

**Joint Declaration of the Ministry of Health of Portugal and
the WHO Regional Office for Europe:
Intensifying collaboration on health technology to advance universal health coverage
in the WHO European Region**

“Realizing the potential of health technology as the great equalizer in health, leaving no one behind”

7 February 2023, Copenhagen, Denmark

The Ministry of Health of Portugal and the WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) share the common goal of achieving the highest level of well-being, health and health protection, in line with the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health in Europe” (EPW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The EPW builds on the WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2025, and sets out a vision of how WHO/Europe can better support countries in meeting citizens’ expectations regarding health and access to health care. It aims to step up support for WHO European Member States in moving towards universal health coverage, better protecting people against health emergencies, and ensuring healthy lives and well-being for all, at all ages.

As health systems come under unprecedented pressure, it is crucial to seize opportunities to modernize delivery of health services to better meet patients’ needs in an ageing region where health workers are increasingly in short supply. The ethical development and rational use of safe, high-quality health products and medical devices that are cost-effective can be further leveraged to contribute to health systems innovation and universal health coverage. Health technology, including robotics, carries the potential to have a net positive impact on the health of populations.

Examples of this potential include the deployment of mobile health clinics equipped with robotics and other technologies that can help bring health care services to under-served or hard-to-reach populations in remote areas, enhanced assisted living for older persons within their homes and communities, and remote telesurgery. Such technologies, if carefully deployed with attention to improving digital and health literacy amongst those most at risk of being left behind, can serve to promote equity in access to state-of-the-art health care practices.

In 1976, the new Portuguese democratic constitution established citizens’ right to health, stating that this should be achieved through the creation of a “universal, general and free-of-charge national health service”. It also established the state’s responsibility for “working towards the socialization of the costs of medical care and medicines”. Accordingly, the Portuguese National Health Service (NHS) was created in 1979 by the enactment of Law No. 56/79. Currently, the Portuguese NHS is focusing on health technology and the role it can play in transforming the health sector. The Portuguese NHS is among those with the highest levels of digitalization in the world, with a large uptake in the use of electronic records across all levels of the system. Moreover, the NHS has the potential to jumpstart entrepreneurship among a different array of stakeholders, while providing the opportunity to democratize the health gains it yields to all Portuguese citizens. Many promising technological advances

can lead to unintended consequences such as perpetuating health and health care inequalities, particularly for vulnerable groups. The NHS will also focus on addressing these unwanted consequences.

This is why the recently nominated Executive Board of the Portuguese NHS has identified investment in health technology, specifically robotics, as a core priority for the NHS over the next three years. This pledge demonstrates a strong sense of commitment towards using technology to improve health care outcomes in the long term. The Executive Board is committed to continue deepening the technological transformation of the health system, to improve its effectiveness, efficiency, safety, timeliness and people-centredness, as well as the quality and integration of care. Tightening existing bonds with WHO/Europe by focusing on the areas of health technology, health literacy and entrepreneurship is a strategic milestone in this context.

Such a milestone can be achieved through intensifying collaboration dedicated to the aforementioned areas, serving the needs of the WHO European Region where applicable, with a particular focus on providing technical assistance, support and leadership to the Member States of the Region.

Working together

Within the scope of these priorities and mutual interests, and considering the added value for the WHO European Region, its Member States, the Portuguese Ministry of Health and the NHS, we aim to work together towards establishing a WHO presence in Portugal while simultaneously preparing a new Country Cooperation Strategy (CCS) and channeling the existing resources in the current biennial collaborative agreement towards establishing this initiative.