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The Irreplaceable Role of Human Doctors in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

[1] Günay Nağıyeva, [2] Harun Süleymanov
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Abstract. *Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most transformative forces in contemporary healthcare, demonstrating remarkable capabilities in medical image analysis, diagnostic accuracy, predictive monitoring, and drug discovery. This article critically examines the central question of whether AI can fully replace human doctors, analyzing both the documented capabilities of AI systems and their persistent structural limitations. Drawing on recent empirical studies and theoretical frameworks from medical informatics and bioethics, the analysis identifies three principal domains of AI superiority — speed and data processing, pattern recognition in imaging, and predictive analytics — alongside three critical domains of irreplaceable human competence: emotional intelligence and the therapeutic relationship, ethical reasoning and accountability, and the clinical judgment required in complex and ambiguous cases. The article further presents evidence from a survey of 30 medical students, whose responses largely affirm the view that AI functions most productively as a supportive tool for physicians rather than a substitute for them. The role of English language proficiency as a prerequisite for engagement with AI-mediated global medical knowledge is additionally examined. The findings support a collaborative model of human-AI partnership in medicine, arguing that the future of healthcare lies not in technological substitution but in the complementary integration of computational precision and human compassion.*

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, medicine, human doctors, AI in healthcare, diagnostic AI, medical ethics, doctor-patient relationship, English for medical purposes*

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed numerous sectors of human activity, but perhaps nowhere more profoundly or consequentially than in healthcare. Modern AI systems demonstrate an extraordinary capacity for analyzing large and complex datasets, detecting pathological patterns in medical imaging, predicting patient deterioration, and accelerating pharmaceutical research — capabilities that have led some commentators to suggest that AI may eventually supplant human doctors as the primary agents of diagnosis and treatment (Topol, 2019;

[1] Nağıyeva, G. Lecturer; Doctoral Student, Nakhchivan Teachers Institute, Nakhchivan State University, Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan. Email: gunaynaghiyeva1995@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2845-6741

[2] Süleymanov, H. First-Year Medical Student, Nakhchivan State University, Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan. Email: harunsuleymanov7854@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7901-074X

Maslej et al., 2024). This position, while superficially compelling, rests on a partial and reductive understanding of what medicine actually is and what doctors actually do.

Medicine is not reducible to data analysis and pattern recognition. It is a fundamentally human practice grounded in the therapeutic relationship between doctor and patient — a relationship built on trust, empathy, moral responsibility, and the kind of contextual, experiential judgment that cannot be replicated by algorithmic processes (Jørgensen et al., 2022). The question of whether AI can replace human doctors is therefore not primarily a technological question but a philosophical and ethical one: it concerns the nature of care, the requirements of trust, and the conditions under which medical decisions can be made accountably and justly.

This article addresses this question through a dual approach. First, it reviews the current state of AI capability in healthcare, identifying the domains in which AI systems have demonstrated documented advantages over unaided human performance and the domains in which fundamental limitations persist. Second, it presents primary survey evidence from a study of medical students' perceptions of AI in medicine, providing an empirical perspective from the healthcare professionals of the future. The article further examines the linguistic dimension of AI-mediated medical knowledge, noting the role of English language proficiency as a prerequisite for full engagement with global medical research and AI-assisted clinical tools. The central argument is that AI and human clinical expertise are not competitors but complementary partners, and that the future of medicine lies in their thoughtful, ethically informed integration.

2. Capabilities of AI in Healthcare

2.1 Data Processing and Diagnostic Speed

The most frequently cited advantage of AI in medical contexts is its capacity to process and analyze data at speeds and scales that far exceed human cognitive capacity. Research from Stanford HAI and McKinsey demonstrates that AI systems can analyze vast quantities of clinical data — laboratory results, imaging studies, electronic health records, and genomic data — in seconds, identifying patterns and correlations invisible to individual clinicians operating under time pressure and cognitive load (Singla et al., 2024; Maslej et al., 2024). This data-processing advantage has direct clinical relevance: it enables AI-assisted systems to function as a form of comprehensive second opinion, reducing the probability of diagnostic errors attributable to information overload or attentional fatigue.

Research published in Nature Medicine confirms that AI algorithms can detect early signs of serious conditions — including malignancies, fractures, and vascular anomalies — with accuracy rates that meet or exceed those of experienced specialist clinicians in controlled evaluation settings (Rajpurkar et al., 2022). Critically, unlike human clinicians, AI systems do not experience performance degradation associated with fatigue, emotional stress, or time pressure — a

practically significant advantage in the high-volume, time-constrained environments of contemporary hospital medicine.

2.2 Medical Imaging and Pattern Recognition

AI has achieved its most impressive and clinically validated results in the domain of medical image analysis. Studies in radiology, pathology, dermatology, and ophthalmology have demonstrated AI performance at or near specialist human levels for specific diagnostic tasks, including the detection of diabetic retinopathy, skin cancer, pulmonary nodules, and breast cancer in mammography (Hosny et al., 2018). The deep learning architectures underpinning these systems are trained on millions of labeled images, enabling them to identify subtle morphological features and statistical patterns that may be imperceptible to human observers examining individual cases. Hosny et al. (2018) note that AI's capacity to analyze thousands of imaging studies simultaneously — processing visual information at a scale impossible for any individual radiologist — makes it a potentially transformative tool for population-level screening and early detection programs.

