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Authors: Carlo De Pietro, Igor Francetic



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MANUSCRIPT

E-health in Switzerland: the laborious adoption of the federal law on electronic health records (EHR) and health information exchange (HIE) networks

Authors:

Carlo DE PIETRO* – carlo.depietro@supsi.ch

Igor FRANCETIC* – igor.francetic@supsi.ch

Affiliations:

* SUPSI DEASS Department of Business Economics, Health and Social Care, University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland – Via Violino 11 – CH-6928 Manno – Switzerland.

Corresponding author:

Carlo DE PIETRO

SUPSI DEASS – Via Violino 11 – CH-6928 Manno – Switzerland

Tel. +41 58 666 64 52

carlo.depietro@supsi.ch

HIGHLIGHTS

- A new law requires the adoption of electronic health records (EHRs) in Switzerland
- Introduction of EHRs is mandatory for hospitals and voluntary for other providers
- Different EHR communities comprising several providers can develop their own IT infrastructure
- Standard communication protocols assure interoperability between different EHR communities
- The reform can provide inspiration to policy makers in other countries with fragmented health systems

Abstract: Within the framework of a broader e-health strategy launched a decade ago, in 2015 Switzerland passed a new federal law on patients' electronic health records (EHR). The reform requires hospitals to adopt interoperable EHRs to facilitate data sharing and cooperation among healthcare providers, ultimately contributing to improvements in quality of care and efficiency in the health system. Adoption is voluntary for ambulatories and private practices, that may however be pushed towards EHRs by patients. The latter have complete discretion in the choice of the health information to share. Moreover, careful attention is given to data security issues. Despite good intentions, the high institutional and organisational fragmentation of the Swiss healthcare system, as well as the lack of full agreement with stakeholders on some critical points of the reform, slowed the process of adoption of the law. In particular, pilot projects made clear that the participation of ambulatories is doomed to be low unless appropriate incentives are put in place. Moreover, most stakeholders point at the strategy proposed to finance technical implementation and management of EHRs as a major drawback. After two years of intense preparatory work, the law entered into force in April 2017.

Keywords: Electronic health data; e-health; Switzerland; Policy development; Care coordination

Purpose of the policy

In June 2015 the two chambers of the Swiss Federal Parliament passed a law [1] that requires hospitals and nursing homes to adopt interoperable patients' electronic health records (EHRs) compatible with national standards, i.e. with technical rules that facilitate sharing of standardised data and the development of health information exchange (HIE) networks. The federal law is in effect since April 2017. Hospitals and nursing homes have respectively three and five years to adopt such compatible EHR systems, whilst other healthcare providers will be encouraged to voluntarily adopt interoperable EHRs and contribute to their development.

EHRs can be defined as “repository of patient data stored in a digital format” [2] containing past, current and possibly prospective data about patient, his/her health and clinical status. EHR system can

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