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PUTTING PATIENTS IN THE DRIVING SEAT: A DIGITAL FUTURE FOR HEALTHCARE

The European Commission has unveiled an Action Plan to address barriers to the full use of digital solutions in Europe's healthcare systems. The goal is to improve healthcare for the benefit of patients, give patients more control of their care and bring down costs. While patients and health professionals are enthusiastically using telehealth solutions and millions of Europeans have downloaded smartphone apps to keep track of their health and wellbeing, digital healthcare has yet to reap its great potential to improve healthcare and generate efficiency savings.

The Action Plan attempts to increase the pace of change and improvement in healthcare by:

- Clarifying areas of legal uncertainty;
- Improving interoperability between systems;
- Increasing awareness and skills among patients and healthcare professionals;
- Putting patients at the centre with initiatives related to personal health management and supporting research into personalised medicine; and
- Ensuring free legal advice for start-up e-health businesses.

The Commission also commits to issue a mHealth (Mobile Health) Green Paper by 2014 addressing quality and transparency issues.

An accompanying Staff Working Paper gives a legal overview of how current EU legislation applies to cross border telemedicine (services such as teleradiology, teleconsultation or telemonitoring). Currently, telemedicine falls within the scope of several legal instruments. The paper clarifies the issues a healthcare practitioner faces in delivering cross-border telemedicine, for example:

- Do they need to be licensed/registered in the Member State of the patient?
- How should health data be processed? Will a given service be reimbursable?
- What is the liability regime applicable in case of legal action?

Neelie Kroes, Commission Vice President for the Digital Agenda, said "Europe's healthcare systems aren't yet broken, but the cracks are beginning to show. It's time to give this 20th Century model a health check. The new European eHealth Action Plan sets out how we can bring digital benefits to healthcare, and lift the barriers to smarter, safer, patient-centred health services."

Tonio Borg, Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, said: "eHealth solutions can deliver high quality, patientcentric healthcare to our citizens. EHealth brings healthcare closer to people and improves health systems' efficiency. Today's Action Plan will help turn the eHealth potential into better care for our citizens. The eHealth Network under the Cross-Border Healthcare Directive channels our joint commitment to find interoperable solutions at EU level."

Members of the new eHealth Network, established by the Cross-border Healthcare Directive will help implement the Action Plan and provide a direct link to the national healthcare authorities and government departments.

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