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South Korea and Estonia to collaborate in healthcare through the use of AI

The MSS has initiated bilateral discussions to utilize Estonian genomic information of tenant companies in Gangwon's special healthcare zone.

Sejong, June 4, 2024 – The Ministry of SMEs and Startups (MSS, Minister OH Youngju) held director-general-level discussions with the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs in Tallinn, Estonia's capital, on Monday, June 3, 2024. The talks took place to discuss using Estonia's genomic information and medical data.

Estonia has an innovative startup ecosystem and maintains a high level of ICT infrastructure. In fact, it was the first country in the world to introduce e-voting in 2007. A majority of routine medical data is collected and securely stored using blockchain technology based on this infrastructure. Additionally, through the BioBank project, genomic information from over 200,000 individuals has been collected. These standardized medical data sets form the basis for Estonia's leadership in healthcare innovation in Europe.

In South Korea, the entire population is enrolled in national health insurance, generating a significant amount of public medical data annually through continuous health check-up records. However, companies can only utilize this data partially due to the lack of regulatory framework and social consensus regarding the use of medical data.

During the discussions, KIM Hong-ju, Director General of Economic Zones Innovation Planning, and Jaanika Merilo, Head of eHealth strategy of Estonia, discussed procedures and methods to support tenant companies in Gangwon's Global Innovation Special Zone for Healthcare in utilizing Estonia's genomic information. They also agreed to seek mutual governmental interest and support for joint R&D projects between tenant companies in the Gangwon special zone and the University of Tartu in Estonia.

Earlier in the day, a delegation from MSS visited the Estonian Business Innovation Agency to discuss providing consulting, funding, and other support for the companies in the Gangwon Global Innovation Special Zone, which will pursue international collaborative research and development with Estonian universities and other entities.

Moreover, there were discussions about support measures for Korean AI healthcare startups looking to collaborate with Health Founders, a health tech-focused accelerator, and universities and companies in Estonia. Health Founders, the first health tech-specific accelerator in the Baltic Sea region, identifies and supports startups in the health tech sector by integrating them with Estonia's health information system.

Also, on June 4, an MOU was signed between HEO Jang-hyeon, Head of Gangwon Technopark, the dedicated agency for Gangwon's Global Innovation Special Zone for AI healthcare, and Andrus Kurvits, Director of Tartu Science Park, a regional innovation agency in Estonia. This MOU aims to provide empirical support and foster talent development for AI healthcare companies.

On June 5, the "Korea-Estonia AI Healthcare Roundtable" was held to promote collaborative technology development and knowledge sharing in the field of AI healthcare between the two countries. Healthcare companies from both countries, as well as experts, including the Director of the Clinical Research Center at the University of Tartu in Estonia and Professor MOON Jisook from CHA University, attended the roundtable.

KIM Hong-ju, Director General of Economic Zones Innovation Planning, stated, "If tenant companies in Gangwon's Global Innovation Special Zone can leverage the extensive healthcare data established by Estonia, it will significantly contribute to developing AI healthcare technology." He added, "MSS will explore additional support measures not only for technology development but also for entering global markets, including Europe."