eMental Health

State-of-the-art & Opportunities for Ireland

Executive Summary

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Kevin Cullen

wrc
WORK RESEARCH CENTRE

Acknowledgements & disclaimer

Foreword

Shari McDaid, Director, Mental Health Reform

As the national coalition promoting better mental health services, Mental Health Reform has a strong interest in exploring the potential of digital technology within the mental health sphere. An example of this is our participation in the eMEN Interreg project. The e-Mental Health innovation and transnational implementation platform North West Europe (eMEN) project is a six-country European Union partnership aiming to improve mental health in Europe through increased use of eMental Health interventions. Rooted in Mental Health Reform's value of empowerment of individuals who use mental health services, we are particularly interested in the possibilities digital technology can open up for this.

Our aim in participating in eMEN is to enable stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of the role of digital technology within the mental health system. This means engaging with all stakeholders, from people who may use eMental Health apps and family members/carers to clinicians and service providers (both statutory and non-statutory). Digital technology may benefit individuals with mental health difficulties in a variety of ways, including helping provide wider access to services, empowering service users, and therapeutic innovation. There are also possible risks to using digital technology, especially in a field where 'talking therapies', as well as human and social support more generally, are so important.

We welcome the publication of this report, presenting an overview and discussion of the state-of-the-art in eMental Health. It provides a very useful starting point for stakeholder engagement, helping interested parties to navigate digital technology's potential, its risks, and its current status in terms of evidence for efficacy.

Maurice Farnan, Programme Manager Mental Health, HSE

HSE Mental Health Services (M.H.S.) welcomes this timely report on eMental Health. As the report notes, eMental Health provides considerable potential for an improved service offering in Mental Health services and offers opportunities to provide information, supports and treatment to people with mental health issues and the wider population.

The M.H.S. working model of eMental Health is underpinned by a tiered approach to provision, including: extensive web enabled information, dynamic signposting and supports for the wider population; enhanced supports such as Instant Messaging / SMS / Live chat / Telephone support for those with greater need; and finally online counselling and potentially tele-psychiatry for those with greatest need. We are also particularly interested in the potential for enhanced self and joint management for service users in their treatment and recovery journeys. These various areas are addressed in some detail in the report, and M.H.S. is itself engaged in a range of initiatives in these fields. We also note and agree with the findings of the report that e-Mental Health is not a panacea. Care and consideration is required in the design and delivery of services, and it is imperative that the services offered are clinically appropriate.

Although the scope of the report did not include the field of mental healthcare informatics, the delivery of a national Electronic Record is a key enabler to support the development of eHealth strategies. HSE will shortly submit a business case for a national electronic health record that will include mental health services. This will be a critical lever to improve services and information on the effectiveness of services, and provide a firm foundation for delivery of enhanced services including eMental Heath into the future.

M.H.S. looks forward to working with all stakeholders in the development of enhanced eMental Health services that will serve the needs of both service users and the wider population.

Executive Summary

This report presents a rapid wide-angle review of the state-of-the-art in the eMental health field in Ireland and internationally, with the aim to provide an orientation and operationally useful guidance for the relevant stakeholders in Ireland. It provides an overview of the spectrum of eMental health applications already on offer and how they are used; summarises evidence on their effectiveness and contribution; and discusses their potential for helping to address challenges facing the mental healthcare system in Ireland. The report focuses on technology supporting direct provision of mental health services and supports. It does not specifically address the field of mental healthcare informatics; this is a focus of attention under the Irish eHealth strategy and within the HSE and other service provider organisations.

The report adopts a broad definition of eMental health as '***technology-supported provision of mental health services and supports***'. Relevant technologies include telecommunications (phone, video, online); online and computer-based programmes; mobile apps; virtual reality; gaming; social media; data analytics; and many more. The report organises and discusses the field around a number of important application domains. These have relevance across the different components of the overall mental healthcare and support ecosystem, including formal mental health services, third sector and peer support organisations, and self-help activity by people with mental health issues.

eMental health application domains covered in the report
• Telemental health
• eTherapy (technology-supported therapy at scale)
• Ongoing support for enduring mental health difficulty
• Other innovative additions to the treatment toolkit
• Crisis support and suicide prevention
• Information and psycho-education (self-help)
• Peer support.

Many opportunities...

