

BioSys/BioISI Research Seminar

Personalized Medicine: semantic ambiguities and ethical quandaries

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Over the last two decades “personalized medicine” (PM) has become a buzzword in the academic and political debates on medicine. Yet, there is no unified definition of what PM actually is or ought to be. Alternative definitions and labels abound. Precision medicine, stratified medicine, individualized medicine, and systems medicine—also known as P4 medicine (predictive, preventive, participatory and personalized)—are just a few examples. This semantic indeterminacy complicates the debate on possibilities, risks and limits of PM. Accordingly, it becomes difficult to foresee and assess its potential impact on healthcare systems and society at large. Yet, this assessment is paramount, because PM raises several ethical and societal issues.

In this seminar I review and compare different definitions of PM and present a possible taxonomy of the ethical issues concerning PM (e.g., research, clinical, societal level), paying particular attention to specific problems posed by systems medicine. Drawing an analogy with the problem of the definition of biodiversity, I discuss why it is difficult to define PM and how semantic confusion can hamper the ethical debate.

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