



The Importance of Digital Health as an Enabler of Self-Care in the Asia-Pacific (APAC)

Position Paper by the Asia-Pacific Self-Medication Industry (APSMI)

BACKGROUND

As a membership-driven and not-for-profit organization, APSMI is committed to advancing self-care through improving access to high-quality healthcare products and solutions for all in the Asia-Pacific (APAC). APSMI views this as one of the most crucial aspects for the long-term sustainability and equity of the region's healthcare systems, as it empowers people to proactively manage their own health while allowing for valuable healthcare resources to be diverted towards the most essential health-care activities.

Healthcare systems across the region are operating at a critical point in time. 62% of all deaths in the South-East Asian region are due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and one quarter of the population will be over 60 by 2050, putting an increasingly heavy burden on resources [1]. With the average number of doctors and healthcare spending compared to GDP lower than the OECD average in the majority of Asia, digital health can immensely help manage the need to balance healthcare expenditure with access to care [2]. To realize the highest gains from digital healthcare in terms of cost-savings and wellbeing – which creates spillover effects into all facets of the economy - regulatory improvements to safely and sustainably expand digital tools and infrastructure are essential.

In recognizing this, APSMI aspires to collaborate with key stakeholders to build a broad advocacy platform for digital health solutions for self-care, to integrate into national health strategies across APAC. We see ourselves as a convening body and facilitator to bring together diverse stakeholders from across sectors and industries for a whole-of-society, participatory approach to digital health policymaking.

THE IMPORTANCE DIGITAL HEALTH SOLUTIONS FOR CONSUMERS HEALTHCARE:



Consumers in Asia are spending more than ever before on health and wellness, with over half of the region's adults willing to spend higher for better healthcare outcomes [3]. This rise in demand for more access to convenient and affordable care was catapulted by COVID-19, when people were required to manage their own health through utilizing telemedicine and e-pharma to access self-care solutions such as non-prescription medicines, vitamins, minerals, and supplements (VMS) and diagnostics kits. The consumer-centric digital health market in Asia is projected to grow over US\$100 billion in 2025 from US\$37.4 billion only four years ago – with telemedicine and e-pharmacy being the main drivers [2]. It is important for APAC governments to build the best framework and tools to respond to the rise in consumer healthcare by ensuring that people have safe, sustainable, and equitable access to quality products.


DIGITAL HEALTH LITERACY AS A CORNERSTONE OF HEALTHCARE ACCESS

Health literacy has been recognized as a critical determinant of health by the World Health Organization (WHO). With digital transformation driven by regional trends such as an increase in the ageing population and NCDs, the healthcare sector has been completely reshaped by incorporating software, hardware, and services. This makes digital health literacy an essential component of access for consumers, making it crucial for healthcare regulators and policymakers to ensure no one is left behind. In general, levels of comprehension for healthcare information remain low across APAC countries [4]. Campaigns conducted by governments with stakeholders such as patient organizations, consumers groups and medical providers have been proven to further self-care empowerment and health literacy rates significantly (over 50% in India and Indonesia) [4].

IV MAIN CHALLENGES AND POLICY OPPORTUNITIES TO BENEFIT PATIENTS AND HEALTHCARE SYSTEM OUTCOMES

Despite the proliferation of digitalization, APAC lacks regional standards for regulating the core activities of digital health. For example, national APAC authorities regulating healthcare products (i.e. FDAs) and Ministries of Health would benefit from evidence-based frameworks with regulatory guidance for e-labelling to enhance access to information, and e-pharmacy to broaden medical access to manage a wide range of health ailments. More consumers in the Asia-Pacific have demonstrated a preference to seek over-the-counter (OTC) medicines from their pharmacy to manage simple conditions before going to see a physician [5]. Simplifying regulations such as registration procedures for OTC products and making these safely available on e-commerce platforms would largely stand to benefit and empower healthcare consumers.

More constructive engagement with stakeholders across industries and sectors can pave the way forward for the region and can be driven by organizations such as APSMI. National regulators stand to benefit from collaborating with other experts, government agencies, and private sector companies from various healthcare industries such as telemedicine and MedTech and other linked sectors such as infrastructure and energy, to inform system-wide approaches to adopting digital healthcare tools and promoting access to information. For example, 40% of consumers across 10 key markets in Asia encounter issues with physical labels for food products, demonstrating the need for inter-agency cooperation to address common digital literacy issues [4].



V CONSUMER-CENTRIC DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM CONDUCIVE TO SELF-CARE

- 1. APAC requires a Digital Literacy framework and guideline development to realize self-care outcomes.** APAC countries would benefit from evidence-based guidance for digital literacy based on global standards, which is essential for widespread implementation. This may resemble common standards through a shared digital platform on how to use e-labels for patients and HCPs and how to benefit from a full e-health journey, including telemedicine, e-pharmacy and e-commerce. Digital platforms can provide a trusted source of health information to provide science-based information (conditions, symptom checker, OTC directory, etc.) to HCPs (such as Health Direct in Australia, Halodoc in Indonesia, Docquity in South East Asia, SwipeRx in South East Asia and many more).
- 2. As part of its overall digital literacy efforts, policymakers must foster more constructive engagement with a wide range of medical stakeholders.** Pharmacists play a pivotal role in healthcare management by recommending the appropriate products to people in need of healthcare solutions and disseminating information on how to use digital health tools such as e-labels. Their buy-in and commitment to integrating self-care and digital literacy education into practice is essential. APSMI can serve as a collaborator and link between pharmacists and regulators in digital literacy efforts as a key driver of consumers health education.
- 3. Regulatory harmonization for e-labelling and e-pharmacies to support adoption must become a policy priority for APAC countries.** Self-CARER has a pivotal role in advancing this agenda and can significantly advance the benefits of digital health in the respective APAC countries with the support of APSMI, the private sector, academia, and HCPs.
- 4. APAC countries will benefit from evidence generation for consumer insights to inform policy development such as market insights and even real world evidence studies.** Consumer data reflecting consumer health usage, sentiment, and needs is an essential part of policy development for patient-centric outcomes. Neutral parties such as academic institutions and think tanks should drive these efforts, integrating AI-enabled analytics to truly understand and respond to emerging trends in digital healthcare.

ABOUT APSMI

APSMI is a membership-driven organization established in 2010 in Taipei, as a result of cooperation among the following industry associations in the region. APSMI is affiliated with Global Self-Care Federation (GSCF) as the regional association for Asia-Pacific. APSMI is a non-governmental, voluntary, non-profit organization. APSMI also works closely with Self-CARER, any association of APAC regulators who share our commitment to improving the regulatory landscape for healthcare access.

WORKS CITED

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