



The chair of the European Connected Health Alliance (ECHAlliance), Brian O'Connor, tells Pan European Networks what's needed to realise Estonia's vision of a Digital Health Society

# Making health digital

**E**stonia has a proud reputation as one of the world's leading digital nations, so it is no surprise that the country's first ever presidency of the Council of the European Union has been hailed by many as the 'digital presidency'. From food production and space exploration to transport and security, Estonia is committed to realising the power of digital for the benefit of all Europeans, and to this end has named the ECHAlliance its international strategic partner in developing a Digital Health Society (DHS).

The ECHAlliance is a non-profit organisation working to deliver innovative solutions around all things e- and m-health. It does this by connecting its more than 600 members across an international network of ecosystems – permanent multi-stakeholder groups committed to working together on a regular basis to improve health and wellbeing, boost growth and jobs creation, and drive sustainable change in the health and social care system.

As part of its role within the Estonian presidency, the ECHAlliance has been working alongside key EU stakeholders to produce the DHS Declaration, which was officially launched in October. The manifesto sets out the benefits of digital technologies for citizens and patients, health and social care providers, research, business, and government and policymakers, among them patient-centric interventions, more efficient service provision, and the potential to create truly innovative and disruptive start-ups. It also outlines the barriers to deploying digital health solutions – including a lack of interoperability, confidence, innovation in funding models, and training for institutions, healthcare provider, and professionals – and makes recommendations at EU and member state level to overcome them. Designed to support the work of the European Commission in the framework of the Digital Single Market Strategy, the DHS Declaration is expected to become an important resource in future discussions about the digitalisation of healthcare systems.

Pan European Networks spoke to ECHAlliance chair Brian O'Connor to find out more.



Brian O'Connor

**How far are European healthcare systems equipped to successfully adjust to the implementation of digital technologies? How can the EU and member states better support this adaption?**

Some are really well equipped but others are lagging behind. There are outstanding examples to follow and emulate, but of course there are many factors involved, including individual member state digital health policies, where they exist. The other issue is of course budget, or rather the lack of budget.

**The free flow of health data within the EU is a necessary precondition of digital health innovation – what are some of the main barriers to achieving this?**

Culture within health systems is a major obstacle, though in some countries this is easing. The Digital Single Market review and the listing of the benefits of embracing digital are beginning to penetrate minds but at a slower pace than is required.

**How can digital technologies be seen as a driver of not just sustainable healthcare systems, but of innovation and economic development?**

There are more and more examples of success in these areas and communicating those successes plays a major role in convincing others to follow these examples. People need to see to believe, and we present examples from our network to speed this process. Catalonia, Finland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Galicia are all positive examples to follow.

**How will the DHS Declaration contribute to the development and realisation of a true Digital Health Society?**

The declaration on its own could easily be just another good paper to read. The Estonian EU presidency appointed the ECHAlliance to ensure that the good intentions in the declaration are turned into real actions, so the focus is on *doing* and *doers* rather than talkers.

**The ECHAlliance ecosystems are permanent multi-stakeholder groups committed to working together on a regular basis to improve the general health and wellbeing status of all citizens**





The initial four taskforces have over the summer of 2017 worked hard to produce concrete actions which can be used by member states and regions to accelerate implementation and deployments. These outputs were published in the declaration and announced at eHealth Tallinn on 16-18 October.

**What challenges have you experienced in bringing together the various stakeholders involved in digital health? Has it been difficult to ensure all of their views have been sufficiently represented?**

It is always difficult to obtain the views of the complex world of digital health, partly because it is a multi-stakeholder environment often made up of competitors – and I don't just mean in the industry sector. There are those who are only interested in their own region or city, who think they know everything and refuse to lift their eyes to learn; there are others who are in crisis locally and don't have the means or time to engage. However, the ECHAlliance has over the past six years succeeded in breaking down the silos by persuasion and exposure to successes and has a community of doers who are hungry to learn and share.

**More widely, what role does the ECHAlliance and its ecosystems play in the digital health transformation?**

We are seen as the global connector: we have a proven ability to connect academia, industry,

**The ECHAlliance works to drive sustainable change in the health and social care system**

governments and policy makers, hospital groups, health insurance companies, economic development agencies, venture capital, etc. We have an Ecosystem Network which, across Europe, holds over 100 meetings a year, building communities, relationships and trust, and communicating successes and failures.

Through this intelligence network we have identified specific opportunities which have helped our members to solve local problems and to share those experiences with the rest of our network.

We have also developed sister alliances in the US, Canada and China, and those connections add effectiveness and value to our members.

**About Brian O'Connor**

After growing up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Brian O'Connor developed his career as a consultant, manager and investor. He has worked in the UK, US and Hong Kong and has vast experience as a company director in a variety of industries and professions. He has raised significant sums for companies through both private equity and structures and exchange listings. Through his long-established consultancy company, Corporate Direction Ltd, he is currently providing strategic advice to governments, international organisations and companies on the challenges facing healthcare in general and specifically on the Connected Health opportunity.



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