

Editorial – Integrated Care and digitalization

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It is important to start the discussion with the driving principle of «integrated care». What does it mean, «integrated care»? This question leads usually to animated discussions, with multiple visions and understandings. An interesting definition is given in a work published in 2013 by the National Health Service [1] (1). The first important aspect of the definition is to put the patient at the center of the integration process, a person-centered process.

Consequently, the person is in a journey across the landscape of health, care and support environments. In this journey, it is important to share with all stakeholders, and refined whenever needed, the understanding and the information about important goals and outcomes to be reached. Drawing goals and outcomes at different time spans allows, and sometimes will constrain, the possible and/or desired paths to the future. As such, this will then allow to support a shared decision-making and care planning.

A set of tools, not a set of solutions

Finally, walking along this path across the healthcare landscape will require good and smooth transitions. Of course, all of it must be monitored and evaluated, the impacts, on health, on satisfaction, human factors and from an economical point of view must be carefully assessed. In Switzerland, the care system is strongly fragmented, which is considered to implement the ideal integrated care paradigm even more challenging.

Information, communication, decision-making, planning, prediction, monitoring and distributed systems (a free translation of fragmentation) are all at the heart of digitalization. Information technologies have the potential to be major enabling tools in order to provide integrated care in to the people in our country. However, digitalization should not be considered as a set of solutions, but as a set of tools in a coherent ecosystem allowing:

- a better sharing and use of information
- share and improved decision processes
- better planning
- more personal involvement of the person using services
- free access to good information
- better monitoring and transparency

not just for the experts, but for patients, people, families and carers, professionals, researchers, etc.

Digitalization is not just the process of using IT, it is a cultural transformation of traditional healthcare (2). Thus, it requires to rethink deeply processes and relationship that shape the current care system. The transformation requires time, it requires education, competences, and forces to carry the changes, including financial forces.

Improving the culture of sharing

Digitalization is not good «by exceptionalism», as discussed in the edition of July 2018 of «The Lancet». Quote: «Without a clear framework to differentiate efficacious digital products from commercial opportunism, companies, clinicians, and policy makers will struggle to provide the required level of evidence to realize the potential of digital medicine. The risks of digital medicine, particularly use of AI in health interventions, are concerning. Continuing to argue for digital exceptionalism and failing to robustly evaluate digital health interventions presents the greatest risk for patients and health systems.» (3).

Digitalization must be used with robust and well supported evidences, or it as to be used in an evaluation framework, as every new technology in the health sector. Digitalization has the potential to be a game changer for integrated care, fostering communication, access to information, better decision support and care planning, building transparency while protecting privacy and providing instruments to assess the efficiency of new measures taken.

However, this will require a profound change in the culture, emphasizing cooperation rather than competition, improving the culture of sharing and the work towards common goals.

Bibliography

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3. Lancet T. Is digital medicine different? The Lancet. 2018 Jul 14;392(10142):95.

[1] NHS - the publicly funded national healthcare system in the United Kingdom