Pan-European programs advance interoperability for e-health

Each European country is entirely responsible for its healthcare, including the health information systems that support healthcare delivery.

If this flexibility is legitimate for the application software, the user interfaces, the deployment architecture used, it results in an uneven and fragmented capability for systems to exchange medical records both within the borders of each country and especially across borders with other nations.

An increasing number of stakeholders at the European level realize the barriers induced within the countries and are convinced that Member States should make an exception to the provisions in European Union treaty that leaves healthcare decisions to the discretion of each country in order to jointly set more consistent interoperability standards and profiles to collectively induce a more robust healthcare IT market.

Recognizing a need to provide both leadership and to create a sense of urgency regarding interoperability among Member States, the European Commission has made substantial progress driving greater consistency between countries through number of European-level initiatives.

Lacking a direct authority, the Commission has applied its considerable influence using policy recommendations and directives, and pressing a concern for citizen health safety in cross-border care delivery.

The Commission has convincingly demonstrated its ability to foster coordinating country-to-country connectivity and has won support for programs covering multiple areas of interoperability.

eHealth falls within the Commission's new "Digital Agenda", which is one of five priorities identified for development and economic growth in Europe.

A policy recommendation on interoperability for electronic health records combined with a proposed Directive on patients' rights in cross-border health care has advanced to the European Parliament and may be adopted next year.

Meanwhile five European-level programs are currently underway that are pioneering policies and processes crucial for increasing consistent interoperability within the countries and the eventual implementation of pan-European data exchanges.

IHE-Europe is an active participant in four of theses programs: European Patient Smart Open Services (epSOS), Health Interoperability Testing and Conformance Harmonization (HITCH), Smart Personal Health Systems (SPHS), and European eHealth Governance. A fifth program, eHealth Interop also called Mandate 403, is scheduled to be launched soon.