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With Avicenna, IBM Watson Health interprets radiology images

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Courtesy: Merge

Just months after closing on the $1 billion acquisition of Merge Healthcare Inc., IBM is putting its money to good use with a test drive of software code-named Avicenna that will help interpret medical images and offer possible diagnoses and treatment suggestions based on the images, patients' medical records and family histories.

The software, which is part of the IBM Watson Health business unit, is a work-in-progress but attendees of the recent RSNA 2015 conference in Chicago got a sneak peek of Avicenna, named after an 11th century philosopher who was also known for writing a medical encyclopedia. Merge, a medical imaging management platform with 30 billion images, was acquired by IBM in October.

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When the deal was announced in August, IBM stated the plan was to use Watson's cognitive and analytic capabilities along with those from Merge and other acquisitions, giving Watson "eyes" on medical images to unlock "entirely new possibilities for the industry."

Deborah DiSanzo, general manager and head of Watson Health, told the Chicago Tribune during the RSNA 2015 conference that the Merge platform and Watson would "help clinicians digest a vast amount of information and point them to what they should look at first." It would also help radiologists compare one particular image with other images and the patient's electronic health information, she added.

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MIT Technology Review reported Avicenna is "currently specialized to cardiology and breast radiology" and was being tested on anonymous images and data but would soon begin testing using real patient information.

"We're getting into preparations for commercialization," Tanveer Syeda-Mahmood, an IBM researcher, told MIT Technology Review.

A demonstration of the system highlighted a 28-year-old woman complaining of shortness of breath. In addition to the pulmonary angiogram images, the text included her family history, specifically her mother who had had multiple miscarriages possibly caused by blood clots. The software diagnosed a possible pulmonary embolism for the patient. An independent review by a radiologist reached the same conclusion.

A blog post on the Merge web site described the demo as the group's "vision of futuristic technology using the Merge PACS™ workstation in which a radiologist opens an exam from the Universal Worklist (UWL) and both the PACS viewer and the IBM Watson Health work in progress are launched in separate monitors to show respective content."

The blog noted the "integrated technologies, which add rich image analytics with deep learning to the Watson Health platform, will advance Watson beyond natural language and help give it the ability to 'see'."

Kenji Suzuki, an associate professor at the medical imaging research center at the Illinois Institute of Technology, applauded IBM's goal of integrating text, structured data and medical imaging. But he noted in an interview with MIT Technology Review that Avicenna needs to become more accurate and be able to integrate with hospital IT systems to provide economic benefits, "such as reducing the total hospital cost, insurance reimbursement, or the risks of lawsuits."

IBM researchers say they are working on making the software more accurate, and believe the company's other acquisitions, including Explorys, a cloud-based health care intelligence firm, will also play a role in adding billions more medical images and electronic health records to the system.

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