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**E-quality for e-safety: a nurses' view
on e-Health**

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The issue of e-Health has been in the limelight for some time in EU health policy as part of the e-Europe initiative. More recently, the European Commission in its Europe 2020 strategy and particularly in its flagship initiative Digital Agenda for Europe, has put forth a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, to develop an economy based on knowledge and innovation. Within this agenda eHealth is highlighted as a means of fostering quality of care and independent living particularly for older people and those suffering from long-term conditions. Similarly, the Council of the European Union in its meeting Conclusions in December 2009 call for the Member States to commit politically and strategically to eHealth as one of the main instruments to enhance quality, access and safety in healthcare, particularly by building confidence in and acceptance of eHealth services, bringing legal clarity and ensuring protection of health data, and solving technical issues and facilitating market development.

The European Federation of nurses associations (EFN) welcomes the eHealth movement and acknowledges in its Position and Policy Statements that nurses must remain a part of this initiative as emerging health care challenges such as the ageing population, staff shortages, increasing health care expectations and rising health care costs are driving the demands for a more efficient, accessible, high-quality and affordable healthcare. During EFN 91st General Assembly, October 2009, EFN Members reported on the actions, initiatives, and concerns that the Nursing community faces on the topic of eHealth throughout the EU Member States reporting on:

- the expected benefits of the eHealth movement such as optimization of services and continuity of care;
- National eHealth advancements like electronic documentation, patient and health professional cards, and telenursing;
- the barriers faced towards implementation such as accessibility and usability; and
- concerns regarding future eHealth developments including privacy and patient contact.

EFN members perceive that developments in eHealth should focus on patient safety and patient empowerment and support continuity of care throughout the patient's journey. Equally important, the nursing profession believes that ICT should safeguard citizens' privacy with mandatory standards for managing confidential information. EFN Members support many developments in their respective Member States with the most notable being electronic health records and patient cards. Electronic Health Records are currently in place in many MS such as Spain, Lithuania and Finland with success. This is seen as enabling quicker access to vital patient information. In countries like Malta, Germany, Slovenia and Slovakia patients are provided with a "health ID card" which allows storing of their health and illness information. Moreover, eHealth services are seen as having enormous potential in facilitating information exchange between hospitals and communities, streamline the delivery of

nursing services, and reach out to remote areas. EFN members have been innovating in some cases taking best advantage of current technological advances like internet enabled communications. eHealth in this context has been particularly useful in advancing the work of community nurses via enabling direct communication with patients in remote areas via webcam conferencing, exchanging advice between community nurses and more specialized nurses in hospitals, participating in discussions on various patient cases, and even transmitting patient data like x-ray, test results, or wound images. For example, in Croatia such technologies enable patients on the various islands to have follow-up care while in Denmark telenursing has been instrumental in supporting individuals with diabetes or chronic pulmonary diseases.

Currently, there are numerous projects, policies and proposals on the matter of eHealth from different stakeholders. A combination of trend, strong political will, and financial support from the industry has resulted in a mayhem of initiatives, widely dispersed and with overall coordination or self-interest focus. Therefore, EFN calls on putting in place mechanisms to foster dialogue, instil a sense of ownership of reform and reduce resistance to change prior to eHealth design. Furthermore, national governments should make the case for investment in eHealth applications together with the users, all users, which requires better marshalling of existing evidence to show that it works. Finally, a critical assessment of financial flows in health systems to determine if they act as incentives or disincentives for eHealth provision should be undertaken.

Nevertheless, from a nursing profession perspective, and in setting clear priorities, the three policy priority areas of e-health could focus on Workforce, Education, and Quality and Safety.

Policy priority Workforce

Nurses as the single largest professional group in healthcare are asked to play a lead role in ensuring the provision of effective, efficient and quality services. Considering the continuous global shortage of nurses and the rising demands for efficiency, proper eHealth solutions can act to support nurses' work processes. Rapid access to patient information and prompt communication with other healthcare professionals can save valuable time which nurses can redistribute to direct bedside care. The nursing workforce is frequently asked to engage in data collection or data input activities for purposes of quality assurance and statistical estimations of indicators to healthcare effectiveness such as patients' length of stay, infection rates, mortality etc. Properly developed ICT systems can potentially automate such work thus relinquishing even more time for patient contact.

Policy priority Quality and Safety

Nurses need to review and share patient information in a standard and secure way. This is meant to ensure safety by reducing care omissions and errors, and improve quality of care across the health care delivery system. Electronic records can therefore act to strengthen communication, and standardisation in information exchange. The development of eHealth systems can also contribute greatly to prevention and to improving patient access to information and health literacy. With internet being used increasingly as a source of information nurses have an important role in guiding and helping patients and their next of kin to handle the vast flow of information they can be met with.

Policy priority Education

EFN concurs with the Norwegian Nurses Organisation eHealth strategy 2009-2013, arguing that if nurses are to practice knowledge-based nursing, they must have access to updated research and quality assured knowledge. Electronic remote access to sources of knowledge such as nursing procedures, guidelines, or research in digital databases would act as a great facilitator to this while at

the same time keep nurses in the clinical area close to the patients. eHealth is rarely included or described in nursing curriculum and it is therefore a challenge to ensure that nurses receive knowledge to utilise the opportunities offered by eHealth. Therefore, it could be explored how eHealth can be supported to be included in nurses' Continues Professional Development to better prepare them for clinical practice.

In concluding, the EFN believes that in order for the eHealth movement to succeed nurses and nursing practice must be involved in all stages of development and implementation of electronic solutions. Moreover, it is crucial to ensure that developments are health-driven and not market-driven, while eHealth devices should take into consideration both usability and user-friendliness and reflect multi-professional practice. Furthermore, healthcare professionals and support staff require education and training for all aspects of eHealth. Nurses' IT skills must be identified as important and integrated into all levels of education, including the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs. Social Cohesion policy would go a long way in this respect particularly by providing the requisite resources. Also, integration of international terminologies (such as International Classification for Nursing Practice) in the electronic health record would serve to achieve continuity, increase communication and secure relevant and reliable data about nursing practice and outcomes. Finally, it is seen as necessary to develop EU quality and safety standards regarding new eHealth applications and nursing information systems.

The EFN is convinced that eQuality and eSafety will mark the way to eHealth for the benefit of the EU citizen as well as for the profession of Nursing. Although eHealth has enormous potential for Nursing – particularly in supporting nurses deliver more efficient, safe, and quality care – EFN Members are cautious to the excessive use of eHealth in order not to endanger personal contact with patients. Nurses must be supported to remain close to the patients' side.