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## HARNESSING E-HEALTH FOR IMPROVED SERVICE DELIVERY

E-Health can advance Member State progress towards universal health coverage by potentially transforming health service access and quality and helping contain costs. But for many countries, implementing e-Health initiatives is proving to be a challenge, especially with the rapid pace of e-Health technical developments. Many e-Health pilot programmes have been initiated in the Region but not scaled up.

Successful e-Health systems require strong leadership and governance, working with stakeholders and monitoring progress for continued learning. E-Health initiatives should demonstrate real service delivery improvements for all population groups. To that end, Member States should prioritize applications in line with national priorities to yield service delivery benefits, including electronic health records, telemedicine and m-Health. Key applications will vary according to the level of development of information and communications technology infrastructure in individual Member States. Member States can further improve information-sharing by developing and applying enterprise architecture and health information standards. The *Regional Action Agenda on Harnessing E-Health for Improved Health Service Delivery* takes stock of developments across the Region and in different groups of countries, and provides a systematic framework for deployment of e-Health for improved service delivery.

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Action Agenda on Harnessing E-Health for Improved Health Service Delivery in the Western Pacific*.

## **1. CURRENT SITUATION**

Member States endorsed *Universal Health Coverage: Moving Towards Better Health – Action Framework for the Western Pacific Region* in 2015. The Framework identified a range of actions to strengthen five interrelated health system attributes of a high-performing health system: quality, efficiency, equity, accountability, and sustainability and resilience.

Over the past decade, Member States in the Region have made significant health gains. However, increasing equitable access to good quality services is a key challenge in advancing universal health coverage (UHC). Countries also face other challenges, including increasing costs of health care, demographic changes, population ageing, and concerns about health workforce sustainability and growing patient demand. These challenges drive broader health system concerns of affordability, sustainable financing for health care, adequate human resources for health, and the ability of health systems to continue to provide timely and high-quality care.

E-Health is defined as the use of information and communications technology (ICT) for health in support of health and health-related fields. Countries can harness e-Health for improving service delivery, as the visible face of UHC. For example, e-Health applications can enable populations living in rural and remote areas to access good quality care, can empower patients and communities to engage at all levels of the health system, and provide timely, detailed information to assist in the prevention, early identification of needs, diagnosis and management of illness.

Progress on e-Health adoption (and tangible benefits) within countries and across the Region has been uneven, and evolving quickly. Many countries are challenged by rapid e-Health developments with many pilot programmes initiated in countries but not scaled up. E-Health solutions are constrained due to poor ICT infrastructure and access, need to align investments and implementation with national policies/strategies, incompatible architecture and standards that limit scalability, and funding patterns that do not support sustainability and adaptation over time.

## **2. ISSUES**

If widely used, e-Health can be a strategic tool for improving access, expanding coverage and increasing the financial efficiency of health-care systems. The challenge is to systematically apply e-Health to accelerate progress towards UHC in a way that builds on current efforts, consistent with the country context. To maximize the benefits of e-Health for improved services, countries should

prioritize e-Health applications at various levels: individual, health service provider, health-care organization and health system. This approach will benefit service delivery and help achieve national health priorities.

## **2.1 Identify e-Health applications to benefit health service delivery**

E-Health applications, such as electronic medical/health records (eMR/eHR) and telemedicine, should be prioritized because they are more likely to yield service delivery benefits. An eMR/eHR that can be shared provides a foundation for e-Health development. Combined with a unique health identifier, which is a number or code for each person, these records contain an individual's health information and allow it to be shared in health service settings throughout the individual's life. An eMR/eHR also helps service providers to make better-informed decisions, to monitor service quality and costs, and to use aggregate information for monitoring performance. Telemedicine is defined as using ICT to provide clinical and preventive care from a distance, and m-Health as the use of mobile communication devices to support or provide health care. Both can help improve health service access and coverage. Investments in ICT infrastructure, such as power supply, Internet connection and mobile coverage, are necessary to ensure e-Health development in the future.

## **2.2 Improve information-sharing at all levels**

The lack of a seamless exchange of data within and between health information systems hinders care and leads to fragmentation of health information systems for health services. Interoperability or the ability for systems to talk to each other, and standardization are required for information to be recorded, exchanged and used. An enterprise architecture structure must be developed as a foundation for the design of an e-Health system. This structure provides a comprehensive description of all key elements and relationships of the system, as well as its alignment with the mission and objectives of the system for e-Health development.

There is also a need for strong information governance to ensure compliance with information standards. The *Regional Action Agenda on Harnessing E-Health for Improved Health Service Delivery in the Western Pacific* encourages Member States to develop appropriate policies and legislative mechanisms linked to an overall national e-Health strategy, in order to ensure adoption and compliance of enterprise architecture and information standards, and the security and privacy of information.

### **2.3 Support e-Health implementation**

To ensure that e-Health applications lead to service delivery gains, key enablers for implementation must be in place. Implementation for e-Health requires a transformational approach in both technical and human processes. Technical transformation can be supported by enhancing leadership and governance, building e-Health literacy and capacity, as well as promoting standards and interoperability. Human transformation will be supported by stakeholder engagement, particularly with end users, training and education, and governance strategies that build upon e-Health knowledge, capacity and infrastructure. Monitoring and evaluation are necessary to track the performance and impact of e-Health projects. Process-focused formative evaluations and benefits-focused outcome evaluations can enhance sustainable progress and help reinforce a cycle of continuous improvement.

## **3. ACTIONS PROPOSED**

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Action Agenda on Harnessing E-Health for Improved Health Service Delivery in the Western Pacific*.