

Hack Aotearoa

Article #5

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JANUARY 18, 2020

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257 WORDS

Where data meet ethics

by Justin Sung

The very different worlds of biomedical ethics and data science ethics are converging, bringing unique conversations and challenges that must be overcome.

Dr Matthew Strother says biomedical ethics are culturally embedded in medicine and medical research. Ethics are not, however, embedded in data science.

Dr Matthew is an oncologist, clinical pharmacologist, clinical senior lecturer at University of Otago in Christchurch, and PhD candidate in evaluating machine learning governance in healthcare.

He spoke at the Hack Aotearoa 2020 conference.

While medicine and ethics have been entwined for decades, he says, “biomedical ethics has been largely reactive.”

He gave examples of ethics being developed in reaction to the Nuremberg code and human radiation experimentation.

He says legal and political responses have formed the core biomedical ethic principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice that all clinicians are intimately familiar with.

“This is where I might get controversial. I would make the statement that data science ethics is underdeveloped.

“Data science has largely evolved in the business arena and, arguably, business ethics have been the dominant paradigm.”

Dr Matthew says conversations in the industry have been dominated by technical discussions and the issue of fairness and bias.

“While these discussions are helpful, they are unlikely to be stand-alone” as a solution to the problems of data ethics that we are beginning to foresee, he says.

“There’s no quick solution” says Dr Matthew. “There’s not going to be a right or wrong with most of these, it’s about having the discussions... and acknowledging the concerns.”