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Recommended Citation

Druedahl, C. Louise, W. Nicholson Price II, Timo Minssen, Dipl Jur, Ameet Sarpatwari. "Use of Artificial Intelligence in Drug Development." *JAMA Network* (2024).

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Use of Artificial Intelligence in Drug Development

Louise C. Druedahl, PhD; W. Nicholson Price II, JD, PhD; Timo Minssen, Dipl Jur, LL.M, LL.Lic, LL.D; Ameet Sarpatwari, PhD, JD

Introduction

Considerable focus has been placed on the health care applications of artificial intelligence (AI). Already, machine learning, a subset of AI that involves “the use of data and algorithms to imitate the way that humans learn”¹ has been used to predict diseases,² while AI-powered smartphone apps have been developed to promote mental health and weight loss.³ Owing in part to such successes, the market for AI in health care has been forecasted to increase more than 1000% between 2022 and 2029, from \$13.8 billion to \$164.1 billion.⁴

One area of substantial promise is drug development, which is poised to benefit from advances in the use of AI to predict protein folding, molecular interactions, and cellular disease processes.⁵ Successful application of AI to drug development, however, faces several obstacles, including poor model performance caused by nondiverse training data and shortcut learning. Additionally, the often opaque ways that AI systems reach their predictions conflict with regulatory approval frameworks that require a rationale for decision-making. Given these obstacles, we sought to identify the scope and breadth of AI use in drug development.

Methods

We conducted a cross-sectional study of investigational and approved drugs (n = 102 454) listed in the global research and drug development database Pharmaprojects (Informa, Citeline) on February 11, 2024. Institutional review board approval was not required because this study did not involve human participants, in accordance with 45 CFR §46. We followed the [STROBE](#) reporting guideline.

To identify AI-developed drugs, we used AI search terms from Janiesch et al⁶ and the National Library of Medicine’s Medical Subject Headings database (eAppendix in [Supplement 1](#)). Automated scans of information for each drug were evaluated. If a drug was described as developed with AI, the type and purpose of AI use were noted. When the type or purpose of AI use could not be determined, additional information was obtained from internet sources. The most specific term identified was used to categorize the AI application (**Figure 1**). Among AI-developed drugs, descriptive statistics were compiled of AI type, AI purpose, therapeutic area, and development status. Statistical analysis was performed using Excel version 16 (Microsoft) from February to March 2024.

Results

The database search yielded 406 drugs, of which 241 were excluded upon review for no reported use of AI in drug development. AI use was reported in the development of 164 investigational drugs and 1 approved drug. The most frequent types of AI use were machine learning (n = 46 [28%]) and deep learning (n = 28 [17%]). AI was used for 12 purposes, most commonly drug molecule discovery (n = 125 [76%]) (**Figure 2**). Examples of such use ranged from platform screening of drugs, in which AI was used to analyze molecular images of the effects of drugs on a cell, to deep generative modeling to design virtual novel molecules. Modest AI use was observed for drug target discovery (n = 37 [22%]), including machine learning to find previously unknown connections between genomic, chemical, and clinical data. AI use for clinical outcomes analysis, such as the use of AI-based

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Figure 1. Categories of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

