


Chapter 6

Using Digital Tools to Improve Policy Making and Citizens' Decisions in Healthcare

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ABSTRACT

Several studies report an overall critical judgement to the Portuguese health system by national citizens, who focus not only on the increased costs associated with healthcare, waiting lists for appointments, and waiting times for emergency services, but also on the lack of appropriate tools and means that can help them to make more informed decisions concerning healthcare. This chapter aims to explore and test the potential development of a digital tool capable of offering accurate, updated, and extended information on care providers and services as well as access to care facilities. Overall, this application is perceived as useful in conveying a wider knowledge of healthcare options that may not only foster more informed and rational choices, but also help policymakers to understand the main factors underlying citizens' choices of healthcare providers.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6701-2.ch006

INTRODUCTION

The Health sector comprises an aggregate of services in which each citizen has had an experience and formulated a value judgment. In Portugal, this judgement is often unfavourable, targeting increased costs associated with healthcare, waiting lists for appointments or diagnostic tests and, also, waiting times for emergency services (Santinha, 2016a). From a geographic perspective, the urban/rural dichotomy stands as a key issue in such judgement, as the challenges that rural residents face in accessing healthcare services may contribute to health disparities (Santinha, 2016b). These perceived flaws, among others, appear to reflect a structural gap derived from not placing the citizen at the centre of the system, i.e., seeking to respond efficiently to their needs, satisfaction and expectations as an individual and community member.

From this perspective, mobile health has become relevant from a legal and public policy point of view (see, WHO, 2011; European Commission, 2012). In e-health Action Plan 2012–2020, the European Commission (2012) explicitly mentions that, “e-health – when applied effectively – delivers more personalized ‘citizen-centric’ healthcare, which is more targeted, effective and efficient and helps reduce errors, as well as the length of hospitalization (...) Empower patients through greater transparency, access to services and information and the use of social media for health”.

In this chapter, it is argued the need to empower citizens, independently of where they live or work, with appropriate tools and means that can support healthcare-related decision-making. Anchored on an ever-growing digital participation, these tools also allow for the scrutiny of the care provided, hence informing not only individual future choices but also those of a wider community of online users. More specifically, our goal is to test the potential development of an interactive digital tool to provide citizens with accurate, updated and extended information on care providers and general access, in medical scheduled appointments or emergencies. In order to collect the technical and functional requirements for this application, semi structured interviews were conducted with several specialists. Their insights were fundamental for the design of a prototype, which was further tested and validated with potential users through a focus group.

Health apps have the potential to improve community health, prevent disease and promote healthy lifestyles in an economical and efficient way, and thus build an important pillar of Public eHealth (Naszay, Stockinger, Jungwirth, & Haluza, 2018). As such, this chapter emphasizes the advantages of the afore-mentioned application and its potential in contributing to health-care decision-making. It may be particularly useful in contexts with a lower density of healthcare services, as is the case of rural settings, as well as in non-familiar or unknown contexts. Accordingly, it can become a valuable tool both for national and worldwide citizens that are visiting Portugal.

The remainder of the chapter is as follows. The next section provides a brief background on how digital tools are being delivered in the Portuguese healthcare sector in order to increase transparency and credibility of information for patients. Section 3 describes the context of the empirical study and section 4 displays the results achieved regarding the experts' interviews, the prototype construction and the focus group conducted at the end of the process. The final section presents some final remarks on the research findings.

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