
2nd WHO Symposium on the Future of Health Systems in a Digital Era in the European Region

Porto, Portugal

22 May 2023

5–6 September 2023

Original: English

Scope and purpose

Background

In February 2019, the WHO Regional Office for Europe hosted the inaugural WHO Symposium on the Future of Digital Health Systems in the European Region,¹ which brought together an audience of over 350 participants – including representatives of Member States, partners and key thought leaders – to discuss topics of strategic relevance to the digitalization of national health systems in the Region. A second symposium planned for February 2020 was unavoidably postponed owing to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since that time, digital transformation of health systems has continued to face significant challenges, which are impeding progress and delaying realization of benefits. These challenges include the need to:

- ensure sustainable financing and an investment rationale for digital health;
- address inequities in the design of and access to digital health solutions;
- develop digital skills and competencies among the health workforce;
- garner the trust of populations, health-care workers and politicians for use of digital health.

Recognizing the importance of coordinated action to address the digital transformation of health systems, Member States approved the Regional digital health action plan for the WHO European Region 2023–2030² at the 72nd session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in 2022. This action plan aims to support countries in leveraging and scaling up digital transformation for better health, and in aligning digital technology investment decisions with their health system needs, while fully respecting the values of equity, solidarity and human rights. It is also expected to contribute to operationalization of the WHO Global strategy on digital health 2020–2025³ by translating its strategic priorities into relevant action for the Region.

To explore these and other important issues affecting current and future health system landscapes in the WHO European Region, the Regional Office, together with the Portuguese Government, will host the **2nd WHO Symposium on the Future of Health Systems in a Digital Era in the European Region** in Porto, Portugal, on 5–6 September 2023.

¹ Future of digital health systems: report on the WHO Symposium on the Future of Digital Health Systems in the European Region: Copenhagen, Denmark, 6–8 February 2019. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/329032>, accessed 16 May 2023).

² Regional digital health action plan for the WHO European Region 2023–2030. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2022 (EUR/RC72/5; <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/360950>, accessed 16 May 2023); Leveraging digital transformation for better health in Europe: Regional digital health action plan for the WHO European Region 2023–2030. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2022 (EUR/RC72/R2; <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/362959>, accessed 16 May 2023).

³ Global strategy on digital health 2020–2025. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/344249>, accessed 16 May 2023).

Aims and objectives of the Symposium

Recent advances in the capability and use of artificial intelligence (AI) in health, and its broader implications in various professional and social contexts, have sparked widespread public debate on the extent to which technology – and, more specifically, generative AI – has the potential to infringe upon personal privacy and affect the health of populations. The trust and transformation agenda⁴ takes this thinking a step further to identify those factors that, with technology, influence the trust of different health system stakeholders. It also examines the impact this erosion of trust is having on creating sustainable and resilient health systems for the future. These, and a multitude of other health system foundations, will be examined during the 2nd WHO Symposium on the Future of Health Systems in a Digital Era to assist countries in building trust and enshrining equity in the design of digital health services. A broad range of information and activities relevant to the future development of health systems will be presented, including the launch of WHO's flagship report on *Leveraging and scaling up digital transformation for better health and resilience in the WHO European Region*, which presents new data from all 53 countries in the Region.

The Symposium will also contribute to countries' progress in digital transformation of health systems by:

- providing a platform for key subject matter experts from across the Region to present the latest thinking and practical advice on implementing safe and inclusive digital health solutions;
- offering perspectives on factors influencing the future design and development of sustainable digital health systems, with a particular focus on actions needed to develop trust in their use;
- exploring the role of data and digital health in addressing health inequities and reducing the key burden of disease in the Region;
- helping to ensure that the knowledge and actions of partners working to develop the field of digital health are leveraged and used appropriately in supporting countries;
- examining how digital health research can be better aligned to countries' needs;
- looking at the role of the health workforce in delivering digital health services, with a particular emphasis on the roles of nurses and midwives;
- reflecting on the future of digital health systems and service delivery, and the collective barriers and enablers influencing their design and development.

Outcomes of the Symposium will also contribute to framing system-wide policy recommendations to be presented at the forthcoming WHO conference on health systems in Tallinn, Estonia, later in 2023, in commemoration of the Tallinn Charter: Health Systems for Health and Wealth.⁵

Format of the Symposium

The Symposium will be hosted as a hybrid event, with some sessions made available via an online streaming service. Attendance in person is encouraged, however.

The programme of the Symposium will consist of plenary and parallel technical sessions that address topics and ideas of relevance to the digitalization of health systems. Participation in the Symposium is by invitation only. The working languages will be English and Russian.

⁴ Kluge H, Azzopardi-Muscat N, Figueras J, McKee M. Trust and transformation: an agenda for creating resilient and sustainable health systems. *BMJ*. 2023;380:651. doi:10.1136/bmj.p651.

⁵ Tallinn Charter: Health Systems for Health and Wealth. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2008 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/349648>, accessed 16 May 2023).

The Symposium will be, to the greatest extent possible, a paper-free environment. As such, the agenda, speaker details, background literature and documents will be made available to participants via a website supporting the event.