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Ethical aspects in the use of artificial intelligence in the process of drug development

Aspecte etice în utilizarea inteligenței artificiale în procesul de dezvoltare a medicamentelor

Ecaterina Pitel, Florin Leașu, Andrada Nicolau, Liliana Rogozea
Facultatea de Medicină, Universitatea Transilvania Brașov

Autor corespondent: ***Florin Leașu***, email *florinleasu@yahoo.com*

Abstract

Background: The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in drug development has revolutionized the pharmaceutical and medical landscape, enhancing drug discovery, clinical trials, and personalized medicine. This evolution, while beneficial, has introduced significant ethical challenges in data privacy, algorithmic bias, intellectual property rights, and equitable access to AI-driven therapies.

Objective The application of AI in drug development presents uncertainties regarding the ethical management of patient data, potential biases in AI decision-making, and the fair distribution of AI-powered treatments. The rapidly evolving nature of AI technologies and the dynamic regulatory environment further compound these uncertainties, posing a challenge to the ethical deployment of AI in this sector.

Methods: We conducted a systematic literature search from January 2019 to December 2023 using databases like PubMed, PLOS, and Google Scholar, with keywords "artificial intelligence," "ethics," and "drug discovery." This search led to the selection and detailed analysis of 33 key documents, focusing on the use of AI in drug discovery and associated ethical challenges. The extracted insights were synthesized to highlight major trends and discoveries in the field.

Results: The review found that while AI significantly streamlines drug development processes, it raises substantial concerns about data privacy, decision-making biases, and equitable access. Key findings highlight the importance of ethically managing patient data, employing inclusive data sets for algorithm training, and maintaining transparency in AI operations. Intellectual property rights linked to AI discoveries and the necessity for transparent AI decision-making, particularly in clinical trials, were identified as critical areas needing attention.

Conclusions: The rapid advancement of AI in pharmaceuticals necessitates a fine balance between innovation and adherence to ethical principles. This requires a multidisciplinary collaborative approach and the ongoing adaptation of regulatory frameworks to ensure the ethical and effective utilization of AI in drug development.

Rezumat

Introducere: Integrarea inteligenței artificiale (AI) în dezvoltarea medicamentelor a revoluționat peisajul farmaceutic și medical, îmbunătățind descoperirea medicamentelor, studiile clinice și medicina personalizată. Această evoluție, deși benefică, a introdus provocări etice semnificative în ceea ce privește confidențialitatea datelor, părtinirea algoritmică, drepturile de proprietate intelectuală și accesul echitabil la terapiile bazate pe IA.

Obiective: Aplicarea IA în dezvoltarea medicamentelor prezintă incertitudini în ceea ce privește gestionarea etică a datelor pacienților, potențialele prejudecăți în procesul decizional al IA și distribuția echitabilă a tratamentelor bazate pe IA. Evoluția rapidă a tehnologiilor IA și mediul de reglementare dinamic accentuează și mai mult aceste incertitudini, reprezentând o provocare pentru implementarea etică a IA în acest sector.

Material și metodă: Am efectuat o căutare sistematică a literaturii din ianuarie 2019 până în decembrie 2023 folosind baze de date precum PubMed, PLOS și Google Scholar, cu cuvinte cheie "inteligență artificială", "etică" și "descoperire de medicamente". Această căutare a condus la selectarea și analiza detaliată a 33 de documente-cheie, concentrându-se pe utilizarea IA în descoperirea medicamentelor și provocările etice asociate. Perspectivele extrase au fost sintetizate pentru a evidenția tendințele și descoperirile majore din domeniu.

Rezultate: Analiza a constatat că, deși AI simplifică semnificativ procesele de dezvoltare a medicamentelor, aceasta ridică preocupări substanțiale cu privire la confidențialitatea datelor, prejudecățile de luare a deciziilor și accesul echitabil. Principalele constatări evidențiază importanța gestionării etice a datelor pacienților, a utilizării seturilor de date incluzive pentru antrenarea algoritmilor și a menținerii transparenței

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în operațiunile IA. Drepturile de proprietate intelectuală legate de descoperirile IA și necesitatea unui proces decizional transparent în domeniul IA, în special în trialurile clinice, au fost identificate ca domenii critice care necesită atenție.

