



WHO symposium on the future of digital health systems in the European Region

Location: UN City, Copenhagen, Denmark

19 November 2018

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Scope and purpose

Background

The effective implementation of digital technologies in health is widely recognized as being crucial in establishing efficient, well-functioning health systems, and empowering patients as part of a transition to integrated person-centred care and ensuring that the vital health information which underpins the future of clinical care and decisions is made available when and where it is most needed.

Digital health also plays a significant role in achieving the key public health priorities put forth by the European health policy framework, Health 2020, which was endorsed by Member States in 2012. Health 2020 advocates for strong intersectoral mechanisms to address the many risk factors and determinants of health, in order to reduce health inequalities and significantly improve the health and well-being of populations. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development incorporates and extends Health 2020 by strengthening the capacities of Member States to achieve better, more equitable, sustainable health and well-being for all throughout the life course. Digital solutions can help in efforts to achieve the health-related Sustainable Development Goals and universal health coverage, by disrupting and transforming the delivery of care and reforming the underlying processes of health systems.

In further acknowledging the potential of digital technologies to strengthen national health systems and in realizing the above goals, WHO Member States adopted resolution WHA71.7 during the Seventy-first World Health Assembly, in May 2018, which frames the role of digital health within the agenda for health system strengthening and “as a means of promoting equitable, affordable and universal access to health for all”.

However, beyond this recognition, health decision-makers are faced with an array of challenges in introducing innovations into health systems, including how to design and

finance strategic investments in creating national digital health services, how to seamlessly and securely integrate data spread in diverse systems across the health sector (while allowing for individual consent to its use in research and care delivery), and how to ensure that the health workforce is appropriately equipped to use digital technologies and accepting of the change to the way in which health services will be delivered in the future.

Approach

To enhance public health action in the WHO European Region, the Regional Director established a new initiative for the digitalization of health systems, under the strategic guidance of the Director for Health Systems and Public Health, Dr Hans Kluge. The aim of this initiative is to provide countries with a fast-track, integrated approach to accelerate digital health adoption for strengthening health systems and enhancing public health capacity, and to reinforce the role of innovation in achieving national health policy objectives and key public health challenges.

This initiative has five overarching focus areas for facilitating the application of digital health in Member States:

1. reforming health service delivery and access;
2. empowering individuals to better manage their own health and well-being;
3. improving the operational efficiency and responsiveness of the health system;
4. enabling the transition to integrated, person-centred models of care and facilitating the move from treatment to prevention;
5. using technology and innovation to facilitate achievement of key public health initiatives.

Underpinning the delivery of these focus areas are the core European health systems values of equity, solidarity and universalism and the caveat that these be preserved as health services in countries become increasingly digitalized.

A kick-off meeting of the digitalization of health systems initiative took place in Budapest, Hungary, on 21 June 2018, with support from Semmelweis University and the European Health Management Association. During this meeting, Member States identified six themes for introducing innovations into health systems and public health for which increased support from WHO and its partners is sought:

1. establishing and maintaining core infrastructure for digital health services;
2. better understanding through data;
3. mobilizing external funding;
4. better understanding of and engaging with resistance to technology-based change;
5. establishing foundations for key future trends;
6. tailoring digital health to population groups.

High-level commitment from Member States to the agenda for innovating health systems was further confirmed during the WHO meeting, Health Systems for Prosperity and Solidarity: Leaving No One Behind, which took place in Tallinn, Estonia, in June 2018, in conjunction with the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Tallinn Charter. Here, the harnessing of innovations and systems to meet people's needs was further examined by key decision-makers under the themes of include, invest and innovate.

Aim and objectives of the symposium

Framed under the five strategic focus areas of the digitalization of health systems initiative, the aim of this symposium will be to develop priorities for public health action to support the adoption of digital health in Member States and to further refine input to the development of a European vision and roadmap for the digitalization of national health systems.

This will be delivered at the symposium through:

- sharing country experiences in the digitalization of national health systems to:
 - **explore** how digital health and emerging innovations are being used to strengthen national health systems, and WHO's role in supporting countries to achieve success in digital health;
 - **identify** the key activities in digital health that countries in the WHO European Region are actively working on; and
 - **understand** how digital technologies can empower individuals and health-care workers and contribute to meeting key national health policy objectives;
- further examination of:
 - concrete actions required to accelerate digitalization of national health systems and the role of digital health in advancing health sector reform and providing new and innovative mechanisms for the delivery of health services;
 - methods for measuring progress in the digitalization of national health systems and approaches to adopting emerging technologies in health; and
 - examples of the application of digital health in facilitating the achievement of Health 2020, universal health coverage and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes from the symposium are:

- an examination of public health perspectives on emerging technologies that will shape the future of health systems and an exchange of experience between countries and thought leaders on activities and mechanisms for their assessment and adoption;
- aligning the efforts of national and international partners working to further the adoption of digital health in the WHO European Region;
- further development and expansion of the priority themes identified for digitalization of health systems in Member States of the WHO European Region, with a view to the development of a European vision and roadmap for accelerating action on digital health.

Format

The symposium will take place at UN City, Copenhagen, Denmark in association with the WHO Collaborating Centre for Digital Health and Telemedicine (Norwegian Centre for e-Health Research).

It will incorporate a series of plenary and parallel sessions to present topics and ideas of relevance to digital health, and focused interactive discussions to identify enablers, challenges and gaps in the digitalization of health systems and health-care delivery, and propose tangible actions for accelerating progress in adopting digital health for achieving public health priorities.

Participation in this meeting is by invitation. The working languages will be English and Russian with a selected number of parallel sessions being presented in one or both of these languages.

The symposium will, to the greatest extent possible, be operated in a paper-free environment. As such, the agenda, speaker details, background literature and documents will be made available to participants via a dedicated conference App and additional websites supporting the event.