongly inclined to social service. Her father, Rudolf D'Mello, a politician, was involved Goa's freedom movement and served as an ambassador to Cuba. Her mother, Rajkumari Priti Singh, hails from the Kuchaman royal family in Rajasthan. A firm believer in a good education, Ms D'Mello studied philosophy, political science and economics at Oxford, all with the aim of eventually serving society. "Healthcare has become so super specialised, especially in urban areas," said D'mello, "a layman doesn't know what doctor to go to. The concept of family physician seems to be dwindling."

"When I came back, I took a job in an MNC because I didn't know how exactly I wanted to enter the realm of social work," she said. Things changed when her mother fell seriously ill and Indiritta's life became about running from one hospital to the next, trying to find treatment. "That's when I realised that our country is home to some of the best doctors in the country, but hospital services can



Indiritta Singh D'Mello

definitely improve."

Ms D'mello began work as a hospital administrator, helping distressed patients get the job done. "I thought I would make the lives of people easier," she said. Before long, she realised that she could be far more effective working on her own, through an NGO. In 2010, her husband took the first step into the world of social service. It started as a group on Facebook, which now has about 30,000 members, quite a few of whom are prominent doctors.

"The idea behind the page was to have people share their experiences, it was a citizen's journal of sorts," she explained. "People don't have to go to a newspaper to be heard, they just put down their experiences, good or bad, on the page and everybody sees it. Because it isn't a face-to-face con-

frontation, the whole thing is much less intimidating." The group also conducts discussions on healthcare.

The organisation soon grew from a Facebook page into a website that accepts healthcare requests. All people have to do is log on and explain their symptoms. Hospital Guide Foundation will do the rest, from following up on the patient for case details and referring them to the right doctors. Their database, which consists of over 700 doctors in Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru, caters to people from across the country. Names are added to the database through references only and no commissions are paid, to hospitals or individual doctors. "We are very strict about keeping everything free of commercial transactions," she explained.

In December 2012, the Hospital Guide Foundation was registered as an NGO under Section 25, the most stringent category for not-for-profit organisations. "The personal touch is very important when it comes to healthcare," said D'mello. "We always call the patient and speak directly to him or her, because they need to feel confident in us and the role we play." More often than not, she said, patients send out inaccurate or incomplete information, so direct interaction pays off in more ways than one.

"It's not a foolproof method," Ms D'mello admitted. "It can never be that." Doctors are not easily added to the database and expansion has remained slow. "We don't have a source of income for the NGO, so we don't expand rapidly. We're concentrating on Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru for the moment." With nearly 30,000 members, the Hospital Guide Foundation is becoming a force to reckon with in the online world and even has a number of doctors responding to queries on the internet. "Healthcare has become very commercial, which is true," she remarked. "But there are a lot of very good people out there, who are willing to help." Doctors are happy to help during lean seasons and many of them, who work in rural areas, are generous with their expertise.

There are moments when Hospital Guide Foundation is mistaken for an emergency service, a mistake Ms D'mello doesn't want anybody to make. "If you need help at once, call a hospital," she said. "We don't provide those facilities yet." Another area into which the foundation hasn't yet ventured is providing aid to the economically weaker sections of society. "We want to, in the future, but at the moment, we don't have the funds," she said, simply.

Ms D'mello remains resolute with her aim, to revolutionise healthcare services in India. "The poor don't have access to healthcare and the rich are also very vulnerable," she said. "Everybody deserves the help."