



## Getting serious about e-quality @ccess

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**M**ore and more cancer patients are using the Internet to find out about their disease and treatment, to seek support from online patient communities and to communicate with their professional carers and loved ones. However, not everyone is benefiting from this digital revolution.

A recent Eurostat survey on the 25 Member States has shown a significant divide between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Young people are much more likely to use the Internet than people over 55. Those of us who don't have a job, live in a rural area and have no child in the household are less likely to use the Internet. Big differences were also reported between countries: while Internet use is common in Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, it is used far less in many of the new Member States. In the EU candidate countries, Internet use is very low. Inadequate telecommunication infrastructures, limited computer skills, economic factors and language all play a role in sustaining this digital divide.

In 2004 the European Commission adopted an action plan on how information and communication technologies can be used to deliver better quality

health care to European citizens. The "e-Health action plan" covers everything from electronic prescriptions and computerised health records to using new systems and services that cut down waiting times and reduce errors.

As part of this plan the Commission is developing an EU health portal that will provide a single point of access to public health and health-related information produced by the EU and its agencies. It was scheduled to be launched in 2005, but the site has not yet gone live. A nod to those of us not yet online was made in a commitment to 'monitor actions taken by Member States to make health information as accessible as possible'.

The importance of extending Internet access was recognised in March by the UN General Assembly, when it endorsed the "Tunis commitment", adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society at the end of last year ([www.itu.int/wsis](http://www.itu.int/wsis)).

Hopefully, this commitment, to which the world's governments have now signed up, will stimulate European governments to step up efforts at European, national and local levels, to enable all European patients, particularly those living in countries with limited resources, to benefit from the digital revolution.

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