



European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI)

Position

Adopted by the CESI trade council 'Health'

Digitalisation in the health sector: opportunities and threats

Further information

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Background information

‘The Internet of Things’ makes it possible for medical information stored on mobile devices (e.g. smartphones, tablets, watches, laptops) to be turned into drivers for medical decisions. In light of the current changes in digitization and democratization of healthcare, radical changes are shifting the traditional relation between doctor/nurse and patient and the entire environment around it. The use of technology on a large scale changes the way medical services are requested and delivered. In order to accommodate these changes, governance steps in. The 2016 [study](#) of World Health Organization (WHO) shows that already 70% of European member states have set up a national eHealth policy or strategy.

In this climate, at European level, the European Commission makes efforts to facilitate and modernise the healthcare systems to adapt to changing environments. The digitalization of healthcare seems a priority for European medical systems in light of the current limitations: ageing population, shortages of medical staff and budget constraints, environmental limitations and transformations in the work conditions. The European Commission has made several proposals for facilitating digitalization in the healthcare system by:

- setting up an internal task force comprised of health and technology policy makers for examining EU policy actions for digital healthcare transformation.
- The Digital Single Market (DSM) strategy for health comprises of three priorities:
 - enabling citizen's secure access to and use of health data across-borders;
 - supporting a cross-border data infrastructure to advance research;
 - personalised medicine and facilitating feedback and interaction between patients and health care providers, supporting citizen empowerment.

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What CESI stands for

As trade union confederation representing trade unions working also in the field of health (but also representing roughly 5 million workers European-wide), CESI is concerned about how the proposed digital transformation of European healthcare system will affect working time and working conditions. In general, as highlighted by the CESI Trade Council on ‘Health’ which took place on the [November 8 2017](#), technology is seen as an important ally for medical practitioners. However, there are serious concerns which need to be considered when advancing in designing transformative reforms of the e-health sector. These concerns are of practical social, ethical and privacy related nature.



1. Practical concerns

- a. First of all, practitioners are sceptical about how the use of digital tools will impact their daily work flow. Many do not think that the use of more information streams can generate more efficient work. At the beginning the use of new technologies is a hurdle for many workers and technological investment in the devices can be a shortcoming for medical institutions which already face budget difficulties.

CESI is concerned that acquiring skills for using new technologies or the use of much more thorough data flows for patient records (due to e-health devices which feed in more information) will impact the working time conditions for medical staff. These situations need to be assessed through research and appropriate recommendations should be set in place.

- b. Moreover, the technological divide between different workers is something which needs to be considered and tackled with appropriate support, incentives and training. As seen in the [2016](#) EU Joint Action on Health Workforce Planning and Forecasting in their [policy brief](#) for health services, it is believed that: “Information interpretation skills resulting from developments in eHealth may increasingly have wide ranging impacts on patients, the workforce and health systems (EFN, 2014). Certain sections of the workforce may be faced with an increasing amount and depth of data to manage, and also increasingly with questions concerning how to reliably analyse and make decisions with potentially conflicting aspects.”

In order to be proactive in this field and in line with the Commission ‘New Skills Agenda’ and the ‘eHealth Action Plan 2012-2020’, it is advisable for healthcare providers to invest in lifelong learning and acquiring digital skills: “Certain health professionals will need education, training and awareness of risk stratification, precision medicine and genomics techniques and their impact to their practice.” The European Health Parliament initiative published in September 2017 a [guideline](#) of practical solutions which can accompany the achievement of digital literacy in the healthcare sector.



2. Ethical concerns about privacy and the use of Big Data

- a. Firstly, issues regarding the privacy of medical data of patients need to be addressed. It is not clear how this data can be collected, used and disseminated. Strong Data Protection needs to be set in place and the right oversight (e-privacy, legal certainty, etc.) needs to be ensured. Patients already consider that their personal medical data is of a highly sensitive nature, and that makes the use of electronic patient records very difficult. Proper cybersecurity measures should be set in place in order to ensure protection of data. Last but not least, appropriate training for healthcare professionals on the issues of privacy, confidentiality and data security must be set in place. In order for privacy to be guaranteed, all medical staff must be informed correctly about the importance of their patients' records and data.
- b. Secondly, the use of Big Data for healthcare purposes (by private entities, hospitals or national healthcare providers) needs to be rightly managed, based on informed consent and with the consultation of all parties involved, which has not always been the case until now. Cyber security is another concern which should be taken into account when dealing with electronic patients' records so that sensitive data is well protected and kept private.
- c. Last but not least, the issue artificial intelligence in medical care is another concern and an obstacle in advancing the e-health policy. Although there has been recognized added value in using artificial intelligence for measuring and analysis purposes, it is not known the extent to which this should continue and under what kind of oversight.
- d. Alienation between workers and of the healthcare sector itself.
- e. Digitalisation of a sector, which is based on inter-human relationship, empathy and intuition.

The digitalisation of healthcare may be a concern from the point of view of expressing empathy. CESI cannot emphasize enough the importance of maintaining the principles of empathy and direct human contact in the provision of healthcare services. As proven scientifically, they both influence the patient recovery and contribute in a positive way to a faster recovery. In a more and more digitalized, technologically-enabled provision of services there is the concern that empathy and human connection between the parties involved will be affected to a large extent.



Key demands

1. Social dialogue: CESI believes that the digitalization of healthcare and the extended use of new technologies in the medical sector should be brought in gradually, with prior consultation of all the stakeholders concerned;
2. Digitalisation must not focus only on the needs of the patient but it should address and be tailored to the interests and needs of the workers involved;
3. Digitalisation of healthcare should respect the principles and standards of fair and equal labour conditions;
4. In depth ethical debates on the limits of digitalization, robotisation and the use of artificial intelligence in the provision of healthcare must pave the way for a humane use of new technologies.

All in all, e-health is a thought-provoking field and CESI and its members look forward to taking part in social dialogue and to contribute to shaping up its policies in the future. The proposed digital transformation of the European healthcare system remains high on CESI's agenda and its members are in favour of addressing its concerns about privacy, autonomy of the patient and ethics in the most constructive manner possible. CESI demands the European and national decision-makers to promote dialogue, constructive criticism and protection of fundamental rights in this digital transformation of the healthcare systems.