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EU-EaP, Wales,
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Encouraging the Growth of Telehealth

By Frank Lievens, Secretary, International Society for Telemedicine & eHealth (ISfTeH)

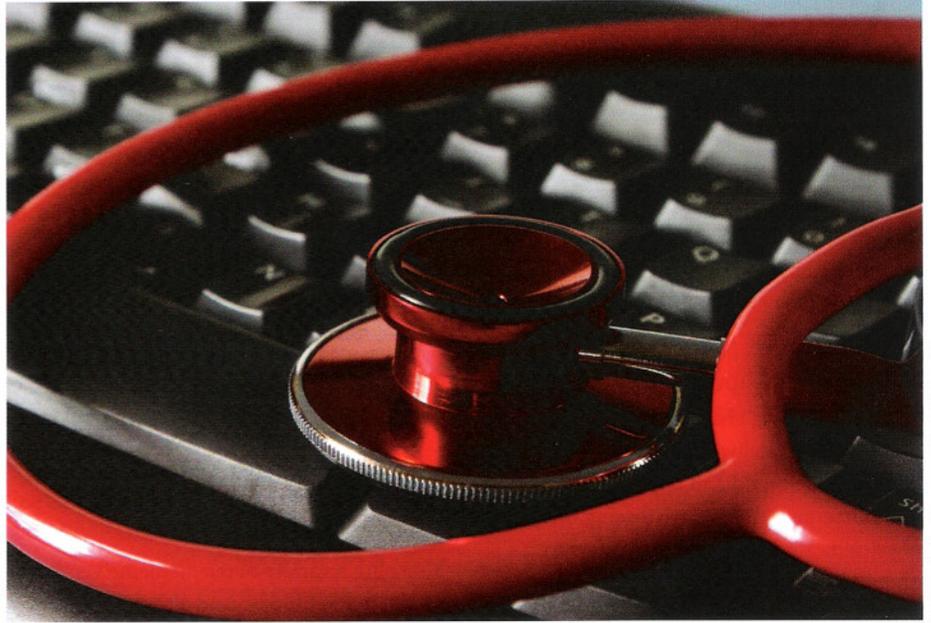
At the International Society for Telemedicine & eHealth (ISfTeH), we aim to facilitate and support the international dissemination of knowledge and experience in telemedicine and telehealth across geographical and professional boundaries, i.e. across stakeholders with different professional interests (care providers, industry representatives, policy makers, researchers and others) from different countries or regions.

We strongly believe in the potential of telemedicine and eHealth to provide equal access to quality care and to build capacity through eLearning and distance education. In developing countries, where most of these issues still require a lot of work, the Society has built up an extensive network of members and partners, and is committed to support the use of telemedicine and eHealth to meet the above goals.

In the EU, one of the main challenges ahead is the demographic evolution and the ageing of the population, the increased care needs of that population and the decreasing professional workforce to provide that care. With the ISfTeH, we are convinced about the potential of telemedicine and telehealth to cope with these challenges and to provide high quality and also cost effective alternatives to the traditional models of care. Also in Europe, the ISfTeH has established in the meantime a wide network of national member organizations, who are actively involved in the promotion of these new technologies among the different stakeholders.

The technologies are indeed readily available, but the multi- and interdisciplinary character of telemedicine/telehealth, requires a mutual understanding and a good collaboration between all players involved such as primary care physicians, specialist doctors, nurses, other care professionals, payers, industry, etc. as well as of course the patient/user. The implementation of the new technologies and solutions requires change management to come to a steady and sustainable acceptance and use of new or adapted habits, procedures and workflows.

Next to this very important 'human factor', the second important hurdle to be overcome in mainstreaming telemedicine



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and telehealth is the financial factor, i.e. who pays or gets paid for what? Healthcare systems in several countries and regions already provide coverage or reimbursement for certain specific telemedicine acts or telehealth programs. National/regional social security authorities and (mutual) insurance providers obviously can play an important role in this, but also employers, doctors' practices or local care organizations can decide to implement telemedicine because it positively affects their bottom line, while of course still providing high quality care for their employees or patients.

Amidst these and other challenges, the ISfTeH fosters networking among all afore mentioned stakeholders in order to enhance interdisciplinary working and in order to share solutions and allow organizations and individuals to benefit from experience and knowledge that has already been built up elsewhere. One of the Society's highly practical and valuable networking initiatives is its annual Med-e-Tel meeting in Luxembourg, where participants from over 50 countries around the world come together each year to present and discuss current experiences and lessons learned.

On the policy side, the ISfTeH maintains close relations with the World Health Organization (ISfTeH is recognized as an

NGO in Official Relations with WHO) and also with the European Commission, mainly through its Information Society and Health & Consumers Directorates General. And at country level, most of the national member organizations within the ISfTeH are following up on national policies and regulations.

The ISfTeH makes a point of being close to the medical and healthcare professionals. Through its Telenursing Working Group, it works closely together with the International Council of Nurses (ICN). Many of its member organizations are driven by medical professionals. It also has a Student Working Group where future care professionals, but also technology professionals, are encouraged to learn more about relevant health ICT topics. The ISfTeH also invites regular input and participation from professional federations (for instance within the frame of the Med-e-Tel conference).

The International Society for Telemedicine & eHealth is a catalyst for telemedicine and telehealth awareness, acceptance and implementation among care professionals, by sharing good practices and as such providing guidelines and service standards.

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