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Digital health and proximity: does technology bring professionals closer to or further from patients?

Saúde digital e proximidade: a tecnologia aproxima ou afasta os profissionais dos doentes?
Salud digital y proximidad: ¿la tecnología acerca o aleja a los profesionales de los pacientes?

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Abstract:
Digital transformation has become a key driver in the modernization of healthcare systems, fostering new forms of interaction between healthcare professionals and patients. This study aimed to analyse the impact of digital health on the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients in Portugal, seeking to determine whether digital technologies promote greater proximity or contribute to distancing within the therapeutic relationship. An exploratory study was conducted through a literature review of scientific publications and institutional documents published between 2019 and 2025, using international databases and official national and international sources. The findings indicate that the implementation of digital solutions, including teleconsultation, telemonitoring, Electronic Medical Prescription, Electronic Health Records and SNS 24 services, has improved healthcare accessibility, continuity of care and organisational efficiency. Nevertheless, challenges related to digital health literacy, technological inclusion, data protection and the preservation of the human dimension of care remain significant. It is concluded that digital health represents an important tool for strengthening the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients, provided that technological innovation supports rather than replaces person-centred clinical care.

Keywords: digital health; National Health Service; digital transformation; Portugal.

Resumo:
A transformação digital dos sistemas de saúde tem vindo a assumir um papel determinante na modernização da prestação de cuidados, promovendo novas formas de interação entre profissionais de saúde e utentes. O presente estudo teve como objetivo analisar a influência da saúde digital na proximidade entre profissionais de saúde e doentes em Portugal, procurando compreender se as tecnologias digitais favorecem a aproximação ou o distanciamento na relação terapêutica. Desenvolveu-se uma investigação exploratória, baseada numa revisão bibliográfica da literatura científica e documental publicada entre 2019 e 2025, com recurso a bases de dados internacionais e a documentos de entidades oficiais nacionais e internacionais. Os resultados evidenciam que a implementação de soluções como a teleconsulta, a telemonitorização, a Prescrição Eletrónica Médica, o Registo de Saúde Eletrónico e os serviços do SNS 24 contribuiu para melhorar a acessibilidade, a continuidade dos cuidados e a eficiência organizacional. Contudo, foram identificados desafios relacionados com a literacia digital, a inclusão tecnológica, a proteção de dados pessoais e a preservação da dimensão humana dos cuidados. Conclui-se que a saúde digital constitui um instrumento relevante de aproximação entre profissionais e utentes, desde que a inovação tecnológica seja utilizada como complemento da prática clínica e integrada num modelo de cuidados centrado na pessoa.

Palavras-chave:
saúde digital; Serviço Nacional de Saúde; transformação digital; Portugal.

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Resumen:
La transformación digital de los sistemas de salud ha asumido un papel determinante en la modernización de la prestación de cuidados, promoviendo nuevas formas de interacción entre profesionales de la salud y usuarios. El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar la influencia de la salud digital en la proximidad entre profesionales de la salud y pacientes en Portugal, buscando comprender si las tecnologías digitales favorecen el acercamiento o el distanciamiento en la relación terapéutica. Se desarrolló una investigación exploratoria, basada en una revisión bibliográfica de la literatura científica y documental publicada entre 2019 y 2025, recurriendo a bases de datos internacionales y a documentos de entidades oficiales nacionales e internacionales. Los resultados evidencian que la implementación de soluciones como la teleconsulta, la telemonitorización, la Prescripción Electrónica Médica, el Registro Electrónico de Salud y los servicios del SNS 24 contribuyó a mejorar la accesibilidad, la continuidad de los cuidados y la eficiencia organizacional. Sin embargo, se identificaron desafíos relacionados con la alfabetización digital, la inclusión tecnológica, la protección de datos personales y la preservación de la dimensión humana de los cuidados. Se concluye que la salud digital constituye un instrumento relevante de acercamiento entre profesionales y usuarios, siempre que la innovación tecnológica sea utilizada como complemento de la práctica clínica e integrada en un modelo de cuidados centrado en la persona.

Palabras clave:
salud digital; Servicio Nacional de Salud; transformación digital; Portugal.

