

# Experiences of Europeans seeking health information in the cyberspace

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“e-Health has the potential to improve the lives of all Europeans while simultaneously improving the efficiency of healthcare systems”.<sup>1</sup>

Consistent with the above policy statement, eHealth services, as an important subset of modern online public services, have been given a considerable emphasis within the eEurope 2005 Action Plan. A consequence of this is the eEurope goal of getting modern e-health services online by 2005 and endeavours to ensure that citizen can access and, subsequently, make use these services, and it is the latter aspects of this goal that is of particular interest here.

However, realising the eHealth potential for European citizens has been tempered by the scope of the challenges involved. There is a challenge relating to ensuring that relevant services are being offered. In order to make these services more relevant for the general public, specific emphasis has been given to the provision of health related information and advice. Related to this, and equally important is the challenge of ensuring the widest possible reach of these services, not least to prevent new social divides arising, or the existing ones being reinforced due to unequal opportunities to access, and therefore benefit from these specific services.

There was already considerable evidence that eHealth information and advice dispensing services are being sought widely in Europe – it is estimated that the prevalence of using the Internet to get information about health matters has exceeded one-in-five of people within EU (SIBIS, 2002-2003) and almost reaching one in four (Eurobarometer 58.0). There are already some emerging relevant issues for public health policy. For instance, it has been suggested that those who might well be in a greater need of accessing these services often lack the opportunity to do so (older people and people in less favourable socio-economic circumstances) with the potential for the existing health divides to be exacerbated (ibid.). Furthermore, looking at this from another perspective, there may well be a risk that those who are not currently users of these services could be left behind without their voices and issues being taken into account when designing new eHealth services. Indeed, the provision of online interactive tools, interactive self-help tools are already pervasive, while commercial aspects are also at play, with ‘members only’ aspects of services being

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<sup>1</sup> (EC [http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/eeurope/2005/all\\_about/ehealth/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/2005/all_about/ehealth/index_en.htm))



provided. It is relatively easy then to envisage the vicious, self-perpetuating circle of non usage. This would be a pity, given the inclusive potential of eHealth. Thus the propensity to seek for health information online amongst Internet users is apparently transcending individual socio-economic divides, and even geographical and regional divides<sup>2</sup> (BISER Project).

However, useful findings from the existing body of research notwithstanding, the fact is that despite being a high priority in terms of policy emphasis, precious little is known about what are the experiences, and subsequently the needs of those seeking health information online, and, by extension, how to ensure that the services are provided adequately. This is equally relevant for both current and potential users. Indeed, it can be suggested that eHealth information seekers are still very much on their own in the cyberspace, given the lack of adequate provision of credible citizens' education programmes. This is also coupled with the lack of effective strategies to ensure that users and potential users can access high quality health information on the Net in a way that is relatively burden-free for them. In addition, the absence of common look and feel of the eHealth resources can have negative implication on successful finding and subsequent navigation of these sources. Indeed some preliminary findings suggest that even those using eHealth resources relatively frequently still find usability (in a broad sense) of the sites to be an issue for them. It is obviously not sufficient to rely on some inherent properties of the Internet to transcend time and place barriers (information at any time, access from own place of convenience) to address user needs in a desired fashion.

This paper will highlight these and similar important user-related issues, using the most up-to-date survey data from the EU population survey undertaken early this year within eUSER, an EU funded research project looking into user orientation of online public services and how well currently provided services meet the needs and preferences of the European population. Through the survey, data from a representative sample of labour market participants has been gathered in 10 EU member states. The survey instrument included an extensive list of eHealth related variables which will be utilised for this paper.

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<sup>2</sup> BISER Project; <http://www.biser-eu.com>



## Speaker biographies

IVICA MILICEVIC is a Senior Research Consultant at the Work Research Centre. His work focused on socio-economic aspects of information technology, including making major contributions to pan-European research projects in the area of IST – Statistical Indicators for Benchmarking Information Society (SIBIS), BISER), ECaTT, and the ADAPT project, with prominent inputs in the areas of research design, data analysis, and policy analysis. He is currently involved in thematic studies on eHealth and eInclusion - promoting access to ICTs as means for advancing social inclusion. His recent work included evaluating the implementation of the Lisbon Agenda in Ireland.

TOBIAS HÜSING is senior researcher at Empirica. His educational background is in economics and sociology. He has worked in quantitative empirical research and has been responsible for survey methodology and statistical analysis in a variety of large-scale, pan-European projects. Among other projects, he has played a part in the European research projects SeniorWatch, BISER, SIBIS, eBusiness W@tch and eUser. He also shouldered responsibility for a project with Eurostat to draw up the methodological report for the 2002 and 2003 European ICT household surveys. His main research interests are the digital divide and societal implications of ICT, as well as methods of empirical ICT research and statistical analysis.