

E-health in the EU

*By Julian Micallef
Consultation Coordinator
Forum Malta fl-Ewropa*

The benefits of information technology can clearly be associated with the health sector. When internet was still in its early days, it was claimed that most searches were related to medical advice, as people sought to know more about this vital aspect of our lives. At a time when e-everything is constantly being introduced, it was to be expected that health was to be included.

The European Union has an action plan in place to ensure that a sound infrastructure integrating telematics is set by service providers of primary and secondary healthcare. It is also seeking to identify and disseminate best practices in this field and establish benchmarking criteria. A number of qualitative criteria for health-related websites are being created and work on data assessment networks is being conducted.

An interesting feature of the e-health system is the electronic health card, expected to be introduced in 2008. Such cards offer the possibility of including medical information that could be used in an emergency and also provide access to information on the patient. Having such a card should ensure continuous care across Europe and the efficient management of data.

There will also be health information networks that would link local hospitals, doctors and patients. Such networks already seem to be useful on an individual scale. The benefits of such systems can however be easily deduced on a pan-European scale. Imagine an emerging health threat. Data being inputted into information networks would indicate a trend, leading to the possibility of a rapid coordinated action against the danger on a European scale.

Malta has already implemented a number of measures. Individuals may apply for the European Health Insurance Card online, place complaints and find information on pharmacies open on Sundays and public holidays. People may also register to become a blood donor (with an included electronic screening to indicate eligibility), apply for various sessions and programmes and ask for information and advice on sexually-transmitted diseases.

An online system permits doctors to refer patients to appointments with the outpatient services at the government hospital. Patients themselves may receive reminders by SMS and email, and also take care of their schedules. An electronic patient library is also in existence. Immunization is the next sector being tackled, where we should be witnessing developments that would aid both practitioners and citizens.

A recent report has indicated that good progress is being attained by the Member States. As more systems are set up, the next hurdle would be interoperability – ensuring that

resources and information can be easily shared across the Union. E-health may provide a number of solutions that would reduce costs in the healthcare sector, while at the same time presenting new horizons that lead to an overall improvement in the quality of care.

More information is also available from Forum Malta fl-Ewropa on 2590 9101 or email: info.forum@gov.mt