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Cost-Benefit of Telecardiology

Author

HITM interview with

Mr. **Dean Westcott**

HITM: Please Tell Us a Little bit About ACCA's Role in the Telecardiology e-Health Cost/Benefit Study that was Undertaken on Dehalf of the European Commission's Information Society and Media Directorate General ?

Westcott: ACCA, as you know, is the world's largest global professional accountancy body, with 260,000 students and 110,000 members (qualified accountants) in 170 countries. ACCA members work worldwide in firms of accountants, commerce, industry and in the public sector.

As a global body, with members working across a full range of sectors, we are particularly well placed to facilitate opportunities for cross-sector and cross-country learning. In the health field, many of our members are in senior positions in health organisations, local authorities and government departments.

This was the third such study undertaken by ACCA in the EU. It focused on a telecardiology project in northern Italy which uses ICT to provide a cardiology monitoring service for patients with chronic heart disease, those waiting for heart transplants and other types of cardiac surgery, as well as a screening service for the identification of the early onset of cardiac disease.

ACCA's role was to provide an economic and financial assessment of this initiative and ascertain the long-term cost benefits of undertaking such investments in healthcare.

HITM: Why was the Study Undertaken?

Westcott: Healthcare expenditure in Europe is currently averaging 8.5% of GDP and with continuing low birth rates, extended life expectancy and new technological and pharmaceutical developments, is set to grow to three times this figure in the next two decades.

The use of e-Health technologies, as our studies have shown, provides significant opportunities to both reduce costs whilst at the same time offering benefits to patients in the way that services are both accessed and delivered. To put this into context as far as the telecardiology study is concerned, cardiovascular diseases represent 42% of all deaths in the EU at an estimated cost of £169 billion per annum to the economy. Clearly, the scope and need to reduce such costs is enormous.

HITM: What Were the Results of the Study? What Impact do Such Results Have on the Future of the European Healthcare Sector?

Westcott: The study identified significant benefits for both patients and healthcare providers in several key areas. These included delivering improved patient services by enabling cardiologists, GPs and nurses to identify changes in conditions and providing a prompt and appropriate medical response, a reduction in cardiology-related GP visits by as much as 90%, a reduction in hospital in-patient admissions of 35% and a reduction in out-patient visits of 12%.

As a result of the use of e-Health technologies the anxiety for both patients and carers is also significantly reduced. Critically, the potential savings identified could amount to as much as £100 million over a 15-year period, directly attributable to the introduction of telecardiology.

Research of this nature sets out a roadmap for policy makers - based on sound clinical evidence - that there are significant benefits both in terms of patient care and cost effectiveness to be realised from the increased use of e-Health technologies.

HITM: In Your Opinion, is There a Strong Impetus From the EU and Member State Governmental Institutions to Promote IT Investments in National Healthcare Systems?

Westcott: The European Commission, through the Information Society and Media Directorate-General, has been instrumental over the past decade in promoting e-Health policies as a route to improving access to healthcare, providing higher quality of healthcare, and alongside, delivering cost benefits which make funds available for reinvestment in healthcare.

Whilst there is no doubt that there is an increased awareness at a national level, it is also clear that there is more that can be done. To put this point into context, it is estimated that spending on e-Health worldwide stands at some 2% of healthcare expenditure, yet it has the potential to reduce inefficiencies inherent in the healthcare environment by as much as 25 – 40%. Thus, significant potential exists for the delivery of improved healthcare through co-ordinated ministerial action in the field of e-Health.

HITM: What do You See as the Biggest Obstacles in Raising the Profile of Healthcare IT Investments in Europe?

Westcott: A sustained increase in the level of IT investments requires the co-operation of all stakeholders (health organisations, healthcare professionals, consumers and industry) in following a realistic strategy for the deployment of e-Health technologies. Whilst the challenges to introducing e-Health technologies have been well documented in the past (interoperability of systems, patient confidentiality, standardisation and fragmentation of the e-Health market), these are not insurmountable. The real challenge is the financial commitment from Member States to invest in such technologies.

As our study and others have shown, the introduction of e-Health technologies has the potential to deliver both improved services, increase cost effectiveness and deliver a significant return on investments.

HITM: What are ACCA's Recommendations to Member States and the European Commission to Ensure the Future of e-Health Developments and Investments in the EU?

Westcott: The message from ACCA is clear: we urge Member States to review their current levels of investment in IT in the health environment, and do so as a matter of urgency. This recommendation is based on strong clinical and economic evidence from a number of studies – most recently, that relating to telecardiology services in northern Italy.

With the costs of modern healthcare escalating rapidly and set to rise further, the evident benefits of e-Health technologies cannot be ignored. ACCA continues to support the European Commission's thrust to promote e-Health policies as a means of improving access to healthcare, improving quality and effectiveness of services and delivering substantial savings for re-investment.

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