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Artificial Intelligence in Dermoscopy: Advancements, Challenges, and Future Directions for Early Skin Cancer Detection

Kelly Frasier, DO, MS[1], Michelle Sobotka, MS[2], Saad Javaid, MD[3]*, Vivian Li, MMS[4], Julia Vinagolu-Baur, MS, MBA[5]

[1]Nuvance Health/Vassar Brothers Medical Center
[2]Midwestern University Arizona College of Osteopathic Medicine, Glendale, AZ
[3]Wyckoff Heights Medical Center, NY
[4]Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine, Erie, PA
[5]State University of New York, Upstate Medical University, Syracuse, NY

***Corresponding author:** Saad Javaid, Nuvance Health/Vassar Brothers Medical Center. Email: SJavaid@wyckoffhospital.org

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Abstract

Our review provides a comprehensive review of the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in dermoscopy for the early detection of skin cancer. The study examines the recent advancements in AI and machine learning algorithms employed in the analysis of dermoscopic images, offering insights into their accuracy, limitations, and challenges. A critical examination of the current state of AI applications reveals their potential impact on clinical practice, as they contribute to the timely identification of skin cancer. Additionally, we highlight areas for further research, emphasizing the need for refining algorithms, addressing obstacles, and exploring new avenues to enhance the effectiveness of AI in dermatological diagnosis. The synthesis of existing knowledge and identification of gaps in research provide a foundation for future investigations aimed at optimizing AI-based tools for skin cancer detection.

Introduction

Skin cancer, with its rising global incidence, demands innovative approaches for early detection and improved prognosis. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative tool in the realm of dermoscopy, offering a promising avenue for enhancing the accuracy and efficiency of skin cancer diagnosis. Our comprehensive review delves into recent advancements in AI and machine learning algorithms applied to dermoscopic image analysis. By critically examining the current state of AI applications in dermatology, we aim to provide insights into their role in the early detection of skin cancer and their potential impact on clinical practice.

A wealth of academic literature underscores the significance of AI in dermatology, particularly in dermoscopy for skin cancer diagnosis. Studies have demonstrated the efficacy of machine learning algorithms in distinguishing between benign and malignant lesions with high accuracy. Notable advancements include the utilization of convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and deep learning techniques to analyze complex dermoscopic patterns. Existing literature forms the foundation for our review, guiding the exploration of the accuracy, limitations, and challenges associated with AI applications in the early detection of skin cancer.

Skin cancer remains a significant public health concern, with melanoma alone accounting for a substantial portion of cancer-related morbidity and mortality. Early detection is crucial for improving outcomes, yet the visual interpretation of dermoscopic images poses challenges for clinicians. AI-based tools offer the potential to enhance diagnostic precision, enabling timely identification and intervention. Considering the increasing burden of skin cancer, the integration of AI into dermatological practice holds promise for more effective and scalable screening programs.

Our study critically examines the current state of AI applications in dermoscopy, addressing the accuracy and limitations of existing algorithms. We explore the challenges faced in real-world clinical settings, such as diverse patient populations and varying image qualities. By providing a nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of AI in skin cancer detection, our review contributes to the ongoing dialogue on optimizing these technologies for routine clinical use.

As we synthesize existing knowledge, our review identifies key areas for future research aimed at advancing AI-based tools for skin cancer detection. These areas include the refinement of algorithms to accommodate diverse skin types and conditions, addressing challenges related to interpretability and transparency, and exploring novel approaches to further improve diagnostic accuracy. By emphasizing the need for ongoing research and development, our review lays the groundwork for future investigations that seek to optimize AI's role in early skin cancer detection, ultimately improving patient outcomes.

Discussion

The escalating global incidence of skin cancer mandates a paradigm shift in diagnostic strategies, prompting a critical examination of AI as a transformative tool in dermoscopy for enhanced accuracy and efficiency. This comprehensive review examines recent advancements in AI and machine learning algorithms, particularly their application in analyzing dermoscopic images for skin cancer diagnosis. Academic literature provides a broad foundation, showcasing the efficacy of machine learning algorithms, including CNNs and deep learning techniques, in discriminating between benign and malignant lesions with remarkable precision.

