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### EU Affairs

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#### Towards a Real European EHealth Area

European Union governments have set themselves a triple target as they try to promote the use of the latest technological developments to help tackle the health challenges in the years ahead.

Firstly, they are looking to make greater use of telemedicine and innovative information and communication technology (ICT) in planning for chronic disease management. Ways in which this can be achieved will become clearer in the autumn when the European Commission intends to publish a paper on the subject.

Secondly, efforts will be made both to stimulate more adventurous and innovative research and to encourage policymakers to better appreciate how these developments can be used in healthcare decisions over a ten-year time frame and to plan accordingly.

Finally, special attention will be paid to the legal, practical and other issues which will arise as eHealth – as the combination of new technology and healthcare is being dubbed – is more widely used. Moves are afoot to establish a clear legal framework which will define the rights, responsibilities and obligations of all those concerned from national and local health authorities to patients and insurance companies.

The exercise will also establish the impact that existing legislation on issues such as data protection, privacy and electronic commerce will have in this area.

The three priorities were agreed at a two-day conference on “eHealth without frontiers” organised by the Slovenian EU presidency and set out in the Portoroz Declaration. Opening the proceedings, Zofija Mazej Kukovic, the Slovenian Health Minister, pointed out that the use of the new possibilities offered by the Internet, mobile phones and television meant greater patient involvement and more effective healthcare providers.

The role of patients was also changing and they were becoming more involved in the treatment process. Telemedicine, or the delivery of medicine at a distance, helped to eliminate all sorts of boundaries and so improve the quality of healthcare, she added.

The conference was an opportunity for participants from almost 40 countries to compare experiences in this fast growing area of healthcare which the European Commission is keen to project. Moves in this area were given a boost in 2004 when the Commission adopted an eHealth action plan. This set out the objective of creating a European eHealth area and identified practical steps to achieve electronic health records, patient identifiers, health cards and the gradual rollout of high speed internet access for health systems.

Already all 27 EU countries have established national eHealth roadmaps containing their policy priorities. The European Commission, with the cooperation of some national authorities and ICT companies, is involved in the development, design and validation of an electronic health services pilot project. This is focusing on two distinct situations: crossborder access to electronic patient summaries and e-prescription.

In similar vein, the Commission will soon table advice on how to ensure national health record systems can be interoperable with each other, enabling patients and medical staff to access the data they require at any time, no matter where they are based. This will emphasise the importance of standardised systems and of ensuring patient welfare remains a priority.

The conference noted that throughout the different EU initiatives the ICT industry and patient groups had to be involved at the earliest possible stage and be regularly consulted so that policy makers had the benefit of their input.

As the host country, Slovenia has been leading by example. It presented participants with a 24-page brochure describing some of the ways in which ICT is being used by the country's health authorities. In one case, it is used to treat depression, an illness that affects 12% of all patients. In another, the technology can monitor and provide home medical care for people suffering from chronic lung disease.

On the administrative front, Slovenia is using ICT to register new births and to update its health insurance card system. It aims to start introducing the new electronic card this autumn.

The growth in eHealth care services has also been underlined in a recent European Commission survey. This shows that 87% of general practitioners use a computer and that 48% have a broadband connection. While the equipment is overwhelmingly used to store patient information, 40% of doctors now transfer data to and from laboratories electronically.

The survey suggests there is still considerable scope for electronic prescriptions. While this is well developed in Denmark (97%) and Sweden (81%), the average across the EU is only 6%. For more information,

please visit:

[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/eeurope/i2010/benchmarking?inex\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/eeurope/i2010/benchmarking?inex_en.html)

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