

OnHOME Alliance event at the European Parliament on digital health solutions to improve medicine accessibility across Europe

European Parliament, Brussels, 20 March 2025

Introduction

On 20 March 2025, the [Online Order and Home Delivery of Medicines Alliance \(OnHOME\)](#) co-organised an event at the European Parliament with MEP Kristian Vigenin (S&D, Bulgaria). The event, “Equitable Access to Medicines Across Europe: The Role of Digital Solutions”, convened a diverse group of stakeholders to discuss the transformative potential of digital health technologies in ensuring equitable access to medicines and mitigate medicine shortages.

While Europe has made significant strides in healthcare, disparities in the availability and affordability of medicines remain, particularly for vulnerable populations and those in remote or rural areas. These inequities highlight the urgent need for innovative solutions to close the access gap. The speakers explored how digital tools, for example electronic patient records, e-prescriptions or physical pharmacies offering complementary online services, can significantly improve equitable access for patients, particularly chronically ill patients or those living in rural and underserved areas, as well as visibility on available stock both in-country and across borders.

Opening speech

MEP Kristian Vigenin (S&D, Bulgaria) opened the event by highlighting the crucial role of digitalisation in healthcare, emphasising the need for digital tools to improve efficiency and healthcare outcomes for patients across Europe. He shared Bulgaria’s progress with the National Health Information System (NHIS), which has registered over 345 million health records and streamlined processes such as e-referrals and e-prescriptions. Despite these advances, Bulgaria faces challenges such as medicine shortages and lack of pharmacies in rural areas, affecting over 50,000 people. MEP Vigenin (S&D, Bulgaria) stressed that these issues are pan-European and, thus, called for better cross-border collaboration, investment in digital infrastructure, and support for EU legislation like the [European Health Data Space \(EHDS\)](#). He concluded by advocating for a long-term strategy to train healthcare professionals, promote public-private partnerships, and ensure digital healthcare will improve access to medicines for all Europeans.

Keynote speech and presentation

Zlatimira Dobreva, Counsellor (Health), Permanent Representation of the Republic of Bulgaria to the EU presented Bulgaria’s progress in digitalisation of its healthcare system, emphasising that the country is not lagging behind but actively expanding and future-proofing its system. She highlighted

the successful implementation of electronic patient records, e-prescriptions, and vaccine tracking systems, which have already improved healthcare accessibility and efficiency. Bulgarian patients can now access mobile health data, receive medication reminders, and benefit from tailored healthcare advice, while healthcare professionals, including GPs and specialists, can safely and securely access patient records. Overall, she underscored that while digitalisation offers valuable complementary tools, it should enrich patient options rather than limit them, and careful impact assessments must be conducted before implementing new digital tools. She also pointed to AI-driven innovations, which have the potential to support both medical professionals and patients but cautioned that digital solutions should never replace the human aspect of healthcare.

Key highlights from panel discussions

A panel discussion, moderated by Petra Wilson, provided further insights on the importance of digital solutions in increasing access to medicines and improving healthcare. Key points include:

- **Martino Canonico (Head of Brussels Office, European Association of E-Pharmacies - EAEP)** emphasised the critical role of digital solutions in enhancing healthcare access, particularly through e-pharmacies and online medicine delivery, which help bridge gaps for patients in remote areas and those with mobility challenges. He stressed that these digital tools are designed to complement, not replace, physical healthcare, offering added convenience and accessibility for those patients that desire these digital options. Mr Canonico highlighted the need for regulatory harmonisation across the EU, noting that while some Member States allow online access to prescription medicines, many still limit it to only over-the-counter products, creating an unequal system. He commented on an [independent report by Copenhagen Economics](#) covering 5 countries and 5000 patients which provided clear evidence as to the benefits of online access. Mr Canonico made a particular point that patients who were able to access medicines online believed that their adherence to treatment was enhanced. With “200,000 patients suffering premature death each year due to lack of treatment adherence this is important evidence for allowing patients’ access to online ordering and home delivery”. Thus, he strongly supports the proposed amendment to Article 172 of the [General Pharmaceutical Legislation](#), advocating for a more modernised approach that removes outdated restrictions and ensures equal access to prescription medicines across Europe. He also pointed out that digital health tools, such as telepharmacy and e-prescriptions, can help address medicine shortages and improve supply chain transparency, aligning with the goals of the [Critical Medicines Act](#). Looking ahead, Mr Canonico called for a unified EU framework for digital health and telemedicine, ensuring that all patients have the same rights and access regardless of location, and for better reimbursement policies for cross-border online healthcare services.
- **Baiba Ziemele (Chairwoman, Latvian Network of Patient Organizations - LPOT)** discussed the significant progress Latvia has made in digital health, particularly in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. She highlighted the country’s advancements with e-prescriptions and digital portals but emphasised that there is still much work to be done. Ms Ziemele advocated for the introduction of home delivery for prescription medicines in Latvia, a service already