Introduction

Digital transformation has taken on a central role in European healthcare systems, responding to the challenges arising from population aging, increased demand for healthcare, human resource shortages, and the need to ensure greater efficiency in care delivery. In this context, digital health emerges as a strategy to promote the sustainability of healthcare systems, improve the quality of care, and strengthen the connection between healthcare professionals and citizens.

The concept of digital health has evolved over the last two decades, coming to encompass a vast array of innovative technologies and solutions, including telehealth, telemedicine, telemonitoring , artificial intelligence, health data analytics, wearable devices , and the Internet of Things (*IoT). Things* (IoT) and personalized medicine, which have transformed traditional care delivery models, enabling a more integrated, preventive and person-centered approach [1].

Recognizing the potential of these technologies, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined, in its *Global Strategy... on Digital Health 2020-2025* , strengthening digital governance as a strategic objective to support universal health coverage and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals related to health [2].

In this sense, in Portugal, the digitalization of health services has been a priority in recent years, a period in which initiatives have been implemented with the aim of simplifying processes and improving access to healthcare. Among these, the Electronic Health Record , the Electronic Medical Prescription (EMP) and the "Paperless Examinations" program stand out, which allows the centralized storage and sharing of prescriptions and clinical results, facilitating access to information by healthcare professionals and citizens [3; 4].

The country has invested in the development of telehealth through public policies and national programs, namely the National Strategic Plan for Telehealth (PENTS), and the progressive integration of services such as teleconsultation, telediagnosis, teletriage and telemonitoring has sought to bring healthcare closer to users [5].

The use of these tools intensified during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. A study conducted in Portugal between July and September 2020 revealed a high adoption rate among doctors of non-face-to-face consultations, with 93.8% of the professionals surveyed resorting to this modality. The telephone stood out as the main means of communication, while video calls showed lower usage, with high levels of professional satisfaction and a positive perception of the quality of care provided through these formats being recorded [6].

Despite the benefits associated with digitalization, technological dependence also brings challenges. Issues related to the protection of personal data, information security, system interoperability, and the increase in cyberattacks are increasingly present in the health sector. Cases recorded in Portuguese institutions demonstrate the need to strengthen digital security mechanisms in order to guarantee the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of clinical information [7].

In this scenario, the following question arises: to what extent does technology contribute to strengthening the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients? While digital tools allow for greater accessibility, faster communication, and continuous monitoring of users, there are also concerns related to the potential dehumanization of care, the reduction of face-to-face contact, and the impact of these changes on the therapeutic relationship.

Digital health thus presents itself as an instrument capable of bringing healthcare closer to citizens, but also as a phenomenon that demands reflection on its effects on the human dimension of care. It therefore becomes pertinent to analyze how the digitalization of healthcare services in Portugal influences the proximity between professionals and patients, assessing whether technologies reinforce or weaken the therapeutic relationship that forms the basis of healthcare.

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Thus, the present study has the general objective of analyzing the impact of digital health on the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients in Portugal, seeking to understand whether the use of digital technologies contributes to greater proximity or favors distancing in the provision of care.

Theoretical framework

Digital health and proximity in healthcare in Portugal

Digital transformation is considered one of the main strategies for improving the quality of care. Digital health integrates a set of technologies, processes, and systems that optimize the delivery of healthcare, promote communication between professionals and users, and facilitate the management of clinical information.

According to the World Health Organization, digital health encompasses the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), telemedicine, telemonitoring , electronic health record systems , artificial intelligence and other digital solutions aimed at improving health outcomes and service accessibility [2].

Its implementation has been encouraged throughout Europe as an instrument for modernizing health systems and bringing care closer to citizens. In Portugal, the digitalization of health has been driven by the National Health Service (SNS), highlighting the Electronic Health Record , the Electronic Medical Prescription (PEM), the "Paperless Examinations" program and the services provided through SNS 24 [8].

The expansion of telehealth constitutes one of the pillars of the Portuguese strategy for digital health. Through the National Strategic Plan for Telehealth (PENTS), services such as teleconsultation, telemonitoring , telediagnosis and teletriage were integrated, enabling healthcare to reach users [5].