Concluzii: Dezvoltarea rapidă a IA în industria farmaceutică necesită un echilibru fin între inovare și respectarea principiilor etice. Acest lucru necesită o abordare multidisciplinară bazată pe colaborare și adaptarea continuă a cadrelor de reglementare pentru a asigura utilizarea etică și eficientă a IA în dezvoltarea medicamentelor.

Key-words: *artificial intelligence, ethical aspects, drug development*
Cuvinte cheie: *Inteligența artificială, aspecte etice, dezvoltarea de droguri*

Introduction

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in drug development marks a critical point in pharmaceutical research and medicine. *(Alowais et al.,2023, Secinaro et al., 2021, Ashiwaju et al., 2023)*

By applying advanced technologies like machine learning and deep learning, AI is transforming fundamental stages of the drug development process, including discovery, clinical trials, personalized medicine, and predictive modeling. AI algorithms efficiently analyze vast data sets to identify drug candidates, predict their efficacy and safety, and optimize the design of clinical trials. The integration of AI aims to reduce the time and costs of drug development, enhancing accuracy and success rates. However, this innovation in healthcare also raises ethical challenges such as the proper use of AI, protecting patient rights, and maintaining trust in the healthcare system. *(Wamala-Anderson et al., 2023)*

The emergence of AI in the pharmaceutical sector has hastened the shift from traditional drug discovery methods to more technological approaches. *(Rajula et al., 2020)* AI, as highlighted in *Blanco-Gonzalez et al. (2023)* "has the potential to revolutionize the drug discovery process, offering improved efficiency, accuracy, and speed". It efficiently analyzes complex datasets, expediting drug development and opening new opportunities in predictive analytics and personalized medicine.

However, AI's rapid advancement brings ethical concerns to the forefront, including data privacy issues, potential biases in decision-making, and intellectual property challenges. These concerns are exacerbated by global disparities in AI access, impacting drug development progress across regions. This evolving ethical landscape calls for a careful analysis of AI's role in drug creation, emphasizing responsible and equitable use. Thus, AI in drug development sparks a vital debate on its ethical implications and the need for effective management through collaboration.

Objectives

The primary goal of this literature review is to provide a profound and balanced perspective on the ethical complexities related to using Artificial Intelligence in drug development. We will consider critical issues such as data privacy protection, algorithm predispositions, intellectual property rights, transparency levels, and equitable access to innovative AI-based therapies. Additionally, our study will assess the impact of AI technologies on justice in healthcare and identify strategies for the fair distribution of AI's benefits in health globally.

Method

We conducted a systematic literature search from January 2019 to December 2023 using databases like PubMed, PLOS, and Google Scholar, with keywords "artificial intelligence," "ethics," and "drug discovery." This search led to the selection and detailed analysis of 33 key documents, focusing on the use of AI in drug discovery and associated ethical challenges. The extracted insights were synthesized to highlight major trends and discoveries in the field.

Results.

AI in Drug Development Overview

"The integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning into drug discovery has ushered in a new era of hope and efficiency in the healthcare industry" according to *Vashishat*

et al., (2023) It offered unprecedented speed and precision in various stages of the drug development process. AI algorithms analyze extensive biological and chemical data, identifying potential drug candidates and even proposing new compounds by analyzing molecular structures. *(Singh et al., 2023)*

AI's impact extends to preclinical research, where it helps understand complex diseases at a molecular level and predicts drug interactions within biological systems. This predictive capability simplifies preclinical testing, reducing time and costs.

Clinical trials benefit greatly from AI, optimizing study design, predicting outcomes, and improving patient recruitment based on medical history and genetics. This accelerates studies and enhances result accuracy.

