

Professor Jakob Nikolas Kather Appointed Hopp Foundation Professor of “Artificial Intelligence in Medicine” and Founding Director of the New Institute for Medical AI (IMAI) in Heidelberg

Effective 1 October 2026, Professor Jakob Nikolas Kather will assume the Hopp Foundation Professorship for “Artificial Intelligence in Medicine” at the Heidelberg Faculty of Medicine at Heidelberg University. Associated with the professorship is the establishment of the new Institute for Medical AI (IMAI) at Heidelberg University Hospital, which Professor Kather will lead as its founding director. The professorship and the IMAI will receive funding of up to eight million euros from the Dietmar Hopp Stiftung (Foundation) over the next five years.

The aim is to further develop Heidelberg into a leading international center for state-of-the-art, AI-enabled medicine. Alongside advancing innovative research approaches and clinical applications, new education and professional development programs in artificial intelligence (AI) will be established to prepare healthcare professionals for the growing role of AI in medicine.

“I am delighted that we have succeeded in recruiting Professor Jakob Nikolas Kather, one of the internationally leading experts in the application of artificial intelligence in medicine,” says Professor Hanns-Peter Knaebel, Chief Medical Officer and Chairman of the Board of the Heidelberg-Mannheim University Hospital Alliance. “AI applications will fundamentally transform healthcare over the coming years. Our ambition is to actively shape this development. We will develop the Heidelberg-Mannheim hospital alliance into a leading center for cutting-edge AI-supported medicine across patient care, research, and teaching, while also fostering collaborations with start-ups and industry partners. The Institute for Medical AI, or IMAI, established and led by Professor Kather, will play a central role in this process.” The newly founded institute, which will be established at Heidelberg University Hospital on 1 October 2026, will be located in the Marsilius Arkaden complex at Neuenheimer Feld.

Also effective 1 October 2026, Professor Kather has accepted the appointment to the newly established Hopp Foundation Professorship for “Artificial Intelligence in Medicine” at the Heidelberg Faculty of Medicine at Heidelberg University. “By appointing Professor Kather, we are strengthening our faculty in a key field for the future of medicine,” emphasizes Professor Michael Boutros, Dean of the Heidelberg Faculty of Medicine at Heidelberg University. “Artificial intelligence will play a pivotal role in accelerating the translation of research findings into clinical practice and in developing innovative diagnostic and therapeutic approaches. Within the framework of the Health + Life Science Alliance Heidelberg Mannheim, the Institute for Medical AI will help bring together medical expertise and technological innovation, accelerate translation, and further enhance the international visibility of our region. Professor Kather will also help shape the next generation of physicians and scientists by embedding the competencies required for working with data and artificial intelligence into medical education, continuing education, and professional training.”

Professor Kather joins Heidelberg from Dresden. Since 2022, he has held the Chair of Clinical Artificial Intelligence at the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Computer Science of TU Dresden. He also served as a senior physician in oncology at Dresden University Hospital and at the National Center for Tumor Diseases (NCT) Dresden. Since 2020, he has additionally led a research group at the Department of Medical Oncology at Heidelberg University Hospital. He is board-certified in internal medicine, holds a master’s degree in Medical Physics, and has been developing AI applications for medicine for the past 15 years.

IMAI as the Organizational Unit for AI Across the Hospital Alliance

At both the Heidelberg Faculty of Medicine at Heidelberg University and the Heidelberg-Mannheim hospital alliance, the new IMAI will serve as a key organizational unit for AI-related activities. Professor Kather and his team will further expand the necessary IT infrastructure, advise research groups and clinical teams on the implementation of AI projects, and promote collaboration with industry partners as well as the creation of start-ups. To support these activities, Professor Kather will build an interdisciplinary team bringing together experts from medicine and computer science, as well as physics, biology,

engineering, and law. "Every member of my team speaks both the language of medicine and the language of technology," he says.

