Establishing an evidence base for e-health: a call for papers

Antoine Geissbuhler[a] & Najeeb Al Shorbaji[b]

There are many definitions of e-health.[1] In 2001 Eysenbach defined e-health as "an emerging field in the intersection of medical informatics, public health and business, referring to health services and information delivered or enhanced through the Internet and related technologies. In a broader sense, the term characterizes not only a technical development, but also a state-of-mind, a way of thinking, an attitude, and a commitment for networked, global thinking, to improve health care locally, regionally and worldwide by using information and communication technology."[2]

The field has since evolved; the potential of e-health to help strengthen health systems and to improve the safety, quality and efficiency of care was recognized by the World Health Assembly in its resolution on e-health in 2005.[3] This has raised high expectations from all stakeholders, many of which are still unmet. New e-health solutions are continually being designed, implemented and evaluated around the world. From what evidence base, if any, are these solutions developed? Can e-health solutions truly improve health equity? What types of disparities do they minimize or exacerbate? How are health systems and their governance influenced by these e-health solutions, policies and practices?

Evidence is needed[4] to promote equity of access to information and health services, and to strengthen activities and programmes that support local, regional, national and global health communities. There is a critical need to communicate evidence and to provide examples of best practice in the development of effective and efficient solutions to major health challenges. These could include: governance and multisectoral engagement, funding systems, system architectures, information systems implementation, capacity building, and areas such as equity in health systems, strategic planning, policy and regulatory frameworks, infrastructures, human capital development and system and data interoperability.

The first objective of this theme issue of the *Bulletin* is to provide an authoritative, critical and independent overview of knowledge about the appropriate, transdisciplinary methods and applications in e-health. There have been considerable developments and experiences – social, technical and political – in the field of e-health in the past several years. This theme issue aims to provide a credible source of evidence, authored by individuals representing different parts of the world, to help inform decisions on e-health and its application. It will draw on examples from around the world of the successes of health informatics. We welcome papers for the research and systematic review sections of the *Bulletin* and encourage authors to consider contributions that document evidence of impact of e-health methods and tools. Suggested domains include: governance and management of health systems; equity of access to health care; transferable and sustainable economic models; health policy development; information sharing and interoperability to improve the quality, efficiency and continuity of care; information collection and aggregation for public health support; and health workforce development. We particularly seek papers that document experiences and lessons learnt in low-resource settings.

The second objective of this theme issue is to include contributors from developing countries who typically do not have the opportunity to publish in international journals. It is likely that significant experiences and knowledge about many e-health issues do not make it to the mainstream scientific literature, as implementers and researchers involved in these projects may lack the resources, skills and/or contacts necessary to access these international communication channels. The International Medical Informatics Association will provide quality control and mentoring to ensure that these contributors get the appropriate level of support, if required. Review papers will be commissioned to teams of authors, with a mix of internationally-recognized senior scientists and contributors who may have valid experiences and perspectives without writing practice. An important goal of this project is to develop writing capacities through a joint authorship and mentoring process.

A third objective is to disseminate the key findings of this theme issue to high-level decision-makers, to promote a stronger commitment on e-health interoperability issues and its wider application. The deadline for submissions is 20 November 2011. Manuscripts should respect the Guidelines for contributors and mention this call for papers in a covering letter. All submissions will go through the *Bulletin*'s peer review process. Please submit to: http://submit.bwho.org ∎

References

1. Oh H, Rizo C, Enkin M, Jadad A. What is e-health: a systematic review of published definitions. *J Med Internet Res* 2005;7:e1. doi:10.2196/jmir.7.1.e1 PMID:15829471
2. Eysenbach G. What is e-health? *J Med Internet Res* 2001;3:e20. doi:10.2196/jmir.3.2.e20 PMID:11720962
3. Resolution WHA58-28. eHealth. In: *Fifty-eighth World Health Assembly, Geneva, 16-25 May 2005. Resolutions and decisions.* Geneva: World Health Organization; 2005. Available from: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA58/WHA58_28-en.pdf [accessed 9 May 2011].
4. Black AD, Car J, Pagliari C, Anandan C, Cresswell K, Bokun T et al. The impact of eHealth on the quality and safety of health care: a systematic overview. *PLoS Med* 2011;8:e1000387. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000387 PMID:21267058

[a] International Medical Informatics Association, Geneva, Switzerland.
[b] Department of Knowledge Management and Sharing, World Health Organization, Avenue Appia 20, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland.
Correspondence to Najeeb Al Shorbaji (e-mail: shorbajin@who.int).