Switzerland in need of an eHealth strategy

Against all our expectations, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in Swiss healthcare is still oriented towards the continuation of traditional business models. Instead of striving for complexity management and harvesting results of knowledge management for the benefit of all the stakeholders in healthcare, efforts are focused on "cream skimming" at the end of the value chain. Resources are invested into retrospective cost analysis of the expenses incurred already, and are thus unavailable for clinical decision support at the point of care delivery, giving away all chances of a bottom-up steering and optimizing of medical processes and risk management.

After the eHype collapse, service oriented industries with typically high information intensity and need for process optimization, discreetly and rapidly began to merge "e" with their traditional business models, thus generating real added value. However, in healthcare which represents the biggest industry in western countries, the use of obsolete technology prevails as well in supportive processes as particularly in medical core processes. Discontinuity of processes, redundancy and lack of coordination do generate unacceptable risks and costs from an economic point of view as well as from a medical and ethical one.

"eHealth" is synonymous with the integration of ICT into healthcare. As a strategic concept, it targets to the impact of ICT on the communication and organisation of healthcare systems. eHealth applies experiences and solutions from other industries to develop enhanced business processes. The aim of eHealth lies in the improvement of efficiency and quality, the fundamental approach is change management in healthcare by use of up-to-date instruments. The upcoming change will also contribute to the development of health professionals' culture. This challenge may be perceived as a threat or as an opportunity.

The prerequisite for any successful change, in healthcare too, is the development of a strategy. Discussions about the use of technology in healthcare only make sense if a shared vision about the shape of this future healthcare system has been attained. Technology is nothing more than a means to this end. Thus, we should withstand seductive but futile technology driven approaches, being able to appraise ICT as a carrier who may convey varying objectives according to the social, cultural and political context within different healthcare systems. The fate of any strategy lies in the expressed commitment by top decision makers. Their unambiguous commitment is crucial, including courageous investment and allocation of resources.

With the present edition of Swiss Medical Informatics, the Swiss Society for Medical Informatics gives a contribution to gain insight into national strategies within the EU. As Switzerland could learn from eHealth strategies in the EU, the reverse process may also be conceivable. In view of the challenges due to enlarging Europe, the Swiss model of developing a national eHealth strategy on its background of federalistic heterogeneity and organisational diversities may be a source of helpful mutual exchange. The Swiss Society for Medical Informatics will encourage any cross-border and transboundary collaboration.