available for over-the-counter medicines. She pointed out that neighbouring countries like Estonia and Sweden have digital health services that enable stock monitoring and convenient ways to check drug availability - services that are currently lacking in Latvia. Finally, she stressed the importance of health literacy, combating misinformation, and the need for government support in educating citizens about reliable healthcare information. Trust, she concluded, is essential, and to build that trust, it is important to understand that patients are not here to criticise but to contribute to creating the best possible healthcare environment. Therefore, it is crucial to listen to patients and implement the digital solutions they call for, such as e-prescriptions and access to e-pharmacies, to improve healthcare outcomes.

- **Alexis Strader (Director of Policy and Research, European Health Management Association – EHMA)** discussed the challenges and opportunities of digital solutions in improving healthcare and addressing medicine shortages. While a European monitoring platform tracks critical medicines, it lacks granular data, and it was suggested that retail pharmacies could contribute to more comprehensive reporting. In addition, Ms Strader highlighted three fundamental challenges in adopting such digital solutions: money and the need for investment, high costs and challenges of updating infrastructure, including IT systems, and resistance to change. As a result, Ms Strader called for increased digital literacy by implementing high-quality and free training to ensure behavioural change. Despite this, Ms Strader also placed attention on the vast opportunities provided by new and upcoming legislation, including the EHDS. She concluded with a call for affordable and accessible medicines, where patients are well-informed and healthcare workers are empowered, emphasising that access should be equal for everyone in Europe.
- **Josephine Mosset (Policy Officer, Cancer Patients Europe - CPE)** emphasised the significant role digital solutions can play in improving access to medicines for patients, particularly in rural areas where pharmacies may be far away, or patients face mobility issues and fatigue. She highlighted that many cancer patients require frequent medication refills to manage side effects, and online access to prescription medicines could enhance convenience, adherence, and safety, particularly for immunocompromised individuals. Ms Mosset stressed the importance of amending legislation to ensure patient safety and access to medicines in a regulated, safe environment, citing the EHDS and [Falsified Medicines Directive](#) as key safeguards. She called for the removal of barriers to online access to medicines and emphasised the need for evidence-based policymaking to justify any restrictions to online access to prescription medicines. Ms Mosset also highlighted the importance of digital literacy, urging patient groups to inform and support their members. She concluded by stressing that *“Where you live, should not determine if you live – and this principle must guide policy, including digital health policy”*.

Exchange with the audience

The event also provided a valuable opportunity for audience engagement, with representatives across sectors, including patient and advocacy groups, pharmacists and pharmacy representatives, and academics and researchers, raising critical questions and points about the future of digital healthcare.

Key discussion points included:

- Ensuring health remains a top priority in the current legislative mandate.
- Encouraging the adoption of digital solutions among healthcare professionals and patients.
- Addressing growing mistrust, misinformation, and disinformation in healthcare.

Panellists, overall, emphasised that while digital solutions can improve access to medicines, their success relies on public trust in healthcare providers, pharmacists, and regulatory safeguards. Strengthening health literacy was identified as a crucial step in combating misinformation and ensuring that patients trust health services more broadly.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of existing safeguards, such as the Falsified Medicines Directive which features the [EU Common Logo](#), which guarantee the authenticity of legitimate e-pharmacies. Participants stressed that restricting access to online healthcare services does not eliminate risks - it only pushes patients towards unregulated sources. Instead, efforts should focus on expanding safe, well-regulated digital options, ensuring patients can access healthcare in a secure and trusted environment.

Conclusion: A call for EU-wide action

The discussions at the event underscored a shared commitment to advancing digital healthcare while ensuring patient safety, trust, and equitable access. Speakers and audience members alike emphasised the urgent need to leverage digital health solutions, such as e-prescriptions, telepharmacy, and home delivery of medicines, to improve medicine accessibility, particularly for patients in remote areas and those with chronic conditions. However, their success depends on regulatory harmonisation, investment in digital literacy, and fostering trust between healthcare providers and patients. Stakeholders urged policymakers to prioritise digitalisation in the ongoing revision of the General Pharmaceutical Legislation as well as the recently published Critical Medicines Act, ensuring that all patients, regardless of location, can benefit from digitalisation in healthcare.