Skin cancer, notably melanoma, remains a public health challenge, contributing significantly to cancer-related morbidity and mortality. The imperative for early detection underscores the limitations of visual interpretation of dermoscopic images, necessitating the exploration of AI-based tools to augment diagnostic precision. AI is now commonly seen as a promising avenue for timely identification and intervention in the face of the increasing burden of skin cancer, offering potential advancements in effective and scalable screening programs.

Introduction of AI in Dermatologic Clinical Practice

Previous technological advances in diagnosing suspicious melanocytic lesions have aimed at decreasing invasive diagnostic procedures (i.e. biopsies) while maintaining high diagnostic accuracy. These technological advancements include total body photography (TBP), sequential digital dermoscopic imaging (SDDI), reflectance confocal microscopy (RCM), and electrical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) [1]. While these technologies have advantages such as identifying new or changing lesions in TBP and SDDI, comparable billing to a biopsy with separate Current Procedural Terminology (CPT) codes in EIS, and the ability to identify borderline atypical lesions in RCM, they also come with some limitations [1]. Some of these limitations include longer office visits, high cost for the technology itself, and the need for additional training on the technology and programming; thus, none of these advances are utilized on a large scale in the field of dermatology [1,2]. However, the rising need for maintaining the balance of high diagnostic accuracy with decreased invasive procedures allows for AI to maintain promise in being integrated throughout the practice of dermatology.

While dermatologists have specialized training in the diagnosis of skin problems, there is a gap in the recognition of dermatological conditions, skin cancer in particular, in other medical fields that work closely with the skin. One such example is the use of AI by primary care physicians (PCPs) and other frontline clinicians, to detect dermatological conditions. A review of medical literature shows that AI-powered devices can benefit non-dermatological specialists in lesion evaluation, monitoring, and management. Clinical studies, presented at the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) Annual Meeting in 2023, including DERM-ASSESS III or DERM-SUCCESS, demonstrate high sensitivity for classifying high-risk skin lesions (94%), with an even higher sensitivity for melanoma detection (96%), one of the deadliest forms of skin cancer [3]. While AI has its limitations, the literature supports its use as a valuable tool to aid PCPs and other primary care providers in their decision to refer patients to a dermatologist. The benefits of AI are two-fold: improving the collaboration between PCPs and dermatologists and bridging the gap between both fields of medicine while altogether highlighting the importance of preventive medicine and early diagnosis.

Advancements to AI in Dermatologic Clinical Practice

One of the most significant advantages of AI in the field of skin cancer and dermoscopy is its potential in enhancing patient outcomes. AI models can assist in early detection of skin cancers, including melanoma, which is imperative for effective treatment and improved survival rates. AI systems can identify subtle patterns and dermatological changes in lesions that might be overlooked by the human eye in traditional examinations, enhancing the early detection of skin cancers [4]. Skin cancer diagnosis relies heavily on provider expertise in pattern recognition with clinical and dermatoscopic examination, with a diagnostic accuracy of 75-84% [5]. The unique pattern recognition and ability of AI to analyze vast datasets can potentially open new avenues for research and understanding of the disease [6]. This could lead to the discovery of novel biomarkers and risk factors, further enhancing preventative strategies. In addition to clinical benefits, using AI for skin cancer detection can reduce the workload of specialists by streamlining the screening process for benign lesions. By prioritizing cases that appear more suspicious or urgent, AI allows for a more efficient use of healthcare resources [7]. This efficiency is particularly beneficial in regions with a shortage of specialists, ensuring that medical expertise is directed where it is most needed.

The integration of AI in the realm of dermatology, particularly for the detection of skin cancers, has been a subject of extensive research and debate. Recent studies have highlighted the potential of AI outperforming physicians in some aspects of skin cancer detection. For example, Anderson et al. revealed that an AI model was significantly more specific and accurate than dermatologists, exhibiting a higher positive predictive value (PPV) and negative predictive value (NPV) with statistical significance ($P<0.05$) [8]. An important part of AI is CNNs, and a study by Esteva, et al. found CNNs were able to classify skin cancer lesions as well as dermatologists [9]. This suggests that AI could potentially reduce false positives and negatives in skin cancer diagnosis, an aspect crucial in patient care.

