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UK Government Promise For 2021: No Halting The Advance Of Healthtech Innovation Adoption

Parliamentary engagement session allowed manufacturers to quiz ministers on new plans affecting UK medtechs

by [Ashley Yeo](#)

There can be no such thing as a COVID dividend, but the renewed digital push and momentum for health system change perhaps come closest.

After the coronavirus disruption of 2020, the current year will see more joined up health care delivery based on faster healthtech adoption. That was the pledge of UK health secretary Matt Hancock as he addressed the 350 attendees of the Association of British HealthTech Industries' annual parliamentary reception.



More digitization of the National Health Service as part of a wider aim to transform health care delivery – but not simply by defaulting to digitizing existing pathways— is a priority for 2021, he said. Connecting the system better to allow data to flow between care providers is also on the minister's agenda. The resulting system will be one that can change in step with scientific advances, and learn from the past, including the lessons from COVID.

“Too much of the system does not yet have the basics, and uses old kit that steals staff's time,” he said, announcing the second “digital aspirant” program from NHSX. This body, the UK's digital health and

social care transformation program, will also announce a third cohort later in 2021. These initiatives, building on the findings of the NHS' Global Digital Exemplar (GDE) program, aim to bring all UK trusts up to digital speed, and help them adopt technology at scale.

The NHS's 42 local sustainability and transformation partnerships (STPs) will be required to have basic shared care records in place by September. "When data can connect, so can care," said Hancock, pointing to the clinical value of real time patient information for doctors and nurses—as seen during the pandemic. The NHS COVID-19 Data Store, set up early in the crisis, provided data and trends information to allow users to look at hospital bed capacity or ventilator availability.

"We must not go backwards on this," said the minister, stressing that the momentum is being continued in 2021, with the recent publication of five NHS digital playbooks for clinicians seeking guidance on digital and remote patient care; and NHSX' new procurement framework that allows images to flow from high street opticians to ophthalmology clinics. NHSX CTO David Turner has been tasked with overseeing an NHS system-based approach to all care delivery for the future.

Diagnostics' Place At The Center Of Integrated Care

2020 saw the ability of digital processes to transform health care delivery, said the minister. In 2021, the drive towards that end will be speeded up.

He added that the pandemic changed the approach to the use of diagnostics for all time – over 600,000 COVID-19 PCR tests were done in the UK on 18 January, a new record high. Early diagnosis of communicable and non-communicable diseases has long been the NHS mantra, but has simply not been implemented at scale, he said, promising new investment and technology, including community-based diagnostic centers.

And yet the diagnostics industry has been underfunded, ABHI chief executive Peter Ellingworth, host of the parliamentary reception, reminded the audience. Under the government-industry Health Technology Partnership, the ABHI plans to present a new diagnostics strategy to government in the second quarter of 2021.

Lord Bethell, parliamentary undersecretary of state for innovation, and the former junior health minister Lord O'Shaughnessy, who was enlisted in 2020 to support the government's COVID test and trace scheme, also attended the ABHI event, where Ellingworth renewed the association's 2020 proposal for board level chief innovation officers (CIO) to be installed at every NHS trust.

O'Shaughnessy observed that the value of such a role had been seen in Israel, for instance, where the CIO is also the CMO.

The idea has the support of Lord Darzi, head of the Accelerated Access Collaborative. The Academic Health Science Networks have done a good in championing innovation, he said, but they lack the necessary levers with which to force change. NHS CEOs must provide the impetus to drive innovation at a local level, he said.

Ellingworth also called on ministers to address the need for better collaboration between NHS England and the medtech industry. A systematic engagement partnership has been missing for many years, he said, and its absence is behind the failure of some of the best planned market access and innovation strategies of the past two decades to fully deliver on their promise.

New UK Legislation As A Driver For Change

Bethell sees the Medical Device Information Service (MDIS) as both innovative and transformative for UK regulation. Part of the Medicines and Medical Devices (MMD) bill, which continues in third reading in the House of Lords on 21 January, the MDIS will oversee a register of devices and a registry of people in whom devices have been implemented. Industry should not be defensive, but should embrace these tools, Bethell cautioned.

Such a registry should, however, not be “Britain only” in scope, said Anne Marie Morris, if the UK wants to fulfil its intentions of being a fully paid up member of the global regulatory community, post-Brexit. Morris leads the All-Party Parliamentary Group on access to medicines and medical devices.