Humanistic Care in the Era of Digital Healthcare: A Philosophical Exploration of "Technological Dependence" and the "Return to Humanity"

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Abstract: Digital healthcare is developing rapidly in the modern medical field, bringing many conveniences to the medical industry. However, it has also led to the problem of technology dependence and had impact on humanistic care. This paper deeply analyzes the manifestations, roots of technology dependence in digital healthcare and its influence on humanistic ideas from a philosophical perspective, and explores the path to achieve the "return of humanity". The research finds that the excessive expansion of technological rationality, the trend of scientism, and the drive of the market economy have led to technology dependence, resulting in problems such as the materialization of medical relationships, the weakening of the patient's dominant position, and the lack of medical humanistic spirit. To solve these problems, it is necessary to clarify the dominant position of "human" in diagnosis and treatment, integrate humanistic concepts into technology applications, strengthen the cultivation of medical staff's humanistic qualities, and deepen the public's understanding of digital healthcare, so as to promote the balanced development of digital healthcare and humanistic care and achieve the essential mission of medicine.

Keywords: Digital Healthcare, Humanistic Care, Medical Philosophy

1. INTRODUCTION

With the widespread application of modern information technologies in the medical field, digital healthcare is integrating into traditional medical practices with unprecedented depth and breadth, bringing about transformative changes. Electronic health records (EHRs) have nearly completely replaced handwritten records, not only standardizing and systematizing the documentation and management of patient information but also significantly reducing repetitive tasks for physicians. This shift allows doctors to dedicate more time and effort to patient diagnosis, treatment, and care. The emergence of telemedicine has dismantled geographical barriers, enabling patients in remote areas to access high-quality medical resources through remote technologies. To some extent, this alleviates the uneven distribution of healthcare resources and overcrowding in offline medical facilities. Artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted diagnostics have been widely adopted in radiology, enhancing the

accuracy and efficiency of medical evaluations (Topol, 2019). Wearable monitoring devices, now integrated with smartwatches, enable real-time and dynamic tracking of basic health metrics, providing clinically reliable data. While the conveniences of digital healthcare are undeniable, they have also profoundly impacted traditional doctor-patient relationships. Against this backdrop, we must pause and reflect: As technology advances, is humanistic care being gradually marginalized? As the digital healthcare services are gaining greater penetrations around the world, the core concern is that how digital technologies could be leveraged to ensure better humanistic care practices. The core belief is that through humanistic care approach, digital technologies could be more effectively leveraged as such could not only enhance patient experience and treatment outcomes, but also the approach could also help in upholding better values in the medical professional.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMANISTIC CARE IN MEDICAL PHILOSOPHY

Humanistic care is one of the core concepts that shaped the norms and values practiced in the medical practice. The concept of 'humanistic care' not only implies respecting the patient as a human being but also the concept that stressed that core practices should be adopted to ensure the psychological, emotional, and social needs of the patient. The concept has gained importance in the medical profession as 'humanistic care' enhances patients' treatment and satisfaction; besides, it has also been regarded as a means of establishing better trust and understanding between doctors and patients, resulting in significantly enhancing therapeutic outcomes. From a philosophical perspective, medical practitioners are not just expected to leverage the latest technology to ensure sound treatment for patients, but also they are expected to ensure better interaction care and interactions with patients and their loved ones as human beings.

2.1 Historical Development of Humanistic Care in the Medical Profession across Different Cultures

The concept of 'humanistic care' is deep-rooted in different cultures. For example, the analysis of Chinese traditional cultures could reveal that humanistic care has been the foundation of the philosophies practiced in different cultures. Confucianism, which is one of the traditional philosophies that shaped Chinese culture and that still shapes the core

norms and values found in Chinese society, stressed the concept of 'Ren,' which denotes compassion, mutual care, and compassion. The Confucian medical practitioners leveraged the concept as the traditional Chinese medicines have been developed with the aim of 'benevolence' stressed in the Chinese culture. Individuals in the medical practices that uphold Confucianism still work for 'the benevolence of others,' which is in line with the concept of 'humanistic care.'

