

AI and the Future of Health Equity

The Promise, The Potential, The Problem, The Prognosis

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What if the same technology powering smartphones, navigation apps, and digital assistants could help close America's most persistent healthcare gaps? Artificial Intelligence—once the stuff of science fiction—now sits at the center of a revolutionary transformation in U.S. healthcare, promising faster diagnoses, more precise, personalized treatments, and smarter use of limited resources. But as AI moves from research labs into hospitals and clinics, one question remains: who truly benefits?

Researchers first imagined intelligent machines in 1956, when scientists gathered to explore whether computers could replicate human reasoning. Nearly seventy years later, AI systems analyze massive volumes of medical data, identify patterns invisible to the human eye, and support clinical decisions in real time. Few industries feel the impact more acutely than healthcare.

Across the country, hospitals are turning to AI to reduce administrative burdens, support overstretched physicians and nurses, and improve patient care. Investment has surged into the billions, reflecting confidence that AI can help address some of healthcare's most pressing challenges. For communities long underserved by the healthcare system, the technology represents more than innovation—it offers the possibility of fairer, more equitable care. Yet AI does not operate in a vacuum. It learns from data shaped by decades of unequal access, incomplete research, and systemic bias.

A New Era for Healthcare

Healthcare systems across the United States are adopting AI at an unprecedented pace. Rising costs, staffing shortages, and administrative complexity have accelerated demand for



tools that improve efficiency without sacrificing quality. In 2023, healthcare AI investment reached \$1.4 billion, with projections estimating growth to \$25.7 billion by 2030.

Health systems now use AI to automate paperwork, analyze complex patient data, and enhance clinical decision-making. When implemented responsibly, these tools can improve outcomes across populations and help narrow gaps affecting underrepresented and underserved communities—groups that continue to experience higher rates of chronic disease, disability, and premature death.

Speeding Up Drug Discovery

AI is also transforming pharmaceutical research and clinical development. Traditionally, bringing a new drug to market has taken more than a decade and required billions of dollars, often without certainty of success. AI-driven tools now help researchers identify promising compounds earlier, refine clinical trials, and shorten development timelines while reducing costs.

This acceleration holds particular significance for diseases that disproportionately affect marginalized populations, who often receive later di-

agnoses and less aggressive treatment. In oncology, AI-powered research is beginning to improve detection and treatment for high-mortality cancers—including breast, prostate, lung, and colorectal cancers—that disproportionately affect communities of color. When grounded in inclusive data, these advances offer a path toward more equitable outcomes.

The Risk of Built-In Bias

AI reflects both the data and the people behind it. Today, women make up fewer than 20 percent of AI professionals, and people of color account for less than 2 percent. That lack of diversity influences which questions AI systems ask—and which problems they overlook.

For decades, clinical research relied heavily on narrow patient populations, often overlooking how disease presents across race, ethnicity, gender,

and environment. As a result, some AI systems struggle to recognize melanated skin or account for cultural and biological differences in care. Models trained on incomplete or biased datasets risk reinforcing disparities rather than reducing them. Even synthetic data, when poorly designed, can amplify bias instead of correcting it.

A More Inclusive Path Forward

Healthcare leaders still have an opportunity to shape AI responsibly. Doing so requires diversifying AI development teams, expanding inclusive data collection, and building partnerships with community-based organizations and trusted leaders. Clinicians must also receive training to use culturally relevant prompts and integrate social determinants of health into AI-supported decision-making. Transparency—clear documentation of data

sources, limitations, and potential bias—must become standard practice.

The Bottom Line

AI has the power to reshape healthcare and improve both the quality and length of life for millions of Americans. But technology alone cannot deliver equity. Only by centering inclusion, data integrity, and accountability can the healthcare system ensure that AI benefits everyone—not just a select few. When built with intention and cultural competence, AI can help move healthcare closer to its most important goal: better outcomes for all.

Sheila Thorne has attended 8 seminars on AI including being a delegate at the 2025 International AI Summit in Cape Town, South Africa sponsored by the University of the Western Cape AI Research Center



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