eHealth Action Plan 2012-2020 - Innovative healthcare for the 21st century

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the eHealth Action Plan 2012-2020 –Innovative healthcare for the 21st century in response to the Commission Communication on the same issue. Parliament noted that equal access to high-quality universal healthcare is recognised as a fundamental right, but that access to a healthcare system is in many cases restricted as a result of either financial or regional constraints. eHealth systems can play an important role in improving these health inequalities. It also stressed the gender aspects of eHealth in the resolution and asked the Commission and the Member States to ensure equal access for women to the field of eHealth, not only as patients but also as caregivers (professional or not), ICT specialists and policymakers, highlighting the fact that women were involved at all levels of the health sector throughout their lives.

Parliament stated that Union action in the field of eHealth, based on Article 168 TFEU, should consist of helping all competent authorities at local, regional, national or state level to coordinate their efforts at national and cross-border levels and supporting their actions in fields where EU intervention can provide added value.

In this respect, Members welcomed the Commission Communication entitled ‘eHealth Action Plan **2012-2020:** Innovative healthcare for the 21st century’, which updates the eHealth Action Plan adopted in 2004 by putting in place further actions, especially as regards improving access to health services, reducing health costs and ensuring greater equality among European citizens. They urged the Commission to continue working towards the wholesale adoption of eHealth throughout the EU.

Parliament also welcomed the Commission’s intention to launch a study regarding the legal aspects of eHealth services. It stressed, however, the need to take effective measures concerning reimbursement, liability and data protection. It emphasised the importance of strengthening the role of healthcare professionals such as doctors, pharmacists and nurses, as well as of patients and patient organisations, in the implementation and development of the eHealth Action Plan, keeping in mind that patients should have the possibility of viewing, using and consulting information concerning their health.

The Commission and the Member States were called upon to play a major part in bringing different stakeholders together in order to share experience and best practices and to focus in particular on its central role in supporting the sharing of best practices on rare diseases.

Accessibility: Parliament emphasised that eHealth applications must be accessible to everyone and that, when developing any product or software application, accessibility should be a mandatory condition, in order to prevent any inequality with regard to access. It recommended that the necessary steps be taken to close the digital gap between the different regions of the Member States. Equal access should be ensure for women to the field of eHealth, not only as patients but also as caregivers (professional or not), ICT specialists and policymakers. The Commission and the Member States are also called upon to:

- pay particular attention to digital literacy and to technical training in order to ensure that eHealth tools, especially telemedicine, are genuinely effective and accessible for the whole population;

- provide the economic, human and material resources necessary to ensure that access to and use of eHealth services will not add to the territorial inequalities already affecting access to existing ICT services;

- encourage and promote eHealth services designed for (informal) family carers so as to support them in their often heavy caring tasks and to enable them to provide the best care possible;

- encourage eHealth solutions for isolated women, not only those living in remote areas but also home-bound women lacking the mobility and/or (social) support network they need in order to maintain their health and well-being;

- bring forward guidelines and legislative proposals to fill the legal gaps that currently exist, in particular in the field of responsibilities and liability, and to ensure effective implementation of the eHealth system across the EU;

- proceed with guidelines and legislation on the legal and data protection considerations relating to eHealth, in particular legislation enabling secure sharing, processing and analysis of data, in order to balance data protection with data access;

- continue their efforts to implement Article 14 of Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, which is aimed at establishing an eHealth network;

- ensure the technical standardisation and interoperability of ICT enabled solutions and of data exchange at all levels of European healthcare systems, while developing guidelines for the EU-wide interoperability of these systems;

- run eHealth awareness and IT literacy training campaigns (taking into account social and territorial inequalities) aimed at overcoming the lack of knowledge and trust among patients, the general public and healthcare professionals;

- to promote a gender-balanced approach to healthcare and medicine and, when implementing the eHealth Action Plan, to take into consideration the specific needs of women and girls as healthcare beneficiaries.

In the light of these considerations, Parliament called for the establishment of a platform for collaboration in research between patients, academia, industry and professionals in order to ensure the delivery of an effective and all-inclusive eHealth policy.

Members considered the proposed cuts to the Connecting Europe facility for broadband and digital services deeply regrettable. They hoped that financing for this area under Horizon 2020 will be maintained.

The Commission is urged to come forward with a **"mHealth action plan" for mobile devices,** which should include guidelines on market surveillance of mHealth apps in order to ensure data protection and the reliability of the provided health information, as well as to guarantee that these apps are developed under appropriate medical scrutiny.

It is also urged to dedicate resources within future research and development framework programmes to eHealth.

Parliament called on the Commission to **publish every other year a progress review** as regards the implementation of the eHealth Action Plan in the individual Member States, showing how this tool has been modified in innovative ways to provide citizens with high-quality and efficient healthcare systems, and, in the light of this, to set effective indicators at national and Union levels to measure the progress and impact of the actions planned, paying particular attention to potential discrimination or to access inequalities that could affect consumers and patients.

Lastly, Parliament recommended that the Member States and the Commission, with the help of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), collect gender-disaggregated data on initial findings as regards the accessibility and impact of eHealth systems and tools, and called for steps to be taken to share best practices in eHealth implementation.