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Let's get rid of the waiting room - Blog post by Neelie Kroes

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I just saw a documentary on television about Greenland, the biggest island in the world with a surface of 2 million square kilometres and nearly 56,000 residents. In the documentary, a woman travelled 2,000 kilometres to the nearest hospital to give birth. That's about from Brussels to the South of Italy.

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I watched it while I was resting my foot on a stool, following a small surgical procedure. Only then do you realise how fortunate we are, with all these services just a few kilometres away: but also, even then, how dependent you can be when things go wrong. How can you keep on living a normal life as much as possible?

Work, in my case, can be done from home, with a telephone, tablet and Skype. No problem. But how can ICT play a valuable role in healthcare? What do you really need, what can make a difference and what would also be financially effective?

The possibilities of eHealth (electronic healthcare), and mHealth (using a mobile) are huge. With mHealth alone, Europe could save €99 billion in healthcare a year in 2017. And thanks to ICT, patients can be central to this, not care providers.

Looking at Europe, every citizen in Estonia has a digital card with unique security, giving access to an electronic patient record. The card also works at the pharmacy: the pharmacist can see which medication has been prescribed and if it conflicts with other drugs.

No more loose notes with unreadable handwriting, no complications from the wrong medication, and you don't have to return to the GP for a follow-up prescription; the GP can just insert it in the

computer. And, if needed, the medication can even be delivered straight to your home.

Staying at home

In Denmark, hospital staff can monitor chronic patients at a distance. The hospital can check vital statistics like blood pressure, blood samples, body temperature, the heartbeat and sleep rhythms. So the hospital can deliver efficient and personalised care, emergency care and advice on topics such as diet and exercise without people having to leave their home.

Also the UK is trying out 'tele-consultation' and 'tele-coaching' for remote areas, so patients can talk directly via the internet with their specialist.

Operations, of course, still have to be performed in a hospital, but can be done much more precisely with robotics: the surgeon stays in control but the movements are much more precise. Also robot arms can lift patients mechanically out of bed — avoiding chronic back problems for nurses.

The Ministers responsible can do a lot more with this. Digital care is not only healthy for a country's budget. It also improves quality and efficiency, by bringing information together, with satisfied patients in control over their treatment from home. Let's get rid of the waiting room! I'm having another cup of coffee.

Neelie Kroes [3] is Commissioner for the Digital Agenda for Europe, DG Connect

This blog post was published on 30/11/2013 in De Tijd: "Weg met de wachtkamer" [4]

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