

# Forum Summary

OECD High-Level Policy  
Forum on Health in the  
21st century: Data, Policy,  
and Digital Technology



## OECD High-Level Policy Forum on Health in the 21st century: Data, Policy, and Digital Technology

**G**overnments have a unique opportunity to build more effective, efficient and equitable health systems, an *OECD High-Level Policy Forum on Health in the 21st century: Data, Policy, and Digital Technology* heard in Copenhagen on November 21.

The forum highlighted the challenges and opportunities of a digital transformation, including ways to improve health and save lives, reduce waste in health care and save money. The opportunities identified included intelligent use of data and digital technology to improve the safety and quality of care, help address unmet health needs and making services more accessible and equitable.





Our common goal should be very clear. Better treatments for our patients. Better conditions for health care professionals to do what they are good at. Better coherence between different sectors and actors within our health care systems. And not least how we make these future health care systems sustainable.

Magnus Heunicke  
Denmark's Minister for Health and Senior Citizens



Our health systems are awash with electronic data and digital technologies. Using them intelligently can help us make our health systems more effective, efficient, equitable and people-centred.

Ulrik Vestergaard Knudsen  
OECD Deputy Secretary-General

# Challenges and opportunities

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The challenges identified are many. They ranged from changing the way health care is organised, including an overhaul of structures, policies, and institutions to balance the public benefits of digitalisation with protecting individual privacy, with governance playing a vital role in harnessing opportunities while managing risks.

Laws and regulations to keep up with the rapid pace of technological innovation is an important part of that challenge, according to experts, officials and ministers.

"Today digitalization is a defining factor. Everyone talks about digital opportunities and the enormous perspectives it brings. In fact, we are in the middle of a digital health revolution," said HRH Crown Princess Mary of Denmark, stressing the opportunity to provide better, more equitable and more sustainable health care at a time of rising technological innovation and consumer demand for more responsive and personalised health care, including the most vulnerable in society.

The importance of making digitalisation in health care work for all was echoed by the OECD Deputy Secretary-General Ulrik Vestergaard Knudsen.

"Our health systems are awash with electronic data and digital technologies. Using them intelligently can help us make our health systems more effective, efficient, equitable and people-centred," he said.

Governments have a crucial role to play in empowering health care professionals and patients to fully embrace digitalisation in a way that improves health care while protecting the rights and needs of all patients in an equitable way, according to Denmark's Minister for Health and Senior Citizens, Magnus Heunicke.

"New technologies are empowering health professionals. Digitalisation can free valuable time from routine tasks, allowing the staff to provide better, closer and more personal care for the patients." This was a key message Heunicke told the Forum attended by more than 120 people, including 8 Ministers and 23 Heads of Delegation from 18 countries and 5 international organisations.

"We need to raise the flag of inequality in health," he stressed.



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HRH Crown Princess Mary of Denmark



The forum focused on three broad areas considered vital for a transformation of the “data rich, information poor” health care sector: empowering patients, empowering workforce and enabling environment.

# Efficiency in health systems

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A recent OECD report, “Health in the 21st Century – Putting Data to Work for Stronger Health Systems” - highlighted that unnecessary practices, duplication and other inefficiencies meant that around a fifth of health expenditure in OECD countries does not generate better health, and sometimes even harmed health, Ulrik Vestergaard Knudsen noted. He described the \$1.3 trillion [annually] wasted spending as “eye watering.”

In addition, health is lagging behind other sectors in using digital technology and data to provide better products and services, he said. Countries spend a much smaller share of budgets than other sectors on managing data and information, especially for an industry where accurate, reliable and timely information is so critical to success.

The forum focused on three broad areas considered vital for a transformation of the “data rich, information poor” health care sector:

1. Empowering patients while protecting privacy
2. Empowering health care professionals
3. Enabling the digital transformation by creating the right regulatory, economic and governance environment.

The first panel discussion “Reforming care models to make health services more people-centred,” highlighted that data is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

“We need to turn data into information, information into knowledge and knowledge into practical actions,” said Ran Balicer, Chief Innovation Officer at Clalit Health Services, the largest Israeli healthcare provider and insurer. “The key is data for action.”

In Israel, doctors are using predictive models to identify and focus on priority cases. In an ageing society where demands and costs are rising, this approach is vital to make health care more effective and efficient, he said.

## Empowering patients

“An empowered patient, an empowered citizen is not necessarily an expensive patient or citizen,” said Nicola Bedlington, the European Patients’ Forum Special Adviser.

Quality information, health literacy and digital literacy are crucial for patients to make the most of digitalisation. This must go hand-in-hand with safeguarding patient privacy, empowering patients in a systematic way.

“We have gathered that patients are altruistic about sharing data. The key point is data security. That is a holy grail,” she said.

Against a backdrop of public concern about data privacy, it is important for governments to reassure the public that the digital transformation can improve health care while protecting patients’ privacy. “We really have to speak to the people to tell them about the benefits of digitalisation to the patient,” said Thomas Steffen, State Secretary at Germany’s Federal Ministry of Health, who also added that a systemic approach is needed, comprising three key elements: modernising institutions, ensuring adequate pace of change, and ensuring that the process of transformation is democratic.

Governments have a leading role to play in communicating the benefits of a digital transformation in health and ensuring public trust in that transition, while ensuring no one was left behind, said Pascal Strupler, Switzerland’s Secretary of State for Health.

“To make the digital transformation of our health systems a success we need the

participation of our people,” Strupler said.

“People’s health literacy can be improved, and with it their ability to take responsibility for their own health” said Ásta Valdimarsdóttir, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health, Iceland. “This must take place in close collaboration with users of the services and it is important to take into account the different needs of different groups.”

