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Irish Prime Minister: "eHealth Action Plan should be vision for all of us"

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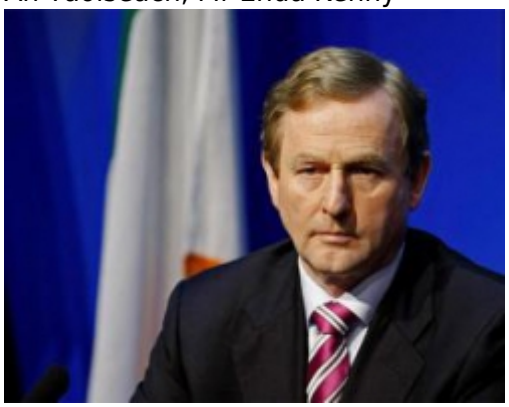
Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny believes that the 'eHealth Action Plan 2012-2020' is "a coherent roadmap allowing us to utilise and develop eHealth to address some of the most pressing health systems challenges in the first half of the 21st century. This should become the vision for all of us."
Speaker:
An Taoiseach, Mr Enda Kenny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He said this during the EU-US eHealth/Health IT Cooperation Assembly (eHealth Week 2013) on Wednesday 15 May in Dublin.

Speech by An Taoiseach, Mr **Enda Kenny**: "It is my privilege to call in on this eHealth week 2013 conference to address this EU-US eHealth/Health IT Cooperation Assembly today which is an important stream within the wider eHealth week events.

I am aware of the significant challenges facing all of our health services. The so-called ‘greying of Europe’ and the expectation of longer life expectancy combined with a healthier life style is something that we all truly welcome, something that is probably one of the good news health stories of our time.

Many of you will be aware that there is an emerging school of thought that health and well being are as an important measure of prosperity as the more traditional measures such as GDP and GNP. Our national statistical institutions are beginning to report on these factors as well.

But we cannot get away from the hard fact that healthcare costs in almost every country continue to escalate, and in most cases, at a rate that ultimately we cannot afford. In Ireland we estimate that

demographic changes alone will place an additional burden of 1% per annum on healthcares resources for the foreseeable future.

Health is clearly our biggest public service delivery spending area. As Taoiseach I am taking a personal interest in the health reform initiatives in Ireland and I am personally very enthusiastic about the potential that eHealth deployment holds to improve our healthcare services, to contain our healthcare costs and to provide a badly needed boost to all our economies by providing jobs through innovation and research in this emerging field of activity.

I am constantly intrigued by just how fast the rate of change here is, moving at bewildering speed. Every time I have the opportunity to visit the research and innovative centres through many of our companies, universities and colleges, it is simply mind-blowing to those of us who are not versed in the details of the nature of these changes. In relation to the stands that are on display here today, I have met with some of those people in the past, they are quite extraordinary.

The benefits of eHealth will be well known to everyone in this audience. Clearly, eHealth can provide us with health care that is safer and more efficient and that can place the patient more at the heart of where we should be. We are also learning that eHealth can give us an additional form of prosperity as eHealth is one of the keys to improving our economic prosperity by providing jobs, innovation and research opportunities.
I am heartened by the eHealth ecosystem approach which was advocated in the Irish Presidency Declaration that issued following the high level working lunch held on Monday in Dublin Castle that I know many of you attended.

This is Ireland's 7th Presidency dealing with 27 countries, directives, regulations and legislation. These can be very technical and complex but I'm glad to report that we have made substantial progress on a raft of dossiers and files that we hope to conclude during the course of this Presidency, not the least of which are related to the work of Minister Reilly and the Department of Health.

Clearly all of that research and innovation allows for a more central involvement for industry, for service providers, and most importantly of all for patients, who may traditionally have been too far removed from the process of participating in managing their own health care.

I recently had discussions about dealing with an ageing society. In the next 3 to 4 decades, it is estimated that people will generally live to be 120 or 130 years of age. Many will draw pensions for much longer than they've actually worked. This is a global phenomenon because of the advances in scientific medicine and the way things are changing. This is a phenomenon that humanity is going to have to deal with.

I am also aware that innovations in the area of eHealth can feed into other ICT initiatives such as 'Big Data' and cloud computing and offers significant potential for research to support wider health developments. The scale of data collection now is phenomenal. The only collating capacity is with computers, to distil that down to the single or double page of information that is transmissible and understandable.

I believe the eHealth Action Plan 2012-2020 - Innovative healthcare for the 21st century is a coherent roadmap allowing us to utilise and develop eHealth to address some of the most pressing health systems challenges in the first half of the 21st century. This should become the vision for all of us as I'm sure you know only too well.