2.3 Drug Discovery and Predictive Analytics

Beyond diagnosis, AI has demonstrated significant potential in pharmaceutical research and predictive patient monitoring. Google DeepMind's AlphaFold system, which achieved landmark accuracy in protein structure prediction, has fundamentally accelerated the drug discovery pipeline by enabling researchers to predict molecular binding sites and protein conformations that previously required years of experimental investigation (Jumper et al., 2021). The practical implication is a compression of the drug development timeline that could bring life-saving treatments to patients substantially faster than conventional methods permit. In clinical monitoring, AI-driven systems integrated into hospital infrastructure can analyze continuous streams of physiological data — heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen saturation, and biochemical markers — to identify early warning signals of deterioration hours before clinical manifestation (Wong et al., 2019). This predictive capability gives medical teams the "golden time" needed to intervene proactively, potentially preventing deterioration to critical states that carry significantly higher mortality.

3. Limitations of AI in Healthcare

3.1 Emotional Intelligence and the Therapeutic Relationship

The most fundamental limitation of AI in medicine is its inability to engage in the human therapeutic relationship that is central to effective clinical care. The doctor-patient relationship is not merely an information exchange; it is a bond of trust, empathy, and mutual recognition that has been shown to have direct therapeutic effects independent of the technical interventions it facilitates (Jørgensen et al., 2022). Patients who trust their physicians are more likely to disclose relevant information, adhere to treatment recommendations, and report better health outcomes. This trust is grounded in the perception of the physician as a fellow human being who understands

suffering, shares vulnerability, and exercises genuine moral concern for the patient's wellbeing — qualities that AI systems, however technically sophisticated, cannot authentically embody.

The communicative and interpretive dimensions of clinical consultation further illustrate this limitation. Skilled clinicians integrate verbal and non-verbal information — hesitation, affect, physical appearance, the patient's account of their experience — into a holistic clinical judgment that goes well beyond the information captured in structured data fields. AI systems trained on structured clinical data have no access to this rich interpretive layer, which is often diagnostically decisive in complex or atypical presentations (Miller et al., 2021).

3.2 Accountability, Ethics, and the Black Box Problem

The deployment of AI in high-stakes medical decision-making raises profound questions of accountability that remain unresolved. As Caicedo et al. (2020) demonstrate, errors in AI systems do not produce the isolated, individual mistakes characteristic of human clinical error; they produce systematic errors at scale — the same incorrect recommendation delivered simultaneously to potentially thousands of patients processed by the same flawed algorithm. This "mass error" risk has no direct human analogue and creates accountability structures that existing medical law and professional ethics frameworks are not equipped to address. When an AI-assisted diagnosis leads to patient harm, the question of who bears legal and ethical responsibility — the AI developer, the clinician who relied on the recommendation, or the institution that deployed the system — remains genuinely contested.

The transparency problem further compounds these concerns. Many high-performance AI systems operate as "black boxes" — producing outputs without providing interpretable explanations of the reasoning process that generated them (Shaban-Nejad et al., 2020). In a clinical context, this opacity is not merely technically inconvenient; it is ethically problematic. Medical ethics requires that treatment decisions be explicable to patients, justified by evidence, and subject to professional scrutiny. A recommendation that a clinician cannot explain, justify, or critically evaluate is incompatible with these requirements, regardless of its statistical accuracy in validation studies.

3.3 Algorithmic Bias and Health Equity

A further structural limitation of AI systems in healthcare concerns the risk of algorithmic bias — the systematic reproduction and amplification of inequalities embedded in training data. AI systems learn from historical clinical data that reflects the biases, omissions, and inequalities of the healthcare systems that generated it: data from wealthier patient populations, from healthcare systems serving predominantly majority ethnic groups, and from historical periods when diagnostic and treatment standards were different from current best practice. A system trained on such data will perform less accurately for patients whose characteristics are underrepresented in the training set, producing precisely the unequal treatment outcomes that contemporary medical ethics is committed to eliminating (Obermeyer et al., 2019). Addressing this limitation requires

not merely technical fixes — algorithmic debiasing procedures, more representative training datasets — but a sustained commitment to health equity that extends beyond the technical domain to the institutional and political conditions of healthcare delivery.

4. Survey Evidence: Medical Students' Perceptions

To supplement the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed above, a small-scale survey was conducted among 30 medical students at Nakhchivan State University to examine current perceptions of AI's role in medicine among future healthcare professionals. Five questions were presented to participants, addressing trust in AI versus human doctors, AI's impact on medical errors, accountability for AI mistakes, the future role of doctors, and the core question of AI substitution.

