

# HUL offers free telemedicine services to rural communities

By Sagar Malviya, ET Bureau • Last Updated: May 31, 2021, 07:54 AM IST

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## Synopsis

As part of the initiative, which is similar to what startups like Connect & Heal and Practo typically provide, qualified nurses are being trained as health entrepreneurs at the centres, which will facilitate tele-consultations through video conferencing with a panel of doctors.



Hindustan Unilever, India's biggest consumer goods firm, has started a **telemedicine initiative** to provide free Covid-19 related services to consumers in rural areas, especially where health infrastructure is lacking.

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Heal and Practo typically provide, qualified nurses are being trained as health entrepreneurs at the centres, which will facilitate tele-consultations through video conferencing with a panel of doctors.

HUL, which is working with communities around its factories under project Prabhat, has opened its first centre in Haldia, West Bengal and the plan is to launch five more before covering all its sites.

"As a big manufacturing and corporate establishment, we have the muscle and infrastructure to support and do this better where we have manufacturing units than in just another location in the country," said Anuradha Razdan, executive director, human resources at HUL.

The company gets over 40% of its sales from rural markets.

"This is in many ways educating and supporting people as the first port of call and it replaces or sort of stepping in for a lacuna which exists in the infrastructure," Razdan said.

In the first three months, consultations will be conducted through calls, and people may walk-in only to pick up medical essentials such as oximeters, medicines, and oxygen concentrators.

These centres, implemented by Labournet Healthcare, will work closely with local public health centres to help strengthen affordable healthcare where it is needed most.

Rural sales, a constant comfort for FMCG companies throughout 2020 in terms of demand, have now come under threat with the Covid-19 second wave spreading rapidly in non-metro areas.

"At this time, we realised public health infrastructure is severely strained. As the wave moves, it is going to get into the rural parts of the country. Not everybody needs hospitalisation or can access hospitalisation, therefore, this is the first port of call," Razdan added.

India Ratings & Research (Ind-Ra) on Friday said the Covid-19 second wave is different as the highly infectious mutant strain had already spread to rural India.

Health ministry statistics show that 394 districts out of 718 had a case positivity rate of over 10% as on May 20.

"Such a high rate of positivity rate is being recorded even when the level of testing is low in rural India," the report added.

India is also facing a severe shortage of oxygen cylinders and concentrators.

Most hospitals are having to turn back patients due to shortage of beds and oxygen.

Earlier this month, HUL said it would provide 4,000 oxygen concentrators to meet the medical oxygen requirement of home-bound patients and hospitals.