

## Information Society and Health: Linking European Policies





**The Information Society brings important benefits for health. To help ensure this promise is fulfilled, the Information Society Policy Link initiative is linking Information Society projects with relevant European policy-makers in areas as diverse as electronic health records, regional health information systems, personalised health information, and tele-diagnosis and treatment.**

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## Challenges for Health

Health is an important priority for Europeans. We expect to be protected against illness and disease. We want to bring up our children in a healthy environment, and demand that our workplace is safe and hygienic. When travelling within the European Union, we need access to reliable and high-quality health advice and assistance.

Healthcare is facing huge challenges. New drugs and advances in medical technologies are opening the way to more effective treatments, while the unravelling of the human genome is leading to totally new treatment regimes. Clinical practices are changing, too, requiring health practitioners to collaborate across disciplines and organisational boundaries. The whole philosophy of healthcare is shifting, towards treating patients at the point of need, and placing a greater emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention. All this is against a background of an aging population and ever-increasing societal expectations of health.

Patients are coming to expect a single point of entry to healthcare services that cuts across organisational boundaries and health services, like other organisations, are having to embrace the opportunities presented by the e-revolution. Providers are looking for ways to deliver health services to the patient as promptly and as locally as possible, while supporting collaboration of healthcare professionals throughout the care episode. Within many hospitals, standardised patient medical records already assist the exchange of information between specialist departments. Frequently hospitals have to work with other health agencies as well, necessitating the sharing of clinical information between different organisations and specialties. Increasingly, this collaboration extends beyond the traditional care environments into the home itself.

The European Union has a vital role to play in the health arena through the obligations placed on it by the European Treaties. Community actions complement the Member States' national health policies – as specified in Article 152 of the Treaty – and at the same time bring European added value. Cross-border health threats – for example influenza – and also the effects of free movement throughout Europe of both patients and medical personnel need the integrated and coordinated response achieved through better sharing of information at the European level.



## Health Policy

The EU Health Strategy, set out in May 2000, aims to integrate all EU health-related policies and concentrate resources where the Community can provide real added-value, without duplicating the work of the Member States or international organisations.

As a key component of the EU Health Strategy, the Commission introduced a new public health programme for the European Community covering the period 2003 to 2008.

This has three priority objectives:

- To improve information and knowledge for the development of public health;
- To enhance the capability of responding rapidly and in a coordinated fashion to threats to health;
- To promote health and prevent disease through addressing health determinants across all policies and activities.

In support of the overall EU Health Strategy, in April 2004 the Commission adopted an action plan on eHealth which aims to establish a European eHealth Area. The plan addresses the crucial role of information and communication technologies and provides new ways of delivering healthcare while improving access to, quality and effectiveness of care. It takes a twin-track approach: making the most of new information and communication technologies in the health sector and better integrating a range of eHealth policies and activities.

The European eHealth Area will provide a framework for exchanging best practices and experience. Through increased integration and interoperability of health information systems and services, it will allow common approaches to shared problems to be developed over time. This action plan focuses on specific actions to bring this about, so that by the end of the decade eHealth will become commonplace for health professionals, patients and citizens. Its impacts will be measured in terms of better access and more efficient services, as well as improved productivity of the healthcare sector.

### *eHealth: Where the Information Society meets Health*

Information and communications technologies are making important contributions to European health policies, and paving the way towards completely new approaches to healthcare provision.

Examples of eHealth applications include: standardised electronic health records, reliable and effective systems for telemedicine (tele-consultation and home tele-monitoring), integrated regional health information networks, as well as personalised systems for citizens to support and manage their health status.

These synergies are reflected in the close interaction between the EU's Information Society policies and activities and those related directly to healthcare. In 2002, eHealth became an eEurope priority, setting targets for both the European Commission and Member States to meet in areas such as:

- Building on the European health insurance card to create a **European electronic health card**, featuring added functionalities, such as medical emergency data and secure access to personal health information;
- Developing **Health Information Networks** to speed the flow of information through the healthcare system
- **Putting health services online** such as information on healthy living and illness prevention, electronic health records, tele-consultation and e-reimbursement.

## Information Society Activities

### Fifth Framework Programme

The European Union has supported research and development in information technology for healthcare for more than 15 years. Over this period, EU research has contributed significantly to advancing health information systems throughout Europe, helping to develop not just specific applications but the underlying infrastructures needed for new solutions to be taken up throughout the European health community.

In IST-FP5, research under Applications relating to Health focused on three main societal needs:

- for health professionals, addressing needs to optimise the human, technical and financial resources within the healthcare system;
- for citizens, addressing the requirement to stay healthy and to protect general well-being;
- for patients, addressing the need to receive the best possible quality of care.

