



Truth or Consequences?

No one can predict
with any certainty
AI's future role in healthcare.

BY LYNN HOMISAK, PRT

Topic: AI: Truth or Consequences?

Dear Lynn,

For my own peace of mind, help me understand why or why not our practice should take part in the AI revolution. I am an assistant and it appears our doctor is considering moving in that direction. I realize this is not my decision to make; however, I feel my job may be in jeopardy as a result. Through articles and colleagues, he believes that AI can help him cut costs (me!) Is it truly the latest and greatest technology for our office, for our patients, for our staff—or am I right to be worried?

I understand your apprehension. Let's talk a little about Artificial Intelligence. It is said that in order to understand its role, one should look at it more of an "evolution" as opposed to a "revolution". So let's explore what that means first.

"There is nothing permanent except change"—Heraclitus. And for sure, AI's impact is a game changer, comparable to the advent of the in-

ternet, computers and cell phones, etc. And like any change, some see it as a good thing—others, not so much.

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AI-manipulated photos and make-believe videos only feeds the fear of "where will this all go?" and "is it too late to intervene?"

People are worried about security and privacy and also the fear

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more concerned than excited about the increased use of AI in daily life. Not surprising, given that the benefits and risks of AI generated information are not yet 100% foolproof. Part of their apprehension is that new, untested technology, run by a few investors, could take a wrong turn and go off track.

For example, if it was merely used for harmless entertainment, like bunnies jumping on trampolines, one might just laugh and brush it off. But having been exposed to things like

of losing their ability to distinguish truth from deception in an AI-driven world. They wonder, who is in control? Man or machine? AI is the new shiny tool. But the fear is not the tool itself; it's about who is wielding it.

Understandably, those unknown factors trouble the skeptics. AI's intention feels unpredictable to them, creating in their minds a slippery slope. Will it be used for better or worse? Will AI be used against them? Encourage job displacement? The un-

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restricted spread of misinformation? All of the above?

While this technology is considered fairly novel to the general public, it is not really new to the technology world. The modern field of artificial intelligence was actually formalized in the 1950s and was known then as “machine intelligence”. Although AI maintains it is not at its full potential yet, it is expected to grow exponentially. Progress...for or in spite of us.

Reassuring or not, we are all part of the AI experiment. Today, who among us hasn't called upon Siri or Alexa on a regular basis to get information, instruction, weather, directions, etc.? Both digital assistants are examples of AI.

So what about its role in health-care?

One conclusion published in *PubMed Central/The National Library of Medicine*, is that the “integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into health



care has the potential to transform the industry, but it also raises ethical, regulatory, and safety concerns.” You can read this more in-depth analysis by scanning the QR code at left.

Others believe that the AI will serve to benefit the workplace. In a medical practice it can reduce documentation, boost marketing through more direct patient contact, increase patient education, and streamline administrative tasks—billing, for example, effortlessly and accurately.

Are these responsibilities that assistants are currently able to do? Yes. Are they typically expected to do them? Yes. Have they always performed them consistently and effectively? Not always. Might there be a more reliable option? Enter AI.

From a salary perspective, AI backers make it sound like all roses and sunshine. Just replace staff and you'll see significant savings in manual labor, working hours, benefits, and overall payroll expenses. They say if staff salaries are the biggest overhead expense employers



face, replacing them must be the solution.

But is substituting humans truly a solution, or just another hollow promise of unrealistic financial gain?

The introduction of AI-infused functional office technologies like automated patient reminder services, online appointment sched-

require staff's physical presence and hands-on responsibilities. Specifically, patient rooming, direct patient care, prepping treatment rooms for protocols, assisting doctor with patient-service procedures and medical emergencies, medical equipment, and supplies, and managing patient flow in real time.

In addition to these physical skills and tasks, what we simply *cannot* and *should not* eliminate is the vital role that staff have in one-on-one patient interactions like customer service, the verbal welcoming and comforting of patients, extending kindness, compassion and empathy. You know, the ability to touch the soul and emotion of an individual and hold their hand during their unnerving injections. These invaluable

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uling, EMR, or telehealth patient visits made a positive impact in efficiency and productivity. Some even suggested they would reduce staff numbers.

Turns out, these office automated tools didn't so much *replace* staff as make their jobs easier and more efficient with less mistakes. In fact, some even created additional jobs that required additional staff. Take scribes, for example. People were needed to operate the technology.

There are some legitimate behind-the-scenes tasks that can effectively and successfully be boosted by AI programs (e.g., billing, self-appointment patient scheduling, patient recall and reminders, web design and patient access, etc.). And make no mistake: removing the more sedentary functions from a busy assistant's job description will streamline their time, freeing them up for more meaningful patient care duties. A plus-plus!

What AI cannot do is perform the necessary practical skills that

human qualities are known to positively impact patient outcomes and satisfaction.

No one can predict with any certainty what future AI will look like. Like all technology that came before it, AI will also take some getting used to. However, in our world, from Visionaries to Laggards, there is no doubt that much like our acceptance of the world wide web, we will proceed and eventually embrace its presence. For some, with a full steam ahead mentality; for others, with caution and resistance.

The same will hold true of AI's influence, including its mishandling of factual information. Society will grow to expect it and learn to deal with it.

Beyond administrative undertakings, we can't help but wonder just how much it will affect medical healthcare. Will it one day replace the need for doctors to share and discuss case studies with colleagues for educational purposes? Will patient

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data privacy be protected? And again, to your concern, will job displacement for staff—or even physicians—

timeline in place? Your concerns are real and deserve acknowledgement and clarity. It would also help the practice if you were on board with its growth goals.

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become inevitable? Only time will tell.

As for the present, my advice to you is to do some homework on your own to learn more about AI's role in a medical office. It might prove to be reassuring to you. Also, plan to have a discussion with your doctor. How does he intend to implement AI? What specific technologies is he considering? How will it affect your responsibilities? Is there a

Our workplace keeps evolving and in order to stay competitive, the adoption of AI-generated tasks will soon become a required part of office training. Doctors/employers want staff that are committed to practice progress and success and eager to embrace new developments to that end. So be open to change. Resistance could be just the thing that leads to replacement.

In the end, for yours and ev-

everyone's peace of mind, we have to believe that AI is meant to compliment human proficiency, not replace it. Big changes will not happen overnight. So, until the day when we are faced with robotic staff as a suitable replacement for the human workforce (my personal nightmare), I presume you will remain a valued and irreplaceable team member! Best of luck! **PM**



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