

mHealth: New challenges as well as new opportunities

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Opinion

mHealth could revolutionise people's health, but this depends just as much on tech companies as it does on governments, writes Michał Boni.



The healthcare system faces many new challenges, which require a real paradigm shift. But first, we need to understand the key factors coming into play, because they will determine the possibilities of this paradigm shift.

One important factor - a game changer, even - is new technologies, and the multitude of digital possibilities: new medical inventions and devices, networks to exchange information and enhance human cooperation, data processing centres, applications for physicians and patients, data storage for referential knowledge on trends and symptoms, devices and wearables for measuring daily health. These are accessible and interoperable all over Europe.

This game changer also stems from new achievements in research, for example the European innovative medicines initiative. One medical approach allows for the use of molecular insights into health. Genetic factors also play a crucial role.

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Using '-omics' technologies and biomarkers can improve our knowledge of the human body and genetic dependencies. It is important to be able to translate these '-omics' to clinical applications used in new diagnosis and treatment models, which can be personalised.

Medical services can be completely personalised, from a much friendlier delivery of ePrescriptions to individual therapy models. This will set the scene for the reorganisation of the entire healthcare system, and increase the focus on patients' needs.

The way to build a preventive healthcare system is by using early warning tools, with real-time health monitoring and giving people the possibility to be responsible for their own health.

This could be applied to several different groups. Elderly people, for example, could live longer and in better health.

Persons with disabilities, who need support in many areas of their everyday lives, could also benefit, as could parents taking care of their children and people with chronic diseases. mHealth contributes to everyone's wellbeing, and is related to today's new lifestyle needs and demands.

Market demand in this sector will be stimulated by innovative technologies, better understanding of the problems, digital literacy, and a good regulatory and non-regulatory framework.

However, there is also an issue linked to growth in demand, demand directed towards new healthcare models and which does not come from medical professionals, politicians or institutions. It comes from tech companies and, most importantly, from patients, consumers, app users and their new lifestyles.

The amount of people using mobile health apps is set to double every two years. In 2013, only 16 per cent were using such applications. In 2015, this proportion increased to 32 per cent and is expected to hit 50 per cent by 2017.

Currently, 49 per cent of patients are willing to use wearables for health reasons. 84 per cent of the total revenue in the mobile health market will come from related services and products, such as sensors.

Only nine per cent of the total revenue will come, in coming years, from downloading apps. This is a clear sign that we must invest in innovation. 83 per cent of people are willing to provide their medical data, if used for research and to improve their health.

There needs to be an adequate response to new habits linked to the digital revolution, in order to set off the paradigm shift.

There needs to be closer cooperation between research and healthcare systems and new forms of bio-banking and terms for data analytical possibilities.

There needs to be clear rules governing the process of data exploring and sharing, processing and comparing the data, making this information useful for clinical activities and ensuring the right to information to all subjects.

All those efforts should be implemented under the conditions of the new general data protection regulation, while also considering ways in which to use big data to improve the quality of medical services in the broader sense.

But first of all, there needs to be better cooperation and synergy among the activities of the EU institutions and national governments and partners.

About the author

Michał Boni (EPP, PL) was host of the Paradigm shift for mHealth event at the European Parliament

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[Research and Innovation](#) [5]

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