

AI chatbots are not doctors

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PETALING JAYA: More Malaysians are turning to artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots for health information, from checking symptoms and understanding medical reports to learning about medications and traditional remedies.

While healthcare professionals welcome the technology as a useful educational tool, they caution that information should not be mistaken for a diagnosis.

Doctors, pharmacists and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioners say patients are increasingly arriving with information obtained from AI chatbots, prompting concerns that some may delay seeking treatment, self-medicate or misinterpret symptoms without professional guidance.

Malaysian Medical Association president Datuk Dr Thirunavukarasu Rajoo said it has become increasingly common for patients to consult AI chatbots or search online before seeing a doctor.



“This is not necessarily a bad thing. Patients today are more informed and more engaged in their healthcare.

“The concern is often not that AI gives a completely wrong answer. The concern is that patients may delay seeking medical attention because the advice appears reassuring,” he said in an interview yesterday.

“For some conditions, that may not matter. For others, such as dengue, stroke, heart attack or cancer, that delay can be significant. When it comes to healthcare, timing matters.”

He noted that AI can only work with the information provided by users and lacks the ability to conduct physical examinations or investigations.

“Medicine is more than information. It is examination, investigation, judgment and responsibility. AI can be a useful source of information, but it should not replace a medical consultation. It can point patients in the right direction, but it cannot confirm a diagnosis,” he said.

AI chatbots VS Doctors

| AI chatbot/Internet | | Doctor |
|--|------------------------------|---|
| Available 24/7 | Access | Requires appointment |
| Fast responses | Speed | Needs consultation time |
| Low cost/free | Cost | Consultation fees |
| General information | Type of advice | Personalised care |
| May give wrong/"hallucinated" answers | Reliability | Professional diagnosis |
| No clinical accountability | Responsibility | Clinical accountability |
| Cannot order tests or prescribe medicine | Tests & treatment | Can order tests and prescribe treatment |

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Universiti Malaya epidemiology and public health expert Prof Dr Sanjay Rampal said AI has made health information more accessible, but users should be mindful that general-purpose models may also provide inaccurate information.

“The models’ reasoning is based on information available on the Internet. As we know, the Internet contains both good and bad information.

“As the models become more intelligent, AI literacy is going to be just as important as health literacy,” he said.

Malaysian Community Pharmacy Guild honorary secretary Rachel Gan said pharmacists are increasingly seeing customers consult AI before seeking professional advice.

“Sometimes they show us the AI responses and ask us to verify the information or explain why the chatbot suggested something different,” she said.

Gan said AI could be useful for general health information, but consumers may become unnecessarily anxious if they misinterpret the information provided.

Malaysian Pharmacists Society president Amrahi Buang said pharmacists are particularly concerned when consumers use AI-generated information to make decisions about medicines without professional advice.

He warned that over-the-counter medicines, supplements and herbal products may - temporarily relieve symptoms while masking more serious underlying conditions.

“Some symptoms that appear harmless can be signs of more serious diseases that require medical attention,” he said.

Federation of Chinese Physicians and Acupuncturists Associations Malaysia president Prof Dr Ng Po Kok said TCM practitioners are seeing more patients consult AI before seeking advice on herbs and traditional remedies.

“Some enter medical terms from their lab reports and ask AI to explain them before bringing the information to us,” he said.

However, he stressed that AI could not replace professional assessment.

“Two patients may have similar symptoms but require different treatment approaches. This is something AI may not always be able to determine accurately,” he said, adding that AI cannot replace a consultation, physical examination and follow-up.