The IMAI will also contribute to the implementation of the joint digital and data strategy of Heidelberg and Mannheim University Hospitals. Working closely with the Center for Digitalization and Information Technology (ZDI) at Heidelberg University Hospital, Professor Kather will support the ongoing digital transformation. "AI can only create real value where large volumes of data are available in a structured digital format within a secure and controlled environment. This is how we ensure that sensitive patient data remain protected and that all legal requirements are met," says Professor Kather.

Focus Area: AI Agents, from Research and Development to Practical Application

One of Professor Kather's key research areas is AI agents, software systems based on large language models that can autonomously perform complex tasks through multiple steps. In medicine, such systems could in the future assist with disease diagnosis, individualized treatment planning, and patient management. "At the IMAI, my team and I will develop and evaluate these advanced AI agents for a range of medical applications," says Professor Kather. "Agentic AI holds enormous potential. It can support and relieve healthcare professionals, help prepare decisions, accelerate processes, and thereby further improve the quality of care. However, decisions regarding diagnoses and treatments will ultimately remain the responsibility of physicians." Patient care, he stresses, will continue to be a profoundly human endeavor.

The Dietmar Hopp Stiftung (Foundation) will support the Institute for Medical AI with funding of up to eight million euros over the next five years. "With the IMAI, a new institute is being established where technological progress is systematically translated into benefits for healthcare," says Daniel Hopp, Managing Director of the Dietmar Hopp Stiftung. "The crucial challenge is bridging the gap between research and development and safe clinical application. Through this funding, we aim to help ensure that the potential of artificial intelligence is realized responsibly for the benefit of patients."

Education and Training in AI for Medicine

In addition to strengthening data and AI literacy within the undergraduate medical curriculum, Professor Kather will expand and further develop educational programs for students and researchers in the field of artificial intelligence in medicine. "We want to educate the next generation of global experts in the application of artificial intelligence in medicine," says the 37-year-old physician-scientist. "Students should gain the technical expertise required to develop AI systems themselves. At the same time, they should be able to translate these developments into practical applications and confidently address the associated ethical, legal, and regulatory challenges."

About Professor Jakob Nikolas Kather

By assuming the Hopp Foundation Professorship for "Artificial Intelligence in Medicine" and leadership of Heidelberg's IMAI, Professor Kather returns to the Rhine-Neckar region. A native of Freiburg, he studied medicine and completed a Master's degree in Medical Physics at the Faculty of Medicine Mannheim of Heidelberg University between 2009 and 2016, where he also earned his doctorate in 2016. He subsequently worked as a resident physician in the Department of Medical Oncology at Heidelberg University Hospital until 2018. Since 2020, he has led the department's Computational Oncology research group. Research stays took him to the Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida, and The University of Chicago Medicine in Chicago, Illinois. In 2021, Jakob Nikolas Kather accepted a tenure-track professorship in Gastrointestinal Immunology at RWTH Aachen University. In June 2022, he was appointed Full Professor of Clinical Artificial Intelligence at TU Dresden.

Professor Kather is a member of numerous national and international professional societies, including the European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO), where he serves as Co-Chair of the AI and Digital Oncology Committee, and the German Society of Hematology and Medical Oncology (DGHO), where he chairs the Working Group on Artificial Intelligence. His honors include the Felix Burda Foundation Award (2025, category "Medicine & Science") and the Heinz Maier-Leibnitz Prize of the German Research Foundation (DFG) (2021).

Numerous externally funded research projects under his leadership will continue at the Heidelberg Faculty of Medicine at Heidelberg University, including a European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant, a Horizon Europe project, and several projects funded by the German Federal Ministry for Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR). At the same time, Professor Kather is establishing new research collaborations across disciplines and institutions in Heidelberg and developing new research approaches at the interface of artificial intelligence and medicine together with partners from academia and industry. These activities are expected to provide fresh momentum for AI-enabled medical research and further strengthen Heidelberg's international profile as a center for innovative medicine.

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Further information

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