Scope and purpose

In February 2019, the WHO Regional Office for Europe, together with the Norwegian Centre for e-Health Research (WHO Collaborating Centre for Digital Health and Telemedicine), hosted the inaugural WHO Symposium on the Future of Digital Health Systems in the European Region, which brought together an audience of over 350 participants from Member States, partners and key thought leaders to discuss topics of strategic relevance to the digitalization of national health systems in Europe.

In continuing this work, and in addressing the evolving role of digital health in influencing the design and delivery of equitable health services, the Regional Office, together with the Norwegian Centre for e-Health Research and the Clalit Research Institute, Israel (WHO Collaborating Centre on Non-Communicable Diseases Research Prevention and Control), will host the 2nd WHO Symposium on the Future of Digital Health Systems in the European Region at UN City, Copenhagen, Denmark, on 4–5 March 2020.

Background

In acknowledging the potential of digital technologies to strengthen national health systems and public health, WHO Member States adopted resolution WHA71.7 during the Seventy-first World Health Assembly, in May 2018, which frames the role of digital health within the agenda for health systems strengthening and “as a means of promoting equitable, affordable and universal access to health for all”. The resolution requests, inter alia, the WHO Secretariat to develop a global digital health strategy in close collaboration with Member States. A draft of this strategy was made available for public and Member State consultations during early 2019. Following approval from WHO’s Executive Board, the strategy will be submitted to the World Health Assembly for approval in May 2020.

In the WHO European Region, public health action for digital health is facilitated through the digitalization of health systems initiative which works to support countries in their assessment and adoption of digital technologies as part of broader efforts to modernize health systems and health services delivery. A kick-off meeting to launch the initiative was held in Budapest, Hungary, in June 2018, at which it was agreed that the most valuable means of providing guidance to Member States in furthering digital health would be through the development of a European roadmap for the digitalization of national health systems that addresses the multitude of factors contributing to success in the adoption of digital health.

The outcomes of the 1st Symposium provided valuable input in shaping the development of the roadmap and highlighted the changing demands and influences on health care delivery, the pivotal role of health data, and the role of technology in working towards universal health coverage.
The European roadmap for the digitalization of national health systems

The European roadmap for the digitalization of national health systems will present an action-oriented approach to operationalizing WHO’s global digital health strategy by bringing together the basic building blocks of digital health systems, with a particular emphasis on equity and governance. It aims to address the “how” in digitalizing health systems by addressing soft and hard factors, drivers, influences and accelerators – internal and external to the health sector – that determine broad-scale success in implementing digital health. The roadmap will also offer a vision of the future of the digitalization of health systems and highlight the need for a transition from systems focused on delivering reactive care to a new model oriented towards a paradigm of preventive health. The roadmap will be presented to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe for approval in September 2020.

Aims and objectives of the Symposium

The 2nd WHO Symposium on the Future of Digital Health Systems aims to continue the dialogue on a broad range of topics relevant to the future development of health systems by:

• providing a platform for key subject matter experts from across Europe to present the latest thinking and practical advice on implementing safe and inclusive digital health services;
• offering perspectives on factors influencing the future design and development of sustainable digital health systems;
• exploring the role of digital health in addressing and reducing the key burden of disease in the European Region;
• helping to ensure that the knowledge and actions of partners working to develop the field of digital health are leveraged and used appropriately in supporting Member States;
• examining how digital health research can be better aligned to the needs of Member States;
• looking at the role of the health workforce in delivering digital health services, with a particular emphasis on the roles of nurses and midwives;
• reflecting on the elements of the European roadmap for the digitalization of health systems and validating these with further input from Member States.

Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes from the Symposium are:

• identification of potential factors and steps in implementing areas crucial to the digitalization of national health systems and the development of safe and inclusive digital health services;
• unpacking of the public health benefits and deficits of emerging technologies and providing an evidence-base for their broad-scale adoption;
• identification of approaches to health technologies that address and mitigate the emergence of a digital divide in European health systems; and
• refinement of the approach and content of the European roadmap for the digitalization of health systems.
Format of the Symposium
The programme of the Symposium will be comprised of plenary and parallel sessions that address topics and ideas of relevance to the digitalization of health systems. Due to a limit on the available places, participation in the Symposium is by invitation only. The working languages will be English and Russian.

The Symposium will be, to the greatest extent possible, a paper-free environment. As such, the agenda, speaker details, background literature and documents will be made available to participants via a dedicated conference app and additional websites supporting the event.