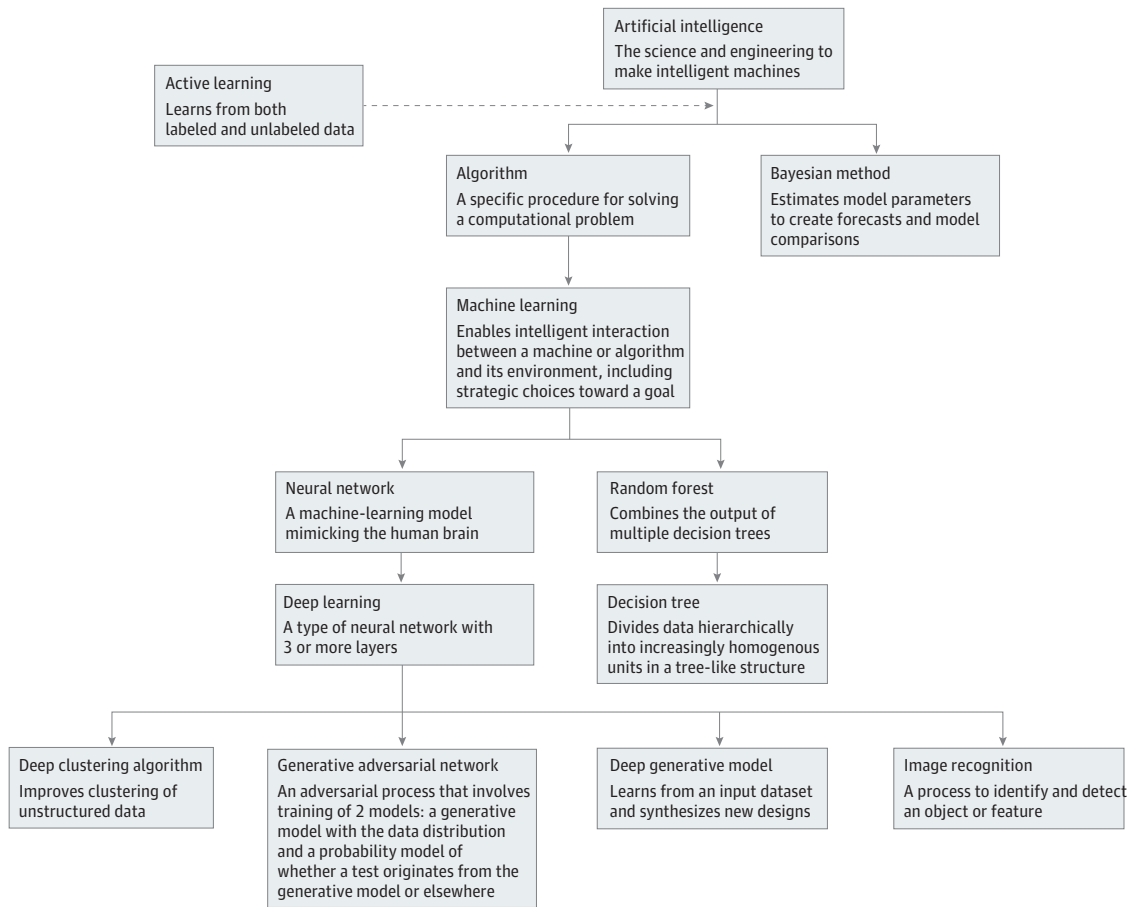
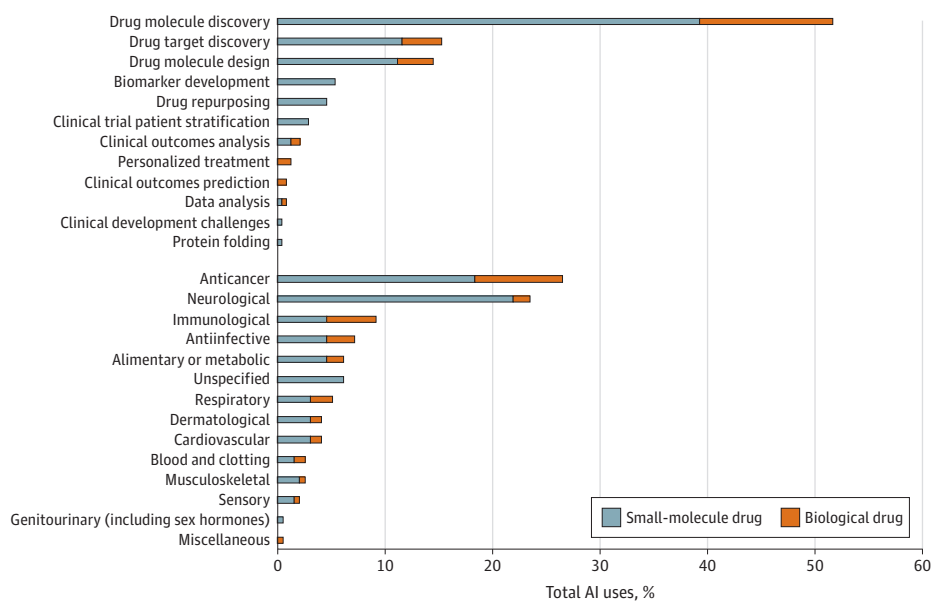


Figure 2. Purpose of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use



pattern recognition algorithms to identify correlations between immune responses and patient survival, was more limited (n = 5 [3%]). Regarding therapeutic area, AI use was most common for intended anticancer (n = 52 [27%]) and neurological (n = 24%) treatments. For the 1 approved drug, which was the stem cell therapy remestemcel-L, a bayesian method was used to estimate the likelihood of obtaining significant results on the primary end point at study completion.

Discussion

This study found modest use of AI for drug development focused primarily on early-stage applications and on anticancer and neurological therapies. Possible explanations include a lack of high-quality data available in the subsequent stages of drug discovery and uncertain regulatory expectations concerning late-stage AI applications. Study limitations included relying upon public disclosures by drug manufacturers. Ultimately, this study's results suggest that greater clarity from medicines regulators is needed to guide sponsors over acceptable AI standards and applications to satisfy marketing authorization requirements.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Accepted for Publication: March 29, 2024.

Published: May 31, 2024. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.14139

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Author Contributions: Dr Druedahl had full access to all of the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

Concept and design: All authors.

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: Druedahl, Price, Sarpatwari.

Drafting of the manuscript: Druedahl, Minssen, Sarpatwari.

Critical review of the manuscript for important intellectual content: All authors.

Statistical analysis: Sarpatwari.

Administrative, technical, or material support: Sarpatwari.

Supervision: Price, Minssen, Sarpatwari.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: Dr Druedahl reported working for and having shares in Novo Nordisk starting June 2023 and November 2023, respectively. However, Dr Druedahl's work on this study was carried out under the umbrella of the Centre for Advanced Studies in Biomedical Innovation Law, the current Centre for Advanced Studies in Bioscience Innovation Law, and independently from Novo Nordisk. Dr Minssen reported personal fees from serving as an advisor to a company engaged in artificial intelligence compliance and governance and to a law firm, both outside the submitted work.

Funding/Support: The study was supported, in part, by the Collaborative Research Program for Biomedical Innovation Law, a scientifically independent research program supported by the Novo Nordisk Foundation (grant NNF17SA0027784). Dr Price's and Dr Minssen's work was also supported, in part, by a subsequent Novo Nordisk Foundation Grant for a scientifically independent International Collaborative Bioscience Innovation & Law Programme (Inter-CeBIL programme- grant No. NNF23SA0087056). Dr Sarpatwari's work was also supported by a grant from Arnold Ventures.

Role of the Funder/Sponsor: The funders had no role in the design and conduct of the study; collection, management, analysis, and interpretation of the data; preparation, review, or approval of the manuscript; and decision to submit the manuscript for publication.

Data Sharing Statement: See Supplement 2.

Additional Contributions: The authors would like to thank Dr Ole Lund for his insightful comments on an earlier draft.

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SUPPLEMENT 1.

eAppendix. Search Terms Used for Data Extraction, Based on Janiesch et al. and MeSH-Terms for Artificial Intelligence

SUPPLEMENT 2.

Data Sharing Statement