

## **CITIZEN'S SUMMARY:**

### **Communication on Telemedicine for the benefit of patients, healthcare systems and society**

#### **What is the problem?**

European citizens are ageing. The percentage of over-65-year-olds as part of the population is projected to increase from 17% today to around 37% in 2050. In parallel, chronic health conditions, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, are becoming more frequent. In 2006, the World Health Organisation calculated that at least 35% of men aged over 60 years experience two or more chronic conditions.

We are therefore envisaging a scenario in which it seems that there will be relatively fewer health professionals to look after the older generation, and the costs of health monitoring and treatment might consequently rise. Chronic Disease burden currently costs €192 billion a year, almost 60% of total health care costs in the European Union. Arguably, the ageing population is bound to increase these costs unless new forms of healthcare services are identified.

Telemedicine, the provision of healthcare services at a distance through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), can contribute to solving these problems. But such tools are currently underused: less than 3% of general practitioners across the EU work with telemedicine occasionally; less than 1% use it on a regular basis. There is an urgent need to address the barriers to wider use of telemedicine services.

#### **The proposal and its benefits**

In order to make sure that as many patients and health professionals benefit from telemedicine as possible, this Communication aims to define the required steps to be taken by Member States, the European Commission and stakeholders including general practitioners and hospitals.

Telemedicine can help both citizens with chronic diseases and healthier individuals to have a better and safer life. For example, remote patient monitoring (telemonitoring) can improve the quality of life of chronically ill patients. Patients' health parameters such as blood pressure or blood sugar levels can be transmitted in real time to their doctor or their local healthcare centre. This allows regular check ups to be done from the patients' home, avoiding troublesome and, particularly for the sick or elderly, exhausting trips to a doctor or hospital.

Telemedicine can also improve access to specialised treatment in areas of healthcare suffering from a shortage of expertise or heavy workloads. It could also be beneficial in remote areas where access to healthcare is difficult. The expertise of specialists in a particular field can be made available in local doctors' surgeries, reducing the need for the patient to travel far away from home. Telemedicine services can also contribute to shortening waiting lists for certain examinations, for example in radiology, where the reading and interpretation of x-rays can be performed at distance.

Telemedicine also has the potential to contribute to the growth of the European economy. European industry, especially SMEs, can play a leading role in tapping the financial and

clinical benefits from this expanding market, provided that certain barriers to development such as market fragmentation and legal aspects can be addressed.

### **The EU position**

Health Authorities in the Member States are best placed to make telemedicine a reality in the daily life of European patients. Member States are primarily responsible for the organisation, financing and delivery of healthcare and therefore need to engage in addressing the barriers to the deployment of telemedicine.

Cooperation at EU-level is essential and the Commission is committed to support these efforts to address issues such as the need to provide evidence of actual large-scale benefits of telemedicine through scientifically-sound studies or providing clarification on the European legal framework relevant to telemedicine.

A lack of coordination at EU level could result in a lost opportunity for patients and health systems to take advantage of the benefits of telemedicine, an absence of common standards and solutions to allow the technology to function properly and lower market uptake and deployment of useful and technologically mature telemedicine products.

### **The terms and scope of application**

Member States have already recognised the opportunities and benefits of telemedicine, but until now efforts to provide these services have been too small. Integrating these new types of services in healthcare systems is a challenging task for Member States, whom the Communication aims to support by setting out actions to address the barriers, with a focus on:

- Building confidence and acceptance of telemedicine services among users by encouraging provision and sharing of scientific evidence on effectiveness and cost efficiency of telemedicine services;
- Bringing legal clarity by identifying the most relevant EU legislation applicable to telemedicine services and encouraging Member States to assess their legal framework to enable provision of telemedicine services;
- Facilitating market development by encouraging industry and relevant stakeholders to contribute to the development of common standards and suitable conditions for telemedicine to achieve its potential.

### **When is the proposal foreseen to come into effect?**

The actions listed in the Communication should all be completed by the end of 2011, when it is expected that patients, professionals, industry and Member States will be able to benefit from the proposed actions.

More information on:

[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/health/policy/telemedicine](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/health/policy/telemedicine)