Indeed, the use of digital technologies in healthcare has demonstrated benefits in the management of clinical information, enabling the storage, processing, and sharing of large volumes of data, supporting clinical and administrative decision-making, promoting continuity of care, reducing duplication of procedures, and contributing to greater patient safety.

However, the effectiveness of digital health depends on the ability of citizens and professionals to use the tools made available, with health literacy playing a fundamental role. In Portugal, and according to data collected between 2019 and 2021, around 70% of the

population has adequate levels of health literacy, although differences associated with age and level of education persist [9], which may constitute an obstacle to the use of services.

The implementation of digital systems also requires investments in infrastructure, professional training, and information security. One of the challenges concerns the protection of health data and cybersecurity. The increased circulation of clinical information in a digital environment makes it necessary to adopt mechanisms to protect the privacy of users and prevent cyberattacks [7].

Beyond technical and organizational issues, it is important to consider the impact of technologies on the therapeutic relationship. The literature shows that digital tools can strengthen the closeness between professionals and users; however, it warns of the risk of depersonalization of care when technological interaction replaces human contact.

In this context, the European Union has promoted policies for digital inclusion and the development of technological skills. In Portugal, initiatives such as the SNS 24 Helpline represent examples of digital inclusion, allowing users to access health services, with face-toface support when necessary, reducing technological barriers and promoting greater proximity between citizens and the SNS [10].

It is therefore understood that digital health should be seen as a strategy to improve the user experience and strengthen the relationship between citizens and health services. The challenge lies in balancing technological innovation and the humanization of care, ensuring that digital tools function as instruments for bringing healthcare professionals and patients closer together.

Method

This study is characterized as an exploratory investigation, developed through a literature review on digital health and its influence on the relationship between healthcare professionals and users in Portugal.

The choice of an exploratory approach is justified by the need to understand a constantly evolving phenomenon, marked by the rapid incorporation of digital technologies into healthcare systems and the transformations these technologies bring about in the provision of care and the therapeutic relationship.

The data collection focused on scientific publications, institutional reports, normative documents, and technical studies published between 2019 and 2025. The bibliographic research was conducted until November 2025. National and international scientific databases were

consulted, such as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed , and Google Scholar, as well as documents produced by official entities, including the Directorate-General of Health (DGS), the Shared Services of the Ministry of Health (SPMS), the National Health Service (SNS), the European Commission, and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The selection of documents was based on criteria of thematic relevance and scientific rigor. Studies addressing digital health, telehealth, telemedicine, health information systems, digital health literacy, and the relationship between health professionals and users were included. Works unrelated to the European or Portuguese context, publications without open access, and studies whose subject matter did not contribute to answering the research objective were excluded.

After gathering the sources, content analysis was carried out through reading and interpreting the main contributions identified in the literature. The information was organized and related to the digital transformation of healthcare and the opportunities provided by digital technologies for providing more accessible care.

Results

The literature review identified a set of studies, institutional reports, and normative documents that demonstrate the advancement of digital health in Portugal between 2019 and 2025. The analyzed works address topics related to telehealth, telemedicine, health information systems, digital literacy, remote consultations, information security, digital transformation, and technological innovation applied to healthcare.

It has been observed that the digital transformation of the Portuguese health sector has been supported by governmental and institutional initiatives aimed at modernizing services, notably the implementation of Electronic Medical Prescriptions (PEM), the "Paperless Exams" program, the Electronic Health Record, and the expansion of services provided by SNS 24.

The studies analyzed demonstrate a growth in the use of remote consultations, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as an increase in the use of digital platforms for communication between professionals and users. Studies were also identified that highlight the importance of digital health literacy, technological inclusion, and the protection of personal data as relevant elements for the consolidation of digital care models.

The analysis of the publications also revealed the existence of strategic initiatives focused on telehealth, aligned with the guidelines of the World Health Organization and the

European Union, with the aim of promoting greater accessibility to healthcare and greater efficiency of services.

Table 1 presents a summary of the main studies included in this review.