Some 750 organisations, mainly large industry but also small- and medium-sized industries, research centres and universities, from over 35 countries were involved in a complementary set of activities ranging from RTD to take-up actions. Strategic aspects, such as support to policies and regulation, standardisation and certification, and ethics were also addressed. A total of 135 projects were funded at a total commitment of €174 million.

### Sixth Framework Programme

Research funded under the eHealth Strategic Objective in IST-FP6 is helping to create an 'intelligent environment' that allows ubiquitous management of each person's health status, and assists health professionals in coping with major health challenges. The focus is on:

- key technologies, such as biosensors and secure communications, which can be built into 'smart clothes' and implants, which help patients - and their doctors - monitor and manage their health;
- software tools to help health professionals take the best possible decisions;
- networking researchers together to help create a new generation of eHealth systems to assist the 'individualisation' of disease prevention, diagnoses and treatment.

### Other Activities

eHealth is a priority area under eTEN, primarily for the practical realisation of eEurope's objectives on eServices. Projects address issues such as health and public health information networks; the use of electronic healthcare and insurance cards; extending the advances in telemedicine to the healthcare sector; and expanding health and related preventative services to a Trans-European level.

Recognising the need to disseminate best practices and reward exemplary achievements, in 2003 IST launched the European eHealth Awards for providers of Europe's best eHealth solutions. This acknowledgement of European best practices in eHealth continues through the on-going organisation of eHealth conferences and exhibitions, and through various other activities such as studies and specific support actions.

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## Next Steps

The research synopses and policy cases presented here represent only the first stage in linking Information Society activities to EU policies. Information Society & Media DG is now working with Health & Consumer Protection DG to establish a policy interface to improve synergies.

A virtuous circle should develop, with improved communication between researchers and policymakers ensuring that:

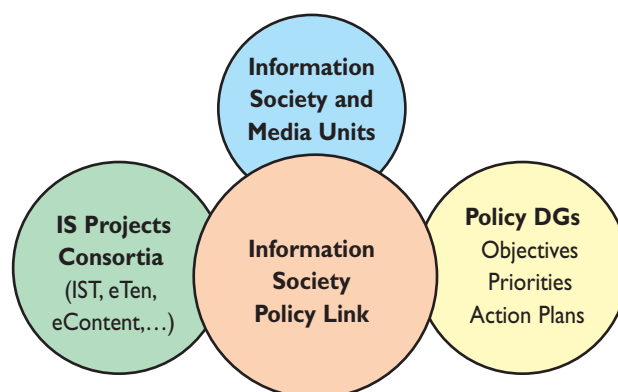
- Information Society & Media programmes better reflect relevant EU policies;
- EU policies better account for Information Society technologies;
- ICTs are better applied to meeting Europe's challenges.

At a later stage, specific actions will be launched addressing policy-makers in national and regional administrations in Member States, European institutions and national parliaments.

## Getting Involved

The *Information Society Policy Link* initiative links policy-makers and researchers in a number of ways, so as to leverage the benefits of Information Society & Media projects for European policies. A variety of activities are planned, including a series of Policy Workshops and events targeted at the European policy community.

Project Consortia play a crucial role in the development of this joint effort, providing a valuable source of information for European policy-makers on relevant technological developments, as well as improving the quality, impact and awareness of their own projects for the benefit of EU policies. Organisations involved in past or present Information Society projects with relevant activities or results are invited to contact the Initiative at the address shown.



## Information Society Policy Link at a Glance

Information Society related actions constitute a considerable effort of the European Union. For instance, Information Society Technologies (IST) research has been the largest thematic priority in the EU's Fifth (1998-2002) and Sixth (2002-2006) Framework Research Programmes. Together they represent an investment of over €7bn in IST research, and are complemented by programmes such as eContent (€100m) and eTEN (€315m), which focus on digital content and eServices deployment respectively.

The projects funded by these programmes offer benefits to all areas of Europe's economy and society. To fully realise these benefits the technologies need to be linked closely to European policy-making in the relevant areas.

**Information Society Policy Link** is an initiative of Information Society & Media DG to identify and reinforce links between its projects and relevant EU policies. More than 3000 projects from Information Society programmes are being analysed, identifying a wealth of concrete results that support EU policies across all of the principal policy domains.

By exchanging information and experiences, the *Information Society Policy Link* initiative aims to ensure that results from European ICT research provide greater leverage, both in implementing current policies and shaping priorities for the future.

## Further Information

### Information Society Policy Link initiative

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### Health and Consumer Protection DG

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### Europe's Information Society: Thematic Portal

[http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/)