The Beautiful Marriage: digitalization and public health
Towards shared objectives in an evolving marriage
07 February 2019, 10:15-12:45

"The promise of digital health will not be achieved if its development is left to market forces alone."
– Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab, Regional Director, WHO Regional Office for Europe

Digital health can transform how people are supported to lead healthier lives, but how will the marriage of digital health and public health unfold?

It has become increasingly clear that we cannot achieve Universal Health Coverage without the support of digital health, which can help: provide services to remote populations and underserved communities; facilitate the training of the health workforce; provide accurate and timely patient information through electronic health records; and so much more. The promise and potential of digital health cannot be achieved if the development of technologies is guided solely by market forces.

How do we ensure that corporate interests and public health objectives go hand in hand?

Against this backdrop, the **World Health Organization** (WHO) **Regional Office for Europe** (EURO) and the **European Public Health Association** (EUPHA), co-hosted a session on 'digitalization and public health' at the WHO Symposium on the Future of Digital Health Systems in the European Region.

The session took on a collaborative approach, enabling participants to explore the extent to which digital health and public health communities are working together to co-create a healthy and fair future. They also investigated the extent to which key governance mechanisms, that guide the development of digital health, are present in the EURO Member States. The session participants consisted of four individuals from the digital health community, four from the public health community, and five who chose to not self-identify.

Learning Exercise:

To gain an aggregated understanding of what the participants had experienced to date, **Martin Krayer von Krauss** (Senior Adviser, WHO) guided the participants in a collective learning exercise. The participants formed groups and responded to four guiding questions[1].

A group rapporteur distilled critical points from their discussion onto a template. The following table represents the data gathered from the templates:

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[1] **1)** *Can you share examples of senior leaders in government that are taking a leadership role in digital health, working to keep public health objectives at the top of the digital health agenda;* **2)** *Do you have examples to share, where a broad range of stakeholders was involved in the development of national digital health strategies? Who convened the process? Which stakeholders were involved? Were any stakeholders neglected;* **3)** *Can you describe the organizations that have been mandated to oversee the implementation of the national digital health strategy in your country, and the extent to which both the digital health and the public health communities are involved in these organizations;* **4)** *Can you share examples from practice of some proper processes for policy and decision-making, planning, resource allocation, coordination, and monitoring and evaluation of digital health systems?*

Collective Learning Exercise		
Country	Examples discussed	Success driver
Czech Republic	Establishment of the national eHealth Center	Good Process
Italy	Digital Immunization system	
Denmark	Reflections on eHealth implementation	Strong Leadership
Malta	Political Leadership: Leading the integration of public health services with digital systems.	
Italy	Digital Immunization system	Engaged Stakeholders
Denmark	Together on Mental Health	
New Zealand	Health Data Strategy	all[2]
Sweden	National Architecture for implementing digital health solutions	
Malta	A National Digital Health Strategy	

While the groups were engaged in the learning exercise, three keynote listeners, **Bogi Eliasen** (Chair of Danish unit, UNESCO Bioethical Committee), **Natasha Azzopardi Muscat** (President, EUPHA), and **Walter Ricciardi** (Professor, Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Roma) moved between the groups listening for crucial insights. The keynote listeners shared their observations at the end of the session to the broader group.

Unified Reflections[3]:

1) The 'marriage' between digital health and public health is in a crisis, and we need an intervention. A platform is required to bring the couple together, and the WHO or the European Commission may have a role to play in creating this platform;

2) The private sector has ownership of the data they collect. Therefore, we need to work together to utilize this data, and the public and private sectors must work together;

3) A relatively small team can create change on a systemic scale. Therefore, we need to focus more on the art and science of managing change; and

4) Technological developments receive a lot of funding. However, we also need to allocate funds for training the public health workforce to utilize new technologies effectively.

What remains?

1) How do we ensure that public health objectives are guiding innovation in digital health?

2) Who [really] owns personal data?

3) How do we improve the capabilities of the health system to meet the demands of the patients?

5) How do we accelerate the health literacy agenda?

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[2] *Engaged Stakeholders, Strong leadership, Good Process, National DH Strategy*
[3] *Derived from comments from all the session participants*