AI plays a crucial role in personalized medicine by analyzing genetic data to predict individual patient responses to drugs, enabling personalized treatment plans. It also aids in drug repurposing, reducing time and costs. Its integration in drug development enhances speed, accuracy, and personalization, marking a transformative era in pharmaceuticals. *(Arora et al., 2021, Bender et al., 2020)*

Ethical Aspects in Using AI in Drug Development

The incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in drug development represents a significant advancement in medical science. *(Arabi et al., 2021)* This technology offers new avenues for innovation in pharmaceutical research and patient care, reshaping the processes of treatment discovery and development. *(Vora et al.,2023)* However, the adoption of AI in this field also presents ethical challenges that require thoughtful consideration. *(Keskinbora et al., 2019, Murphy et al., 2021, Thai et al., 2023)*

Ethical aspects are paramount in navigating the complexities introduced by AI in pharmaceuticals. Concerns such as safeguarding personal data, addressing bias in AI algorithms, managing intellectual property rights, ensuring transparency in AI operations, and promoting equitable access to AI-driven therapies, according to *Morley et al., (2020)* are central to ongoing discussions. These challenges demand a thorough understanding and a cautious approach to ensure that AI in medicine not only enhances existing processes but also aligns with the ethical standards of the healthcare industry.

As AI revolutionizes pharmaceutical research and healthcare, active involvement from healthcare professionals, researchers, ethicists, and policymakers is essential. Their collaboration is crucial for addressing these ethical dilemmas and ensuring responsible and equitable utilization of AI's benefits. This multidimensional ethical analysis is vital to create a future where AI enhances drug development while adhering to the core values of medical ethics and patient care. *(Saheb et al., 2021)*

Data Integrity and Confidentiality in AI-Assisted Drug Development

In AI-assisted drug development, maintaining data integrity and upholding confidentiality are vital ethical considerations. The careful management of sensitive patient information holds paramount significance. AI systems necessitate access to extensive datasets for the training and enhancement of algorithms, which frequently encompass sensitive patient data, including medical histories, genetic information, and essential personal identifiers utilized in personalized treatments. *(Yadav et al., 2023)*

Ethical data management requires strict adherence to confidentiality principles. This involves robust data protection measures like encryption and secure storage, alongside transparent data governance policies. As emphasized by *Forcier et al., (2019)*, clear policies must define data access, usage, and purposes. International data protection laws, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), set high standards, demanding stringent personal data protections.

Informed consent is critical for data integrity. Patients must fully understand data usage, potential risks, and their rights regarding data access and control. This process must be transparent and free from coercion, ensuring patients comprehend the implications of data use.

Ethical responsibility extends beyond data collection and consent, encompassing ongoing AI system surveillance and auditability.

Ensuring compliance with ethical standards and data privacy regulations, including those by international laws like the GDPR or HIPAA is challenging due to evolving AI algorithms. A dynamic approach to ethics and privacy is necessary.

To address these challenges, international collaboration is gaining support to establish ethical standards and a regulatory framework for AI in drug development. These frameworks should protect patient confidentiality and foster trust and transparency, enabling AI's benefits without compromising individual rights and ethical standards. AI in drug development presents a dual challenge: harnessing AI's potential while navigating the complex ethical landscape of data confidentiality and integrity. Addressing this challenge requires collective efforts from AI developers, healthcare providers, ethicists, regulators, and patients to ensure technological advances align with robust ethical practices.

Biases and Representation in AI-Developed Drugs

The potential for AI systems to perpetuate and amplify biases is a significant concern in drug development. This issue impacts the reliability and fairness of AI-driven processes in the pharmaceutical industry. AI-integrated systems have faced criticism for under-representing certain ethnic groups in their study data, exemplifying how biases in AI algorithms can lead to distorted outcomes and potentially ineffective treatments for diverse populations.

This problem often originates from the data used to train AI algorithms. *(Vicente and Matute, 2023; Nazer et al., 2023)* If the data is not representative of the entire population, the AI system can develop biases reflecting those in the dataset. For drug efficacy, this can have serious consequences. For instance, a project predominantly using data from a specific demographic may yield less applicable or even ineffective results for other groups, raising ethical and practical concerns about equity and drug efficacy. To tackle this, there's a growing emphasis on diversifying data sources in AI-assisted drug development. This involves ensuring that data from clinical trials and other datasets used to train AI are as inclusive and representative as possible for the entire population. Efforts are made to include diverse demographic groups in clinical studies and collect data from various ethnicities, genders, ages, and socio-demographic factors.

