



European Economic and Social Committee

Welcome address by Vice-President **Irini Ivoni Pari** to the

eHealth Anniversary Symposium

"Joining for Visions of Person-Centred Health"

Brussels, 21 October 2009

Distinguished guests,

dear fellow members, colleagues,

ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you today on behalf of our Committee. I am particularly glad that we have co-organised this conference with EHTEL, a civil society organisation and, therefore, one of our natural partners in Europe. In case there is anyone amongst you who does not know, let me tell you that EHTEL, the European Health Telematics Association is representing more than 200 key organisations and individuals in this field and is, in fact, celebrating today its 10th anniversary – so, congratulations and many happy returns!

This is **the right place** for today's debate: To build such a long-term vision, debate should be as wide as possible aiming at broad consensus. Our Committee, in its several opinions on the rapid growth and use of electronic communications and the internet, has systematically advocated the involvement of social and economic partners in the respective efforts. And we have always encouraged our institutional partners within the EU, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council, to do more, and to work faster when it comes to tackling these issues.

We are 344 men and women, from all the 27 Member States, speaking in 22 different languages and writing in three alphabets. We represent businessmen and employees, consumers and environmentalists, crafts and trade unions, farmers and parents, cooperatives and non-governmental – in short, the entire civil society from across the EU. We are not politicians, neither decision-makers nor bureaucrats, but we all have experience at grassroots' level and different points of view. We sit together and, out of all these different points of view and the sometimes controversial interests, we build consensus through intensive dialogue on the general interest and make specific and independent proposals to the European decision makers – the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. So, for more than **50 years**, our Committee can be viewed as **THE BRIDGE** between the EU institutions and the organised civil society in Europe. And in this competence, we are here to assist your efforts with our expertise and by building consensus.

This conference is dealing with a critical and sensitive matter - healthcare and its future. Healthcare is critical as it deals with our most precious gift, life itself! It is a sensitive social policy concern, but also a major financial domain and a thorny political issue as shown by the on-going debate in the United States. Recent developments, such as population ageing in Western societies and rising healthcare costs, have brought healthcare and its future to the forefront of social, political and economic debate.

Today and tomorrow **you**, the specialists on these issues, will discuss the future of healthcare provision in particular combined with the rapid developments in modern telecommunication technologies. I believe that this debate is taking place at the right place, at the right time and with the right people to discuss what lies ahead in this crucial domain.

I am also convinced this is the **right time** because

- 1) the EESC has recently adopted its opinion on the subject,
- 2) EHTEL is celebrating its 10 years milestone calling stakeholders to join forces in preparing our e-health vision for the future and
- 3) you will be discussing visions of tomorrow and from visions to actions.. Well, it is today that we have to act for tomorrow. Aging population, 60 mio people, will need health care.

This Committee adopted last July an opinion on Telemedicine which was drafted by our distinguished colleague, Mr Bouis, who will present it to you later today in more detail.

Indeed, there is a lot of potential in e-health and telemedicine, for both patients and health professionals. For example, it can improve access to specialised care in areas suffering from a shortage of expertise or in areas where access to healthcare is difficult. It can also contribute significantly to our recovering economy, since many European businesses, notably small and medium-sized ones, are well placed in this rapidly expanding sector.

However, despite the potential benefits of telemedicine and the technical maturity of its applications, it appears that the use of its services is still limited and its market highly fragmented. We all know that technology alone is not panacea and that the deployment of new technological applications does not suffice. As underlined in our recently adopted opinion, telemedicine cannot and should not replace conventional medicine, but should be viewed as a complementary technique, compliant to the same rights and obligations attached to any medical act. In such a context, more action is needed 1) to increase legal clarity, 2) to address the remaining technical issues 3) to facilitate market development and 4) to build confidence in and acceptance of telemedicine services. Building the confidence of both health professionals and the general public in new telemedicine applications is also important, so training programmes, information campaigns and awareness activities are vital. Moreover, in general but more so in the health area, technology must be friendly to all users involved, from physicians to patients and from financial agents to nursing staff.

Furthermore, Ms Viviane Reding, the current Commissioner for Information Society and Media recently pointed to e-health as both a success story in the on-going European Research Programme and a top priority for the next e-Europe Strategy.

At this point, in light also of the current economic difficulties, I would like to underline that a long-term vision in this area should not only focus on rapid returns-on-investment, but aim at the most efficient use of resources to ensure the best possible quality level. Nevertheless, pressing necessities such as the need to circumscribe public finances or the growing number of elderly persons and patients in need of chronic care, may drive developments in a faster than expected manner. In this context, therefore, please allow me to highlight two issues:

- First, in this as in other fields, we should avoid reinventing the wheel. In this particular area, we believe that focus should be on the interface between the healthcare system on the one hand and the patient / consumer on the other in order to improve the delivery of services; and

- Second, it is necessary to improve not only the effectiveness but also the **efficiency** of these systems. The development of a suitable methodology and an appropriate indicator to monitor the "best-value-for-money" e-Health applications across Europe would possibly help in this respect.

In short, e-health and telemedicine offer significant **opportunities**, but they also raise important **challenges**.

And you are the right people to discuss this issue. We welcome representatives from the European Commission, the welfare and medical communities, the Information and Communication Technology industry, the academic and researcher communities, as well as prominent NGOs and other stakeholders in this field. We are eagerly looking forward to YOUR contribution in this discussion!

Ladies and gentlemen,

With today's event, we -the European Economic and Social Committee- wish to confirm our commitment in promoting the social dialogue on e-health and its future. I would like to **congratulate** the TEN Section and its Secretariat, as well as EHTEL, in particular its Secretary General, for the immense effort they have put in successfully organising this conference.

I am wishing you all a fruitful and constructive participation and I sincerely hope that today's deliberations will also be **valuable to you and your organisations and our society**. I am looking forward to a lively debate and a fruitful conclusion since this is how our Committee will have fulfilled its role in the best possible manner. I will be following the results of this event, and you always can count on **my personal support** in your efforts in this field!

Thank you for your attention.