

Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs
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Report: Europe has necessary preconditions for free movement of health records

In many European countries the digital health data exists, as well as the expectations of patients and health professionals for the development of e-health services and the legislation that supports the safe use of health data, says the report "Mapping out the obstacles of free movement of electronic health records in the EU in the light of the single digital market".

The study mapped the obstacles as well as enablers of movement of health data, including expectations of the population and the patients' possibilities of using their own health data in Finland, Sweden, Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom and across the borders of Member States. Also proposals were made to overcome the obstacles.

The report shows that necessary preconditions for the free and safe movement of health data across the borders of Member States exist in the EU. "The basic premise – digital health records – exist in Estonia as in the European Union. Now, that electronic health data exists, we have to focus on developing services that would benefit people, public services as well as private," said Jutta Saarevet from KPMG Baltics. "The more services there are, the more these services are used and the better will be the quality of the data and the more we can develop better services."

Still, according to Saarevet the accessibility of electronic health records and data portability should be improved. "Attention must be paid to the modernization of the legal space, as well as the creation of infrastructure that supports secure data exchange and portability. If we wish the EU single market to work for e-health solutions, we need common, clear and simple set of rules for the creation, use and dissemination of e-health solutions."

Peoples' attitudes towards the data protection and privacy are different in Europe. While patients in Estonia, Finland and Sweden are not significantly concerned about the use of their data, in Poland and Germany 20-40% of patients consider it an important point of concern and in the UK up to 60%.

The report concludes that the main barriers for free movement of health data are not information technology or legislation, but rather so-called soft aspects such as people's attitudes, awareness and cooperation.

The head of the Estonian Society of Family Doctors Diana Ingerainen says that an important premise for development of e-health is also the necessary change in the way doctors think. "We should acknowledge that medical workers are only users of the data and patient is the owner. Instead of keeping the data inside medical facilities, we should give the data to people in language they understand, to enable them to participate actively in treatment process."

The study shows that health data is moving between Member States in Europe also today, but in most cases the patient takes them along on the paper. The survey points out that although many countries have

regulated and enabled also the secondary use of data, for example for statistics, research or for the development of health services, they are still used a little.

"If we expect citizens to take better control of their own health and our health systems to respond more precisely to our patients' individual needs we must enhance the citizens' control of their health data and empower them to use it for their own benefit," says Ain Aaviksoo, the Deputy Secretary General on E-services Development and Innovation of the Ministry of Social Affairs. „We need to agree on how, what and when to do with data in healthcare, including exchange between providers within but increasingly between different countries.“

Supporting the principles of the digital single market, free movement of personal data and digital innovation to support healthcare is one of the priorities during the Estonia's EU Council Presidency. "Our goal is to reach to the EU Council conclusions that give states wide political guidelines for the e-health policy and planning for the coming years, in order to accelerate and expand the use of medical information across borders," said Aaviksoo. "In addition, we hope to agree on 7-9 joint digital project initiatives that would be carried out and funded by the Member States in cooperation with the European Commission."

The report "Mapping out the obstacles of free movement of electronic health records in the EU in the light of the single digital market" was commissioned by the Government Office of Estonia. It was funded by the "Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds 2014-2020". The study was initiated and conducted in cooperation with the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs.

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Editor's notes

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About eHealth Tallinn

'Health in the Digital Society. Digital Society for Health' is organised by the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs as part of Estonia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, ECHAlliance and HIMSS Europe. The high-level conference will address how digital technologies and the wider use of health data are changing our lives and the ways of healthcare. Through a combination of educational sessions, interactive workshops and valuable networking opportunities, the conference will not only showcase already existing digital health solutions, but also use-cases and technologies to demonstrate that citizen-centric health services and systems are genuinely valuable. European healthcare IT leaders and professionals will gather in Tallinn from 16-18 October 2017.