

Commonwealth Secretariat

eHealth in the Commonwealth – Challenges and Opportunities

Overview

Information is a core resource for healthcare, so every country needs good policies, strategies and plans to invest in information and communication technologies (ICT) and the associated organisational changes needed to improve health and healthcare. These eHealth investments are not single events with fixed timescales or permanent solutions. They are continuous developments and offers excellent opportunities to strengthen healthcare. It also brings significant challenges that need addressing firmly and clearly to succeed. Both are part of eHealth investment with a goal to strengthen countries' different healthcare systems. These differences highlight the need for eHealth to be specific to each country.

ICT and organisational change comprise eHealth. They are both essential. The effort and investment needed has many parts, it is complex, it changes constantly and has to be congruent over time. The main eHealth themes include:

- Information needed, when and by whom to support health and healthcare strategies and services
- The ICT needed to deliver this
- Organisational, clinical and working practice changes needed to realise the benefits.

Up to the 1990's, much ICT in health care supported administrative and financial activities. Then, the emphasis began to switch to clinical and operational information needed by healthcare professionals to support their work for patients. At the turn of the century, this expanded to include health and healthcare information directly for patients. Now, healthcare organisations have immense opportunities to use eHealth as a core resource for healthcare professionals. In such a relatively short time scale, it is unsurprising that this relatively new and combined change brings challenges too.

It was with this in mind that the Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting in May 2008 agreed to hold high-level meetings between Ministers of Health and Ministers responsible for ICT to:

- Identify regional priorities and challenges
- Foster strategic partnerships
- Reach a consensus on eHealth projects in selected countries
- Promote exchange of information on eHealth expertise.

The first event was in East, Central and Southern Africa. With ECSA, the Commonwealth Secretariat supported the high-level dialogue. The outcome was the need for two workbooks for:

- eHealth policy and strategy template
- eHealth assessment tool.

The work to develop these identified two additional requirements:

- eHealth proposal template
- Draft heading for eHealth strategies.

These four workbooks are the Secretariat's first phase of eHealth support. After testing the four workbooks with users, they are now available for use by Commonwealth countries. These workbooks derive from countries efforts, knowledge, experiences and initiatives to:

- Identify and share opportunities, challenges and lessons
- Learn from each other
- Identify practical steps to achieve their eHealth goals
- Identify the stakeholders and approaches to their engagement in eHealth.

The Secretariat's initial priority is supporting developing countries in investing in eHealth as part of their initiatives to strengthen their health systems.

The Role of ehealth in Strengthening Health Systems

All health systems can be improved, and in many ways. They can all benefit from more doctors, more nurses, new drugs, new equipment and new hospitals. At the same time, all systems are keen to improve their performance, and over the years, have applied many different techniques, from quality circles to lean thinking.

The limitations of obsolete information systems, especially clinical information, in healthcare are well known. New solutions have emerged in many different healthcare systems from which everyone can learn, in particular, how to use eHealth to strengthen health systems by improving quality, modernising access, sharing clinical and patient information and improving efficiency. These need new clinical and working practices, not just new types of ICT; success needs changes too.

Healthcare professionals accessing and sharing information creates new opportunities for them to strengthen their roles, and so healthcare. eHealth can also enable new regional and national strategies, such as converting evidence into practice with more comprehensive protocols for healthcare that can help to improve the quality of healthcare services. Some of these are achievable on a small scale

without eHealth, but with proven eHealth, the scale and impact steps up significantly.

eHealth can strengthen public health too. Successful levels of vaccination are sustainable by using inexpensive web-based eHealth solutions. Surveillance information for epidemic response is another area where eHealth can provide the tools to combine data from many sources, such as weather, migration and disease, to enable health professionals to advise and alert healthcare systems into prompt, effective action.

Alongside these clinical and public health opportunities are numerous other eHealth solutions. Telemedicine and telemonitoring have offered opportunities for many years and in some places, and now, plans are in place for a steady expansion to improve the access to healthcare of people in remote areas. eHealth based on radio frequency identification, or RFID, can strengthen the logistics of healthcare, such as managing the supply chains for drugs and medical supplies more effectively and efficiently.

Each of these illustrates the opportunities to use eHealth to strengthen health systems, but the complexity of the investment is a serious undertaking within strict affordability limits, and it is not without risks. Realising the opportunities relies on the challenge to define eHealth as one of a group of strategic resources. All health systems need more doctors, more nurses, new drugs, new equipment and new hospitals, and to this list, eHealth must be added, but not as an isolated activity. Some large-scale eHealth projects have adopted this approach, sometimes ending up with the need to integrate eHealth back into the full health strategy, but it's often too late, so isolated eHealth is not the right role.

Integrated eHealth is. Here, eHealth can be set as an appropriate part of the initiatives needed to realise the goals of health strategies. Decisions can balance the need for more doctors and nurses with their needs to access and share information as a resource; some of the essential tools they need. In this way, the range of possible eHealth projects tie in to the overall strategic goals, frequently expressed as improving quality, access and efficiency. Of these, quality and access can offer the greatest benefits.

Unfortunately, eHealth is never an easy option because it combines change often with complex ICT facilities. Some people say that the ICT part is easy, but the change is hard. This is a dubious stance. ICT is not easy. There are many issues around data, interoperability, standards, architecture and capacity that create choices that are not always easy to resolve, so it seems best to recognise the need to integrate the role of eHealth as part of a comprehensive strategic response, then to acknowledge that all aspects of eHealth are challenging.

This leads on to recognising that eHealth also takes time, and extended time so that healthcare professionals and other stakeholders can participate in the decisions needed. This is not consultation. Ignoring their requirements is a route to potential high-cost eHealth disaster. They must have a role as partners and stakeholders, so they need engaging from the outset, not consulting.

It is still the case in many parts of the world that eHealth is proposed as a rapid response. This is not a good idea. People never achieve over-ambitious eHealth goals because working faster fails to deal with eHealth complexities. It usually makes them worse. The eHealth role is to deliver realistic goals, but it still needs strict, careful and direct management. eHealth cannot deliver itself. Both the ICT and the changes that have to be achieved have to be delivered together and by healthcare professionals, executives, managers and ICT specialists all working as a team so that affordable eHealth realises benefits for citizens, patients, healthcare professionals and health organisations.

In this way, eHealth is a never-ending initiative that fits into health strategies and organisations, and this combination helps to strengthen health systems.