

General Questions

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Q: What is Telehealth?

A: Telehealth is the means by which technologies and related services concerned with health and well-being are accessed by people or provided for them, at a distance. It includes telecare and aspects of telemedicine. All of these come within the 'umbrella' term of eHealth. Telehealth services operate with the help of communications technologies – including installed and mobile devices.

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Q: What is the European Code of Practice for Telehealth Services?

A: The Code supports the European Commission's eHealth Action Plan by providing a quality benchmark for telehealth and telecare services. The Code focuses on the needs of service users and carers. In so doing it also addresses the concerns of service providers, commissioners and procurers. Broadly, the Code supports healthy lifestyles and public wellbeing by championing excellent service provision and providing a benchmark against which to assess service quality.

The Code is open for anyone to read or buy. It can help to guide service developments, therefore, regardless of whether a service goes on to seek accreditation.

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Q: Why was the Code developed?

A: eHealth and its related areas are a relatively new development in healthcare. The Code helps to build 'trust in telehealth'. It promotes excellence, supporting service improvement and user empowerment.

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Q: How does the Code work?

A: The Code comprises a series of clauses against which services can be assessed by an independent body. Where services meet the requirements set out in the clauses that apply to them, they can apply to be accredited. Such accreditation follows robust procedures and is renewed on an annual basis. It informs and reassures service users and carers, service providers, commissioners and procurers.

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Q: Who will benefit from the Code?

A: *Service users and carers:*

The ultimate beneficiaries of telehealth and telecare services are the people who use them. This can include people who manage their own health or who care for others. Many users of telehealth services have long-term conditions. Therefore many of the people who access telehealth services are older and will access the support that telehealth offers in order to help them manage such conditions. But other users are younger people who may have particular conditions or may simply use telehealth to help them manage their lifestyles.

Service providers, commissioners and procurers:

Service providers, commissioners and procurers benefit from the Code simply by virtue of it providing such an important benchmark quality standard. By becoming accredited to the Code there is, therefore, reassurance regarding the way that users and carers are safeguarded. The Code guides such organisations whether or not they are involved in direct service provision. And for commissioners, procurers and a wider range of stakeholders, the Code gives crucial support for the re-framing of health service provision.

For Service Providers

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Q: Will being accredited to the Code give me a commercial advantage?

A: The Code will be increasingly specified by commissioners and procurers. Users and carers will, furthermore, seek out those who can provide them with the quality of service that they need or want. Both of these mean that accredited services will have a competitive advantage.

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Q: How does the code fit with other standards?

A: Because telehealth services are relatively new, there are very few standards/guidelines against which to compare the Code. It is, however, the only Code that offers a benchmark standard for telehealth services throughout the European Union. Services in the UK and The Netherlands will wish to consider the merits of the Code with that offered by the TSA (Telecare Services Association) and the quality mark offered by WDTM

(Wonen, Diensten en Techniek voor Mensen).

A further reference point in the UK is the CECOPS (Community Equipment Code of Practice Scheme). Services that are accredited to the CECOPS can be 'pass-ported' through a number of clauses of the European Code and benefit, therefore, from a saving in the overall cost of inspection and auditing. The reverse also applies.

For Service Users

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Q: I am a user. How does the Code tell me more about the service I'm using?

A: People who access telehealth services are central to the Code. By considering the requirements of the Code that are met by accredited services, users and carers can be more confident in their choice of service provider. Important, and particularly reassuring for users and carers, are the safeguards that the Code requires to be in place regarding how their personal information is gathered and used; and the necessity for services to take their needs and opinions into account.

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Q: I'm using a telehealth service. How can I find out if they are accredited to the Code?

A: Service providers will make it clear on their websites if they are accredited to the Code. Those websites will also include a number of declarations and documents about the way they provide their telehealth service.

