

Digital health progressing towards more interoperability for the digital cross border exchange of health data in Europe

[The meeting of the eHealth Network held in Bucharest on 11-12 June](#) led to important decisions: Malta, Portugal and Estonia received the green light to launch their first digital cross border services for the exchange of health data, and Member States adopted “investment guidelines” to orient public and private actors towards funding and purchasing choices that foster interoperable digital health, using standards and profiles in the Electronic Health Record Exchange Format. The high-level event, involving Romanian Presidency, ministers, the European Commission, WHO and eHealth Network and held on 12 June, put the emphasis on interoperability and more generally on the creation of a Common European health data space.

The Member States meeting through the eHealth Network approved unanimously the possibility for three countries, i.e. Malta, Portugal and Estonia, to go live with their first exchange of ePrescriptions and patient summaries, part of the “[My Health @EU](#)”¹ initiative. The initiative allows patients and their health professionals to access their health data while traveling to another European country. Portugal will offer the possibility to its own citizens to retrieve medicines in a pharmacy abroad without any printed prescription, merely relying on the cross-border exchange of ePrescription data between the two countries, and will offer the same service to the foreigners in Portugal. Portugal will also allow hospitals in its country to have access to health data of the patients from other European countries visiting the emergency services, and the same possibility will be put in place for Portuguese abroad. Malta will provide the exchange of patient summaries for its own and foreign citizens, and Estonia will enable its own citizens to use ePrescriptions abroad (for foreign citizens the system is already operational with almost 3000 ePrescriptions already dispensed to Finnish citizens in Estonia). These countries will soon join Estonia, Finland, Czech Republic, Luxembourg and Croatia which recently [launched these services](#) or part of them.

Interoperability of health data was at the centre of the discussions. Current work is ongoing in order to find possible alignment between European and international standards, as the presentation made by CEN on the International Patient Summary illustrated. Further analysis will also be conducted by the [eHAction Joint Action](#) to possibly include planned care into the current frame of the patient summary guidelines which currently covers unplanned care (emergency). The Commission outlined, then, that a forthcoming call will allow developing the technical specifications for three new elements to be included in the European Health Record exchange format: lab results, images, discharge letters.

The eHealth Network adopted the “[investments guidelines](#)” that guide the Commission, Member States, regions, procurers and industry towards funding and purchasing choices that foster interoperability in digital health. The investment guidelines are expected to support the uptake of the European Health Record exchange format standards, and thus the cross border exchange of health data among pharmacies and hospitals.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/health/ehealth/electronic_crossborder_healthservices_en

Interoperability was also a major topic during the high-level events which were organised in parallel to the eHealth Network meeting by the Romanian Presidency. More generally speaking, the Romanian Presidency, the European Commission, WHO and the eHealth Network underlined the relevance and even urgent need to set up a Common European health data space, to use the new increased availability of health data to meet the needs of health systems. Discussions highlighted, among other things, the usefulness of sharing best practices, funding mechanisms, building evidence in favour of digital health investments, data protection, interoperability.

The eHealth Network set up under Directive 2011/24/EU on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare connects national authorities responsible for eHealth. In this forum, EU countries can give direction to eHealth developments in Europe by playing an important role in strategic eHealth related decision-making on interoperability and standardisation. It is supported at technical level by the eHAction Joint Action.

The Directive 2011/24 ensures continuity of care for European citizens across borders by giving the possibility for Member States to exchange health data in a secure, efficient and interoperable way. Two cross-border health services are being progressively introduced in all EU Member States. The ePrescription and eDispensation allow any EU citizen to retrieve his/her medication in a pharmacy located in another EU Member State, thanks to the electronic transfer of their prescription from his/her country of residence to the country of travel. The Patient Summaries provide background information on important health-related aspects such as allergies, current medication, previous illness, surgeries, etc., making it digitally accessible in case of a medical (emergency) visit in another country. It is an abstract of a larger collection of health data called the European Health Record, on which the Commission has adopted a Recommendation last 6th February with the objective of setting common standards, the European Electronic Health Record Exchange Format.