One year of e-prescriptions in Germany – an interim conclusion

Publication by Sandoz in Germany and Flying Health

E-prescription as an important milestone for the digitization of the healthcare system

Since its introduction, the e-prescription has fundamentally changed everyday life in the German healthcare system and with more than 400 million prescriptions redeemed is now well accepted by all stakeholders involved such as patients, practitioners, pharmacists and payers. Aspects such as therapy safety and adherence are improved, and digital medication management is established as automatic and qualitatively better comparisons of medication prescriptions are enbled, and thereby the number of patients present in practices is reduced. At the same time, e-prescription promotes patients' sense of ownership, who are increasingly actively involved in shaping their healthcare and have higher expectations of efficiency and effectiveness of care structures. Thus, the e-prescription marks a significant step towards a functional and acceptance-based digitization of medical care and patient pathways.

Technical adjustments are still necessary

The adaptability of the system is an important empirical value for the introduction of further digital applications in the German healthcare system. Technical difficulties at the beginning of e-prescription introduction have been successively resolved. Based on practical experience, processes could be improved. For example, the introduction of CardLink function, which enables a complete digital redemption path, represents an improvement in user-friendliness. However, technical and organizational adjustments are still necessary, especially regarding accounting processes between pharmacies, health insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies. Further examples are the interoperability of existing software systems and the regulatory billing specifications for doctors (quarterly in-person presence of patients is required to swipe the electronic health insurance card through physicians' software systems to be able to invoice the quarterly fee).

Expand to further user groups as quickly as possible

Till now, not all therapy areas (e.g. digital health applications) or prescription types (e.g. narcotics or aid prescriptions) have been approved for e-prescription. The use of e-prescription across sectors and types of health insurance companies, including outpatient care and private health insurance companies, is essential to avoid unnecessary breaks in the digital patient path

and to further increase acceptance. The relevant actors and structures should therefore be given access to the e-prescription in a timely manner.

Digital identity as a vision of the future

The current low-threshold redemption options of e-prescription via inserted health insurance card or digital CardLink procedure have significantly promoted the acceptance and use of e-prescription. However, it can be assumed that these options will only act as a bridging technology in the medium to long term. The goal should be redemption via digital identity and a TI 2.0 via mobile applications and TI gateway solutions that do not require the use of hardware or cards.

The nationwide introduction of the electronic patient record and its link to the e-prescription will help to overcome existing sector boundaries between outpatient, inpatient and home care. For example, a direct forwarding of e-prescription between doctors and pharmacies supplying homes in home care or the linkage of digital applications (e.g. provision of a medication plan with e-prescription information in the electronic patient record) could lead to significant improvements in care. Furthermore, the expansion of telemedicine services can support the healthcare system and counteract the shortage of skilled workers.

Legal requirements and creative solutions as success factors

For the digitization of the healthcare system to succeed sustainably and effectively, a balanced strategy is required. Statutory regulations published by the federal digital agency should provide sufficient room for innovation so that the best technical solutions can be developed in competition between market participants.

The integration or co-existence of existing software systems also requires further progress regarding system connectivity and interoperability. Currently, data exchange between technical systems often fails due to a lack of uniform (data) standards and limited ability of IT systems to communicate with each other. If these aspects are resolved, the e-prescription in combination with other digital applications, has the potential to maintain and expand its position as a central component of a modern, digital healthcare system in Germany.

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