



PRESS RELEASE

Healthy ageing in the EU: The potential of digital innovation for elderly health and social care

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Today, the European Week of Regions and Cities was platform for an insightful discussion on active and healthy ageing and the potential of digitalisation for enhancing elderly health and social well-being. The conference was a flagship event within the #EURegionsWeek Health Day and organised by the Committee of the Regions' NAT Commission and Interregional Group on Health and Well-being, and DG CONNECT from European Commission, in collaboration with EUREGHA - the reference network for European Regional and Local Health Authorities - and the Province of Lugo (ES). With interventions of high-level representatives of European institutions, EU experts, and concrete examples from the field, the event emphasized digital innovation as a top theme on the EU political agenda, as demonstrated by the participation of 117 people from different regions and sectors across Europe.

“One thing is clear: ageing brings with it both challenges and opportunities. Ageing is not just a matter for older people.” Vice-President and Commissioner for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica, opened the conference, underlining: *“As a result of demographic change, the number of people who potentially need of long-term care in the European Union is projected to rise substantially. This will lead to a drastic increase in demand for long-term care services. We are aware of the need to balance more investment in long-term care and social services by prioritising technology and community-based care. The idea is to use demographic change as the spark for creating new developments”.*

Digitalisation has the potential to improve effectiveness and efficiency in health care, but can also introduce new risks, such as amplifying existing inequalities. Jarosław Duda, member of the European Parliament, pointed out: *“Innovation and technological progress make lives easier – but only when designed properly. The age-related mobility deterioration, lack of access to equipment and low e-literacy lead to marginalisation and exclusion of many older people. They can be effectively excluded when the new solutions are introduced without a thought for their needs or abilities. Older citizens must be part of decision-making processes.”*

Strong political commitment is key to foster sustainable digitalisation at scale through a person-centred and community-based approach. Regional and local authorities are often at the forefront, as - in 19 out of 27 Member States - they share strong responsibilities with central governments. Birgitta Sacrédeus, Chair of the CoR Interregional Group on Health and Well-Being stressed their key role: *“Local and regional authorities should embrace the opportunities of digitalisation to transform healthcare systems. By investing in the silver economy sector, supporting innovative assisted living solutions, and promoting self-care and digital health expansion, local and regional authorities can turn the ‘demographic tsunami’ into a real opportunity”.*

There is a clear need for partnerships where we harness collective skills and capacity within public services and those of industry, academia, and the wider public. As IN-4-AHA Project Manager, Piret Hirv said, *“we know the technologies are there. What we need is scalability and collaboration.”* Marco Marsella, Head of Unit ‘eHealth, Wellbeing and Ageing’ at DG CONNECT, affirmed: *“Collaborations between regions with similar characteristics is a good practice to support adoption of new technologies. Exchanging knowledge is key”.*

In a context marked by recovery and the new EU MFF, the spotlight is on how states and regions invest resources in digital transition to improve elderly health and well-being. *“The European Commission through the Technical Support Instrument is working and committed to continue facilitating national and regional*

reforms for improving accessibility and quality of primary and long-term care”, according to Raluca Painter, Head of Unit ‘Labour Market, Education, Health, and Social Services’ at DG REFORM.

Giovanni Gorgoni, Chair of EUREGHA, concluded the session with a summarising thought: *“We need to bring the digital transition and digital healthcare processes out of hospitals and traditional healthcare centres, towards where the lives elderly people take place; their own homes, communities and towns. We need new skills, new professions, and also new ways of procurement”.*

The points that emerged from the conference carry even more meaning considering that, on the same morning, the European Health Ministers informally met at the Brdo Congress Centre to reaffirm the importance of investing in innovative solutions to build a strong European Health Union. Through a multilevel and constructive dialogue, the European Week of Regions and Cities enriches this effort and encourages reflections on how to anticipate and deal with opportunities for this and future generations.