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# INNOVATIONS & DIGITAL TRENDS IN HEALTHCARE

## BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS BETWEEN TECH AND HEALTHCARE IN SLOVAKIA

October 14 | 2021

Innovation remains one of the four key pillars supporting all of AmCham's activities. This full-day conference narrowed the focus down on one specific area where innovations could massively improve the quality of life in Slovakia - the healthcare system.

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis is testing the limits of healthcare systems around the world. In Slovakia, it clearly demonstrated the shortcomings of the current system - the lack of capacities as well as flexible solutions in a critical situation.

As Vladimír Mičieta, Country Manager, Medtronic, pointed out in his opening speech "Innovation in healthcare is not only about implementing new solutions and technologies but about starting to do things differently." This requires a different approach and a different mindset and presents a real challenge to the prevailing conservative outlook.

The good news is, and this was one of the most often repeated messages of the conference, that Slovakia currently finds itself in a unique position to implement changes which could have a lasting positive effect. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is the largest component of Next Generation EU (NGEU), the EU's instrument for recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. In the years to come, RRF will represent

an unprecedented financial injection into the Slovak healthcare system. As the experts at the conference agreed, the question of the day is how to use these funds efficiently and create a long-lasting impact.

**The pandemic  
has shown us  
that without  
digital  
solutions of  
the highest  
quality our  
options are  
very limited.**

JÁN HARGAŠ



Ján Hargaš, State Secretary, Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatization, stressed the importance of a successful digital transformation in general, as Slovakia lags behind not only in healthcare, but also science, education, research, or informatization. All of these areas impact the quality of life in an important way. However, he made a point of not only focusing on the technical aspects of innovative solutions, but on creating the human capital necessary to

absorb them as well. He perceives sufficient and properly skilled capacities of the public sector as critically important for the successful implementation of the desired innovations.

Federico Pratellesi, DG Sante, European Commission and Ľudmila Majláthová, Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia, shared their views on the transformation of health systems in the post-pandemic era. Ms. Majláthová noted that the pandemic helped in identifying the priorities and the incoming funds give Slovakia a huge opportunity to transform its healthcare system. However, they also pointed out the numerous negative effects of the pandemic which has stretched the capacity of the system too thin. RRF, as significant as it this, remains a temporary tool and it should be perceived as such. Any lasting changes have to be sustainable even when these funds are no longer available.

The subsequent discussion panels focused on specific issues which plague the Slovak healthcare system and stall a wider adoption of innovative solutions. Jasper Kunow, Managing Director for Central Eastern Europe, MSD, talked about the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on cancer treatment. Oncological disease has been on the rise in Europe even before the pandemic, which worsened the situation further due to late diagnosis

and lack of adequate treatment. Innovative treatments have vastly improved the survival rates, unfortunately, most of them are absent in Slovakia's public health system.

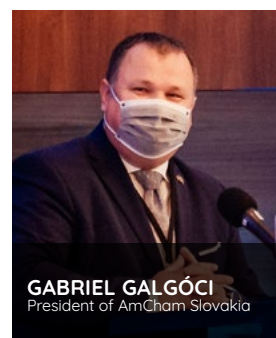
Slovakia counted among leaders in the field of oncology. Legislative changes adopted in 2011 which resulted in a different system of categorizing drugs reversed this situation. This discussion panel included doctors as well as experts from the public sector and the biggest health insurance company. As they agreed, Slovakia lacks a long-term vision in its drug and health policies which would acknowledge the future benefits of investments.

**In order to  
correctly  
interpret  
big data we  
need big  
investments.**

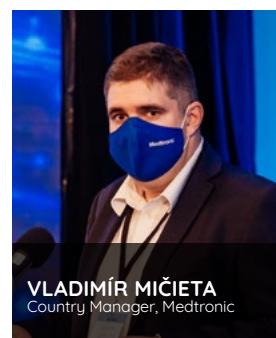
ROBERT HATALA



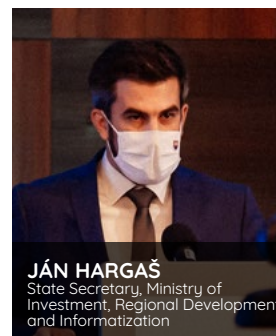
The next panel took a close look at current trends in innovative diagnostics of tissue and blood samples. Ales Ryška, President of the European Society of Pathology, introduced the



**GABRIEL GALGÓCI**  
President of AmCham Slovakia



**VLADIMÍR MIČIETA**  
Country Manager, Medtronic



**JÁN HARGAŠ**  
State Secretary, Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatization



**ĽUDMILA MAJLÁTHOVÁ**  
Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia

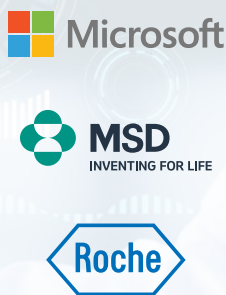




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latest trends and explained the benefits of next generation sequencing (NGS) which allows testing numerous genes of a cancer simultaneously. The panelists talked about the importance of predictive testing in general and how the resulting optimal choice of oncological treatment translates into better results for the patients.



