

Beat: Health

How technology can help to empower patients

Health literacy

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USPA NEWS - Patients are becoming more independent as they can monitor their own health using mobile applications, not only for monitoring serious cases such as kidney failure, but also to quit smoking, drink more water or exercise more.

On 1 July the European Parliament's Science and Technology Options Assessment (STOA) unit organised a workshop with experts to learn how new technologies can empower patients and improve health literacy.

STOA chair Paul Rübiger, an Austrian member of the EPP group, opened the workshop. "It's critical to guarantee that citizens can make decisions about their own health," he said, adding: "We have to work also on legislation to protect privacy."

Roberto Bertollini, the World Health Organization's representative to the EU, said healthcare systems should be simplified to help improve health literacy: "Even people with substantial knowledge might have difficulties in dealing with the healthcare system." Participants discussed healthcare practices such as e-health and m-health. E-health, which is endorsed by Parliament, is built around electronic devices and communication. For example, patients can access their own medical data on internet, which makes them better informed about their health and it also facilitates the communication between healthcare professionals and patients.

Marc Lange, from the European Health Telematics Association, said that e-health was about much more than just technology: "E-health is about changing the behaviour of patients and healthcare systems. The aim is to move the place of care from hospitals to homecare and even to the pockets of citizens [smartphones]." M-health stands for mobile health, a sub-section of e-health. It involves using mobile health applications for self-assessment or remote monitoring.

For example, patients with kidney failure can receive a wearable artificial kidney device, which is remotely monitored by patients on their smartphone and by medical staff. It is a fast developing field: according to the European Commission about 100,000 mHealth apps are currently available.

Closing the workshop, Karin Kadenbach, an Austrian member of the S&D group, said that it was essential to improve Europeans' health literacy: "Low health literacy has proved to have a direct impact on the management of chronic conditions, productivity levels, mortality rate and overall healthcare costs."

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