Table 1 — Summary of the analyzed studies on digital health and proximity to care.

Author / Year	Title	Method	Country	Key findings
Arriaga et al. (2022)	*Health Literacy in Portugal: Results of Health Literacy Population Survey Project 2019–2021*	National population survey	Portugal	Different levels of health literacy were identified in the Portuguese population, associated with sociodemographic and educational factors.
Mathews et al. (2019)	*Digital Health: A Path to Validation*	Conceptual review	United States	It presented models for the scientific and regulatory validation of digital health technologies.
Santos et al. (2024)	*SNS 24, the telephone triage service of the National Health System in Portugal: analyze, validate, improve*	Evaluation study of the SNS 24 service.	Portugal	It demonstrated the relevance of telephone triage as a mechanism for accessing and referring users within the National Health Service.
SPMS (2018)	*Paperless Exams*	Institutional document	Portugal	He described the implementation of the digitization of requests and results of clinical tests.
SPMS (2020)	*Electronic Medical Prescription (PEM)*	Institutional document	Portugal	electronic prescription system and its integration with health services.

Bobrowicz-Campos and Ventura (2022)	*People-centered approach for equitable digital health.*	Reflective/documentary study	Portugal	It highlighted the importance of usercenteredness and equity in the development of digital health.
Author / Year	**Title**	**Method**	**Country**	**Key findings**
O'Neill et al. (2022)	*Remote consultations in the Portuguese National Health Service during the COVID19 pandemic.*	Cross-sectional study with physicians	Portugal	High uptake was observed for remote consultations, along with positive perceptions regarding their use.
Rodrigues et al. (2025)	*Organization of work in healthcare and digital transformations*	Comparative study	Brazil and Portugal	It identified organizational changes resulting from the incorporation of digital technologies in health services.
SPMS / CNTS (2019)	*National Strategic Plan for Telehealth 2019-2022*	National strategic document	Portugal	It defined guidelines for the implementation of telehealth in the National Health Service.
Resende and Correia (2024)	*Digital health: analysis and European plans for digital transition in healthcare.*	Document review	European Union / Portugal	It mapped European digitalization strategies applied to the healthcare sector.
Magalhães et al. (2022)	*Digital health in Portugal (Spring Report 2022)*	Technical report	Portugal	He presented a diagnosis of the digital maturity of the Portuguese healthcare system.

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Candeira Braga and Furtado (2025)	*Telemedicine, data protection and information security*	Legal and documentary review	Brazil	He highlighted the need for data protection mechanisms and confidentiality of electronic health records.

Source: author's elaboration (2025).

The analyzed documents show that digital health in Portugal is supported by different technological components, including electronic clinical record systems, teleconsultation platforms, remote triage services, electronic prescriptions , and mechanisms for interoperability of health information. It was found that most studies published between 2022 and 2025 focus on evaluating the impacts of digital transformation on access to services, the organization of work in healthcare, digital literacy, and information security.

Finally, it was found that the selected studies show convergence regarding the expansion of digital health services in Portugal after the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which the use of non-face-to-face consultations, telemonitoring , and digital communication platforms between professionals and users intensified .

Discussion

The digital transformation of healthcare in Portugal, in light of the results, appears to be a well-established process, supported by public policies and continued investment in the modernization of the National Health Service. The literature reviewed is unanimous regarding the potential of digital technologies to expand access to care, make services more efficient, and facilitate communication between professionals and users. This potential, however, is not automatic: it only translates into real gains when technology is accompanied by measures for digital inclusion, training, and attention to the human dimension of care.

The World Health Organization’s strategic guidance [2] serves as a backdrop to this analysis, placing digital health among the indispensable tools for universal coverage, system sustainability and improved clinical outcomes. The National Strategic Plan for Telehealth [5] translates this global guidance into the national plan, setting out the lines of action that have made it possible to bring healthcare closer to Portuguese citizens. It is, in essence, the transition from an international recommendation to a concrete policy with its own targets.

