eHealth Policy and Deployment in Europe: Implications for Research

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eHealth has been a key focus area in European Union policy, with the 2004 eHealth Action Plan setting specific targets and implementation timelines. In the framework of the recently completed eHealth ERA project² we have mapped and analysed the state of eHealth policy and deployment across the EU until the end of 2006. Considerable advances have been achieved in both fronts, although there is significant variation among EU countries. We have used the main findings of our study to construct an agenda of timely attention topics for the medical informatics research community. We charted national eHealth activities through a variety of sources (policy documents, reports, project materials, scientific literature, information from national experts, etc). By the end of 2006, 25 out of 27 Member States possessed an official policy on eHealth. Areas of high policy priority were: the electronic health record or patient summary, the service network infrastructure or a national health information system, standards, cards and telemedicine. Most active deployment areas were the electronic health record, patient identifiers, health portals, card activities and telemedicine.

The analysis of strategic policy priorities reveals the following focus areas for medical informatics researchers: a. semantic interoperability of Electronic Patient/Health Records and communication between different providers, as well as patients, b. storage and retrieval challenges in life-long EHRs, c. tele-consultations, tele-health and home monitoring, d. interactive services and access to personal medical data through health portals, e. access rights management and granularity of information retrieved through or stored on health cards, f. legislative and regulatory issues, particularly in the context of (virtual) cross-border services, and g. extending eHealth to social care. Further efforts are needed to increase awareness of the trend towards integration of bio-informatics and medical informatics, as well as advance professional training in Medical Informatics. In addition to informing decision makers on the national and international level, our findings can be utilized to indicate the foreseeable impact policy developments have on the work and contribution of medical informatics researchers in the progress of eHealth. This could be a useful first step in improving communication and closing the gap between policy makers and researchers.

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