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E-Health with Citizens and with Choices

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The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has great potential for helping older people and people with disabilities to continue to live at home, at work, and in the community. Technology can enable older people carry out daily activities as well as monitor health, create social networks, increase participation in society and augment safety. The use of technology can also facilitate social inclusion, improve professional participation and quality of life and ultimately enhance independent living. The development of new technologies and services for older people are

wide ranging and include: safety-related services, healthcare and medical services “wellness services”, mobility and social care services, smart homes, smart textiles, robotics and consumer electronics.

The mobility of health-related goods and services without the patient or service provider being mobile themselves has come to be known as e-Health. It is a growing market in the area of cross border health (acquisition of therapeutic aids, drugs, etc). However, e-Health tools and solutions go well beyond simply Internet-based applications. As noted by the EU Commission in its 2004 Action Plan for a European e-Health Area, they cover not only health authorities and healthcare professionals, but patients and citizens too. Included here are “health information networks, electronic health records, telemedicine services, personal wearable and portable communicable systems, health portals, and many other information and communication technology based tools assisting prevention, diagnosis, treatment, health monitoring and lifestyle management.”

There is an obvious added value in ensuring that EU-wide e-Health systems are interoperable in order to facilitate and foster the collaboration of health professionals and organisations as well as between health professionals and their patients. To achieve this, national/regional representatives and stakeholders must cooperate in order to resolve the various associated legal, organisational, policy and ethical issues, not least concerns about data security and quality. E-Health guidelines have already been published to facilitate the implementation in the various Member States and at the Union level. This initiative will enable easy and fast access to a citizen’s electronic health record or a targeted extract from it (like a patient summary or emergency data), from any place, and at any time, across Europe.

Over the last couple of years, the development of e-Health solutions has been seen as a fundamental and integrative part of achieving some of Europe’s key and overarching shared values: universal access to healthcare; access to good quality care; equity and solidarity. The European Union has also supported research in this area and continues fostering exchanges of good practices between Member states.

Given the growing number of older people within the European Union, this represents both opportunity and value: on the one hand, national governments are beginning to integrate e-Health as part of their healthcare strategic plans; on the other, they are aiming at improving quality and efficiency of healthcare systems enabling better usage of resources. The economic benefits of e-Health have been acknowledged in a study carried out in 2006 under e-Health Impact, a project funded by the European Commission. This shows that once the development and implementation stages have been successfully achieved, e-Health can measurably contribute to meet the needs of citizens in a ‘virtual health economy’.

However, the development of health technology solutions and products must enable the active participation of citizens / users / consumers from the research and development stages to implementation and monitoring. There can be no meaningful e-Health without the active involvement of citizens. Such an approach to e-Health must be taken seriously by industry, Member States, regional and local actors.

E-Health cannot also be seen as the panacea to the increasing lack of sustainability of healthcare systems. E-Health can only be part of the solution.