On the question of trust, 60% of participants indicated greater trust in human doctors for medical decision-making, 40% expressed equal trust in both human and AI-assisted approaches, and only one participant indicated primary trust in AI systems alone. This distribution suggests that even among a digitally literate student population with generally positive attitudes toward technology, the perception of human doctors as the primary locus of trustworthy clinical judgment remains robust. On the question of AI's effect on medical errors, approximately 70% of participants held that AI partially reduces errors, while 13% expressed concern that AI may introduce new error risks — a nuanced response that reflects genuine engagement with the dual-edged character of AI deployment in medicine.

On accountability, a majority of participants held AI developer companies responsible for errors arising from AI systems — a position that reflects an intuitive but legally unresolved principle: that those who design and deploy powerful decision-support systems bear primary responsibility for their consequences. On the future role of doctors, the overwhelming majority of participants affirmed that human doctors will remain essential in future healthcare, irrespective of AI advancement. On the core substitution question, the majority answered in the negative, though a minority maintained that AI substitution was a genuine future possibility — a minority view that the present article's analysis does not support, but which reflects real uncertainty within the healthcare community about the trajectory of AI development.

5. The Role of English Language Proficiency

A dimension of AI's impact on healthcare that is particularly relevant to an English-language pedagogy journal concerns the linguistic prerequisites for engagement with AI-mediated medical knowledge. The global medical research literature, and virtually all leading AI-assisted clinical decision support tools, operate primarily in English. Medical professionals who lack strong English language proficiency are therefore structurally excluded from full engagement with the international evidence base that AI systems synthesize and deploy. This linguistic dimension of healthcare inequity is not often discussed in the AI in medicine literature but has direct practical consequences for clinicians practicing in non-anglophone contexts.

Naghiyeva (2024) addresses this issue directly in her analysis of listening skill development for medical English, arguing that listening comprehension — the ability to understand international medical lectures, research presentations, and clinical communications — constitutes a foundational competency for participation in the global medical knowledge community. For medical students in contexts such as Azerbaijan, where English is a foreign language and access to English-medium instruction may be limited, developing the English language proficiency necessary for confident engagement with AI-assisted diagnostic tools, international clinical literature, and global medical education is not merely an academic exercise but a professional necessity. The integration of English language instruction that is specifically oriented toward medical discourse and the communicative demands of AI-mediated clinical practice therefore represents an important curricular priority for medical education in non-anglophone settings.

6. Toward a Collaborative Model of Human-AI Medicine

The evidence reviewed in this article supports a model of human-AI collaboration in medicine rather than one of substitution. AI systems are most productively understood not as replacements for human clinicians but as powerful tools that augment specific dimensions of clinical capability — processing speed, pattern recognition at scale, predictive analytics, and pharmaceutical research acceleration — while human physicians provide the irreplaceable dimensions of care: the therapeutic relationship, ethical judgment, contextual clinical reasoning, and accountability. Miller et al. (2021) describe this collaborative model as one in which AI handles time-consuming routine tasks — paperwork, data analysis, preliminary screening — freeing physicians to invest more time and attention in the higher-order functions of clinical care that require human presence and judgment. Jørgensen et al. (2022) reinforce this perspective, finding that clinicians view AI as a sophisticated clinical instrument analogous to advanced imaging technology — a tool that enhances diagnostic capability without displacing the clinician's interpretive and relational role.

Tan et al. (2021) offer an important reframing of the debate: the relevant comparison for AI in medicine is not with doctors but with doctorlessness — the condition of populations in underserved and under-resourced healthcare settings where access to trained physicians is severely limited. In these contexts, AI-assisted diagnosis may provide genuinely life-saving screening and triage capability that would otherwise be unavailable, and the ethical question shifts from whether AI can replace doctors to how AI can extend the reach of healthcare to those currently excluded from it. This reframing does not diminish the importance of the limitations and risks analyzed in this article; it contextualizes them within a more nuanced and equitable ethical framework that takes seriously both the transformative potential and the irreplaceable human dimensions of medical care.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the capabilities and limitations of AI in healthcare through theoretical analysis, empirical literature review, and primary survey evidence, arriving at a conclusion that the

evidence strongly supports: artificial intelligence is a powerful and increasingly indispensable tool in modern medicine, but it cannot replace human doctors. The dimensions of medical practice that AI cannot replicate — the therapeutic relationship, emotional intelligence, ethical accountability, contextual clinical judgment, and the communicative dimensions of care — are not peripheral features of medicine that technology may eventually overcome; they are constitutive of what medicine fundamentally is.

The future of healthcare lies in the thoughtful, ethically informed integration of computational and human capabilities — a model in which AI's extraordinary data-processing and pattern-recognition strengths amplify the effectiveness of human clinical expertise, while human physicians provide the moral agency, relational presence, and contextual wisdom that algorithmic systems cannot supply. Realizing this future requires investment not only in AI technology but in the education of healthcare professionals who possess both the digital literacy to work effectively with AI tools and the humanistic formation to ensure that technology serves rather than supplants the human dimensions of care. It also requires sustained attention to the linguistic prerequisites for AI-mediated medical practice, ensuring that English language education for medical professionals keeps pace with the demands of an increasingly AI-mediated global healthcare environment.

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