Ministerial Declaration
Brussels, 22 May 2003

Ministers of EU Member States, Acceding and Associated countries, as well as EFTA countries met on 22nd May 2003 in the framework of the *e*Health 2003 conference organised jointly by the European Commission and the Greek Presidency of the Council.

*e*Health refers to the use of modern information and communication technologies to meet needs of citizens, patients, healthcare professionals, healthcare providers, as well as policy makers.

On this occasion, Ministers expressed their commitment to the development of national and regional *e*Health implementation plans as an integral part of *e*Europe 2005. Ministers declared their willingness to work together towards best practices in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as tools for enhancing health promotion and health protection, as well as quality, accessibility and efficiency in all aspects of health care delivery.

Ministers welcomed the eHealth Conference initiative of the Greek Presidency working in close collaboration with both the public health and information society directorates of the European Commission.

Promoting quality of and enhancing efficiency in health care through eHealth applications

The ministers recognised that efficient national planning and evaluation of health policy, as well as cost effective delivery of health care, require speedy, accurate and comprehensive exchange of data.

Ministers noted that the accessibility to appropriate health information can be enhanced through the use of secure shared eHealth applications, such as those described in the objectives of the eEurope 2005 Action Plan[1], and agreed in the Council's Resolution[2] of 18 February 2003 on the implementation of the eEurope 2005 Action Plan.

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[1] COM (2002) 263
[2] OJ: C 048, 28/02/2003, p.2-9

Ministers reiterated their commitment to the developing of an information system for the early warning, detection and surveillance of health threats, both on communicable diseases and on non-communicable diseases.

The ministers acknowledged that eHealth applications can enhance efficiency and bring added value to health care by avoiding duplicate or unnecessary diagnostic or therapeutic interventions, by supporting the continuity of care, by improving communication between healthcare establishments and by widening access to health knowledge and evidence-based medicine.

Ministers welcomed the initiative on the European Health Insurance Card announced at the Barcelona Council[3] and endorsed by the Seville Council as part of the eEurope 2005 Action Plan. Ministers encouraged the Commission to explore further initiatives in developing European Electronic Health Cards also taking into account the recent Communication from the Commission (COM (2003)73) on the European Health Insurance Card.

Facilitating citizen involvement through access to high quality information

The ministers shared the view that citizens' needs must be at the centre of attention in the development of high quality health related information services. Ministers noted the potential for citizen empowerment through widespread availability of high quality appropriate health information on the internet. Ministers welcomed the Commission Communication on Quality Criteria for Health related Websites[4] and encouraged the Commission to explore the possibilities of EU level Quality Seals.[5]

The ministers expressed concern about the possible exclusion of sectors in society that do not enjoy easy access to the internet. Ministers acknowledged the need to widen the provision of public access points to the internet to facilitate wide citizen accessibility to appropriate health related information. Ministers noted that such access points and publicly supported health related websites should comply with guidelines on Web Accessibility[6].

Implementing and sharing best practices of eHealth

Ministers agreed to share experiences on the utilisation, efficiency and impact of eHealth applications, and to assist the Commission in further dissemination of information on best eHealth practices.

Ministers supported concerted actions to address particularly the development of standards enabling interoperability of diverse systems and services and to especially explore the possibilities of open source applications for achieving this objective.

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[3] Communication from the Commission concerning the introduction of a European health insurance card, COM (2003)73 final, 17 February 2003
[4] COM (2002) 667 final
[5] Decision N° 1786/2002/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 23 September 2002 adopting a programme of Community action in the field of public health (2003-2008) - Commission
[6] Communication from the Commission concerning eEurope 2002: Accessibility of Public Web Sites and their Content COM (2001) 529, 25 September 2001

Ministers took note of the best practices in the utilisation of *e*Health technologies identified and presented at the conference and agreed to explore further how best to use them within their countries, across Europe and internationally. Ministers invited the Commission to further refine and develop assessment methodologies for *e*Health ICT applications.

Looking to the future

The ministers recognised that full exploitation of eHealth goes beyond local information systems and Internet based provision of information to integrated or linked eHealth systems, that serve the needs of citizens, patients, healthcare professionals, health service providers as well as policy makers.

Ministers welcomed the Commission's initiative to explore the possibilities to promote co-ordination at a European level, in order to meet the targets and objectives laid down in the eEurope 2005 Action Plan and the Programme of Community Action in the Field of Public Health (2003-2008), and liasing with other Community initiatives as appropriate.

Ministers encouraged Member States, Acceding and Associated countries as well as EFTA countries, to take, as appropriate, effective legislative, executive, administrative and other measures, to promote the adoption and use of eHealth applications.

Ministers noted that the full exploitation of the benefits of eHealth technologies requires continued commitment to the development and use of a robust, secure and interoperable infrastructure, as well as to wide availability and use of broadband communications to maximise the efficiency of eHealth systems and applications.

Ministers acknowledged the importance of continued commitment to the implementation of eHealth applications, as agreed to by the Heads of State through the eEurope 2002 Action Plan and noted that benchmarking of such implementation will be carried out under the eEurope 2005 Action Plan.

Ministers encouraged the continued investment in research and technological development[7], ensuring steady advancement of European eHealth technology applications that meet European demands for confidentiality[8], data security and interoperability.

Ministers noted the successful collaboration on issues related to eHealth with the World Health Organisation, the Council of Europe and the OECD and encouraged its further continuation.

Ministers welcomed the initiative of the Irish Government to take stock of further eHealth developments at the second eHealth Conference in 2004.

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[7] Comm (2002) 499 more research for Europe towards 3% of GDP
[8] Directive 95/46/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 October 1995 on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (OJ: L 281, 23/11/1995, p.31-50)