

THE EEUROPE INITIATIVE OF THE EU - BOOSTING HEALTH ONLINE

The rapid development of the Internet is changing the landscape for health care providers and consumers alike. While an estimated 100,000 websites are providing health information of some sort, their quality is highly questionable. The health online component of the eEurope initiative aims at establishing a legal framework and codes of conduct, as well as the dissemination of best practice to ensure that the benefits of the Internet are maximised, whilst its use is secured for all actors. An in-depth technology-assessment of key health telematics applications will assess their interoperability and cost-effectiveness, while European-level networks will increase transparency of health information.

There is a technical revolution taking place in communications. The Internet, email, and mobile communications represent fundamental changes in common forms of interaction. Forum II of the European Health Forum Gastein focuses on the relationship between the health sector, citizens, and the media - particularly the use of the Internet. The Council of the European Union has adopted an Action Plan to develop the safe and efficient use of the Internet in the EU. Whilst covering a broad spectrum of political areas, eEurope also has a focus on the health sector which is discussed at the EHFG 2000.

Why eEurope?

The Internet has widely been accepted as new economic driving force. All sectors and businesses are getting involved in the Web, a new type of business - the so-called 'new economy' - is emerging with a vast number of start-up enterprises. The Internet increases productivity, creates jobs, and opens global markets. Its cross-border nature and rapid growth bring along risks and uncertainties as well as difficulties in regulation. Through the eEurope initiative, the European Commission aims at establishing a common European framework to ensure maximum benefits through the use of the Internet, whilst minimising related risks.

Compared to the level of development of the Internet's commercial use in the US, Europe is lagging behind. In the EU, access to the Web tends to be slower and more expensive, the population is not sufficiently digitally literate. Both public and private sectors are slower than their overseas counterparts in exploiting new applications and services.

The EU has identified three key activities within their eEurope initiative: (1) Accelerating the appropriate legal environment; (2) Supporting new infrastructure and services; (3) Open co-ordination and benchmarking. Through these activities, Internet should become cheaper, faster and more secure. Investment in human resources with a particular focus on youth, a knowledge-based economy and socially disadvantaged groups ('fighting info-exclusion') will increase skill levels and stimulate the use of the Internet.

Health online

Health online is an EU Action Plan agreed in Feira, which focuses on the implementation of health telematics infrastructure for primary and secondary health care providers by the year 2002. Priority areas identified within the Action Plan cover the dissemination of best practices in eHealth, the adoption of quality criteria and certificates, linkages of national and international health data networks, as well as developing a communication on legal aspects of eHealth by the end of 2001. The latter is to clarify the impact of existing legislation on eHealth practice, addressing data protection, on-line liability, distance contracting, pharmaceuticals selling and

advertising, and certification of medical device. Member States, the EU Directorate Generals for Health and Consumer Protection, Enterprise, Internal Market, and Information Society together with the private sector will be the key actors. Infrastructure for the use of eHealth tools by primary and secondary care providers is to be implemented through the health policies of Member States by the end of 2002.

Building confidence through quality

Dissemination of best practice and quality criteria in eHealth are priorities of the Action Plan. The European Commission will disseminate best practices to Member States through new R&D projects and accompanying measures, covering all areas of eHealth, including networking, data security, eprescription practices, ecertification, etc. Quality criteria for health related websites will be adopted through meetings and workshops as from October 2000 in co-operation between the Commission and key actors in Member States. These key actors are National Medical Associations, National Ethics Councils, Health Ethics Groups, Trade and Commercial Representative Bodies, etc.

Key questions to be addressed include:

- A definition of 'quality' in the eHealth context;
- Who is qualified to assess quality in eHealth?
- What is the role of different actors (professionals, businesses, consumers) in defining eHealth quality?
- A definition of ethical challenges faced by eHealth practice and funding or sponsorship;
- Standards, processes, and monitoring of accreditation and trustmarking of Websites dealing with health.

Assessing technology and building European-level networks

An in-depth European-wide technology assessment of key health telematics applications will assess these technologies' interoperability and cost-effectiveness. Purpose-built data assessment networks, such as a pharmaceutical relative effectiveness network, are to support Member States in making informed purchasing decisions. Networked databanks on communicable diseases will serve as early-warning systems and facilitate the management of these diseases. The Commission will facilitate the setting-up of these networks and ensure quality at the European level.