Health for all in the digital age

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At the United Nations High-Level Meeting on universal health coverage (UHC) in 2019, world leaders reaffirmed their Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) commitment to extend Universal Health Coverage (UHC) to everyone by 2030. UHC means that all people have access to quality health services, when and where they need them, without financial hardship. It includes the full range of essential health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care.

Whilst most countries have expanded access to health services and coverage of key interventions over the last two decades, on current trends many countries— particularly low and middle income countries (LMICs)— will not meet the goal of UHC by 2030.

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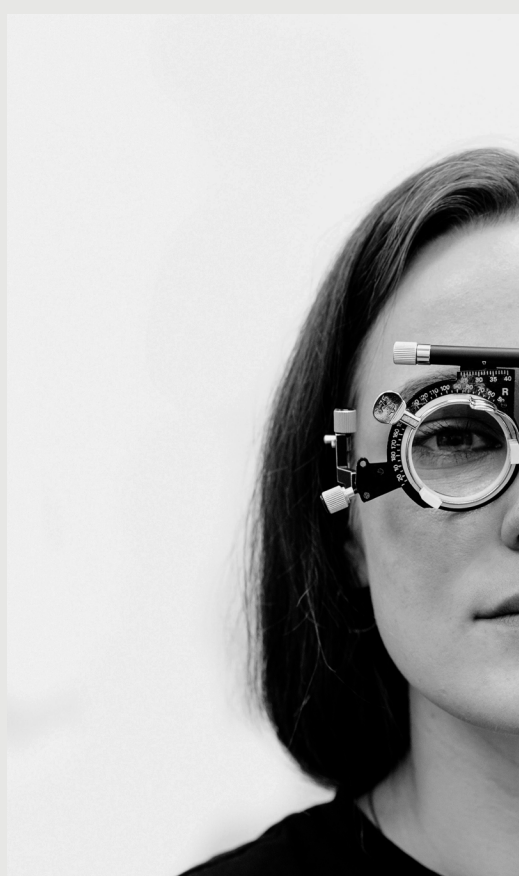
The successful application of digital technologies to health depends on the right technology and and effective governance which will ensure a supportive enabling environment that includes: high level political support; policies, legislation and regulation to build trust and guide the use of technologies and data; adequate levels of funding; health workforce capacity building, training and support; effective and integrated management structures, and an incentive system for staff to adopt and use digital tools; and oversight and accountability mechanisms.

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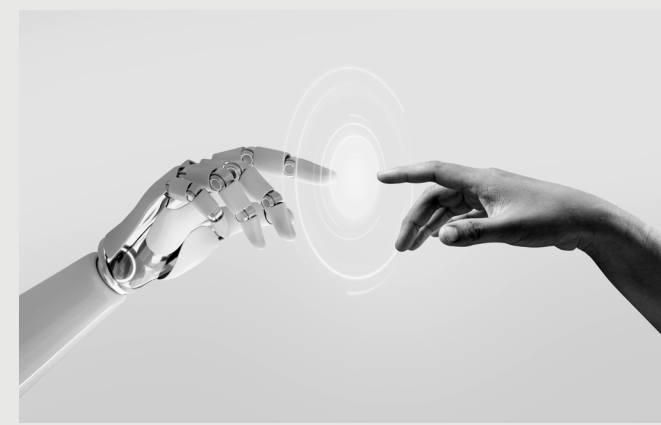
Bridging the technical-political divide

Developing an enabling environment for the digital transformation of health requires sustained collaboration between technical experts, governments, research institutions, civil society organisations and patients groups and communities in order to build systems that respond to everyone's needs.

To achieve this we need to move out of technical and corporate silos and ensure greater leadership and digital transformation becomes a government priority. The surest way to ensure this is by building up public understanding and support for the vital contribution digital technology can make to all our health, if applied correctly.

Digital Health Week is a global week of action that aims to put digital health on the public and political agenda. It is a moment for us all to come together to build partnerships, share our digital health successes and challenges, and chart a roadmap towards achieving health for all.

Digital and data governance

Data governance defines how health data is collected, stored, used and disposed and how improved decision-making should be operationalized.

As health systems and other parts of our lives have become increasingly digital, volumes of health data continue to expand, such as insurance claims, physician notes, medical records, medical images, pharmaceutical R&D, conversations about health in social media, and information from wearables and other monitoring devices. Data governance defines how this health data is collected, stored, used and disposed and how improved decision-making should be operationalized. In a digital world, this is closely linked with digital governance to regulate the development and use of digital health tools and technologies.

However, national, regional and global rules to govern the use of digital health technologies and health data have not kept pace with their growing potential to support better and more equitable health and wellbeing, and help accelerate UHC progress, nor the potential harms arising from data misuse. The COVID-19 pandemic has further demonstrated the value of sharing health data within and across borders. At the same time, misinformation and cases of health data being used for political and commercial gains have highlighted the need to build public trust in data systems and safeguard personal data.

A comprehensive global framework on health data governance – based on principles of protecting people; promoting health value; and prioritising equity – would guide countries towards a common vision of health data collection and use that maximises public benefit within and across borders, whilst safeguarding individual rights.

Why we need a global health data governance framework now

Although some countries have developed health data governance policies and legislation, there are no common standards that can be applied across countries or regions. This creates regulatory hurdles for researchers and health planners, and also creates lack of clarity among individuals travelling across countries and jurisdictions who may not know how their health related data is being used.

Current regulatory frameworks on health data governance rarely consider equity and the full spectrum of human rights, or take a comprehensive view of health and wellbeing, thus failing to ensure that the best possible health value is created through data and digitalisation. A comprehensive global framework on health data governance – based on principles of protecting people; promoting health value; and prioritising equity – would guide countries towards a common vision of health data collection and use that maximises public benefit within and across borders, whilst safeguarding individual rights. Such a framework must be grounded in core equity and human-rights principles.

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