

Rethinking Healthcare Access In Sri Lanka

DIMO's Wijith Pushpawela on Tech-Driven Medical care

S

Sri Lanka's healthcare system has been steadily embracing technological transformation in recent years, grounded in a long-standing commitment to universal access and the advancement of medical professionals, according to DIMO Executive Director Wijith Pushpawela, who also leads the Group's Healthcare arm. While the road ahead has its challenges, there are signs of progress.

One of the biggest enablers has been the global exposure of the country's medical professionals. Sri Lankan consultant doctors have been exposed to advanced diagnostics and treatment tools during their higher studies, and they become natural advocates for adopting similar technologies at home. This professional drive has played a critical role in raising

both the standard and speed of diagnosis and therapies in the country.

A clear example lies in diagnostic imaging. MRI machines, once limited in capacity, are being upgraded nationwide, with Sri Lanka now actively investing in 3-Tesla MRI scanners which will offer superior image clarity and faster patient throughput. The same applies to CT scanners, where quality and details of images are defined by the number of 'slices'. In radiology, cardiology, and ophthalmology, hospitals are steadily embracing high-end diagnostic platforms, Pushpawela explains.

The shift is also visible in treatment technologies. For instance, selective laser trabeculoplasty (SLT) is a game-changing innovation for glaucoma patients, replacing daily eye drops with a single, long-term laser procedure. This technology, already in use across several hospitals

in Sri Lanka, reduces cost, improves compliance, and enhances quality of life.

Minimally invasive surgery is another frontier. Advanced laparoscopic and cardiac equipment now allow surgeons to perform complex procedures through small incisions, reducing infection risk and accelerating recovery. Stenting procedures in cardiac care have largely replaced open-heart surgeries, guided by precision tools and equipment. These advancements are not isolated cases. Instead, they serve to illustrate the sector's overall direction.

However, several structural barriers still stand in the way of widespread adoption, the most critical of which is financing. High-end medical technology comes at a cost, and public sector budgets are constrained. Equipment maintenance is also a concern, often delayed by lapses in service contracts, he elaborates.

On the private sector side, Pushpawela remarks, recent tax reforms have worsened affordability. With healthcare institutions now required to pay VAT on equipment and services, without the ability to pass that cost on to patients, many providers are scaling back investment. Meanwhile, patients, facing reduced insurance coverage and increased living costs, are finding private care less accessible. This pushes more patients back into the state system, further burdening public resources.

Regulatory delays pose another major hurdle. New equipment can take up to two to three years to secure approval from local regulatory bodies, even if it is already certified by global bodies, such as the FDA. This has led to avoidable shortages and delayed access to life-saving technologies.

Human capital is similarly under pressure, with a steady brain drain of doctors, radiographers, and technicians leaving critical gaps in both the public and private sectors. Without skilled professionals to operate these advanced machines, even



Wijith Pushpawela
Executive Director at DIMO

“**HE FURTHER NOTES THAT SRI LANKA HOLDS SIGNIFICANT POTENTIAL TO EMERGE AS THE PREMIER DESTINATION FOR HEALTH TOURISM IN THE REGION.**”

the best equipment risks underutilisation.

Despite these barriers, both public and private sector interest in technology remains strong, particularly among doctors. Their training and familiarity with global best practices make them vocal proponents of equipment upgrades. Unfortunately, rural hospitals often lack the infrastructure, investment, and incentives needed to retain these professionals or equip their facilities.

Sri Lanka's public healthcare system currently offers over 75,000 beds to state-run hospitals, while the private sector provides an additional 5,000+ beds to hospitals nationwide.

Pushpawela argues that the situation calls for a new policy orientation. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can offer a pragmatic path forward, and encouraging

private sector investment in underserved regions, with targeted tax concessions, infrastructure support, and regulatory streamlining, would relieve pressure on public hospitals. Strengthening health insurance coverage is equally critical to making private care more affordable and reducing out-of-pocket expenses for patients.

In areas like oncology, early detection is vital, so technologies such as mammography and PET scanning can dramatically improve outcomes. Despite this, awareness and access remain limited. For example, while PET scanners are available, usage in the public sector is restricted due to staffing and maintenance issues. In contrast, private facilities operate these machines at full capacity, but at a cost that remains out of reach for many patients.

The gap here is not just technological, Pushpawela says. It is also educational. Awareness campaigns must expand beyond urban centres to ensure that communities across the island understand the importance of early screening and the availability of advanced treatment options.

As such, he concludes that technological investments must extend past machines, aiming instead for system-wide transformation. From neonatal screening to cancer care, from diagnostics to post-operative recovery, and so on, technology can help deliver faster, more accurate, and more equitable care.

Pushpawela believes that Sri Lanka already has the clinical talent and the vision. With smart investment, bold policy, and cross-sector collaboration, he says the country can scale these advancements nationwide, ensuring that every Sri Lankan has access to the healthcare innovations they deserve. He further notes that Sri Lanka holds significant potential to emerge as the premier destination for health tourism in the region. ●