Digitalizing Switzerland's Healthcare

By introducing electronic health records in Switzerland, Swiss Post is assuming a key role as a provider of digital infrastructure and services. The company relies on the eHealth solutions offered by ITH icoserve, a subsidiary of Siemens Healthineers. Martin Fuchs, Head of Digital Health at Swiss Post, talked about the developments in Switzerland and the collaboration with Siemens Healthineers.

Text: Mark Berninger | Photos: Post CH AG

Which services is Swiss Post offering in connection with the introduction of the EHR?

Martin Fuchs: We are committed to transporting health information securely and confidentially between all actors involved in healthcare throughout Switzerland. We provide the necessary infrastructure on the basis of the IHE standard required by law to the core communities which offer EHRs. In addition, we offer process support and special eHealth services to effectively implement the EHRs.

Why did Swiss Post choose Siemens Healthineers as its technology partner for this project?

Fuchs: We chose Siemens Healthineers as our technology partner because it had already run several eHealth projects successfully in other countries. The software is also very mature and the company has a clear strategic focus on a standards-based platform. Since we'll be offering a running, certified system by April 2020, it was very convenient that we could build on the experience that Siemens Healthineers had gathered with Austria's electronic health record, the ELGA, which is designed very similarly to ours.

How does the collaboration with Siemens Healthineers work?

Fuchs: From the outset, we jointly presented to our customers, the core communities. People have a high degree of trust in Swiss Post when it comes to reliability and handling sensitive information. In addition, our customers value Siemens Healthineers for its extensive experience in realizing such projects, its focus on solutions, and its knowledge of the specific standards that need to be implemented.

How is Switzerland financing the introduction of the EHR?

Fuchs: The financing varies a great deal between the various core communities. In some cases, the canton is paying for it using tax revenues. In others, it's financed via membership fees that should eventually pay off. For the start-up phase, the communities also receive subsidies from the national and cantonal governments. The major benefit of the EHR is that it provides patients and medical professionals with easy access to health information and allows them to share it easily.

Electronic Health Records: An overview
In April 2017, Switzerland introduced a law requiring electronic health records (EHRs) to be rolled out nationwide by 2020. The aim is to improve the quality of medical care, enhance treatment processes, increase patient safety, make the healthcare system more efficient, and encourage health literacy among patients. These electronic health records will allow patients to decide who can access their data. The principle of double voluntary action also applies – in other words, patients are just as free to decide whether or not to use the records as private practice physicians and pharmacists are. However, hospitals as well as rehab centers and psychiatric units on cantonal hospital lists will be obliged to participate in the scheme from 2020. The law will apply to retirement and care homes from 2022. To ensure that patients can move around the country and that service providers can access their health records from anywhere, Switzerland's cantons and hospitals have formed *Stammgemeinschaften*, or "core communities," which store data locally and organize information sharing via IHE profiles.

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Aside from the feasibility of technical interoperability on the basis of the IHE standard, which insights from the process so far do you think are interesting for the situation in other countries?

Fuchs: Probably the biggest difference is that Switzerland is taking a top-down approach. Service providers are legally obliged to participate in the EHR. We also have a clear timetable, and sanctions will be imposed if the goals aren't met.

What are the next steps on the road to EHR introduction?

Fuchs: There's still a great deal to do. One key milestone is the technical certification, and a few details still need to be clarified – such as how patients enter the core community of their choice. However, thanks to our Siemens Healthineers-supported platform, we'll be able to provide the core communities with a certifiable solution for the EHR and a wide range of value-added services by the end of 2019.