



EHFG 2011: SPEEDING UP ICT IN EUROPE'S HEALTH SYSTEMS

The role of eHealth is a main topic at several sessions at this year's European Health Forum Gastein. In addition to IT technology's enormous contribution to health care, participants pointed out the huge cost savings available from utilizing new technologies. But affecting organisational change is essential, and obstacles include overcoming a "guild mentality" among parts of the health care sector and understandable but exaggerated fears of insufficient data protection.

Bad Hofgastein, October 7, 2011 - Experts from government and industry agreed at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) that the modernisation of systems and tailoring of care to improve health outcomes had to be patient-centred. Collaboration of stakeholders, and the involvement of patients and physicians early on in the design and implementation of ICT systems in health were each seen as some of the prerequisites to the more rapid uptake of eHealth across Europe.

"We have the technology, we have the business case for its use. We must now commit to faster organisational change," stated Robert Madelin, Director General for the European Commission's Directorate General on Information Society and Media. Organisational changes are among the challenges needed to make eHealth a reality. But, as Mr. Madelin also noted, "one of the major obstacles to organisational changes is a guild mentality," not just in the hospitals but throughout the health sector. "Getting technology used tends to be a major problem – people aren't getting it partially because people fear it. We need to have doctors pushing it more, not just geeks."

Mr. Madelin also addressed the fear of data protection violations. While important, he thought the fear could often be "exaggerated and used as an excuse for inaction. How many file cabinets are left unlocked every day? The problem is less security than human error." There are sophisticated hackers out there. Of greater concern, however, should be the lost opportunities from not making data speedily available to patients and doctors, at home and across borders, both in emergencies and in their prevention, experts said at the EHFG.

Elena Bonfiglioli, Senior Director for Health, Public-Sector EMEA, Microsoft also focused on the opportunity costs of not taking advantage of today's eHealth technology, without whose contribution problems can not be optimally managed and costs will increase more. "Through e-health, children with diseases such as diabetes and those caring for them have access through their schools to an extended information and monitoring environment. The information can be exchanged in ways children use to communicate, such as SMS text messaging. Microsoft has already started working on chronic disease management and care-giver collaboration across Europe by helping to technologically modernise health systems," she said.

Speaking on the role of the pharmaceutical industry in helping to offer exceptional opportunity to deliver better and smarter health care, Jacques Weiss, Vice President, Strategic Marketing for Endocrinology, Merck Serono also suggested that eHealth has a pivotal role in making ICT in health a reality, given its unique knowledge, based on working closely with patients. “However, a challenge is the cultural and structural shift required to move from delivering products to fully integrated and tailored health services.”

EHFG Lunch Workshop 2: “eHealth”; 6 October 2011; EHFG Plenary Session “Linking innovation and ITC to health”, October 6, 2011

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