



PROJECT SARATHI

*Students' Alliance for Responsible Action
to Transform Healthcare Institutes*

SYNOPSIS



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SARATHI – A Volunteer based Transformative Initiative

Summary

Project SARATHI, launched at PGIMER Chandigarh, is a volunteer-based initiative designed to improve patient navigation, streamline outpatient services, and ease the non-clinical workload of healthcare staff. By mobilizing NSS student volunteers and local partners, the program has benefitted over nine lakh individuals within a span of 16 months since its inception in May, 2024, significantly reducing waiting times and enhancing patient satisfaction. Beyond strengthening healthcare delivery, the initiative fosters youth engagement, cultivates empathy and social responsibility, and offers a sustainable, scalable, low-cost model that is already being adapted across hospitals in multiple states. With its focus on compassionate support, efficient service delivery, and youth engagement, SARATHI has set a new benchmark for enhancing the patient experience in public healthcare.

Introduction

Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, an Institute of National Importance, is a premier tertiary care centre and teaching hospital, created by a Statute under an Act of Parliament (Act No.51 of 1966). In addition to catering to the health needs of northern states of India, PGIMER is also known for broadening the horizon of medical knowledge by conducting intensive research in the field of health.





Background

Sh. Pankaj Rai, IAS, joined PGIMER, Chandigarh on deputation as Deputy Director (Administration) from the Government of Himachal Pradesh. During his visits to OPDs and other areas, he observed that patients and their attendants often remain under considerable stress due to the lack of structured assistance in navigating various processes. While the PGI Administration has made concerted efforts by providing signages, Help Desks, and Reception Centers at designated points, the existing system has proved inadequate in view of the heavy patient footfall and emerging challenges.

Preface

In an era where healthcare systems are increasingly challenged by overwhelming patient load, the need for innovative solutions has been necessitated. SARATHI emerges as a beacon of hope, meticulously crafted to address the escalating demand for healthcare services at PGIMER, Chandigarh. More than just a response to the operational pressures faced by medical facilities, this initiative is a transformative movement aimed at engaging the youth in the community service and fostering responsible citizenship.

With approximately three million of patients seeking care annually, PGIMER has experienced unprecedented strain on its resources. SARATHI not only aims to alleviate this burden, but also provides students with invaluable, hands-on exposure to the healthcare environment. By actively involving them in patient care and navigation, the project cultivates essential life skills and promotes a culture of empathy and social responsibility.

Through this initiative, PGIMER is not just enhancing healthcare delivery, but also nurturing the next generation of responsible citizens, creating a brighter and healthier future.





Conceptualization

SARATHI draws inspiration from the Henry Ford Hospital model in Detroit, USA, where students actively contributed through social service. This concept was observed by Mr. Pankaj Rai, Deputy Director (Administration), PGIMER, Chandigarh, during his visit to the USA in 2019 while serving with the Himachal Pradesh Government. Hence, the concept of enlisting NSS volunteers from educational institutions was born. This is a unique initiative in participative healthcare management focused on the welfare of patients, based on volunteerism whereby energetic youth come together with the healthcare system to improve patient care. It not only enhances patient outcomes, but also fosters a strong sense of community involvement paving the way for a new era for better healthcare in future. It is first-of-its-kind effort in a government hospital making a paradigm shift in fostering empathy, compassion, warmth & affinity among youth towards the ailing community. Beyond these, a significant goal was to constructively engage students in activities that would steer them away from harmful behaviours including drug abuse and promote social responsibility.

Stakeholders' requirements

The innovation was driven by stakeholders' requirements in respect of reduction in wait time, hand holding, assistance in processes like navigation, queue management, registration, lab testing and adequate compassionate care to physically challenged, senior citizens and very sick patients. These gaps pointed towards a critical need for more efficient, empathetic and "Patient Centric Service Model".

Community Involvement

SARATHI initiative fostered strong community involvement by engaging student volunteers from schools, colleges & universities, local NGOs like Manav Ruhani Satsang as well as media. Since the innovation is based on the premise of selfless and compassionate care, it has touched an emotional chord with the community, driven by a shared sense of purpose and positive word of mouth.



Formal Launch

Following a highly impactful pilot with just 22 students from a local college, SARATHI was officially launched at PGIMER, Chandigarh on 6th May 2024. Its core components include assisting patients in navigating and accessing services, as well as facilitating effective communication between healthcare providers, patients, and their families.



Roll out of the Project

After the successful launch of the Project, it was decided to make it sustainable. Various rounds of meetings were held with the stakeholders including the concerned heads of different Institutions. Curriculum and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) of SARATHI were framed. A society was registered to monitor the project and to make it financially viable. The matter was taken up with the Secretary (Education) U.T., Chandigarh, V.C. Panjab University including the State Liaison Officer, NSS for encouraging the educational institutions to participate in the Project.

Study and its Impacts

The evaluation of SARATHI was conducted by an independent team of researchers of the Department of Community Medicine. The outcomes are delineated below.

