How blockchain is fighting opioid epidemic

Much has been said about blockchain's potential to enhance security of data management and sharing. Gartner has gone so far to say it's overhyped at the moment; yet IBM and other tech firms are bent on turning the promise of cryptographic ledger technology into real-world efficiencies in healthcare and beyond.

Blockchain's growing list of innovative use cases already includes optimisation of supply chain and revenue cycle processes. Tracking prescription and population health data is a new addition to that list.

Mining of big data is increasingly used by medical institutions to identify and help solve public health issues. Big Blue is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on a new project to make use of longitudinal data to help stem the widening opioid epidemic.

Fast Company reported that IBM, together with CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, has made strides developing a blockchain-enabled health surveillance system that makes it easier for public health agencies to survey hospitals and physicians about their patients and prescription practices. The work has included surveys to collect data on patients seeking care and how doctors prescribe antibiotics and opioids.

IBM isn't the only company convinced of blockchain's ability to combat opioid addiction. This spring, for instance, Intel embarked on innovating another approach to fighting prescription drug abuse, Bloomberg reported on Intel's work.

It is believed that digital currencies are partly to blame for aggravating the opioid crisis because they make it easier to buy and sell drugs anonymously.

In a pilot project with pharma industry giants (including McKesson and Johnson & Johnson), Intel is developing ways to deploy blockchain as a means to better trace how pills are distributed from point to point.

That could "vastly reduce the opioid epidemic," David Houlding, director of healthcare privacy and security at Intel told Bloomberg. "I would not say this will eliminate the opioid problem, but this will help."

Another blockchain player, Hashed Health, offered its own perspective on the opioid problem and what needs to be done to curb drug overuse.

"Concerned parties suggesting Blockchain as a single solution for the opioid epidemic often attribute the liability for abuse to the physician who prescribes the opioid or to the pharmacist at the point of fulfilment," Hashed Health explained on its website. "In this model, the responsible parties are deemed as those who issue the opiates. While pragmatic from the supply chain management perspective, a more robust understanding of the epidemic suggests that culpability for addiction entails more than supply chain dynamics."

Beyond merely trying to track the distribution, use and misuse of opioids, blockchain could help power an even more fundamental approach to patient safety, the company said – playing a "pivotal role in the research and development of opiate alternatives."

By laying the groundwork for a "decentralized database of test results with free access to this data," Hashed Health added, blockchain "prevents the possibility of duplicated efforts globally as well as enhanced coordination across projects."

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