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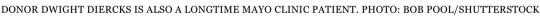
Behind an Early Nvidia Employee's Big Gift for Healthcare AI

Ade Adeniji | July 09, 2024

DONOR DWIGHT DIERCKS IS ALSO A LONGTIME MAYO CLINIC PATIENT. PHOTO: BOB POOL/SHUTTERSTOCK
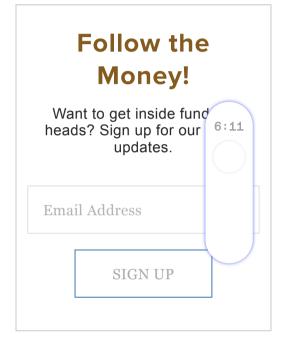
Nvidia cofounder and CEO Jensen Huang and his wife Lori recently became centibillionaires, powered by the company's leading role in manufacturing the GPU chips that help make AI systems possible.

However, the Huangs aren't the only Nvidia insiders the company's meteoric rise has enriched. Dwight Diercks, employee No. 22 at Nvidia, is currently senior vice president of software engineering and moonlights as a mega-giver in his own right. Raised in rural Minnesota, he graduated from Milwaukee School of Engineering in 1990 with a B.S. in computer engineering and began his career at Nvidia as a senior software engineer in 1994.

Diercks and his wife Dian recently made a $20 million gift to Mayo Clinic in Minnesota to catalyze Mayo's strategy for transformational healthcare AI and innovation. The eight-figure gift will establish the Heidi Diercks Krause Fund in AI Innovation for Cancer at Mayo, as well as the Dwight and Dian Diercks President, Mayo Clinic Platform, a title held by veteran physician John Halamka.

We've written about the promise, and potential perils, that AI holds for philanthropy and social impact. To take just one positive example, in Latin America, Caroline Suozzi and Henrietta Bankole-Olusina of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors note in a recent IP

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that AI is making it possible for micro-entrepreneurs and small business owners to go beyond the limits of traditional bank branches to access banking services and credit.

AI is opening up new possibilities in healthcare, too. IP recently caught up with Diercks and Halamka to find out more about how the gift to Mayo took shape, more about what the funds will support, and how AI tools could impact medicine.

A tech winner gets involved

Dwight Diercks grew up in Minnesota, where Mayo Clinic loomed large. He worked on a family farm about 50 miles from Mayo. "If you live within an hour of Mayo Clinic, all of your family goes there. The work they do touches so many," Diercks began. "Being an engineer by training, if you go there, it's like seeing a doctor who's at the intersection of medicine and engineering. Everything is data-driven."

Though also based in the Bay Area, Diercks has been doing yearly checkups along with his wife Dian at Mayo for the past few years, which allowed him to become even more familiar with all the work going on at the institution he's long known. This is the couple's first gift to Mayo, Diercks said, and conversations for the gift started around a year and a half ago.

This isn't the couple's first big AI-focused gift, though. Back in 2017, the Dierckses gave $34 million to the Milwaukee School of Engineering, creating the Dwight and Dian Diercks Computational Science Hall. The computational science program has been heavily focused on AI since that time, well before the technology hit the mainstream. A cornerstone of the building is a supercomputer powered by state-of-the-art Nvidia GPU units.

"In general, we like to figure out timing, what we can do beyond just writing a check, and how to make a big impact," Diercks said of his philanthropic approach. Donating a large lump sum up front proved a good model at Milwaukee School of Engineering, quickly allowing his alma mater to hire new faculty and start and finish the new building.

Part of Diercks' interest in Mayo and its impact on diseases like cancer is also deeply personal. A portion of the gift will support the Heidi Diercks Krause Fund in AI Innovation for Cancer, which bears the name of Diercks' late sister. The fund will enable Mayo Clinic's Generative Artificial Intelligence Program and Mayo Clinic's Comprehensive Cancer Center to develop advanced generative AI tools to gain insight into a patient's risk of developing cancer. This forecasting will allow clinicians to intervene early, even before cancer can be diagnosed by a doctor.

Bringing all the data together

Launched in 1865, the Mayo Clinic has been at the forefront of clinical practice and research for decades. The nonprofit institution boasts thousands of employees, including more than 7,300 physicians and scientists, working between three main campuses in Rochester Minnesota; Jacksonville, Florida; and the Phoenix/Scottsdale area in Arizona.

In 2023, scientists at the Mayo Clinic Center for Individualized Medicine and Mayo Clinic Comprehensive Cancer Center developed an artificial intelligence method, called Spatially Informed Artificial Intelligence (SPIN-AI), to analyze the genetic information of individual cells and reconstruct the precise layout of the cells in a tissue, all without preexisting knowledge of how the cells are organized. Down the line, these findings could pave for individualized treatments that target the specific cellular traits of each person.

President of Mayo Platforms John Halamka joined Mayo Clinic in 2020 and spoke about how AI is being used there. With degrees from Stanford and Harvard, Halamka calls

himself a physician but also an engineer. He served as chief information officer of Harvard Medical School and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center before coming to Mayo, where he says one of his main goals is better understanding how we use the data from the past to help patients of the future. To that end, the program Halamka heads, Mayo Clinic Platform, has been working over the past four years across 21 countries, including Sweden, Belgium, Kenya and Nigeria.

"Mayo had this notion [that] if we are going to transform healthcare globally, not just for a single institution or region, we better figure out a way where we can… ethically use data that's consented to create AI models, to think about new cures and discoveries… and do it across the globe," Halamka said.

The goal, according to Halamka, is to democratize healthcare by tapping a diverse dataset of 46 million de-identified patient records and using AI to help develop new treatment models. First, Mayo began in its own backyard, assembling the birth-to-death records of 10 million patients within the Mayo network, largely in the Midwest. But it has since expanded its distributed data network to include other healthcare systems and hospitals around the world, including Mercy Health System, Hospital Israelita Albert Einstein in Brazil, and Sheba Medical Center in Israel.

Eventually, AI may help tackle many longstanding medical challenges, including cardiovascular disease detection and by making possible an algorithm for radiation oncologists that auto-contours head and neck cancers more quickly and accurately than traditional contouring methods.

The longtime Harvard School of Medicine professor breaks down the promise of AI in tackling cancer: "Cancer is a combination of phenotype, which would be who you are, genotype, which is more what you could be, and exposome—what you eat, where you live, do you exercise?" Halamka said. He added that to date, it's been hard to find an institution that brings all of this data together. But this is what Mayo has been able to achieve.

Diercks looks ahead

At Mayo, Diercks knows getting the data platform up to speed quickly will be foundational to all of Mayo's AI efforts across the institution. This is why he was inspired to give $20 million. He calls data the "new oil" for AI and believes that by supporting good data, you can apply it to all kinds of algorithms. "There really isn't such a platform out there that's so broad with such a diversity of different data," Diercks said.

Diercks says his growing philanthropy has so far strongly focused on education in the Midwest, and that his gift to Mayo is his first big gift in the non-education sphere. The couple also loves animals and is thinking about more gifts in that area, as well.

In his 50s, Diercks made it clear that right now, his No. 1 focus is still his tech career. "If I work hard at Nvidia, we're probably going to generate more money. We're not really at philanthropy full time. But someday, we probably will be," he said. As for right now, he said the biggest thing he can do is find great people — including John Halamka at Mayo — and invest in them.

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