Sami Perälä explains how the EU Flagship Project PrimCareIT is using telemedicine in the Baltic Sea Region to eliminate barriers caused by distance, promote equality in access to health services and support healthcare professionals working in rural areas.

Could you discuss your professional background?

I have an undergraduate degree in nursing, a Master’s degree in Health Science and have worked in various health technology development programmes for 15 years. As the Lead Partner of PrimCareIT, I work with Project Coordinator Minna Kamula and DSN, a management office located in Kiel, Germany. Together, we take care of scheduling and target reaching, cooperation between partners and communication to the EU on project matters.

What are PrimCareIT’s missions and objectives?

The main mission of PrimCareIT is to tackle the challenge of an ageing population and lack of healthcare professionals in remote primary care. Our overall aim is to raise the attractiveness of remote primary healthcare for medical professionals by utilising health technology techniques, such as tele-consultation and tele-mentoring. Using these methods, we try to reduce feelings of professional isolation, counteract brain drain in sparsely populated areas and provide more equal access to primary healthcare services to all citizens, regardless of where they live.

PrimCareIT is a Flagship Project of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). How was it chosen?

The EUSBSR is the first macro-regional strategy in Europe. It has three main objectives – saving the sea, connecting the region and increasing prosperity – and several priority areas under each
Programme in the spotlight

PrimCareIT has partnered with the Blekinge Wound Centre in Sweden to test the arrangements, structures and equipment needed to support wound centres remotely.

The tele-consultation pilot between Blekinge Wound Centre and several primary healthcare centres focused on wound assessment, treatment and health to promote patient care. It approached this goal by testing devices that could improve tele-support and replace or complement consultations.

During the pilot – which started in 2012 – nurses and nurse assistants at five healthcare centres continually participated in tele-consultations via a video conference system in different types of wound consultations and assessment scenarios.

According to Pilot Leader Ewy Olander: “Both the Wound Centre personnel and primary healthcare staff were satisfied with the tele-consultation and agreed it brought several benefits, such as faster and easier access to experts, increased quality in assessments of wounds and more secure treatment”.

Moreover, both centres involved in the pilot enthused that tele-consultations with mentoring facilitated a higher competence in wound treatment among the primary healthcare personnel, improved working satisfaction and offered higher qualities for primary healthcare wound consultations.

Could you explain ‘tele-mentoring’ and ‘tele-consultation’? How is PrimCareIT encouraging both to take form in remote healthcare settings?

Tele-consultation is a form of consultation that takes place virtually via audio and visual communication. It enables communication between doctors of different disciplines or with specialists in other healthcare institutions.

Tele-mentoring is a form of virtual mentoring that can take various forms. Our pilot schemes consist of one-on-one virtual mentoring as well as e-lectures with several mentees at once. Tele-mentoring provides good opportunities for continuing education and professional development for health workers and GPs in remote areas.

What are the aims of these 12 pilot programmes, and how are they faring?

PrimCareIT project is responsible for 12 pilots, seven in tele-consultation and five in tele-mentoring. The pilots were carried out...
The first macro-regional strategy in Europe

The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region supports cooperation in several key areas to face challenges from healthcare to environmental issues and promote balanced development.

17 per cent of the EU’s population resides in the Baltic Sea Region, made up of Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. These 85 million individuals share common challenges, which the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) aims to overcome.

The EUSBSR is taking on these challenges by bringing together initiatives in different sectors, promoting cooperation between stakeholders in the Region, and promoting and funding Flagship Projects.

The Strategy has three key areas: saving the sea, connecting the region and increasing prosperity. Each of these objectives is an umbrella for several priority areas, which are specific areas that foster macro-regional cooperation to address important challenges and opportunities.

by project partners in Belarus, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden. The pilots had similar aims, including enhancing the means of communication and consultation between healthcare personnel; participating in continued education and lectures; and supporting young or otherwise less experienced healthcare professionals working in remote regions. Overall, the pilots have proven successful and many sites continue to use these techniques as part of their daily work routines. For most, these opportunities bring significant time and cost savings.

In what ways is collaboration between international partners important to your goals? Could you provide examples of key challenges and opportunities these partnerships have provided?

During the PrimCareIT project, it became apparent that challenges and problems are rather similar in the BSR countries. International collaboration offers great development potential in this field, as well as the chance to learn from each other. Adapting technology in the healthcare field is both an opportunity and a challenge. We found similar challenges between different countries, including healthcare professionals’ attitudes, financial obstacles, and technical and operational challenges. On the other hand, after experiencing good results from technology adaptation, it became easier to accept new work models.