

PM+: Technology could help tackle Europe's obesity epidemic

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Opinion Plus

Better data protection rules needed to support personalised health technology, says Tim Lobstein.



How are we going to tackle Europe's obesity epidemic?

For a third of adults, preventing obesity is not an option – they are already seriously overweight and at risk of diabetes, breast and bowel cancer, heart disease and strokes.

In order to reduce this risk, they need to manage their weight and keep as fit as possible.

Healthcare professionals encourage their patients to follow healthy lifestyle advice, but they face a common problem: how to keep patients motivated between their clinical appointments.

Keeping patients motivated is crucial in achieving long-term behaviour changes. This is where technology might help.

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A new generation of sensors can detect personal energy expenditure, showing patterns of walking or standing or sitting, or sleeping.

They can indicate levels of stress, nutritional status and healthy functioning, including balance, heart function and sleep quality.

The data can be analysed to recognise behaviour patterns and check how well we are making changes to our lifestyle.

An EU-funded project called DAPHNE (data-as-a-service platform for healthy lifestyle and preventive medicine) is developing state-of-the-art procedures for collecting, analysing and delivering information on physical fitness and behaviour in a format which can be used by clinical staff and other health professionals, via a Cloud-based platform.

The idea is not new: Google, Apple and Microsoft are developing ready-to-use systems for hospitals in the USA.

But when these companies release their products they keep their systems under wraps, while the DAPHNE project will be fully transparent and use open-access software and standardised protocols to let third party developers make full use of the services.

The project's principle investigator Alberto Olmo, of Spanish technology company Treelogic, told us that it was important to ensure that the products of EU-funded research should be in the public domain and available to small and medium enterprises in Europe.

He foresees that this will be a benefit for SMEs competing with companies like Apple and Samsung.

It isn't just doctors and health services that will be interested in developing a platform to share personal health data.

For example, personal fitness trainers will be able to monitor their clients' well-being, lifestyle and activities.

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Coaches and trainers of professional athletes will also be interested to see how their top sportsmen and women are performing and to keep a careful eye on their health.

But while open-access platforms can help hardware and software developers, is there also a risk that private health information will open to unauthorised access?

The DAPHNE project staff told us that they recognised the need to ensure the full protection of personal data and compliance with ethical standards but pointed out that European and member state regulations already provide a high level of protection for individuals.

Protecting privacy is an important issue for European policy-makers, but the need to meet and exceed

standards of confidentiality has proven to be a challenging problem.

Clinical service providers generally forbid patient records and patient's health data from leaving their premises, so only limited feedback from doctor to patient can be given, and virtually nothing can be held on a Cloud service unless it is highly codified and anonymised.

As personal sensor devices become increasingly sophisticated, and Cloud platforms hold more data for health professionals to access, there will be new challenges on personal data availability.

Policymakers will have to decide if our personal fitness information can be used by insurers to set their premiums, or by employers to check if we are getting enough exercise and losing those extra kilograms.

About the author

Tim Lobstein is policy director at the World Obesity Federation

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