

Summary

Digitization can open new pathways to health care, strengthen patients and also improve the accessibility of care. Taking advantage of these possibilities will be crucial to addressing citizens' high expectations of health care and the growing needs that stem from an aging population. Sweden is facing a strategic choice for the future of health care, where digitization plays a key role. New technology enables citizens to monitor their health better, take preventive measures and, if necessary, take more control of their health situation. The technology can thus enable more and better care despite fewer physical care visits.

In this report, we present the state of knowledge about the effects of digitization on health care based on a review of the research literature. We discuss how the effects can be interpreted in a Swedish context and conclude that quality improvements can be achieved in almost all areas. In elderly care, technology can lead to improvements in mobility, more social contacts as well as increased independence. Accessibility in Swedish healthcare has already improved since private telemedicine firms have offered video-calls via smartphone apps since 2016. Health care is mainly tax-financed, and so are the telemedicine services. The developments have resulted in increasing economic tensions between different players, mainly due to the complex and outdated public sector remunerations systems. The benefits of video calls should be especially high in rural areas, but so far, telemedicine is mostly used by the residents in the major cities.

One message is that the gains from digitization are not automatic. Instead, what is required is active support concerning governance, organization, and cooperation between as well as within different levels of government. The benefits of digitization can be substantial, but when matters go wrong, the risks to patients can be significant.

It is also the case that older people today often find it harder to use digital services. The county councils need to make sure that the services are easy to use and that the data is secure.

At the overall level, there is a significant gap between the stated political vision that Sweden should be the best in the world on e-health on the one hand, and the problems reported by healthcare staff, such as incompatible IT systems, duplication, and unclear control, on the other hand. Providing better support to staff is crucial to meeting the health care needs of the future and the transformation that digitalization brings.

What should be done? In order to benefit from the potential of digitization, legislators should deal with both legal and practical barriers. The challenges are illustrated not least by the experience of the government's agency for e-Health's and its difficulties in launching a platform for e-health services. The platform was intended to offer different health care related web services to citizens, but after several years of work, it seems likely to be discontinued.

What does this failed digitization project mean for Sweden, a country with a sizeable physical territory, but in many parts sparsely populated? A critical insight from digital platforms is that its strength essentially is based on economies of scale and network effects. Experience shows that a platform that attracts large user flows, in turn, becomes further enamored when it is open to third-party developers who can create new services. Here data security and privacy are of crucial importance. Without proper safeguards, individuals may at risk if data is exposed or comes into the wrong hands. However, so far, personal integrity has been overemphasized without taking sufficient account of the benefits from using big data, for the individual and society as a whole. Large amounts of data can help save lives and reduce suffering by facilitating the development of new knowledge, better diagnoses, and treatments. Sweden needs to continue to protect personal data, but also find a way forward that is more pragmatic that better weighs in the benefits of using data to improve health care and services.

An equally important part is that the county council improve their co-operation in areas where unnecessary bureaucracy puts obstacles of care between regions and different providers, be they in the public or private sector. The public sector should put even more effort into getting a common technical infrastructure in place that is

compatible across the country. In this way, there will be better opportunities for entrepreneurs to create new innovative services that do not risk running into red tape in other regional jurisdictions. Continuing on the same path as today without substantial reform is unlikely to lead to a dramatic deterioration of health care services in the short term, but the future gains may be small or non-existent.