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Biomind, an artificial intelligence (AI) machine, can read MRI scans and diagnose neurological conditions like tumours in a second, its maker, Hanalytics, has claimed.

In contrast, a doctor will take an hour on average to study the images and draw up a report, the Singapore start-up said.

But while AI machines like Biomind are increasingly outperforming humans, they can never totally replace them. This was a recurring theme at the inaugural Sino-Singapore Artificial Intelligence Forum yesterday.

The reason has to do with the importance of the human touch.

Said Professor Loh Han Tong, deputy president (academic) of the Singapore Institute of Technology: “People don’t want to

walk into a clinic, say they want a cataract operation, hit three buttons, go and pay, and then (walk) into the operating room.”

In such a situation, patients expect to be counselled and reassured by another human being, said Prof Loh, who gave a presentation on how AI will affect the next generation.

Hanalytics chief executive Raymond Moh told The Straits Times that AI systems like Biomind are meant to “help doctors to make accurate diagnoses and not replace them”.

Prof Loh, giving another example, said that while robots could teach subjects such as English, they could not replace teachers when it came to imparting values.

“How would a robot distinguish

ethical situations and help the child with his reasoning?”

On the other hand, workers who perform repetitive tasks or need a “less creative use of knowledge” – such as call centre staff or taxi drivers – are at risk of being replaced by AI, Professor Hans Uszkoreit of the European Academy of Sciences said during another panel discussion.

“Society will have to put humans to tasks only humans can do, and machines to tasks that machines can do,” he said.

But he cautioned: “The thing is technology develops so much faster than social systems. My fear is that... generations would have to suffer if we don’t play it right.”

Danson Cheong