Qualitative Outcome:

The study revealed that innovation has significantly improved healthcare delivery system in the form of wait time reduction, queue management, optimizing lab utilization, patient satisfaction, reduction in workload of staff and enhanced operational efficiency. The assessment revealed measurable improvements, with wait times reduced by 1.5-fold, queue management enhanced by 1.09-fold, meaning patients who received SARATHI assistance reported higher satisfaction (satisfaction score 4.27 vs. 3.91), laboratory utilization improved by 1.42-fold as SARATHI-assisted patients were far more likely to complete their recommended tests within PGIMER labs (85% vs. 60% among non-assisted patients), and overall patient satisfaction rising by 1.11-fold.

 **Wait Time Reduction**  **1.5×**

 **Queue Management** —  **1.09×**

 **Lab Utilization** —  **1.42×**

 **Overall Patient Satisfaction** —  **1.11×**

Quantitative Outcomes

With nearly 30 lakh patient visits each year, PGIMER has seen the SARATHI initiative make a remarkable impact benefiting around 8 lakh individuals, including patients, attendants, volunteers, and healthcare staff, within just 16 months of its inception (Fig 1).

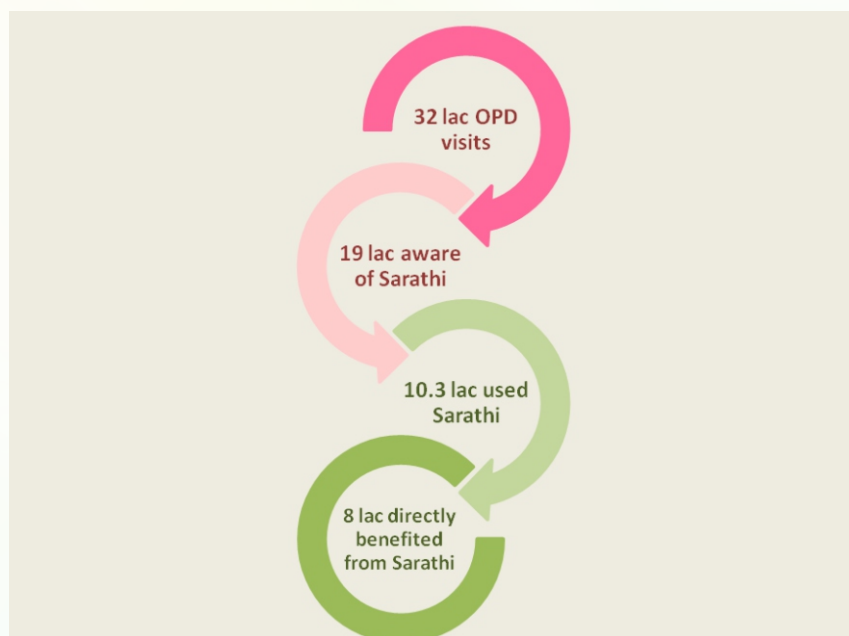


Figure 1. Impact Cascade of the SARATHI Initiative

The demographic distribution of beneficiaries who availed SARATHI services shows that 4.73 lakh males and 4.38 lakh females directly benefited during the study period. Age-stratified analysis showed that the largest share of beneficiaries, approximately 3 lakhs, belonged to the 26–45 years group, followed by younger individuals aged ≤ 25 years and those in the 46–65 years category, while the elderly above 65 years represented the smallest segment (Fig.2).

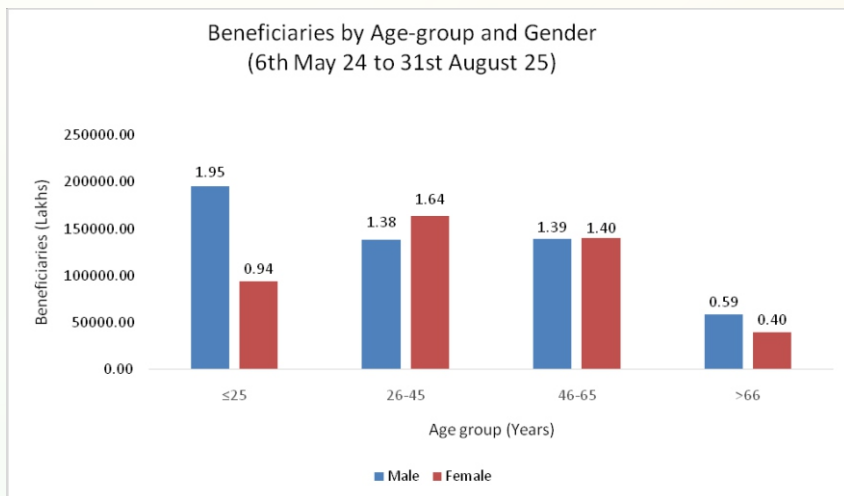


Figure 2. Age- and gender-wise distribution of beneficiaries

The geographic reach of beneficiaries demonstrates a wide catchment area across northern India. Approximately 3.38 lakh individuals benefitted from Punjab, 1.63 lakh from Chandigarh, 1.57 lakh from Haryana, and 1.27 lakh from Himachal Pradesh. In addition, people also benefited from Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, and several other states (Fig. 3).