This policy materialized in a set of tools that the SPMS documentation describes in detail [3; 4]: Electronic Medical Prescription, Electronic Health Record and the "Paperless Examinations" program streamlined administrative circuits, facilitated the circulation of clinical information and improved continuity of care. The diagnosis of the Portuguese Observatory of Health Systems [11] expands on this operational picture, showing that the digital maturity of the system has evolved progressively and that its effects extend beyond administrative procedures, reaching the very organization of care.

One of the clearest signs of this evolution was the rapid spread of telehealth during the pandemic. O'Neill et al. [6] documented the strong adoption by Portuguese doctors of non-faceto-face consultations and an overall positive assessment of the quality of care thus provided. In a different but convergent register, the study on SNS 24 [8] shows how telephone triage has become an effective gateway for guiding and referring users. Distinct services, therefore, but which point in the same direction: when used well, digital means shorten geographical distances and bring professionals and citizens closer together.

It would still be premature to conclude that technology generates proximity by itself. Bobrowicz -Campos and Ventura [10] remind us that digital health only fulfills its promise when it remains person-centered and faithful to the principles of equity and inclusion. Health literacy data substantiate this caveat: if, as Arriaga et al. [9] show, significant differences associated with age and education persist, then the focus on the user depends, in practice, on the digital skills that the population actually possesses. Humanization and literacy thus emerge as two sides of the same problem.

Information security constitutes the other critical facet of this transformation. The work of Candeira Braga and Furtado [7] draws attention to the increased risks that the digital circulation of clinical data entails for privacy and confidentiality, and advocates for the strengthening of cybersecurity — a concern that the OPSS diagnosis [11] also underlines by placing digital security among the pillars of modernization. The common message is that there is no sustainable digital transformation without robust protection of the clinical information that feeds it.

Finally, there is a dimension that cuts across all the previous ones: the work itself in healthcare changes with digitalization. Rodrigues et al. [12] observed changes in organizational models resulting from the introduction of technologies, which require new skills and the reconfiguration of care processes. This requirement is linked to the warning by Mathews et al. [1] regarding the need to scientifically and regulatorily validate digital solutions before generalizing them, ensuring that they demonstrate efficacy, safety, and clinical benefit.

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Changing the organization of work and ensuring the quality of the tools are, therefore, inseparable tasks.

Looking at the whole picture, authors rarely disagree on the usefulness of technology; they do, however, disagree on the conditions that make it beneficial. Some value above all the organizational and technological gains, while others insist on humanization, literacy, social inclusion, and data protection. Far from contradicting each other, these emphases complement each other and suggest that the success of digital transformation rests on an integrated approach, capable of combining innovation, empowerment of professionals and users, and preservation of the therapeutic relationship.

In summary, the evidence gathered points to a nuanced conclusion: in Portugal, digital health tends to bring professionals and patients closer together, provided it functions as support for clinical practice and not as a substitute for human contact. The quality of the therapeutic relationship continues to depend, ultimately, on the ability of professionals to integrate digital resources into a safe, accessible, and person-centered care delivery.

Final considerations

The digital transformation of healthcare services represents one of the most significant changes observed in contemporary healthcare systems, assuming a strategic role in improving accessibility, continuity of care, and organizational efficiency. In the Portuguese context, the implementation of solutions such as teleconsultation, Electronic Medical Prescription, Electronic Health Record , and the services provided by SNS 24 demonstrates the National Health Service's commitment to innovation and modernization of care.

The literature review concluded that digital technologies tend to strengthen the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients, particularly by reducing geographical barriers, streamlining communication, and facilitating clinical follow-up. However, the benefits of digitalization depend on the existence of policies that promote digital literacy, technological inclusion, system interoperability, and high standards of health information protection.

It has been found that the therapeutic relationship remains a central element in the provision of care and cannot be replaced by technology. Therefore, digital innovation should be understood as a tool to support clinical practice, contributing to safer, more efficient, and person-centered care, without compromising the humanization of care.

As a limitation, it is important to mention that the study was based on a literature review, not incorporating empirical evidence from healthcare professionals or users. It is recommended that future research use both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess the perceptions of different stakeholders regarding the impact of digital health on the quality of the therapeutic relationship and health outcomes, contributing to the development of more effective public policies.

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