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## Chandigarh administration aggressively pushes national health ID registrations among residents

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A health worker instructs people waiting to see doctors after the OPD at the Government Multi Speciality Hospital in Sector 16, Chandigarh on 19 October 2020. KESHAV SINGH/HINDUSTAN TIMES

In the first week of December, residents of Chandigarh sectors 18 and 19 received a WhatsApp message asking them to generate health IDs. The message was sent by health officials at the government dispensary for those sectors. The message shared a link to the national health ID page on the website of the National Digital Health Mission, the government agency set up to build integrated digital health infrastructure for the country. It said, “This is to be done for every member of the family so that COVID Vaccine distribution can be streamlined.”

The health ID is a unique identification code for personal health records generated under the National Digital Health Mission. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the mission on 15 August 2020, and said that it would leverage technology for better health outcomes across the country. The government said that the health ID would be voluntary. It rolled the scheme out on trial basis in seven union territories including Chandigarh. In September, about a month after the trial started, *The Caravan* reported (<https://caravanmagazine.in/health/doctors-in-chandigarh-compelled-to-register-for-the-voluntary-national-health-id>) that the Chandigarh

administration was pressuring doctors to register for health IDs, giving them 48-hour deadlines to register and threatening them with non-compliance reports if they did not register. The message now suggesting a link between having a health ID and getting the COVID-19 vaccine suggests that local authorities are trying to compel Chandigarh residents to also sign up.

The message said a person would need their Aadhaar to update their information on the NHDM website. It failed to mention the provision for people to create IDs without Aadhaar. It asked the recipient to submit data of all family members—full name, NDHM health ID, age, gender, address, and phone number—to the local dispensary after completing registration. In a postscript, the message asks recipients to widely share the content amongst family and friends in order to “maximise awareness towards fast registration of individuals online.”

Amandeep Kang, the director of health services for Chandigarh, said that she was aware of the message. She called it “an error made by some staff and we will ensure that such false information is not circulated again.” Kang said that the UT’s health department was linking COVID-19 vaccination to the generation of health IDs. “We have only been instructed by the central government to begin implementing the NDHM here so we are just counselling residents, sharing the benefits of the scheme with them so they register themselves readily.”

In its earlier report, *The Caravan* detailed how the Post Graduate Institute for Medical Education and Research issued a circular saying that it was mandatory for health workers to create health IDs. The National Health Authority, which implements the mission, distanced itself from the circular and said the national health ID was a purely voluntary exercise. PGIMER backtracked a week after issuing the circular and called it an error. The institute revoked the circular after activists and journalists started asking questions about why it said registration was mandatory. Public health experts and digital-privacy activists have questioned the need for such a large scale and centralised process of collecting sensitive health data. They have

repeatedly raised concerns of potential breaches of privacy in the absence of a strong data protection law in India.

Kang said that although getting a COVID-19 vaccine was not contingent on having a health ID, the record of vaccination could be linked to the health ID later. “It is possible that later on one’s vaccination records will be uploaded digitally and linked to their health IDs,” she said. “After all, the point of this exercise is to have all your records stored in one unique digital account.”

A healthcare worker employed at a dispensary in Chandigarh told me that senior officials were sending frequent reminders to healthcare workers to register as many patients as possible. “It is not technically mandatory, but most patients visiting these local hospitals just go through the process without asking too many questions,” the healthcare worker, who asked not to be identified, said.

The healthcare worker shared with me a WhatsApp message that Kang sent to doctors at health and wellness centres and at dispensaries. It directed doctors to instruct Auxiliary Nurse Midwives to collect health ID information during their interactions with the community. “Instruct all the ANMs of your facility to generate health IDs of all the beneficiaries of the household when they go house to house for Annual Survey, visit the household for any of their field activity or during any of their field visits,” the message read. “The IDs have to be generated for all the persons/patients visiting the health facility.” The message continued with instructions on collecting, cross-checking and reviewing collected data. The message noted that many health workers cited “family refusal” for people who they could not convince to sign up. It added “it is being warned that these households who have refused shall be cross checked and the refusal will be verified so do your best to generate the health IDs.” The language of the message did not reflect that signing up for the health ID was optional and voluntary.

I spoke with an ANM, a pharmacist and two doctors working for local dispensaries under the National health Mission in Chandigarh. They all confirmed that they have been receiving regular instructions since mid-August to register their patients with the NDHM. “There is no written order that it is mandatory to register our patients and beneficiaries, but we have been verbally asked to complete surveys, collect data and Aadhaar details and register them for health IDs as soon as possible,” the ANM, who did not want to be named, said.

Some healthcare workers I spoke to were unsure whether health IDs would be linked to the vaccination process. Others did not want to comment. They all said that they thought it was mandatory to link a patient’s Aadhaar details to her health ID. The NDHM website allows people to register using just their mobile phone number if they do not want to use Aadhaar. “People like you and I can make that informed decision, but the patients who come to us readily share their Aadhaar details when we ask for it,” said the healthcare worker who shared the DHS order with me. “They are not concerned about privacy and all.”

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