

AIIMS-Bibinagar to boost tuberculosis care in Telangana with aerial aid

Inaugurated virtually by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the drone service is part of a series of health projects designed to enhance access to essential services in remote and underserved areas

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A drone being prepared for its flight from AIIMS-Bibinagar to a nearby primary health centre during a live demonstration on Tuesday (October 29, 2024). | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

The All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS)-Bibinagar on Tuesday marked a step in healthcare accessibility with the launch of drone services for health outreach.

Around 2 p.m., patients and bystanders gathered outside the institute's administration building to witness two drones, a smaller and a bigger unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), stationed on a synthetic mat featuring a QR code. Operated by locally trained 'Drone Didis', these drones soon took flight towards the Kondamadugu Primary Health Centre (PHC), located about 10 kilometres from the institute.

Inaugurated virtually by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the initiative is part of a series of health projects designed to enhance access to essential services in remote and underserved areas. The drone services of AIIMS-Bibinagar in Yadadri Bhuvanagiri district aim to streamline the transport of sputum samples from PHCs in remote areas to district tuberculosis (TB) units, with medicines delivered back to the PHCs on return flights. The project operates under the National Tuberculosis Elimination Program and seeks to assess the feasibility of drones for transporting medical samples and drugs in tribal and hilly regions, where access to healthcare facilities can be challenging.

Since the pilot project commenced in February, the drone team has conducted 88 flights, 62 of which have been successful. Managed by TSAW Drone Private Limited, a Ministry of Civil Aviation-licensed agency, the operations rely on the support of Drone Didis, local women from self-help groups and frontline healthcare workers trained to facilitate drone use. The smaller drone has a payload capacity of three to eight kilograms, while the larger one can carry up to 15 kilograms, covering distances between 30 and 60 kilometres.

“This project represents a major advancement in healthcare innovation, providing critical support to tuberculosis patients in remote areas with limited healthcare infrastructure and high out-of-pocket expenses,” said Vikas Bhatia, executive director of AIIMS-Bibinagar.

During Tuesday’s demonstration, the two drones covered the 10-kilometre round-trip to Kondamadugu PHC in just five minutes, safely transporting medical samples inside a secure enclosure. Staff at the receiving PHC were pre-notified to promptly collect the samples, which were immediately processed for TB testing.

Sumit Aggarwal, in-charge of the ICMR Drone Unit, highlighted similar drone initiatives across India that have enhanced healthcare accessibility and affordability. The AIIMS drone team recognised the ASHA workers and Drone Didis who have played a crucial role in making the project a success.

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