Geneva is supposed to watch over health data worldwide

The Swiss Botnar Foundation lays the foundation stone in Geneva for an organization that wants to regulate the handling of health data globally.

Birgit Voigt
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Health workers in Bangalore, India collect data from people who are being tested for Corona. Digitally recorded information is a valuable basis for research, but it can also easily be misused. (Bangalore, 11/27/2020)

EPA / Jagadeesh
How do you get a project up and running for which there is a great global need but no responsibility? It's about the bulky regulation of digital health data. Its use offers enormous potential for positive change, but also for abuse. The question of how to keep the introduction of artificial intelligence and big data in the health care system in a socially acceptable way is a matter of concern to experts all over the world.

The developments are rapid. The pharmaceutical industry is interested in the possibility of developing better diagnostic techniques or accelerating research using large amounts of patient data. Aid organizations are concerned with the hope of using digital tools to improve healthcare in poor nations. But much of what would soon be possible threatens to be blocked by the proliferation of technologies and the lack of regulation within and between states.

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Stefan Germann, director of the Basel-based Fondation Botnar, wants to tackle this problem with a network of high-caliber partners. One of the goals of the foundation, endowed with CHF 3.8 billion, is to establish a neutral platform in Geneva that will promote the best research projects in the segment. In the course of this, it is hoped that one day it could perhaps also set global standards for handling health data. The little-known foundation has given start-up funding of around CHF 8 million. “It is a project with considerable risks. But I think Switzerland would be predestined to play an important role in this area,” says Germann.

The nucleus of the organization recently started operations under the name I-DAIR. Germann was able to win the former Indian ambassador Amandeep Gill as director. He is well networked at the United Nations and, among other things, administered a permanent advisory panel on the subject of digital cooperation for the UN Secretary-General until last year. The presidents of this panel are Melinda Gates and Jack Ma, head of the Chinese online giant Alibaba.

It is no coincidence that I-DAIR was docked with the Institute for Global Health of the Graduate Institute of Geneva. Geneva is the center of global health policy. The World Health Organization and all of its sub-organizations are located there, and numerous relevant aid organizations such as the Global Alliance for Vaccines (GAVI), but also lobbying organizations such as the World Association of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers, have settled there.
In Switzerland, the city and canton of Geneva as well as the federal government support the project through a joint foundation called GESDA. To this end, some prominent scientists have dedicated themselves to the matter. The busy networker Patrick Aebischer, former President of EPFL, is one of them. Former Federal Councilor Doris Leuthard, chairwoman of the Swiss Digital Initiative, is also apparently inclined.

Nevertheless, it will be extremely difficult to persuade the USA or China to agree on an international platform with reasonably clear guidelines for the use of new data technologies in the sensitive health sector.

The actors cannot even come to an agreement within Switzerland. For decades, for example, the federal government and cantons have been arguing with healthcare providers about how the electronic patient record could become a reality. And a study published a week ago on behalf of the Federal Council on the country's Covid 19 crisis management revealed blatant weaknesses in the handling of health data. A study by Foraus and Sensor Advice, commissioned by the Botnar Foundation, documents how stagnation in the healthcare system is managed in a variety of ways in this country. The opportunities offered by digitization threaten to be overslept.

One is further in the EU. The community has agreed on how to build the data infrastructure of the future and how exchange and protection can be guaranteed. As a small nation, Switzerland will need to have access to this infrastructure for its research projects. Without a framework agreement, however, the path is blocked. There
is still a lot to be done.

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