Addressing bias in AI requires a nuanced approach to algorithm development. It's crucial to create AI systems that are technically proficient and ethically aware. This means implementing checks and balances to identify and mitigate biases. AI developers, data scientists, ethicists, and community representatives collaborate to ensure fairness and equity in AI systems for drug development.

Continuous post-launch surveillance and monitoring are also vital. Even after a drug is launched, ongoing assessment is essential to monitor its efficacy in different population groups and make adjustments if necessary. This process helps identify overlooked biases and address them promptly.

In conclusion, reducing bias in AI-assisted drug development is both a technical and ethical challenge. It necessitates a multidisciplinary approach involving diverse and inclusive data collection, ethically aware algorithm design, continuous monitoring, and a commitment to fairness and representation. Addressing these challenges is essential to realize the transformative potential of AI in drug development equitably benefiting all segments of society.

Intellectual Property Rights in AI-Enhanced Discoveries

The ethical dimension of intellectual property (IP) rights in AI-enhanced discoveries poses a complex challenge, particularly as AI becomes more integral to pharmaceutical research. Drugs developed with substantial AI assistance can trigger legal debates surrounding the IP rights of AI algorithms versus traditional human inputs.

The central issue in these debates revolves around authorship and inventorship within AI-aided discoveries. Existing IP laws are rooted in human creativity and invention, yet AI systems, capable of analyzing vast data and uncovering patterns beyond human capacity, challenge these conventions. When AI significantly contributes to a discovery, the question arises: can AI itself be considered an inventor, or should sole credit go to human operators of AI?

This quandary has practical consequences, affecting patent law, property rights, and the distribution of rewards resulting from successful drug development. Furthermore, it raises ethical concerns about sharing benefits derived from AI-aided discoveries, particularly when AI relies on extensive datasets, including patient data. To address these challenges, there is a growing call to review and potentially reform IP laws to better accommodate AI's unique contributions to scientific discoveries. Reforms may involve establishing new IP categories or modifying the existing framework to acknowledge the collaborative nature of AI-aided discoveries. Ethical guidelines are also needed to ensure transparent attribution of credit and benefits in AI-assisted drug development.

Intellectual property rights in AI-augmented drug discoveries present significant ethical and legal complexities in the pharmaceutical industry. Resolving this challenge demands a nuanced understanding of AI capabilities and the principles underlying IP laws. It calls for a balanced approach that recognizes the contributions of all involved parties - both human and AI - while fostering an environment conducive to innovation and continued progress in drug development.

Transparency and Accountability in the Use of AI Algorithms

Transparency in AI algorithms, especially those used in drug development, is a critical issue that intersects both ethical and regulatory dimensions. This transparency becomes particularly vital during regulatory approvals and clinical trials, where decisions made by AI can have significant consequences for patient safety and treatment efficacy.

One of the main challenges in ensuring transparency in AI algorithms is the inherent complexity of these systems, especially those based on deep learning. These algorithms often operate as "black boxes," where the decision-making process is not easily interpreted by humans. This lack of interpretability can make it difficult to validate the algorithm's decisions, understand the basis of its predictions, or identify potential biases in its operation.

According to *Kisileva et al., (2022)* “transparency in AI algorithms is not just a technical issue, but also a regulatory one”. Regulatory authorities are increasingly focused on the need for clear and interpretable AI systems to ensure that new drugs meet safety and efficacy standards. This requires a collaborative effort between AI developers, pharmaceutical companies, and regulatory agencies to establish standards and guidelines for AI transparency in drug development.

In addition to regulatory compliance, transparency in AI algorithms also contributes to trust among the broader community, including patients and healthcare providers. When the AI decision-making process is clear and understood, this enhances the credibility of drugs developed with these technologies and can lead to greater acceptance and adoption in clinical settings.

Transparency and accountability of AI algorithms in drug development are crucial to ensure that these innovative technologies are safe, effective, and trustworthy. Cultivating transparent AI systems is essential not just for regulatory approval but also for building trust in AI-assisted medical solutions.

