Volume 2 / Issue 2 2007 - Country Focus: Nordic Countries

IT and Nordic Healthcare

Drivers of healthcare IT in the Nordic countries follow the general pattern in the OECD – in terms of the need for patient-centricity, service-orientation and cost-effectiveness.

All Nordic countries rank high in terms of e-Health readiness indicators, as well as healthcare and IT/Internet infrastructure. Indeed, the World Economic Forum's Network Readiness Index for 2006/07 is dominated by the Nordic countries, with Denmark and Sweden in the first and second slots, Finland in fourth and Norway in tenth. The Index is based on a combination of factors: ICT penetration and usage, e-government and e-business environments as well as government vision, education, R&D and a talent for pioneering high-technology applications.

In other words, they have the necessary infrastructure in place for effective e- Health as well as political will – from the point of view of the demands of an aging society, the need for individualisation and customisation of healthcare

delivery as well as requirements for increasing healthcare efficiency.

Buttressing the above is the high R&D spend in the Nordic region. Unlike their EU-12 peer group, which spend 1.9% of gross domestic product on R&D, the figures are 2.6% for Denmark, 3.5% for Finland and 3.7% for Sweden. Only ranks below the EU-12 average, 1.6%. This can be explained by the relatively high GDP due to its oil and gas revenues. Indeed, in Euros per person, Norwegian R&D spending is higher than the EU-12.

While all Nordic countries make clear their commitment to deliver on the key e-Health enabling electronic health record, there are, however, some differences in priority.

Denmark, home to several cutting-edge medical electronic firms, sees sensors and intelligent medical equipment as part of its national mission. It is also one of the few countries to have an explicit policy on healthcare IT, in terms of a 'National IT Strategy of the healthcare system 2003-2007' from the Ministry of the Interior and Health. This provides a framework for choices and priorities on healthcare IT, in terms of general technology and public policy. Finland and Sweden, on the other hand, have a very strong interest in mobility aspects of e-Health – an understandable factor given that they are home to mobile telephony giants Nokia and Ericsson.

Finland also places considerable priority on bioinformatics, and is among the first EU Member States to have a specific IT policy for addressing the needs of the elderly.

Norway has long been identified as a telemedicine pioneer, largely due to its scattered population clusters. The country has operational telemedicine solutions in place at a variety of medical disciplines and facilities.

Norway also has assigned official/State-supported R&D institutions with a mandate to investigate healthcare IT and e-Health, grouped under the cross-Ministry Norwegian Centre for Informatics in Health and Social Care.

The Centre operates the Volven database which contains coding, classifications, terminologies and definitions for a coherent e-Health infrastructure.

Another interesting initiative in Norway – especially given its status as a non-EU Member – is IKTHELSE (ICT in Medicine and Health Care).

This programme which ran from 2001-2005 sought to map current and future healthcare ICT technologies and needs, and to develop Norwegian competencies, some of which have since become eligible for government financial support. (TS).

To obtain an overview of policymaker's perspectives on healthcare and IT in the Nordic countries, HITM's Catalina Ciolan interviewed Pentti Itkonen and Daniel Forslund from the Health Ministries of Finland and Sweden, respectively.

Published on : Mon, 31 Dec 2007