

e-Health Initiatives



What is e-health?

We define e-health as the use of ICTs, locally and at a distance, to strengthen health systems and address public health priorities.

E-health has the potential to increase the efficiency of health systems and to improve access, especially in remote areas, for marginalised or excluded populations, people with disabilities and the elderly. It can be used to improve service quality, and can also reduce the cost of health care delivery by reducing redundancy and duplication and introducing economies of scale.

The Commonwealth e-health programme

E-health is being promoted by the Commonwealth Secretariat, not as a stand-alone programme but as support to the ongoing efforts to strengthen health systems.

Based on the May 2008 Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting (CHMM), which focused on e-health, the Secretariat was mandated to:

- pursue high-level policy dialogues involving the health and information technology sectors, the private sector, health professionals and civil society on the opportunities and the challenges of e-health; they also requested the Secretariat to facilitate these dialogues;
- explore setting up e-health pilot projects in all regions of the Commonwealth;
- pursue public-private partnerships (PPPs) in e-health;
- share knowledge, expertise and technical assistance between Commonwealth countries, both North-South and South-South; and
- leverage additional resources to support the further development of its work on e-health and development.

These mandates are in line with the Millennium Development Goal 8, target 18. The aim of Goal 8 is to 'develop a global partnership for development', and stresses the need for 'co-operation with the private sector to make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications'.

Activities

Research

In 2008, the Secretariat carried out a survey of Commonwealth member countries and territories to find out about their e-health status.

The survey shows that all member countries are already practising e-health at some level. For instance, Zambia has introduced a Smartcard that contains patients' medical records,

which patients can carry wherever they go. Medical technology in the Cook Islands – a self-governing country in free association with Commonwealth member New Zealand – gives health workers access to centralised patient-health records, thus improving reporting and analysis of health statistics.

These surveys are carried out periodically to update the existing information on the e-health status of member countries.

Policy dialogues

We have initiated Ministerial High-Level Dialogues for member states aimed at:

- enabling ministries for health and technology, the private sector and civil society to collaborate effectively;
- supporting health ministries in developing realistic, affordable e-health strategies and investment plans; and
- expanding e-health capacity and capabilities.

A working group on e-health policies and strategies was set up to review the main approaches to such policies and strategies, and to draft a framework for the assessment of the status of e-health in Commonwealth regions.

The aim of the draft framework is to provide methodologies, models and templates to help countries to develop their e-health strategies.

Setting up e-health pilot projects

The Secretariat is assisting countries to develop funding proposals to support e-health pilot projects that utilise existing and widely available technologies, such as mobile phones, to support health sector development.

Sharing expertise and technical assistance between Commonwealth countries

We share knowledge products, and outcomes of the dialogues and seminars with Commonwealth ministries of health, the private sector and civil society.

Public-private partnerships

Cisco Systems is supporting the Commonwealth Secretariat with the Ministerial High-Level Dialogues and in developing its methodology and model for e-health strategies and investment plans.

The Secretariat is exploring collaboration and funding support for its e-health programme with Microsoft to support assessments of the status of e-health in the Commonwealth as a basis for piloting e-health solutions in member countries.

What are the e-health issues and challenges in the Commonwealth?

Policy and strategy

- There is a lack of policy and strategic plans in most member states.
- Not all countries have an information and communication technology (ICT) policy integrated into health and e-health policies.

Legislation

- There is no e-legislation in most countries.
- Legislation on confidentiality of data, ethics, and inter-country transfer of data is not available in most countries.
- There are no guidelines for clinical/technical practice including licensure for practitioners in an e-context.
- Medical record portability, privacy and ownership have not been addressed.

Standards

- There is a lack of standards in place for medical imaging, inter-operability, software, transmission, infrastructure, architecture, medical informatics, and bioinformatics.

E-health infrastructure

- Getting connectivity to the 'last mile' should be the goal.
- Minimal infrastructure is in place in countries, but there is a lack of knowledge or awareness of what is available to countries.
- Public-private partnerships are needed in this venture.
- Relevant content is essential to ensure community needs are met.
- There is a need to identify and build on existing infrastructure at country level.
- Models such as millennium and digital villages in several countries should be noted.

- There is also the need to develop guidelines on equipment procurement and ICT sourcing strategy.

Capacity-building in ICTs

- There are inadequate ICT skills available in the health sector, including ICT maintenance staff.
- There is also a shortage of skills in health informatics.
- ICT is lacking in health professionals' curricula.
- Re-tooling of ICT skills for health workers is required.
- ICT as a tool for expanding health sector training programmes is vital.
- There is a need to raise awareness of ICTs in the health sector.

Conclusion

Within the health-system strengthening approach, e-health could be used to improve service delivery; improve the quality and quantity of the health workforce; expand health information systems; improve logistics management for and access to medical products and commodities; and increase the efficiency with which health sector resources are used.

The starting point in adopting e-health is the development of coherent national e-health policies and strategies which are in tune with national development plans, national ICT policies and with buy-in from health care workers – the users.

National e-health strategies and plans have many features and variables, complicating their development and improvement. Many countries do not have the resources or expertise to deal with this consistently on their own, so the Secretariat is supporting countries to better understand the elements of comprehensive e-health strategies. Enlisting the support of ICT suppliers has been crucial in this work. The Secretariat is grateful for this support and recognises the importance of building partnerships.

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What is the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Secretariat?

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 54 countries that support each other and work together towards shared goals in democracy and development.

The world's largest and smallest, richest and poorest countries make up the Commonwealth and are home to 2 billion citizens. Member countries span all continents, from Africa (19) to Asia (8), the Americas and the Caribbean (13), Europe (3) and the South Pacific (11).

The Commonwealth Secretariat, based in London, executes plans agreed by Commonwealth Heads of Government through technical assistance, advice and policy development.