Artificial Intelligence in Clinical Trials

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in clinical trials brings into discussion complex ethical considerations, especially regarding the autonomy of participants and the reliability of AI predictions. The publication “Artificial Intelligence Applied to clinical trials: opportunities and challenges” by *Askin et. al., (2023),* explores the nuances of balancing AI assistance with human decision-making in clinical studies. This balance is crucial as it affects the integrity of the study process and the validity of its results.

Using AI to select participants, a decision traditionally made by human researchers, raises significant questions about the autonomy of the study process. Autonomy in clinical trials typically involves honoring an individual participant's choice to participate in the study, driven by a comprehensive understanding of the study's details. However, when AI systems are used for participant selection, a level of complexity is introduced regarding autonomy. There are concerns about whether the AI's selection criteria are transparent and fair and how these

criteria align with the traditionally respected ethical standards in human-driven selection. *(Shu et al., 2019, Vijayan et al., 2021, Bordukova et al., 2023)*

Moreover, the reliability of AI predictions in clinical trials is a crucial factor. AI systems, especially those based on complex algorithms like machine learning, can be particularly effective in identifying patterns and making predictions. However, their reliability may depend on the quality and coverage of the data they are trained on. Inaccuracies or biases in training data can lead to distorted AI predictions, potentially compromising the integrity of the study.

The implications of AI's role in participant selection are profound. Firstly, there is concern about whether AI identifies the most suitable candidates for the study in terms of diversity and representativeness. This is crucial for ensuring the generalizability of the study's results. Secondly, there is the issue of transparency - are the criteria used by AI for selection clear and understood by all stakeholders, including participants and regulatory authorities? Finally, the reliability of AI predictions must be constantly evaluated to ensure that AI decision-making aligns with the study's objectives and ethical standards.

While AI presents significant opportunities for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of clinical trials, it is imperative to navigate the ethical landscape carefully. Balancing AI assistance with human decision-making, ensuring participant autonomy, and maintaining the reliability of AI predictions are essential to uphold the ethical integrity of clinical studies in the era of AI.

Global Disparities in AI and Drug Development Access

The issue of global disparities in AI development and access significantly impacts health equity worldwide, particularly in drug development. These disparities can lead to inequities in drug development and availability across regions. Disparities in AI access and development are rooted in socio-economic, geopolitical, and infrastructural factors. Wealthier countries with advanced technological infrastructures, more financial resources, and higher expertise concentrations lead in AI development. This creates a technological gap, with resource-limited settings, especially in low- and middle-income countries, falling behind in utilizing AI for healthcare advancements.

The consequences of this gap are multi-faceted. Regions with limited AI development miss out on the efficiencies and insights AI offers, like accelerating drug discovery and optimizing clinical trials. This hinders effective drug development to address specific health challenges. *Cili et al., (2022)* emphasize that "building equitable sociodemographic representation in data repositories, in author nationality, gender and expertise, and in clinical specialties is crucial in ameliorating health inequities". AI systems often train on datasets from regions with advanced AI infrastructures, failing to capture genetic, environmental, and lifestyle diversity in underrepresented areas. This can result in less effective drugs or unexpected side effects in those populations.

Addressing these disparities requires a global effort involving technology, expertise, and data exchange. Initiatives promoting technology transfer, local AI capacity building, and inclusive global health databases are crucial. International funding bodies and policymakers must allocate resources to support AI development in underprivileged regions, ensuring equitable AI benefits in drug development globally.

Furthermore, AI development should prioritize inclusion, designing systems with global diversity in mind. This involves incorporating diverse datasets and perspectives to create universally applicable and effective health solutions. *(Lillywhite et al., 2019)*

Reducing global disparities in AI access and development is vital for equitable drug development and addressing global health challenges. Multifaceted efforts, spanning technology, economics, and politics, guided by a commitment to global health equity, are essential to bridge this gap.

Regulations in AI-Assisted Drug Development

In the dynamic intersection of healthcare and technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI) in drug development presents unique regulatory challenges. *(Stahl et al., 2021)* Key global and regional

regulators such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the European Union (EU) have been instrumental in shaping the regulatory landscape for AI applications in this sector.

