



POSITION PAPER
ON
DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF HEALTHCARE SYSTEM OF MONTENEGRO

Podgorica, March 2021

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Introduction

Digitization, digitization and digital transformation in healthcare have transformational potential for healthcare worldwide. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) gives us opportunities to provide and improve health services and health outcomes, and the use of digital technologies in health care ultimately contributes to greater efficiency of the health system and the access to healthcare in general.

When we talk about digital health, it implies a wide range of services such as e-health (eHealth) and mobile health (mHealth), but also those domains of research that are still in the making such as the application of artificial intelligence (AI), big data and genomics. As the population ages and the burden of non-communicable diseases grows, the pressure on health systems will increase, emphasizing the need to apply currently available, but also new technological solutions. The World Health Organization warns: "Universal health coverage cannot be achieved without the support of eHealth."

This document was created as a result of the work of the Health Care Committee of the American Chamber of Commerce in Montenegro and contains recommendations for improving the digital health in Montenegro. The goal of this Position Paper is to give decision makers recommendations for creating a modern and agile health system.

Global framework for digital health

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in healthcare, given the role that smartphone applications and other digital tools have played in helping control the spread of the virus. The 2020 pandemic was a turning point in creating the health systems of the future by giving us insight into the following:

- the use of data and digital technologies can be crucial to improving overall health outcomes;
- the use of digital technologies reduces the need for in-person services or care;
- the cooperation of all stakeholders is a key link for improving public health.

In 2018, the World Health Organization and other credible international institutions focused on digital health, intensifying activities in this area. In March 2019, the World Health Organization adopted the Global Strategy on Digital Health for 2020-2025, which was updated in mid-2020, with the aim "to improve health for everyone, everywhere by accelerating the adoption of appropriate digital health".

The European Commission is continuously working on digital transformation of healthcare, and it emphasizes the importance of this topic through various position papers: from healthcare transformation and protection in the digital single market, to assessing the impact of the digital transformation of healthcare, and through comprehensive European Digital Strategy (including artificial intelligence and data strategy). The recent adoption of The Pharmaceutical Strategy for Europe also follows the trends of the digital transformation process.

In addition, the Commission for Sustainable Development, which emerged as a collaboration of the United Nations International Telecommunication Union and UNESCO, adopted a comprehensive report on Digital Health: A Call for Government Leadership and Cooperation between ICT and Health. The working group, under the auspices of this Commission, published a report examining the role of digital health in the treatment of non-communicable diseases.

Despite the potential benefits of digital health, few countries have established the policies, programs and strategies needed to take full advantage of its benefits. The global digital health framework requires countries to work with international partners in those areas that are defined as key foundations: national strategies, skills, ICT infrastructure, and governance that integrates innovation and data protection.

Country overview: digital health in Montenegro

Montenegro has already made some progress in implementing digital health services. The Ministry of Health recognized the necessity and benefit of digitalization of health care, focusing primarily on the application of new technologies. The Health Insurance Fund has developed several new digital services that primarily allow increased availability of information, but also introduce time-saving processes that significantly ease the administrative burden. The "eHealth" portal allows citizens to schedule, cancel and change an appointment with the chosen doctor without any in-person visits or phone calls. "eApoteka" (ePharmacy) allows all individuals registered with The Health Insurance Fund to access data on medicines for all associated pharmacies. "eRecept" (eRecipe) gives patients an insight into previously and currently prescribed drugs, as well as the purchase of drugs realized in the previous 6 months. This changed the use of paper prescriptions, enabling patients to pick up their medications only with health insurance cards. "eNalaz" (eTherapy) is an electronic service that allows patients to check the results of their laboratory tests without a personal visit to their doctor. The results can be easily downloaded, and accessed as needed in the future. "eOsiguranje" (eInsurance) allows citizens to check their health insurance status and any obligations towards their provider, while "eNaručivanje" (eOrdering) is intended for insured individuals with chosen doctors and can be used for ordering electronic invoices, reports for calculating salary compensation due to illness, confirmations and sick leave certificates.

In addition to eHealth services, Montenegro has implemented telemedicine and teleradiology systems between the Clinical Center of Montenegro and three general hospitals, in Bar, Berane and Pljevlja. Established systems have the capacity to make health information, care and diagnosis more accessible, along with faster and easier access to healthcare professionals, radiology and imaging results.