Innovation is an integral part of this government's overall economic policy and indeed is included as a

specific pillar in the Action Plan for Jobs 2013 strategy. One of the key points that makes this country so attractive for investment for research and innovation is not just tax policy, is not just our tradition, is not just our technology but it is the talent pool that we find here. I meet this on many occasions with international visitors who say they can be quite astounded at the creativity and the imaginative capacity of young people when they are challenged. We have the best demographic features of any country in Europe for the next 25 years and that's paying serious dividends in the area of research, innovation and eHealth and will in the time ahead.

We are also very cognisant that we have to use the research and innovation to build competitive advantage. Government strategy is to accelerate the economic and societal return on our strategic investments in this area to further strengthen that enterprise engagement, the take-up of public research that will drive commercialisation afterwards.

In this context, Ireland's National Research Prioritisation exercise which has been underway since March 2012 will see the majority of public research funding aligned with 14 specific areas of priority where we are most likely to get economic and societal returns, particularly in the form of jobs. As a small country with a limited capacity to spend, we looked at the entire spectrum of where investment was going and analysed where spend should be in the context of the best return for our society, for our capacity and the contribution that we can make.

By identifying 14 particular areas that underpin the platform of science and technology and integrating infrastructure to support future priority areas. Arising from this analysis, connected health and independent living has been identified as one of the priority areas. I've often heard Minister Reilly, as a doctor, speak about the wish of so many people to be in their own home for as long as possible. This is an issue that is both comforting for them and is a particular strategy of government. In addition one of the clear areas we see as holding real potential is that this country will be established as a world renowned national health innovation hub.

We have one of healthiest populations in Europe, a population that is really interested and an outgoing population, given our scale and size, we can grow to be recongised as national health innovation hub on a worldwide basis, clearly that will drive collaboration.

The hub we have here in Ireland is already helping the development of, for example, the hospital mattress sterilization system, an electronic prescription service which will allow prescriptions to be sent automatically from GPs to pharmacies, technology which would allow GPs to take and process blood tests in their surgeries, post hospital discharge patient telephone follow-up programme which will help to prevent avoidable readmissions and improve continuity of care. These things are all so welcome, they are so simple in their effect, that you might ask why where they not there so many years ago. Yet there are hundreds of parallel developments in various areas moving together. The world will be a very different place inside the next decade when many of these become a reality in everyday life.

We want to establish and will establish Ireland as a leading location for Irish and for international start-ups, both medical technology and healthcare companies together. We see this as an area of real priority. We will be following the Action Plan's recommendation in formulating our own eHealth strategy. We will continue to work very closely with our European colleagues.

Overall Ireland is well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that arise in this emerging area. We have in this country several clusters of the largest and most dynamic medical device and pharmaceutical companies in the world. The trend is that one develops off the other. The challenge and the capacity for change and innovation is always there. 9 out of the top 10 pharmaceutical

companies in the world have a base in Ireland, as do 8 out of the top 10 medical technology companies. They are all here because they recognise the advantages that I have already mentioned.

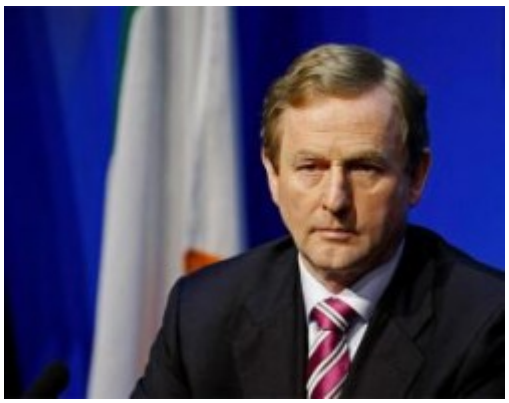
The research and third level institutions which we have are first class and world class. They work with partner industries on a tightly focused series of research and development programmes, many in the life sciences, many in the ICT sectors where we have a proven and in-depth expertise. There is also the cohort of promising Irish companies with very strong analytical and technological capabilities in these fields also. The life sciences sector in Ireland accounts for over 50,000 jobs and €50 billion worth of exports. You can see clearly it's potential.

The life sciences sector is supported and complemented by a world-class research institution and health professionals who work in our hospitals. Informed by gatherings such as these, over eHealth Week, Ireland does take a lead in cooperation with international partners and I want to congratulate everyone involved in that.

We have the President of the Massachusetts Senate here, Therese Murray who has got connections with the west of Ireland, from where I come myself. I've just met with the President and the Governor of Massachusetts earlier on in government buildings. We have extraordinary ties with that part of America and many of the bigger companies operating out of Massachusetts have serious bases here in Ireland.

I'd like you to give a warm welcome to Therese, the President of the Massachusetts Senate."

ENDS



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