A new report on e-Health in the WHO European Region reveals that tangible progress has been made, with clear benefits for many countries. In most Member States, it has become commonplace for technology to be used to deliver health services and public health improvements, such as electronic health records.

The report, entitled From innovation to implementation – e-Health in the WHO European Region, indicates a trend towards strategic engagement, although some countries have weak or no governance, legislation and legal protection in e-Health. This can lead to missed opportunities and inefficiencies that put lives at risk and can also leave e-Health open to commercial exploitation, while public health authorities miss out on the benefits.

E-Health is defined as any activity in which an electronic means is used to deliver information, resources and services related to health. It covers many domains, including electronic health records, telehealth, mobile health (m-Health) and health-related use of e-Learning, social media, health analytics and “Big Data”.

Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe, said: “The 21st century has swept in on a wave of technology, bringing with it a huge range of possibilities for innovation in health. In many countries, e-Health is revolutionizing health care delivery and the health information needed to support it. Patients are more and more empowered because they have access to information and advice. This is improving the quality of health care and also challenging the traditional roles of health care professionals. E-Health saves lives and money; yet, despite many inspiring examples of progress, this report makes it clear that e-Health is not being adopted evenly across the Region. Stronger investment in e-Health is needed in order to achieve the Health 2020 policy objectives.”

The report describes why governments should take action on e-Health and provides a clear governance structure to oversee implementation, legislation, clinical registries, legal protection and other issues. The report calls for sustained funding, reimbursement and defined standards for e-Health.

Health analytics and Big Data hold significant potential for health, but this potential is not being explored fast enough, and few policies are available to support progress in this area. Currently, only 6 countries have a national policy or strategy regulating the use of Big Data in the health sector, and few regulate the use of Big Data by private companies. When public health authorities do not step in, commercial organizations will be quick to exploit the potential of the health sector.

Key facts and statistics

93% of Member States (42 countries) have made public funding available for e-Health programmes, showing the strong commitment of governments for further development in the sector.

81% of Member States (35 countries) report that their health care organizations are using social media to promote health messages as part of health campaigns. 91% (40 countries) report that individuals and communities use social media to learn about health issues. These data demonstrate both strong uptake of social media and interest in its potential as a communication medium for both patients and professionals. Yet, 81% of Member States report having no national policy to govern the use of social media in health care, leaving the use of social media informal and unregulated.

80% of Member States have legislation to protect the privacy of individual health-related data in electronic health records – an increase of nearly 30% since 2009. This indicates significant progress in adopting electronic health records responsibly.

73% of Member States (33 countries) do not have an entity that is responsible for the regulatory oversight of mobile health apps for quality, safety and reliability, despite widespread use of such technology. This presents a potential risk for countries and is an area in need of incentives, guidance and oversight.

38% of Member States (17 countries) have yet to establish a dedicated telehealth policy or strategy. Given the considerable increase in telehealth initiatives in Europe, this area requires more dedicated focus by governments to ensure a solid foundation for its continued growth.