## Empowering workforce

While the health sector employs one in ten workers across the OECD, increases in productivity remain low. Digitalisation holds the promise of boosting productivity and precision, but health care workers need to know how to use data and digital tools. However, 30-70% percent of all health professionals report gaps in knowledge and skills needed for safe and effective use of digital tools, according to the OECD.

“There is a lot of inefficiency in the health system,” said Michael Green, CEO and President of Canada Health Infoway. “I think the first thing that technology can achieve is to streamline the administrative processes in health system,” he said in the second panel discussion on “Transforming the health workforce.”

Educating and training doctors, nurses, pharmacists, medical technicians and other health care workers is critical to make the most of data and digital technology, the Forum heard.



We need regulations and laws that enable people to have trust. ””

Pascal Strupler  
Secretary of State for Health, Switzerland

As our new report *Health in the 21st Century* makes clear, a true transformation will not happen without leadership, political will and bold policy reform. ””

Stefano Scarpetta  
Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, OECD







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Copenhagen, 21 November 2019

Training, skills and a new way of organising services are necessary to make the most of the transition. Automation and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) – with machines performing repetitive cognitive tasks previously performed by people – will also be key in boosting productivity and precision in health care. Across the economy, such technologies are likely to affect nearly half of all jobs in terms of tasks performed with one in seven jobs at high risk of automation.

Digital technologies, including AI, are likely to trigger significant changes in the health care sector. While the sector is less likely than many others to be automated, tasks that are repetitive, time-consuming and data heavy are likely to be automated.

However, the human touch, particularly in care for the elderly and most vulnerable, will remain at the heart of quality health systems, the Forum heard. A major benefit of AI will be freeing up time for health workers' to invest in these important interactions.

"We are very pro-digitalisation in health. There is no other way," said Judith Kiejda, New South Wales Nurses & Midwives' Association. She stressed, however, that it is paramount for the workforce to be supported and trained in using new technology.

According to Clemens Auer, Special Envoy for Health for the Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection, Austria, "The willingness of professionals to improve health outcomes need to be embraced. The cultural change is happening but the professions have to be involved along the way".

Olivia Wigzell, Director-General, National Board of Health and Welfare, Sweden, said on the final panel "The way forward" that these discussions are not really about digital technology or digitalisation, but digital transformation. Yet, current policy discussions are often around the cost of digital technology, but not around the cost and time needed to train the workforce and reorganise our systems.

## Enabling environment

**G**etting the governance right is vital to ensure that privacy is protected while also using data for public benefit.

Managing who owns, accesses and controls personal health data, including electronic health records (EHR), as well as administrative and billing data, is critical to ensuring that they would be used to improve health and welfare for all.

"We are making progress and will be making progress but not as fast as we would have wished," said Yasuhiro Suzuki, Vice-Minister for Health at the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan, in the third discussion "Using data in the public interest."

Transparency and trust are key considerations around the use of data, particularly with people wary of third parties, such as technology companies, using their data without appropriate authorisation. Establishing

trusted government e-health portals for people to view their own data is not only effective in boosting health literacy but also in improving data quality.

Ensuring patients can protect their privacy while allowing the medical world to harness the power of data is critical to unleashing the true potential of technology and AI, according to Don Rucker, National Coordinator for Health Information Technology at the US Department of Health and Human Services. “We need a computable model of consent,” he said.

“We need regulations and laws that enable people to have trust,” Pascal Strupler said in a keynote remark over lunch with Ministers and Heads of Delegation. Czech Minister of Health Adam Vojtech referred to a health data council put in place at the Czech Ministry, which brings together all stakeholders, including patient and medical organisations, to guide the government.

According to Päivi Sillanaukee, Director-General at the Finnish Department of Wellbeing and Services, “well-functioning data protection legislation combined with good practices provide a strong foundation for people to trust digitalisation.”

Governance is decisive in “allowing data to be shared in the right way at the right time with the right people”, said Effy Vayena, Professor of Bioethics at ETH Zurich.

This is critical in a world where “all data are potentially health data”, said Ilona Kickbush, Founder of the Global Health Centre, Geneva.



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Yasuhiro Suzuki,  
Vice-Minister for Health,  
Japan

# Moving forward

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**D**emonstrating the benefits of digitalisation to both patients and practitioners is necessary to make the transformation a reality, the final panel concluded in a discussion on “The way forward.” Leadership is key.

“As our new report ‘Health in the 21st Century’ makes clear, a true transformation will not happen without leadership, political will and bold policy reform,” Stefano Scarpetta, Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs at the OECD said in discussions with Ministers.

This was echoed by Lithuania’s Minister of Health, Aurelijus Veryga. “As a politician you have to believe in what you are doing. We decided we would not step back, and make digital transformation a priority,” he said. While in Kazakhstan, “the process of digital transformation started in 2005, but with many bumps along the way. However good progress has been made, by making all health information machine-readable” remarked Olzhas Abishev, the Kazakh Vice-Minister of Healthcare.

The digital transformation in health will



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Päivi Sillanaukee  
Director-General, Finnish Department of Wellbeing and Services

require vital investment said Henrique Martins, President of the Board of the Shared Services and eHealth/IT authority at Portugal's Ministry of Health.

Investing in the digital transformation is essential to ensure the sustainability of health care in the decades ahead, he said. "I think next time, we need to have this meeting with the ministers of finance," he added.

International partnerships will also be key. Tanel Kiik, Minister of Social Affairs

of Estonia, said "Collaboration across countries is essential and we also need to find ways to foster cooperation between the public sector, healthcare professionals, patients, researchers and industry."

This was reiterated by the Norwegian Minister of Health, Bent Høie, who said "We are probably not even close to fully imagine what impact digitalisation may have on our health system and patient treatment. Getting together with countries to learn from each other will be both necessary and beneficial."

