



“Glocal” eHealth Policy

From Silos to Systems

Chapter 7

eHealth is now recognized as a key enabler for supporting health systems the world over as they strive to deliver good health and wellness. Policy is a unifying element in eHealth. Developed appropriately, it can help clear a path for sound adoption of technological solutions and enable countries with similar challenges to share resources and lessons learned across international borders.

eHealth policy is concerned with solutions that support capacity building and provide services that improve health outcomes. Policy boundaries are defined by socio-economic, financial, cultural and institutional conditions; by human and material resources; and by organizational and managerial models. While health may be a domestic matter, the networked nature of eHealth creates a new paradigm for it, as a global matter. Local and national development of eHealth policy must occur in a global context, and vice versa—or from a “Glocal” perspective.

To advance dialogue and consensus in the global eHealth arena, the World Health Organization convened National and Global eHealth Policy, part of the Rockefeller Foundation’s *Making the eHealth Connection: Global Partnerships, Local Solutions* Bellagio Center conference series. Participants were asked to form new ideas and frameworks that support the proliferation of sound and sustainable eHealth policies in the developing world and internationally.

Glocal eHealth Policy: Key Issues

eHealth policy is a new and rapidly expanding field. Nearly 100 eHealth policy issues have been identified to date. Yet progress in resolving these issues in developing countries and on the international stage lags far behind. Achieving needed consensus on these issues and advancing to the next stage of eHealth policy development requires answering some key questions:

- ▶ What eHealth policy issues and gaps exist?
- ▶ How can the full spectrum of eHealth policy issues, from local to global, be captured?
- ▶ What eHealth policies already exist? Are they applicable in developing-world contexts?
- ▶ Which global outcomes indicators can provide evidence and insight to guide policy development?
- ▶ Which organizations should take the lead in eHealth policy development on the regional, national and global level? How can cooperation between these bodies be encouraged?

eHealth Policy: Conquering the New Digital Divide?

eHealth policy has been defined as “a set of statements, directives, regulations, laws, and judicial interpretations that direct and manage the life cycle of eHealth.”¹ The idea of having an eHealth policy is still relatively new, yet more than half of the countries in the world already have some form of eHealth policy, strategic plan, road map or action plan, however basic or nascent. This number is expected to rise above 85 percent within three years. Early eHealth policy adopters include Australia, Canada, China, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Iran, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Vietnam and the United States.²

eHealth policies, strategies, and road maps already drafted cover a wide range of issues, but there is little commonality in what the policies aim to achieve. This is in part due to different levels of maturity in the eHealth field, the fact that issues that have already been addressed in one nation may still be a goal to be achieved in another, and different interpretations of terms such as an electronic medical record. Issues including standards, interoperability and data security are often stated as important components of eHealth policy, but in reality, these issues are being dealt with at an international level by other agencies and are ever-changing as technology evolves.

In the developing world, eHealth expectations and requirements are somewhat different. The developed world looks to provide services like eCards and grapples with how to reduce the health care costs of an aging population by introducing home care and keeping people out of hospitals. Meanwhile, the developing world is examining how to find ways of overcoming extreme shortages of health care workers and improve rural health care, while at the same time improving or implementing electronic health information systems. What seems perfectly acceptable and correct in the developed world, in terms of data quality and patient confidentiality, may be major impediments in the developing world.

Attention needs to be directed toward inter-jurisdictional policy issues that will enable and facilitate patient mobility, data mobility and sharing, both across international borders and regional boundaries within countries.³ Developing countries already find themselves disadvantaged in respect to access to eHealth, human resource capacity and economic capacity. They require assistance with the creation of relevant policies and strategies. They also need standards appropriate to their socioeconomic conditions and infrastructure. Crafted effectively, eHealth policy will draw developing countries into the fold and enable them to further engage with the international community and enjoy the benefits of global eHealth.

eHealth Policy Issues: Emerging Consensus

Discussions between ministers of health and technology on different continents are bringing common eHealth policy issues to the surface. A recent eHealth literature review also brings fundamental eHealth policy points into focus. It reveals that eHealth policy elements of concern to countries around the globe fall into nine categories:

NETWORKED CARE: Enhances the ability of providers, departments, organizations and jurisdictions to work in a coordinated environment to improve care of the population, by

- ▶ Creating an enabling environment
- ▶ Sharing information, knowledge and practice
- ▶ Making the transfer of information easier
- ▶ Making the transfer of information safer
- ▶ Overcoming challenges for networked care

INTER-JURISDICTIONAL PRACTICE: Deals with the transfer of information and the provision of care between different jurisdictions, by

- ▶ Addressing professional portability
- ▶ Tackling challenges and discrepancies in inter-jurisdictional practice

DIFFUSION OF eHEALTH ADDRESSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: Supports the use of eHealth among the neediest populations to improve health services, by

- ▶ Increasing penetration of services
- ▶ Developing “open” policies

INTEGRATION INTO EXISTING SYSTEMS: Enables integration of eHealth projects and programs with the regular services, by

- ▶ Achieving broader goals through integration
- ▶ Facilitating integration
- ▶ Identifying and involving the stakeholders
- ▶ Overcoming challenges with integration

HANDLING INNOVATION AT DIFFERENT LEVELS: Grows the capability of institutions to implement eHealth successfully, by

- ▶ Assigning definitive roles
- ▶ Managing change brought by new technologies and ideas
- ▶ Assessing technologies

POLICY GOAL SETTING: Guides institutions in defining policies for eHealth, by

- ▶ Making eHealth feasible
- ▶ Making policies flexible
- ▶ Providing effective governance
- ▶ Creating guidelines for different stakeholders

EVALUATION AND RESEARCH: Generates evidence for adoption of eHealth, by

- ▶ Evaluating the impact of eHealth
- ▶ Assessing new technologies

INVESTMENT: Introduces business models for eHealth adoption, by

- ▶ Using eHealth for commercialization purposes: It is a natural phenomenon that many institutions will use eHealth to increase their clientele and thus grow their businesses. Proper policies are needed to regulate these efforts so that the elements of care and benefit to the population are not lost.
- ▶ Engaging in public-private partnership: Realizing the kind of investments required in implementing eHealth programs, it may be useful to explore public-private partnership models for eHealth. Clear policies and guidelines to implement such partnerships would be beneficial.