The report considers eMental health applications that may be helpful for the large numbers of people with common mental health conditions, as well as applications relevant for people with more severe and enduring conditions. Current evidence and practice suggests that eMental health offers considerable potential, and some fields of application are already quite mature. eMental health applications can help to empower people with mental health conditions to engage more effectively in their recovery through self-help, access to peer support, and new ways to participate in jointly managing treatment and recovery pathways with clinicians. They can also help mental health services to address the large treatment gaps that prevail for common mental health conditions as well as the current limitations on effective continuity of care for people with enduring conditions. More generally, traditional service models need to evolve in appropriate ways alongside the major societal trends associated with the pervasiveness of the internet, smart-phones and other technologies.

Telemental health is already in extensive usage in a number of countries. This includes telepsychiatry applications to provide improved access to specialists in primary care settings and emergency departments, and telepsychology/counselling arrangements enabling remote client-practitioner therapy sessions. Emerging communication modes, such as instant chat, are increasingly employed to reach and engage with the demographic groups that favour these. eTherapy applications, combining online self-administration with varying levels of therapist assistance, are beginning to be offered in programmes providing psychological therapies at scale for common conditions such as mild/moderate depression and anxiety. Mobile applications show promise in supporting ongoing care management and self-management for people with enduring/severe mental health conditions. Gaming applications are used to support treatment provision and engagement for young people, and virtual reality has important application in the treatment of phobias and other conditions. Online platforms are providing organised repositories of mental health information and psycho-education modules, as well as peer support fora and other group-based applications.

Potential benefits
• Wider reach of mental health services and access to these • Cost-efficiencies in delivering high-volume services • Treatment innovation and enhancement • More user involvement and empowerment • Expansion of self-help and access to peer support

...but not a simple 'plug-and-play' game-changer or panacea

Despite the undoubted opportunities presented by eMental health, it is not a simple 'plug-and-play' game-changer or panacea. Face-to-face therapy and in-person support will continue to remain centrally important. eMental health is not a replacement for these forms of support, but provides opportunities for innovation and service improvement. Ensuring user choice is important - some may prefer to access services in eMental health mode, others will prefer more traditional approaches; and provision of services through eMental health must target it towards those for whom it is clinically appropriate.

eMental health encompasses a wide range of technologies and domains of application. These vary in their functionality and in the purposes for which they are appropriate. This may be to increase reach and access to therapy, enable innovation in existing treatment approaches, support people to manage their mental health issues, or a variety other purposes. It is important to bear this in mind when considering the role of eMental health within the mental healthcare system; the key question is whether particular applications of eMental health are useful and add value for the purposes for which they are intended and used.

A growing body of evidence suggests the likely efficacy and effectiveness of a range of products and applications for particular purposes. Some of this is from Irish research but most comes from research conducted in other countries, so further Irish research and evaluation in this field is important. In addition, the research evidence in this field can be quite complex to interpret for purposes of guiding implementation of eMental health as part of mainstream services. Available evidence often comes from controlled studies with participants who are not necessarily representative of the wider potential user populations and settings. Selection of particular eMental health approaches, and of particular product

offerings on the market, requires careful and critical appraisal of their existing evidence base; and implementation in mainstream services requires ongoing assessment and review of fitness for purpose.

More generally, in promoting development and deployment of eMental health it is important to adopt a measured perspective. This includes circumspection about the hype that can surround technological innovations and about overly simplistic claims of dramatic cost efficiencies. Although eMental health has the potential to provide substantial economic benefits, the focus must be on effective implementation in ways that really improve the lives of people with mental health difficulties. This requires careful attention to embedding eMental health within well-functioning mental health systems, care pathways, and user journeys, supported by secure and stable IT infrastructures.

Progressing the appropriate exploitation of eMental health in Ireland

Notwithstanding the requirement for a careful and circumspect approach, a range of applications of eMental health are now mature enough to consider their incorporation within the mainstream repertoire of mental health services and supports in Ireland, and a number of examples can already be found in parts of the Irish mental health service and support ecosystem. The report suggests the most useful next steps might include development of an overarching strategic framework (an eMental health Strategy) and promotion of targeted actions in key areas. The listing of action lines suggested does not necessarily imply any particular sequencing, and some or all could usefully be addressed in parallel.