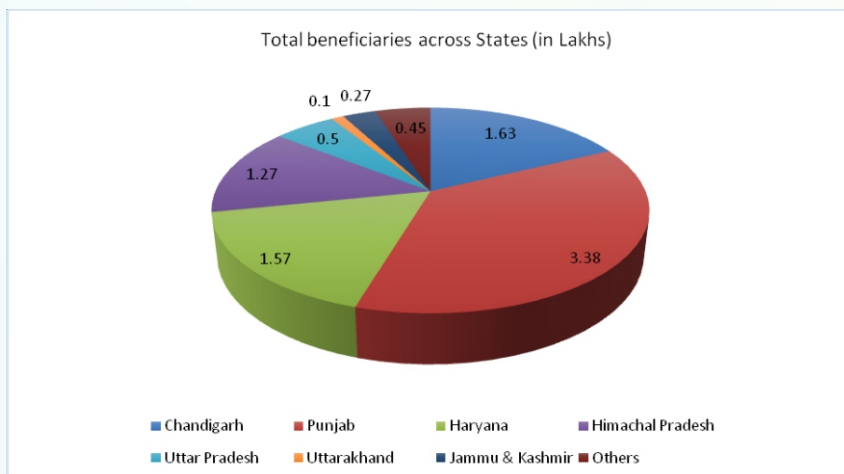


Figure 3. Geographic distribution of beneficiaries across states (in lakhs)

Dissemination of the project

The Chief Secretaries of feeding states were urged to promote SARATHI to the last mile, given the outstanding outcomes of this Project. Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and Ministry of Youth Services & Sports were also approached for their support in disseminating this Project across the country.

Making Rewarding Environment

Certificates are being awarded at the culmination of voluntary service to the volunteers who complete 60 hours of dedicated service under the Project. It aims to encourage sustained participation, ensuring the continuity of compassionate support for the patients.



Grievance Redressal and feedback mechanism

SARATHI provides a comprehensive grievance redressal and feedback mechanism, including a dedicated e-mail ID on the PGI website and suggestion boxes at various locations. To further enhance patient-centered care, PGIMER has launched the SARATHI Feedback App, which equips each volunteer to capture real-time feedback from patients and their attendants after providing assistance. This data-driven approach enables the administration to make informed decisions, enhance transparency, and strengthen communication between SARATHI volunteers and those they assist. PGIMER has also implemented outreach through random calls to patients and attendants to gather authentic feedback.

Regular monitoring is conducted to evaluate service effectiveness, and stakeholders are encouraged to provide real-time input, ensuring timely resolution of issues and continuous improvement in service quality.

Conclusion

The initiative manifests that with careful planning, community engagement and volunteerism, significant improvements can be made in the healthcare system without major expenditure. It offers a sustainable model that benefits all stakeholders –patients, healthcare providers and the wider community. Through the innovative strategies, SARATHI is poised to create a lasting impact on healthcare access and quality across the country. As a game changer in the healthcare sector, it stands as a source of inspiration for transforming healthcare systems and improving the overall well-being of countless individuals, making a real difference without heavy financial investments. The other significant outcomes are outlined as under:

Snowballing into National Movement

From a pilot involving 22 students from a single institute, Project SARATHI has expanded to over 1,100 students across 17 institutions, contributing more than 66,000 hours in just 16 months. Notably, having been integrated with the ‘My Bharat’ portal under the Seva Se Seekhen Experiential Learning Program, over 1,400 hospitals across 30 States and Union Territories have on-boarded the initiative, with more than 550 hospitals already implementing the model—demonstrating its scalability and replicability.

Health Consciousness

SARATHI has sparked health consciousness among the youth, as they are being exposed to deteriorating health conditions, pain, agony and anxiety of the patients, thus motivating and encouraging them to adopt healthier habits as perceived from the volunteers during feedback deliberations.

Personality Development

With this exposure in a high-volume tertiary care set up, NSS volunteers are not only helping the patients in real time, but have also become ambassadors of change, as experience has instilled in them the values of compassion and empathy along with carving their skills to deal with crisis management and tough situation under high stressed environment.

Resource Utilization

It has resulted reduction in wait time, which has led to less congestion in parking lots and waiting areas, minimizing crowding and traffic congestion, thus improving the overall hospital efficiency. The manpower is being better utilized for essential tasks as the non-core work has largely been taken over by volunteers ensuring smooth operations and enhanced patient care as has been revealed in the study.

Transforming Public Perception

SARATHI has brought in a paradigm shift in public perception towards public sector hospitals from the earlier image of dispassionate care to more patient centric and humane approach, taking it to the levels of best healthcare facilities. It is a watershed moment for the Healthcare System in India.

Disclaimer: Conceived entirely from a clean slate, SARATHI is a dynamic, result-oriented programme with a clear vision, effective implementation, and measurable impact. While the name may resonate with certain past or present initiatives, any resemblance is purely coincidental. This project is neither an iteration, revival, nor extension of any earlier or ongoing effort.



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