**In the past in cancer care we were talking about surgery, radio therapy, chemo therapy. Now we're talking about personal self-care and immuno-oncology on top of that. These new interventions have turned cancer more into a chronic disease.**

JASPER KUNOW



The role of telemedicine, which became much more used during the pandemic, was the subject of the following panel. The panelists discussed the huge potential of telemedicine, as well as the particular issues which complicate its wider adoption in Slovakia. It requires a certain level of digital skills from both the doctors and the patients, the availability of experts to interpret the data and legislative updates clarifying the status of telemedicine in the system. The panelists also discussed the potential of AI in interpreting huge volumes of available data and identifying at risk cases for the doctors. Self-learning systems of this kind are already in use and should provide crucial assistance to doctors.

The afternoon program was opened by an inspiring presentation by Karina Rubinstein, describing how Israel continues to shine as a hub of med-tech innovation, with more than 1,500 companies in the health care and life sciences sectors, roughly 70% in medical devices and digital health. The country offers ideal conditions for innovative research and development in this area, in accordance with the trend labeled bioconvergence, which combines various fields such as biology, engineering, nanotech, and IT.

Back to the Slovak reality, the next panel discussion took a look at the patient journey in our country and the potential of innovative

solutions and technologies to improve it. The panelists share best practices from abroad and discussed their applicability in Slovakia. As it became evident, introducing innovative solutions is a complex process which requires a certain level of digital skills and openness to change from the patient population as well as the healthcare providers.

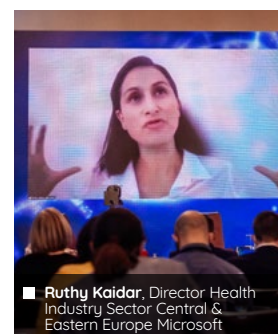
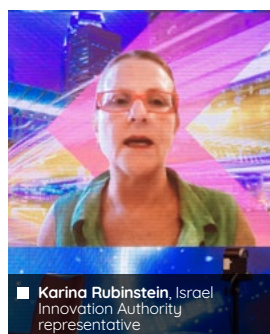


**The better technologies we have at our disposal, the more we should focus on people.**

MARCELA HAVRILOVÁ



The following panel shifted the attention to the topic of mental health, which has gained prominence over the past two years. The sudden switch to remote work forced by the pandemic offers people more flexibility and comfort but the missing social contacts and a blurring of boundaries between work and private life have led to a sudden rise in depression and other mental health issues. One of the biggest challenges for the private sector is to have clearly







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defined processes and programs to identify and help the people dealing with such issues. This often requires a change of mindset and company culture, with the managers leading by example in creating a healthy and safe work environment.



**Value based  
public  
procurement  
which helps  
to introduce  
diagnostics,  
therapies and  
innovative  
tools into the  
system for  
the benefit of  
the patient.  
It's important  
to evaluate  
it in the  
context of the  
entire patient  
journey.**

PAVOL LEPEY



Another aspect that was discussed considered threats to healthcare security in the digital era. As healthcare systems integrate innovative

solutions, they are also opening up to cyber-attacks. A series of recent cyber-attacks on hospitals in the Czech Republic serves as sufficient warning. The present experts discussed how to react if such an event occurs, and, even more importantly, how to prevent it. With the pace of new cyber threats appearing, the general recommendation was to outsource these services to an experienced provider instead of attempting to handle cyber security issues on your own.

The last panel of the conference introduced the term value based public procurement. This concept should change the logic of the public procurement process to include a wider set of perspectives and evaluation criteria and enable the introduction of innovative therapies and diagnostic methods. The ultimate goal is an overall improvement of the patient journey, but all the involved stakeholders should benefit.

As the conference confirmed, numerous barriers preventing a wider introduction of innovative solutions into the Slovak healthcare system still exist. The most often mentioned steps towards breaking these barriers down involved a change of mindset, closer cooperation between various stakeholders and a more holistic approach taking into consideration the long-term effects of each decision. Let's hope that the unique opportunity related to RRF will be used to make the critical first steps down this path.

