

eHealth provides opportunities for smaller countries with limited resources

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Opinion

While the positives of developing eHealth and ICT quickly become apparent, there are still some major challenges, writes Andrey Kovatchev.



Andrey Kovatchev | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

The ever-increasing pressure on health systems means we must rethink the current paradigm of health care delivery. We need to invest in innovative models of carrying out and managing public health. Digital healthcare and eHealth have the potential to make healthcare more effective, with patient-centred services that are geared towards the needs of the individual.

It could also improve access to healthcare for disadvantaged groups and people living in remote or underserved areas. It has the potential to reduce health inequalities that undermine social cohesion.

Digital health has been high on the EU agenda for over a decade. Following the eHealth action plan adopted in 2004, the cross-border healthcare directive set a milestone in this process by establishing the eHealth network for voluntary cooperation between competent national authorities.

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While much has been built on this foundation, more needs to be done to reap the full benefit of accelerated deployment of eHealth services and infrastructure. I strongly support the efforts of Commissioners Mariya Gabriel and Vytenis Andriukaitis in developing the recently-published communication on digital transformation of health and care in the digital single market. It will play a key role in providing direction for EU-level activities in the field for the coming years.

In addition, Parliament and Council have expressed their ongoing support for developing digital health solutions in Europe. In its 2017 report on access to medicines, Parliament called on the Commission and member states to develop a single eHealth and mHealth roadmap, including the development of pilot projects at national level, and the modernisation of reimbursement models. This will stimulate a shift towards outcomes-driven healthcare systems.

Meanwhile, the Estonian Council presidency adopted conclusions inviting member states and the Commission to work together to seize the potential of digital technologies in European healthcare.

These specifically call for implementing existing EU legislation on the protection of personal data, electronic identification and information security in the health sector. It is vital that the work carried out by the Estonian presidency is continued by its successors, so that progress is not left to fade.

The EU's added value in healthcare includes providing a platform for exchange of best practices between member states and supporting them when pooling resources to maximise the advantages of their joint efforts.

The European reference networks (ERNs) are the flagship project facilitating discussions between healthcare providers across Europe, specialising in complex and rare diseases or conditions that require highly specialised treatment as well as concentrated knowledge and resources.

With the development of digital care and eHealth, the Commission has announced that it is planning to implement pilot projects based on 'real world data' to meet patients' needs with appropriate treatments.

Starting with the ERNs, these projects will look into helping people with rare conditions and diseases as well as how to forecast epidemics.

Additionally, national authorities and other stakeholders, notably healthcare practitioners and researchers, have been encouraged to share data and infrastructure. This will allow better

understanding and prevention of diseases and improve personalised medical research, diagnosis and treatment.

In an attempt to complement the development of personalised care and eHealth, 14 member states recently committed to the goal of providing access to at least one million sequenced genomes in the EU by 2022.

Digital care and eHealth provide opportunities for smaller countries to excel in digitalising their public health systems, despite being hampered by limited resources. For example, my home country, Bulgaria, has enjoyed a proliferation of different health platforms and wellbeing apps over recent years.

Studies have shown that more people in Bulgaria use health apps to contact a medical professional than any other European citizens. Local authorities are also investing in digital health solutions.

Sofia has developed a centralised portal where patients can book a doctor's appointment throughout the capital region, saving time and resources for both users and the city's health establishments.

While the positives of developing eHealth and ICT quickly become apparent, there are still some major challenges. Special efforts and funds need to be allocated for training healthcare professionals, as well as some of the socially disadvantaged groups that are most likely to be affected by social divisions.

In addition, there needs to be investment in developing the necessary infrastructure. In order for the EU to continue delivering added value in the realm of digital care and eHealth, adequate financial resources need to be allocated in the next multiannual financial framework.

About the author

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