Thinking of data as the core of value-based healthcare and digital transformation, one of the key goals for the future is interoperability. This is in line with the recommendations of the aforementioned Global Strategy of the World Health Organization on Digital Health, which states that the digital infrastructure in healthcare should be understood as an ecosystem, with seamless and integrated data flows in various healthcare, educational and research institutions. The framework for the interoperability of the Montenegrin health system has been adopted to support the implementation of this principle, describing the rules and methods in detail.

Activity areas in Montenegro

The AmCham Health Care Committee prioritized four key areas for action in Montenegro, the implementation of which, through the process of digital transformation, would lay the foundation for creating a sustainable and modern, quality and efficient healthcare system, based on public-private partnerships. Our proposals aim to affirm the potential that digital health can have in effectively planning funds allocated for health, but also to improve the experience and outcomes for patients.

Area of activity 1: Develop a national digital health strategy – Bringing together stakeholders and facilitating a dialogue

Developing a national digital health strategy is a key first step in identifying, prioritizing and addressing barriers and shortfalls in key enablers for digital health. A comprehensive local assessment is crucial for the development of a long-term plan, in coordination with development and other partners, as well as for mobilizing the political support necessary for resources and implementation.

In order to achieve the goals defined by the digital health strategy, appropriate financial support will be needed, especially bearing in mind that the introduction of new programs and technologies often means significant initial costs. The strategy would define the vision, strategic priorities and outcomes to be achieved in 2022-2026, with measurable benefits for patients, careers and overall health system.

Proposed activity: Policy Hackathon

Typically, a hackathon is an event where computer developers and other experts collaborate to develop new software and applications. A policy hackathon works in a similar way: stakeholders of different profiles come together in a workshop to come up with solutions to the problems they identify. During the hackathon, roles change - so decision-makers are put in the place of policy-users, while policy-users try to create policies that would remove barriers to innovative entrepreneurship. We believe that organizing such an event on digital health in Montenegro, which would bring together various stakeholders, would help decision makers to better understand how they can use technology to optimize public policy solutions, with the help of the private sector.

Area of activity 2: Digital literacy, education and workforce - Curriculum development

The use of data and digital technologies in health care largely depends on whether the state has an adequate level of digital literacy of people working in health care. The lack of digital skills is not unique to the health-care sector in LMICs, but given the impact on people's well-being, requires special attention.

Although improving digital literacy in health care can be done through capacity-building efforts, as well as those related to specific digital health projects, we point out that training in health care can also take place through programs and institutions in the private sector. Private-sector-led programs could be a way to bridge the existing gap in digital skills. The World Health Organization's Action Plan for the Implementation of the Global Digital Health Strategy recommends that all WHO member states commit to strengthening the capacity of health personnel, including strengthening the capacity of tertiary institutions and developing relevant curricula.

Proposed activity: Modification of curricula in the field of health in order to raise the digital literacy of healthcare personnel

Area of activity 3: Networking, expertise and partnership

COVID-19 has shown that only a robust network of people and technology, as well as joint efforts at all levels can overcome the health crisis. In transition countries, such as Montenegro, a major challenge is to modernize health care through the use of digital technologies in order to achieve better health outcomes, especially given the financial impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the economy. Nevertheless, modernization of health care must be an imperative for decision makers in Montenegro in the coming years, and, with the help of international partners, a way should be sought to combine limited resources and expertise efficiently, in a coordinated and targeted manner.

Proposed activity: The AmCham Health Care Committee can provide international expertise and consultancy to decision makers. The Committee launched the AmCham Portal "Digital Future of Health" in order to promote digital health, and an international policy conference dedicated to this topic is planned.

Area of activity 4: Data strategy - Health data management: Collecting, Protecting and Sharing Data for Better Health Outcomes

When we talk about digital innovations in healthcare, we must mention data management in this area. New technologies provide opportunities not only to generate, collect and use large amounts of real-world data on health outcomes (defined as observational data obtained outside the context of randomized control trials and during clinical practice), but also have a direct impact on the creation of new digital health services, which are significantly cheaper and accessible to a broader range of people.

Reliable and meaningful data allow predictability of healthcare spending, including expenditure for medicines and measuring treatment outcomes that will further enable innovative pricing models for medicines.

Proposed activity: Creation of a working group composed of representatives of the Ministry of Health, the Health Insurance Fund, the Institute of Medicines and Medical Devices, clinicians and industry, which would provide guidance and framework for implementation of innovative Managed Entry Agreements that relies on meaningful and accessible data.