An idea about this could be gained from one of the books published for the treatment of 'Typhoid Fever and Miscellaneous Diseases' in China, where the author, Zhang Zhongjing (Zhongjing, 2005), noted in the preface of the book, "I grieve for the loss of lives in the past and lament those who perished prematurely without remedy." From this one could understand that the author, who is a medical practitioner, has expressed his sorrow because of his inability to treat typhoid when he was a small child, and thousands of lives were thus lost. Zhang has been not only practicing medicine with the aim to save lives, stressing the 'humanistic care,' but also he has worked on developing theoretical knowledge and models with the aim to help others to ensure greater benevolence found in the Chinese society. In the Essential Formulas for Emergencies Worth a Thousand Gold (Simiao, 2022), Sun Simiao of the Tang dynasty introduced the concept of "Great Physicians' Mastery and Sincerity" in its first chapter. This principle demands that physicians excel in both medical skill and moral integrity. Jing refers to the relentless pursuit of medical expertise, while change embodies sincerity and empathy toward patients. Sun urged physicians to "first cultivate great compassion and vow to relieve the suffering of all living beings" (Bleakley, 2015). His admonition—"When treating patients, a great physician must calm the mind, free from desires, and act with profound compassion to save all beings from suffering"— epitomizes the Confucian ideal of ren and reinforces the ethical imperative of medicine as "the art of benevolence."

2.2 Western Medical Philosophy also Places Great Emphasis on Humanism

Hippocrates regarded healing as the ultimate goal of medicine, prioritizing patients' lives and advocating holistic care grounded in compassion (Orfanos, 2007). He stands as a pioneer in integrating humanistic values into Western medical and philosophical traditions. From Heidegger's philosophy of technology, modern technology exhibits the characteristic of Gestell, a mode of thinking that risks reducing humans to objects dominated by technology (Heidegger, 2020). Technology is not a

neutral tool but a way of "not concealing" the world through specific frameworks. Heidegger argued that physicians must retain humanistic reflection to preserve the artistry of medicine and resist being subsumed by technological imperatives (Svenaeus, 2013). In Phenomenology of Perception (Nanay, 2012), Maurice Merleau-Ponty posited that the body is not merely a collection of parts but an organic whole. The core thesis of the author reminds physicians to consider patient suffering as not isolated to specific organs but to consider the entire body malfunctions that a patient has witnessed. On the basis of Merleau-Ponty's model of intersubjectivity, the relationship between doctors and patients could be mediated, as body language, expressions, and gestures of the patient need due consideration. Consequently, physicians undertaking medical treatment are expected to be attentive while interpreting patients' nonverbal elements, including facial expressions or posture, as such are crucial in evaluating pain and the level of emotional status witnessed by the patient. Instantaneously, medical practitioners are also expected to uphold the principles of empathy and trust while communicating with patients, particularly when they want to communicate through their non-verbal cues. Spotting the subjectivity of patients' bodies, medical practitioners are expected to honor patients' holistic experiences.

3. TECHNOLOGICAL DEPENDENCE IN DIGITAL HEALTHCARE AND ITS IMPACT ON HUMANISTIC CARE

3.1 Dependence on AI Algorithms

As artificial intelligence (AI) has been shaping opportunities in every walk of life, the medical profession has also witnessed some of its blessings. Some of the applications of AI in the medical field include disease prediction models, intelligent diagnostic systems, and better healthcare management. In particular, the algorithms-based AI models have significantly benefited the decision-making process in the clinical field due to their distinctive capabilities of conducting in-depth analysis (Topol, 2019). Nevertheless, some of the medical practitioners believe that this has also been posing some risks, as the overreliance on AI could negatively affect independent critical thinking and judgment needed in different circumstances.

3.2 Dependence on Digital Platforms

The unprecedented use of technology has benefited the medical field as

doctor-patient communication, which is essential for diagnosis, treatment, and management of patient health, is now mediated through internet technology. As a result, the temporal and spatial constraints that were previously affecting doctor-patient communication have now been eradicated, providing greater opportunities for better healthcare management. In particular, there is a growing recognition amongst medical practitioners that the development and use of technology have resulted in greater convenience for both doctors and patients, as preliminary consultations could be carried out from home, thereby significantly cutting down the travelling and communicating costs and time otherwise needed.

Nevertheless, the development that has been thus taking place has been significantly criticized by individuals believing in the phenomenological theory, as the theory stressed the intersubjectivity and embodied cognition. While leveraging technology for the sake of communication and diagnosis of patients, doctors and medical practitioners could be risking the most important non-verbal clues that have an important role in the patient's treatment. In particular, the healthcare providers could miss out on significant cues related to the patient's psychological state and emotional needs, thus affecting the effectiveness of treatment. In addition, while using the internet and other digital technologies in communication with the healthcare providers, the patient could not be able to effectively communicate due to language barriers, technology usage, and device usability, all of which could affect the communication process. In addition, there is also a danger of weaker relations between doctors and patients due to lack of physical touch.

4. PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF TECHNOLOGICAL DEPENDENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON HUMANISTIC THOUGHT

While digital healthcare, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), enhances the efficiency of diagnosis and treatment, its practical application has significantly eroded humanistic care. Herbert Marcuse, in One-Dimensional Man (Marcuse, 1988), does not explicitly define technological rationality, but his ideas suggest it refers to a mode of thinking that prioritizes technology as the core means to maximize efficiency and utility. In advanced industrial societies, this rationality transforms technological logic into political logic, becoming a new form of domination. In modern society, technological rationality has flourished and permeated sectors such as industrial production and transportation, driving social progress through

heightened productivity and convenience. However, in digital healthcare, the unchecked expansion of technological rationality fosters blind worship of and overdependence on technology. While the benefits—such as rapid diagnostics and precise data analysis—are celebrated, the limitations and potential harms of technology are often overlooked. Technological rationality overemphasizes instrumentality and practicality, focusing on achieving specific goals through technological means while neglecting human values and significance. Under this paradigm, medical practice is reduced to technical operations, marginalizing patients' emotional and psychological needs. Scientism, defined as the indiscriminate application of natural scientific methods to all human domains (Hayek, 1941), exerts a profound influence in medicine. It reduces medicine to a purely natural science, overemphasizing objectivity, scientific rigor, and empiricism while disregarding its humanistic and social dimensions. Unlike the emerging healthcare system, the traditional healthcare model enjoys some strengths that could be lost in the process of transformation. One of the essential strengths in this regard includes the participation of patients in the management of healthcare. Patients have been engaged in making choices in conventional healthcare. However, as per emerging scientism, healthcare providers are increasingly prioritizing biological factors over psychological and sociocultural influence, which are decreasing patients' agency. The increasing dependence on technology and AI algorithms leads healthcare providers to sacrifice subjective considerations that were important in the better management of healthcare services. Increasingly, the treatment plans are crafted on the basis of technical data rather than patient dialogue, thus making the patient a passive recipient of care alone. The emerging climate in turn weakens therapeutic outcomes, as patient autonomy and dignity may be affected in different instances. The development in the digital healthcare technologies has also been negatively affecting the trust-based relations that could be found in the conventional healthcare system. Healthcare providers have been using a more holistic approach, which provided them the opportunity to establish emotional links with their patients. However, unlike this, the healthcare providers using technology have been losing such strengths that were the backbone of effective healthcare management. As pointed out by Heidegger in the concept of "unconcealment," the emerging digital technology-based healthcare system has been making healthcare service confined to quantifiable data matrices (Svenaeus, 2013), posing strong challenges to the emotional link and doctor-patient relationship that were once held (Liu et al., 2023). Furthermore, with the use of technology, detachment and alienation have

also been witnessed as the interpersonal communication between doctor and patient has also been negatively affected (Wang et al., 2023). The increased interdependence on technology has thus been leading to the complete eradication of the humanistic care that was once the dominant feature of this profession (Guan, 2019).

Furthermore, the principle of equity could also be lost in the process of the increased reliance on and use of technology for healthcare services. In the emerging healthcare system, a patient's age, education, and most importantly, socioeconomic situation could affect access to healthcare services (Pagliari, 2021). Patients who are lacking the desired technological access or technological understanding may not be able to access the services. The same is the case with the economically unfortunate social class, who may have healthcare needs but are not able to access services due to technological barriers (Wang et al., 2023). Additionally, a wrong diagnosis could be the core issue due to communication issues that are witnessed in the case of telemedicine (Chandhanayingyong et al., 2007).

Moreover, due to the transformation taking place in the global healthcare services industry, an increasing number of healthcare institutions preferred the competitiveness and profitability dimension over streamlining healthcare services. The increase in technology focus has been contributing to such goals as men being replaced with machines; however, the transformation that has been thus taking place is at the cost of patient care and quality of services, having a significant downgrading impact on humanistic care values (Poongkunran et al., 2023).