Possible action lines
• eMental Health Strategy
• Stakeholder engagement/consultation
• Quality assurance; Guidance for users & practitioners
• Implementation pilots
• Supporting innovation
• eMental health research

eMental Health Strategy

A number of countries have developed promotional and other initiatives to support wider deployment and utilisation of eMental health, most notably Australia. In Ireland, the programme of activity under the eHealth Strategy is giving some attention to eMental health. However, it may be helpful to develop and resource a dedicated eMental Health Strategy to encourage broad consideration of eMental health opportunities across the mental healthcare ecosystem and to support accelerated deployment of useful applications. This should be embedded within wider mental health policy/strategy, such as currently being developed in the refresh of A Vision for Change.

Stakeholder engagement/consultation

It is essential that all stakeholder groupings are involved in driving the future development of eMental health in Ireland. Effective mechanisms for engagement and informed discussion are necessary to support consultation with professional bodies, practitioners, user groups and service users, NGOs, and

other stakeholders. This might include broad-based exercises to identify stakeholder interests and priorities, followed by more focused and targeted engagement on specific themes (e.g. telepsychiatry, eTherapy to support delivery of psychological therapies at scale, mobile supports for people with enduring mental health issues, and applications supporting self-help and service user empowerment).

Quality assurance; Guidance for users and practitioners

Given the large and growing number of online and mobile services and applications on offer, development of Irish quality assurance systems and guidance for eMental health users and practitioners is also important. Quality assurance systems (e.g. official certification systems or listing of endorsed products) encourage development and offering of proven good-quality products and services, and help users and practitioners to select which to use.

Navigating the burgeoning array of resources in the eMental health field can be challenging for people seeking support and services. A one-stop-shop Irish eMental health website signposting to useful resources would be helpful in this context, drawing on well-developed examples in other countries such as the Australian *headtohealth* website. The most effective approach to development and ongoing maintenance of such a website might be through a collaborative arrangement between government, HSE, third sector organisations, practitioner bodies, and user groups.

Guidance material for both users and practitioners is important. The suggested officially-supported eMental health website would be one element of this, along with more detailed guidance material for specific groups. Mental health professionals need guidance on utilisation of eMental health in clinical practice, and GPs and other practitioners need guidance to help them to advise patients on utilisation of self-help apps and services. Users need guidance on what to look for when selecting mental health apps and online offerings, and how to assess quality and suitability for their purposes. Examples of useful approaches to guidance are available from other countries and may be suitable for tailoring and customising for the Irish context.

Implementation pilots

It would also be useful to consider design, implementation, and evaluation of pilots/trials of eMental health in targeted fields in Ireland. This might include large-scale pilots of telemental health and eTherapies for common mental health conditions and more targeted pilots of telepsychiatry for specific purposes.   Such initiatives would require prior consultation and agreement with the relevant stakeholders.

A recognised need in Ireland is to increase the large-scale provision of psychological therapies for people with common mental health conditions. Telemental health and eTherapies offer considerable potential as part of these approaches. One of the challenges in implementing eMental health in these contexts is to find the most effective ways to incorporate it within the overall service delivery framework and associated care pathways. Set-up and maintenance of an appropriate IT infrastructure is also central. A carefully constructed Irish pilot programme would be very useful, with involvement of all relevant parties including service providers, therapy professionals, and users.

Telepsychiatry may offer important opportunities to increase access to psychiatric consultation in a range of settings. This might help alleviate some of the difficulties currently experienced in this area in Ireland.   Following consultation with the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland and the other relevant stakeholder groupings, a series of pilot projects could be useful to explore the potential of telepsychiatry

in specific areas. Examples might include applications to support liaison/consultation models for mental health in primary care, access to psychiatric consultations in emergency departments, and applications in other relevant locations/settings.

Supporting innovation

More generally, it would be useful to establish a lasting support structure to lead knowledge-sharing, foster innovation, and support implementation of eMental health across the system in Ireland. The most effective way to foster useful innovation in eMental health is through collaboration between clinicians, technology developers, and people with lived experience of mental health issues. Establishment of a dedicated eMental health innovation 'hub' might be the most effective way to do this.

eMental health research

Finally, a range of important aspects of eMental health require attention in mental health research in Ireland. This includes efficacy and effectiveness evaluation of eMental health offerings, translational and implementation research on putting useful innovations into practice, eMental health user experience research, and wider population research on utilisation patterns and their implications.