

eHealth 2005 – Conference Conclusions

<http://www.ehealth2005.no/>

Introduction

“eHealth matters. It can improve access to healthcare and boost the quality and effectiveness of the services offered.” These are the rousing words with which the European Commission introduced its 2004 Communication on eHealth and its *Action Plan for a European e-Health Area*. They set the tone for the European Union’s perspective on eHealth. This approach forms a central part of the Union’s response to meeting the health needs of a growing and ageing European Union in which, by 2051, close to 40% of the population will be older than 65 years old.

The European Journey to eHealth

The European Union’s commitment to eHealth did not, however, begin in 2004. In fact it goes back at least fifteen years to a period before the term eHealth was even coined. As long ago as 1988, the European Union started to invest its Community Research and Technological Development in what was then called ‘advanced informatics in medicine’. This commitment to funding research in eHealth related areas has been continued through to the current 6th Framework Programme. Research and technological development alone is, however, not sufficient to make a reality of the potential of eHealth. Accordingly, in 2000, the Heads of State adopted the **eEurope Initiative** and its associated Action Plans.

The Road leading towards a European eHealth Area

The positive support from the Member States to the eHealth chapters of both policy initiatives, *eEurope 2002* and *eEurope 2005* was shown in particular in the 2003 *Ministerial Declaration on eHealth*. The declaration was adopted on the occasion of the first European eHealth Conference and was later confirmed in Cork in 2004 at the second conference. eHealth was brought to the forefront of European policy again, in April 2004, when the European Commission adopted a joint package of three health-related Communications, that included the *Action Plan for a European eHealth Area*.

In adopting the **Action Plan**, Ministers recognised the importance of a focussed approach in achieving and realising the potential of eHealth. Thus, each Member State is now committed to show eHealth Leadership in developing an eHealth road map. Each road map will address the challenges of providing citizen-centred healthcare services in a context of rising expectations, ageing populations, increased mobility and limited budgetary conditions. There should be a European-level solution for exchange and use of this information. Key targets for the near future include:

eHealth can support provision of good care within and across borders:

In their recently concluded Reflection Process on Patient Mobility, the Health Ministers of the European Union undertook to support the mobility of patients in Europe in order to ensure that European citizens have access to the best available care. Further achieving standardisation and interoperability of patient medical records will form an important basis to ease patient mobility. Developments in the legal framework (confidentiality and ethical issues) and standardisation activities are essential to support patient mobility, safe health care, and market development.

Developing Citizen Empowerment and Support through eHealth:

European citizens are becoming more health literate and more involved in their own healthcare. The Internet is a key resource for health information and education, with the potential to provide a very significant percentage of the European population with sound advice and guidance. Information

services, coupled with the introduction of secure and safe identification of the citizens/patients on the Internet, and the necessary privacy and security procedures, will enable more patients to be treated, supported and monitored in the comfort and safety of their own homes, work places and leisure environments.

Delivering Safe and Efficient Healthcare through eHealth

It is well recognised that medical errors and accidents cost thousands of lives as well as millions of euros every year. It is also acknowledged that eHealth tools such as electronic prescribing and real-time decision support - when coupled with integrated, interoperable electronic health records - can reduce significantly the number of such accidents and errors. Yet patient safety will not be the only benefit of an integrated eHealth infrastructure. Efficient eHealth tools developed for the use of health professionals will facilitate more flexible and collaborative work within and between health institutions as well as between traditional health care spheres, such as primary and secondary care and home care.

Planning Ahead for eHealth

In a framework of close collaboration between the European Commission and the Member States, the target for Ministers is now to address the common challenges of eHealth through shared targets, dissemination of best practice, common benchmarking and international collaboration.

Special attention should be paid to overcoming some of the major challenges to the implementation of eHealth applications, such as organisational issues, interoperability, availability of funding, lack of long-term planning, and difficulties related to the overall assessment of ICT applications in the health care field. Particular emphasis should be allotted to the planning of eHealth implementation in the new Member States and candidate countries so as to facilitate the restructuring of health care services and mobility across European space.

Upcoming in 2005, we can fully anticipate advances in such eHealth initiatives as: the Member States making good progress on their eHealth roadmaps; completing the EU health portal; strengthening health threats surveillance using ICT; promoting the use of health cards further; agreeing on approaches to best practices and benchmarking; advancing developments in integration and interoperability of health information systems and electronic health records; and making solid progress on the ICT implications of patient and professional mobility.

Overall, the new **i2010: European Information Society** initiative will stimulate the take-up of information and communication technologies, to continue the eEurope agenda. The new initiative promotes a clear, stable and competitive environment for electronic communications and digital services - a European information space; increased research and innovation in information and communication technologies; and an Information Society dedicated to inclusion and quality of life. It goes without saying that eHealth is an important part of the new strategy which will continue to foster the growth of our competitive, knowledge-based economy. Hence, it will support European citizens through creation of a safe, reliable, efficient and accessible eHealth infrastructure which not only meets the demands of national health strategies, but also develops a European-wide preparedness to address transborder health challenges and crises.

In a Europe in which our citizens are increasingly mobile - whether within the borders of their own Member State or among different countries - we need to raise awareness of the pressing need for a more **integrated and interoperable** European health information space. The Ministers commit to taking up this challenge in a staged and structured approach over the next five-year period.