Patients in charge, qualitative study on e-health and empowerment
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Summary
Healthcare is encountering two major challenges in the near future. It faces a care capacity problem and meets a changing care consumer. The focus on empowerment and the use of e-health within healthcare are seen as possible solutions for these challenges. E-health is a relatively new phenomenon in health care. E-health is considered as a means to stimulate patient empowerment. The term empowerment is again a topic of present interest. It is not a unambiguous topic. More controle, more selfmanagement are terms used to define this concept. There is little knowledge about the influence of e-health on patient empowerment, or the influence on the health care professional. Therefore it is difficult describe the actual contribution of e-health on patient empowerment.

The main purpose of the study was to obtain knowledge about the empowering value of e-health and e-health interventions, by describing its influence on patients and healthcare professionals. This would lead to recommendations on stimulating patient empowerment in mental health care with the use of e-health.

The research question was:
What is the influence of e-health and e-health interventions on empowerment of patients in (mental) health care and on the health care professional’s methods.

The following sub questions were formulated:
1. What is the definition of e-health and e-health interventions?
2. What is the definition of the concept empowerment and what are the aspects for patient and health care professional?
3. What is the influence of e-health and e-health interventions on patient empowerment?
4. What is the influence of e-health and e-health interventions on the health care professional’s methods?
5. During what phase of the treatment or care process does the influence of the different e-health interventions occur?

The study was performed as a qualitative study, consisting of a literature review and interviews. The data-analyse were done by the method of open coding using a text analysis program. For validation of the outcomes a expert meeting was held.

Based on the findings from the literature review and interviews a definition of e-health was given and e-health interventions were categorised and described. A conceptual model for empowerment was developed, based on literature and validated in the interviews. The model for empowerment exists of four aspects: attitude, knowledge input, dialogue and cooperation. The four aspects have been further developed into a model for empowerment for patients and a model for empowerment and health care professionals. These theoretical concepts were used to describe the influence of e-health and e-health interventions on patient empowerment and the health care professional’s method. Both questions were answered through literature review and interviews.

Based on the outcomes the following can be concluded:

• For both patient and health care professional there are four aspects for empowerment: attitude, knowledge input, dialogue and cooperation.
• E-health as a whole and the total package of e-health interventions have the potential to contribute to patient empowerment in all treatment phases.
• De possibilities for patient empowerment are specifically supported by e-health elements such as online information, e-communication and possibilities for e-self-care, within the different e-health interventions.
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- The influence of e-health on the working method of health care professionals is visible as a general shift of ideas about who’s is charge, but the influence of the different e-health interventions has not yet sufficiently enough been translated to the daily care practice.

Overseeing the results, conclusions and the comments in the discussion, the following recommendations can made:

- Use knowledge and e-health interventions from other health care sectors, to develop a whole package of e-health care for the mental health care sector, to support patient empowerment during all phases of treatment.

- Do not only invest in treatment interventions for the mental health sector, but particularly stimulate and develop e-health interventions that support dialogue and cooperation, for instance a Personal Health Record, e-communication and self-care tasks.

- Support the empowering quality of e-health interventions by explicitating the impact on the health care professional’s working methods, using the empowerment model for the healthcare professional.

- More research is needed into the influence of e-health and e-health interventions on the working methods of the health care professional to acquire more knowledge, which can be used to enrich the health care professionals job profile and educational curricula.

The study describes the state of current practice on the subject. The outcomes can be helpful for care organisations, but also for health care professionals, to further develop empowering health care with the use of e-health and e-health interventions.