

eHealth: a driver for growth and innovation?

In Europe....

Telemedicine initiatives have been with us for the last 20 years or so, but have never been adopted on a large scale. In human terms, both patients and doctors would rather be together in the same room, although it is possible for a consultation to take place remotely. But a consensus is growing that developing telehealth solutions at EU and national level will help combat growing financial and staff shortages in the European health sector. In the US, the recent federal economic stimulus package included Euros 36.8 billion to encourage the take-up and application of IT to health care.

There is much less agreement about how to go about introducing new technology. Over 200 studies have been done on information and communications technology, medical devices and imaging technologies. Points of debate include which technologies should be prioritised, how to ensure interoperability between different systems, and how to ensure that eHealth technologies correspond to the needs of doctors and patients. epSOS, a pilot project funded by the EU, is developing cross-border interoperability between electronic health records and currently involves 12 Member States. Other issues of key importance are to demonstrate savings and measure costs, while a single legal framework is needed to overcome problems such as licensing, liability and cross-border jurisdiction. The projects, debates and lobbying continue.

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...and in developing countries.

On the other hand, IT giants have their own solution to interoperability and it is greatly to their advantage to see low-cost technologies become accessible to billions of people. Interviewed by EurActiv in January 2010, Mr Craig Mundie, Chief Research and Strategy Officer at Microsoft, considered the traditional model of medical care unsustainable in the developing world. Could a more radical rethink provide shortcuts?

“Microsoft is developing a robotic triage doctor, capable of learning and reasoning, which projects an avatar of itself onto a screen. It listens to patients and can make a diagnosis and recommend a course of treatment,” he told EurActiv. The virtual medic can already deal with 16 conditions commonly affecting children. This robotic doctor gives us the ability to take a subset of medical practice and bring it to villages where that expertise is scarce.

“In the future, we have to do a better job for more people for less money. And technology is the answer,” Mr Mundie says.
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Organ donation

Sixty thousand patients are now waiting for organ transplantation in the EU - not enough organs are being donated. This has sparked an upsurge in illegal organ trafficking. The use of transplant coordinators to boost donation rates has been pioneered by Spain, where 35% of people donate their organs – twice as many as the EU average. Spain, which holds the rotating six-month EU presidency, is keen to have a first reading of a new organs directive in May 2010.

Under the scheme, each EU Member State will set up a national authority responsible for quality and safety standards of organs intended for transplantation. Confidentiality of patient data must be respected in line with national rules. To facilitate cooperation between Member States, the Commission will set up a network of authorities and establish systems to transmit information. Traceability will be part of the system, along with arrangements for reporting adverse reactions, to protect patients and donors alike. Donation should be voluntary and unpaid.

MEPs gave a first approval to the measures on 16 March 2010. Slovak MEP, Mr Miroslav Mikolasik, European People’s Party, Rapporteur, said detailed discussions will continue with a view to a full vote.

50 years of Pharmaceutical Group of the EU

The PGEU came into being in 1959 and recently celebrated 50 years of promoting pharmacy. From a base of six founder member countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, PGEU now represents 400,000 pharmacists in 30 European countries.

PGEU works on behalf of community pharmacists in three main ways - as an Advocate: profile raising; creating new opportunities; as Radar: identifying challenges and opportunities; and as a Platform: collecting and sharing information as a basis for coordinated actions.

In 2009, a major priority was patient safety. In this field PGEU participated actively with European Commission Directorate-General for Health and Consumers – DG SANCO, and the European Network for Patient Safety – EUNetPAS, project to promote pharmacists as stakeholders in safety issues at both national and European level. It published two policy statements on community pharmacists’ contribution to the safe use of medicines by older people, and the control of antibiotic resistance; and contributed actively to preparing European Antibiotic Awareness Day, 18 November 2009.

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