The WHO, as a global health authority, emphasizes the need for international standards and ethical guidelines in AI integration. Recognizing AI's potential in accelerating drug development and enhancing patient outcomes, WHO advocates for regulations that ensure AI systems are safe, effective, and equitable. It stresses the importance of data privacy, reliability of AI algorithms, and the inclusion of diverse population data to avoid biases in drug development. *(WHO Guidance, 2021)*

The FDA, governing one of the largest pharmaceutical markets, plays a pivotal role in regulating AI in drug development in the United States. It has adapted its regulatory framework to accommodate the evolving nature of AI-driven technologies. The FDA's approach focuses on validating the efficacy and safety of AI algorithms, ensuring they meet the rigorous standards for medical products. It also emphasizes the importance of transparency in AI decision-making processes and continuous monitoring post-approval to ensure sustained safety and efficacy. *(Arden et al., 2021)*

In the EU, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) significantly influences the use of AI in drug development, particularly concerning data privacy and protection. The European Medicines Agency (EMA), alongside GDPR, ensures that AI applications in drug development comply with data protection laws and ethical standards. The EU's approach is characterized by stringent requirements for data security, consent, and transparency, ensuring that AI systems are not only innovative but also respectful of individual privacy and rights.*(EP, Fox-Skelly et al., 2020)*

Each of these regulatory bodies contribute to a comprehensive regulatory framework that balances the innovative potential of AI in drug development with the need for patient safety, data security, and ethical considerations. The regulatory ecosystem is continuously evolving, reflecting the dynamic nature of AI and its profound impact on drug development.

Multidisciplinary Collaboration and Ethical Standards

Integrating ethical principles into AI-assisted drug development is a complex challenge that requires collaborative efforts across different sectors. *Amann et al., (2020)* claim that "Some of these challenges are tied to the technical properties of AI, others relate to the legal, medical, and patient perspectives, making it necessary to adopt a multidisciplinary perspective". AI developers bring technical understanding of the capabilities and limitations of AI technologies. Pharmaceutical companies provide context regarding practical applications and challenges in drug development. Ethicists bring a deep understanding of moral principles and ethical frameworks, while regulators provide guidance on compliance with legal and safety standards.

This collaborative approach is crucial for several reasons:

-*Comprehensive Understanding of Ethical Issues*: Bringing together diverse perspectives ensures a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical challenges posed by AI in drug development. It allows for the identification of potential ethical dilemmas that may not be evident to stakeholders working in isolation.

-*Development of Inclusive and Practical Guidelines*: Collaboration facilitates the creation of ethical guidelines that are not only theoretically sound but also applicable in the real-world practice of drug development. These guidelines can address a wide range of issues, from data protection and bias in AI algorithms to transparency and accountability.

-*Harmonization of Standards*: Involving regulators and industry stakeholders, collaborative efforts can lead to the harmonization of ethical standards across different regions and jurisdictions. This is particularly important in the global context of pharmaceutical research and drug development.

-*Building Public Trust:* Collaborative approaches can enhance public trust in AI-assisted drug development. When stakeholders see that ethical considerations are taken seriously by a consortium of experts and industry leaders, they have more confidence in the developed products and technologies.

-Promoting Innovation While Upholding Ethics: A key advantage of these collaborations is the ability to stimulate innovation in AI while ensuring ethical standards are upheld. Ethical considerations do not have to be in opposition to innovation; instead, they can guide the development process in a direction that maximizes benefits while minimizing potential harms.

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies in the pharmaceutical field, it is essential to reflect on the ethical aspects of using these technologies in the drug development process. Here are some key conclusions regarding the ethical aspects of AI utilization summarized from this literature study:

• *The Need for Balance Between Innovation and Ethics:* The use of AI in drug development offers significant potential for innovation and efficiency but also raises complex ethical issues, such as transparency of AI decisions, equitable distribution of benefits, and respect for patient autonomy and confidentiality.

• *The Importance of Multidisciplinary Collaboration:* Addressing ethical issues requires collaboration among AI developers, pharmaceutical companies, ethicists, regulators, and other stakeholders to understand and develop balanced and comprehensive solutions.

• *The Need for Adapted and Flexible Regulatory Frameworks*: Regulatory frameworks that can adapt to rapid changes in AI technology are required to ensure the safety and efficacy of drugs developed with AI assistance while upholding ethical principles.

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