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Digital Skills for Health Professionals

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Digital Skills for Health Professionals

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Introduction

The digitisation of healthcare has been on the European agenda to modernise and improve healthcare across the member states. The focus in Europe has switched from developing technology to implementing digital health and ehealth. The digital skills for health professional's (HCPs) committee has surveyed over 200 health professionals. It has discovered no change has resulted in the education of HCPs to prepare them for said implementation. The EU risks spending time and resources on strategies that will have little effect due to the lack of change.

The state of digital skills in the health professions

Due to a rapidly aging population, there is a special need for digital skills in the health professions. Shortages of practitioner skills in ICT have been endemic across many sectors, the rapid advancement of technological innovation and ICT activity has been exacerbated by low availability of employees and entrepreneurs with the relevant qualifications. This has slowed the uptake of the internet in the healthcare sector.

The need for digital skills for HCPs has been acknowledged at EU level, the Commission's Action Plan (2012-2020) provides a roadmap to empower patients and health workers, and includes actions to promote skills and digital literacy. Recently the Commission and the United States Department of Health and Human Services consulted on a roadmap to guide cooperation on eHealth/Health IT.

The digital skills for health professional's committee supported this initiative and contributed to the public consultation the following suggestions:

All health professionals should be familiar with available eHealth and mHealth solutions, and know how to use them in an effective, responsible, and ethical way, with patient's interest at the centre:

- **Health professionals** should possess skills and aptitude for communication, data analysis, computer literacy, medical devices compatibility, data protecting programs, mobile apps, cloud storage, using the internet, and have the ability to read, understand and forward information using a smart device.
- **Health informatics professionals** should acquire skills in information security, interoperability, analysing data, design and implementation of tools to measure data, software development, 3D image processing, project management and communication.
- **Non-clinical and administrative staff** should possess skills in project management, communications, computer literacy, information security, and the use of clinical software
- **IT professionals working in the healthcare environment** should possess skills in data privacy, information security, ethics, software engineering and database development.

Despite the abundance of initiatives to improve digital literacy among healthcare professionals the committee has identified some important gas and shortcomings:

- The need for digital skills is widely acknowledged, but there is limited reference to the health professions. Most current national medical guidelines do not include digital skills.
- Existing health professional curricula are inadequate, there is a need to strengthen the educational curricula of health professionals and use CPD programs to provide them with useful digital skills training.
- eHealth solutions don't always reflect the existing healthcare pathways, nor the needs of patients and health professionals.
- The patients and health professionals who are end-users of eHealth are not involved in the development of these solutions.
- Member States differ in their readiness to implement eHealth solutions in their health systems, as well as in the structure of their training curricula for health professionals

eSurvey on the state of digital skills in the health professions

The survey was created to identify healthcare professionals experience with digital health and in digital health education. The survey demonstrates that eHealth and mHealth in various forms are already in use in daily practice. However, the uptake of eHealth and mHealth apps could be increased, as the health professionals themselves believe that it could benefit their profession

and, ultimately, the patient. Despite this current use and great promise, a clear majority of health professionals feel insufficiently trained to deal with the digital revolution. Health professionals ask for education from early on, but believe that training should continue all through their careers. This training should be practical and hands-on, leading to direct patient benefit.

Recommendations

1. **Generating demand for digital healthcare:** The EU and Member States should create a basis for improving demand for digital healthcare goods, a solution might be more advantageous reimbursement schemes for the use of digital tools for medical treatment, especially in the monitoring and treatment of chronic disease. At a European level, the EU commission should provide a platform for better cooperation between healthcare systems to promote the exchange of information and best practices. A European label based on a set of minimum standards could also strengthen trust amongst health professionals and patients, and increase uptake of digital technology in the European health sector.

2. **Raising awareness of the use of digital tools amongst healthcare professionals:** continuous digital education for healthcare professionals should be central to the European agenda to digitise healthcare. This can be achieved through coordinated initiatives:
   A. Mandatory tailored training programs on digital skills for health professionals should be established in Europe. These programs should be continuous starting at an early stage of education and continue in the work place.
   B. The European Commission and Member states should launch a joint action to agree on the key issues related to digital skills for healthcare professionals.
   C. Update clinical guidelines to include mHealth and eHealth, so that healthcare professionals are able to deliver mHealth and eHealth solutions to their patients.
   D. Make healthcare professionals co-developers of mHealth and eHealth solutions by placing them at the centre of the development process.