5. PATHWAYS TO ACHIEVING THE "RETURN TO HUMANITY" IN DIGITAL HEALTHCARE

5.1 Clarifying the Dominant Role of "Human" in Diagnosis and Treatment

The emerging climate is believed to be a great danger, even for the healthcare providers, as they foresee that the AI could ultimately emerge as a replacement for doctors (Li & Liu, 2024). Additionally, there are numerous ethical challenges that are associated with the use of technology that are often overlooked. In particular, humanistic care has been lost in the process(Guan, 2019; Li & Liu, 2024; Pagliari, 2021; Topol, 2019; Wang et al., 2023). For the future of the healthcare profession, it is vital that different stakeholders ensure the primacy of human agency over digital tools or AI in clinical practice. The role of technology should be promoted as an assistant and as a means to add better value to healthcare services, rather than as a replacement of conventional healthcare services centered

on humanistic care (Jong, 2024). The healthcare service providers should ensure personal communication and bond with patients and look for the means through which they could uphold the emotional link that they were once having with patients (Li & Liu, 2024).

5.2 Assimilating Humanistic Values as Part of Technological Applications

While executing and using emerging AI and related technologies, healthcare management professionals should ensure that such technologies are used, ensuring humanistic values. Ethical values should be prioritized, and whenever they oppose humanistic values, care should be observed in the introduction of such technologies. In particular, while leveraging AI diagnostic systems, healthcare providers should ensure independent judgment. The healthcare providers should be trained that they should not overuse the technology; rather, technology should be used to add greater value to patient care. Contextual information should always be incorporated while treating patients, and healthcare providers should observe utmost care in standardizing patient treatment.

5.3 Strengthening the Cultivation of Humanistic Competence in Medical Professionals

As frontline providers of healthcare services, medical professionals should ensure humanistic literacy directly, as it could significantly affect care quality. Comprehensive training programs are needed to enhance their empathy, communication skills, and awareness of humanistic care. In particular, medical professionals should be trained on how they should be observing empathy as a foundation-level value while undertaking medical treatment. By cultivating empathy, physicians can better understand patients' physical and psychological suffering during illness (Jong, 2024). Medical education should increase the weight of humanities courses, instilling ethical values and fostering problem-solving skills through practical experience. Continuing education programs should offer regular workshops led by experts to update practitioners' knowledge and refine their capacity for compassionate care.

5.4 Enhancing Public Understanding of Digital Healthcare

While some public awareness exists regarding digital healthcare's role in diagnostics and imaging, many remain unclear about AI's mechanisms and scope (Gao et al., 2020). Public attitudes are mixed: optimism about improved care coexists with fears of misdiagnosis, privacy breaches, and altered doctor-patient dynamics (Li & Liu, 2024). This gap underscores the

need for transparent communication and education. Developers and institutions must address public concerns by prioritizing privacy safeguards and algorithmic fairness. Multichannel (science popularization) campaigns should demystify AI's workings, benefits, and applications to build trust. Policymakers must craft regulations informed by public sentiment to ensure ethical AI development (Gao et al., 2020).

6. CONCLUSION

The advancement of digital healthcare is an unstoppable and inevitable trend of our era, bringing unprecedented transformation to the medical industry. However, we must soberly recognize that the issues arising from technological dependence under this wave of digitization cannot be overlooked. Modern society must resist the blind belief that technology can solve all problems and prevent it from wholly dominating human life and development. It is imperative to acknowledge technology as a double-edged sword. In the development of artificial intelligence (AI), for instance, we must not pursue technological progress while neglecting ethical challenges such as algorithmic bias and privacy violations. Technology should be used as a means to add better value, and its blind and uncontrollable use should be prevented. In particular, greater care of sociocultural and philosophical value should be observed while introducing such technologies. Taking into consideration the philosophical perspective, this paper stressed that technological dependence stalks from the excessive expansion of technological rationality. The market economy that has been emerging in the healthcare profession could engulf the profession as profitability is taking precedence over care and benevolence. As a result, this paper strongly favors that humanistic values should be striven for and that medical professionals and healthcare providers should be trained in the humanistic values and the primacy that it assumes while undertaking medical treatment. As the AI and related technology could be used positively, besides the risks that the profession could encounter in the years ahead, it is strongly recommended that humanistic value should be incorporated and ensured while leveraging these technologies. Ethical literacy is thus vital for the medical care provider, as they could then be able to use the emerging technologies for the benefits of patients and avoid the range of risks that the profession could otherwise encounter. This approach allows the medical field to embrace technological progress without losing the warmth of humanistic care, thereby fulfilling medicine's essential mission: to cherish life and safeguard health.

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