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# AI's staggering growth in health: Benefits and limitations of artificial intelligence in healthcare



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Orion Health clinical director for Australia and New Zealand Carey Campbell says Virtuoso is being used by almost 15 million people in Canada

A software solution that was developed by Orion Health in New Zealand and launched globally last month combines the latest in information technology and artificial intelligence.

The Virtuoso system gives patients a single point of access to healthcare services and information, and includes a symptom-assessment tool using AI to help diagnose a person's illness and guide them to more targeted advice.

Orion Health clinical director for Australia and New Zealand Carey Campbell says the software solution, which it is pitching to health providers, is an exciting development for the sector. It is already being used by almost 15 million people in Canada.

“You can go into Virtuoso and it will give you information on your condition, it will tell you whether you need to go to an [emergency department], or if you can self-care. If you need to make an appointment, you can do that through the system.”

Virtuoso also allows patients to contact a real nurse to discuss their condition, Ms Campbell says.

“If, for instance, you can’t get an appointment with your doctor, Virtuoso can also show you how you can access a virtual GP,” she says. “It can also tell you where the nearest providers are in an area.”

In New Zealand, the system is so far used only by Southern Cross Healthcare to support patients waiting for surgery, and this is a more limited, tailored version of the software.

Asked whether she has concerns about AI in health, Ms Campbell says it's a source of a lot of debate.

“But while Virtuoso uses algorithms, it's people that are still making the choices and they have the information to make an informed decision,” Ms Campbell says.

And she's convinced the role of AI and software solutions like Virtuoso in health are only going to grow.

Wellington-based specialist GP and long-time health IT champion Richard Medicott says the growth of such technology in health is staggering.

“It is developing incredibly quickly and there's a lot of thought going into it,” says Dr Medicott.

He notes Te Whatu Ora recently warned its employees and contractors against leaping into AI. “But the pace of change means people have started using it anyway,” he says.

He can see some benefits from using a system like Virtuoso in certain situations to diagnose patients.

“For really simple things, with targeted clinical questions, it would be relatively safe,” Dr Medlicott says. “And we may find AI becomes a useful tool for reducing the workloads of doctors and nurses.” But in many cases, a face-to-face diagnosis with a healthcare professional is what is needed.

An unintended consequence of the use of AI, he says, could be more work for healthcare professionals, who would have to double-check diagnoses and information that was produced by using the technology.

Health Informatics New Zealand chief executive Tim Corbett says he thinks the potential benefits of AI are massive.

Using such technology to enable health professionals to spend more time on health and care, and less on administration has to be a positive, he says.

“But I totally understand Te Whatu Ora and Te Aka Whai Ora’s wariness about jumping into AI, and they should be [wary],” Mr Corbett says.

### **Te Whatu Ora gives clear warning on AI**

- › Te Whatu Ora has warned employees and contractors against the use of large language models and generative artificial intelligence tools.
- › On a web page headed, “Advice on the use of Large Language Models and Generative AI in Healthcare”, the agency says these “have not been validated as safe and effective for use in healthcare; nor have the risks and benefits been adequately evaluated in the

Aotearoa New Zealand health context”.

- › Te Whatu Ora employees and contractors must not enter any personal, confidential or sensitive patient or organisational data into AI tools. They also must not use it for any clinical decisions, or any personalised patient-related documentation, or for personalised advice to patients.
- › “This technology is rapidly advancing and changing – safe and appropriate uses that help our staff and the population of Aotearoa NZ may well be developed in the near future.”
- › Te Whatu Ora recommends a precautionary approach due to the risks around breach of privacy, inaccuracy of output, bias, lack of transparency and data sovereignty.

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