- ▶ Advertising cross-border sale of drugs: The use of eHealth has encouraged inter-jurisdictional provision of care, including the order and sale of medicines. It is necessary for governments to design policies that could regulate and guide the use of eHealth for such purposes, and control malpractice and fraud.

ETHICAL ISSUES: Fosters the adoption of eHealth, by

- ▶ Addressing consent for care in eHealth: Laws differ in many areas on obtaining consent for care before transferring patient information online, or before arranging video-conferencing sessions. Clear policies to guide such consent can benefit health care institutions and providers.
- ▶ Dealing with liability issues (medical malpractice liability): Policies regarding liability issues are extremely important, especially in the cases of inter-jurisdictional care.
- ▶ Figuring out medico-legal issues: Policies regarding medico-legal issues in eHealth are also crucial, and must be developed before such programs are implemented.
- ▶ Affirming the patient’s right to access information: Policies regarding a patient’s right to access his or her own information is an important matter for eHealth decision makers.

Moving Forward: Planning for eHealth Policy Success

To address varied, complex and multi-jurisdictional eHealth policy challenges, a five-step framework was developed by *National and Global eHealth Policy* conference participants to push eHealth policy and better health forward:

1. GLOBAL eHEALTH CONVENTION ⇒ The goal is to swiftly prepare a global legal and regulatory framework for eHealth, and to seek intergovernmental endorsement of the convention. The convention itself would establish high-level, core eHealth principles that could then be implemented in national legislation and international resolutions. The World Health Organization is seen as a principal body to move this initiative forward. Interoperability and cross-border provision of medical services are the critical areas of focus for the convention.

2. eHEALTH POLICY TOOLKIT⇒Conference participants recognized an urgent need for an eHealth toolkit that would offer relevant information to ministries of health on policy issues, such as standards and interoperability, data stewardship, governance and institutional responsibilities, finance and budget planning and human health resource needs. This toolkit should be in both paper and online form and consistently updated.

3. eHEALTH EDUCATION⇒There is a significant lack of understanding in relation to eHealth. Raising awareness among all stakeholders about what eHealth is, and what it can do, is a critical and urgent issue. Of equal importance is consistency in the messaging. To address this need, an integrated advocacy, communications and marketing plan should be established that will make the case for eHealth.

4. NATIONAL eHEALTH COUNCILS⇒There is great value to be gained from each country having a resource that provides a broad perspective on eHealth with representation from diverse stakeholders. This body could advise or assist in eHealth policy development and the provision of technical advice. It could also help with implementation, evaluation and monitoring. Conference participants agreed that the formation of national eHealth councils was the most appropriate mechanism. These could be national in scope for small countries, sub-national for large countries, or even linked through the creation of regional clusters or the joining of established regional entities. Conference attendees recommended forming networks of eHealth ambassadors who are respected individuals at local, regional or national levels. These ambassadors could knowledgeably promote the application and integration of eHealth solutions.

5. STAKEHOLDERS⇒Another highlight of *National and Global eHealth Policy* conference discussions was recognition of the complexity of the eHealth arena, and the number of stakeholders that must be involved in decisions and actions related to implementation and integration of eHealth solutions. Stakeholders include:

- ▶ International agencies and bodies
- ▶ Community and community-based organizations (CBOs)
- ▶ Special-interest groups and religious groups
- ▶ Government and government-supported organizations at all levels and all sectors
- ▶ Politicians, legislators and parliamentarians
- ▶ NGOs /BINGOs (Big International NGOs)
- ▶ Donors
- ▶ Private-sector organizations
- ▶ Academia
- ▶ Professional associations
- ▶ Health service providers
- ▶ Regulatory bodies at various levels
- ▶ Standards development organizations
- ▶ Media and opinion makers
- ▶ Judicial bodies
- ▶ Research and development institutions at all levels

Addressing eHealth policy issues will be a complex process. A common vision can unite diverse stakeholders.

Conclusion

In order for eHealth policy to progress, experts from around the globe must engage in an active dialogue that provides consensus-based answers to complex questions and puts conceptual policy frameworks into practice. The overall goal is to speed the implementation and integration of appropriate eHealth solutions into health care environments, particularly within a developing world context. Nothing could be more important for improving global health, revamping health systems and supporting the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Notes

- 1 Scott RE, Chowdhury MFU, Varghese S. TeleHealth Policy: Looking for Global Complimentarity. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare*. 2002;8(Suppl 3):55-57.
- 2 Scott RE, Chowdhury MFU, Varghese S. TeleHealth Policy: Looking for Global Complimentarity. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare*. 2002;8(Suppl 3): 55-57.
- 3 Scott RE, Chowdhury MFU, Varghese S. TeleHealth Policy: Looking for Global Complimentarity. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare* 2002;8(Suppl 3): 55-57.



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“People think of policy very differently. Policy can be law, regulation, process or a way to put in place incentives that drive the private market. It is not just government top-down solutions. This is good news for eHealth because we have many levers with which to effectuate positive change.”