
AI can Revolutionise Patient Access in Healthcare



Healthcare systems depend on patient access to function effectively, yet many face challenges in ensuring their communities receive necessary care in a timely and affordable manner. Patient access remains a significant issue in the United States, with logistical barriers and financial struggles shared across the board. These difficulties have only been exacerbated for underserved populations. Healthcare leaders are now focusing on using artificial intelligence (AI) to address these barriers, improving patient access while optimising care delivery. This article explores how AI can help overcome access hurdles in scheduling, hospital-at-home programs, mental health services, and provider communication.

Optimizing Scheduling in Clinics and Operating Rooms

One significant barrier to patient access is inefficient clinic and operating room scheduling. Traditionally, healthcare systems have struggled with fragmented schedules, leading to no-shows, unused time slots, and inefficient patient management. This directly affects patients' access to timely care and increases operational costs.

AI is now being leveraged to address these issues. For example, WakeMed Health and Hospitals in North Carolina used AI to optimize their operating room scheduling, which led to a 22% increase in capacity and a rise in on-time surgery starts from 70% to 92%. AI platforms can significantly improve scheduling efficiency by analysing bottlenecks, such as personal preferences among surgeons. Furthermore, AI-driven tools like behaviour prediction and automated appointment reminders help reduce no-shows and allow patients to easily book appointments online, removing unnecessary delays and making the system more patient-friendly.

Expanding Access with Hospital-at-Home Programs

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for alternatives to traditional inpatient care, especially for stable patients who require monitoring but not constant in-hospital attention. The rise of hospital-at-home programs has been a game changer, enabling healthcare systems to offer inpatient-level care to patients in their own homes, freeing up hospital beds for more critical cases.

AI plays a pivotal role in the success of these programs. Remote patient monitoring and AI-powered communication tools ensure patients receive high-quality care without compromising their safety or health outcomes. Hospitals such as Johns Hopkins have reported up to 30% in cost savings through the implementation of hospital-at-home initiatives, and major health systems like Mass General Brigham anticipate freeing up 10% of their inpatient beds. By reducing the need for physical hospital space and staffing, AI not only makes care more accessible but also more affordable for patients.

AI and Mental Health: Easing the Bottleneck in Access to Care

Mental health care has long faced a critical shortage of providers, leaving millions of patients without timely access to therapy and other behavioural health services. Waitlists for therapists are often long, exacerbating mental health crises and leaving patients in limbo. This is where AI-driven virtual care comes into play, offering innovative ways to bridge the gap between patients and mental health services.

AI is now being used to streamline mental health support, from transcribing therapy notes and managing patient data to providing basic AI chatbots that assist with issues like anxiety and depression. Some platforms even integrate immersive virtual reality sessions that simulate a therapeutic environment. While AI may never fully replace human therapists, it can augment services by expanding the reach of mental health professionals. In the future, AI tools could play a vital role in reducing wait times and improving access to care for patients who need urgent support.

Conclusion

AI offers promising solutions for addressing the ongoing challenges of patient access in healthcare. From optimising scheduling systems and expanding hospital-at-home programs to improving access to mental health services, AI technologies are already making a tangible difference.

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While AI alone cannot fully solve the access crisis, its ability to analyse vast amounts of data and streamline processes allows healthcare systems to provide more efficient, affordable, and timely care. As AI continues to evolve, it holds the potential to revolutionise the healthcare industry further, ultimately improving the experience for patients and providers alike.

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