However, the accuracy and efficacy of AI in this field are not unanimously agreed upon. Contrasting the research of Anderson et al. and Van Molle et al. highlighted the uncertainty inherent in CNNs used for image recognition. In their study, the CNN achieved a sensitivity and specificity of 50% and 80%, respectively, which was comparable to the average dermatologist's performance (sensitivity 68%, specificity 73%) [8,10]. Notably, Van Molle et al. observed that higher confidence in diagnosis was linked to better diagnostic performance, a trend that was consistent in both the CNN and among dermatologists [10]. This disparity in findings between studies underscores the complexity of assessing AI's diagnostic accuracy in skin cancer at the present moment. While AI shows promise, its performance varies across different models and conditions, and its comparison with the expertise of dermatologists remains a nuanced subject.

Challenges to AI Utilization

The rapid advancement in AI has yet to fully revolutionize the diagnosis of skin cancer, an area where the expertise of dermatologists remains crucial. This is primarily due to the complex nature of skin cancer diagnosis and the inherent limitations of AI in this context. A key challenge lies in the way AI algorithms, particularly those based on machine learning (ML), function. These systems learn and make decisions through identifying patterns within the datasets they are given. As a result, their diagnostic capabilities are restricted to the scope of their training data. This limitation becomes evident when comparing the results of diagnostic experimental studies with real-world clinical practices. A multicenter, prospective clinical trial evaluating the diagnostic accuracy of two AI models against that of dermatologists in recognizing pigmented skin cancers revealed that the two AI algorithms were significantly less accurate than dermatologists in clinical diagnoses, but better than novices [11]. The reliance of AI on pattern recognition can lead to biases in interpreting skin lesions. Research has shown that surgical pen markings on the skin could inadvertently increase melanoma probability scores of CNNs, resulting in a 40% higher false-positive rate for benign nevi [12]. This is due to the fact that skin markings are often present around lesions suspected of malignancy for identification purposes and are subsequently biopsied for further histopathological examination. As a result, AI associates these markings with malignancy.

Another issue that AI faces in dermatology is the underrepresentation of diverse skin tones in training datasets. Due to the higher prevalence of skin cancers in individuals with lighter skin tones, most databases used for training AI models primarily consist of images representing Fitzpatrick skin types I-IV. This leads to an underperformance of AI in diagnosing skin cancers in darker skin types (Fitzpatrick V-VI) [13,14]. To address this issue, Aggarwal et al. conducted a study where images of basal cell carcinomas (BCC) and melanomas from lighter-skinned patients were artificially darkened to train the AI model for better recognition of these lesions in darker-skinned individuals [15]. This approach improved AI's sensitivity and specificity in identifying BCC and melanoma in diverse skin tones, highlighting the existing limitations and emphasizing the need for more diverse datasets in training AI models.

Current Events

In a prospective study by Marchetti, et al., an open-source, non-commercial AI algorithm ("All Data Are Ext" (ADAE)) was evaluated for diagnostic accuracy to predict melanoma in dermoscopy [2]. It was discovered that dermatologists exposed to ADAE changed their management in 29% of cases by avoiding skin biopsy (ranging 0-39% based on the dermatologist), significantly improving the ability to assess melanoma risk in patients [2]. However, the AI algorithm had lower specificity in patients older than 65 years old, with Fitzpatrick skin type I, head/neck lesions, >6mm lesions, and surrounding photodamage indicating that AI is more useful in a certain demographic and for certain skin lesions [2].

According to a recent press release in January of 2024, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized a non-invasive AI device to detect three most common forms of skin cancer: melanoma, BCC, and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). The device utilizes one scan to collect five spectral recordings from a lesion and evaluates the data from an algorithm that has been validated on over 20,000 scans. The device, geared towards PCPs, offers a number of suggestions such as "investigate further," prompting a dermatologist referral, or "monitor," suggesting there is no immediate need for a referral [16]. In a recent prospective blinded study published in JAAD International, it was found that the device exhibited an observed specificity of 95.5% (successfully detecting 42 of 44 melanomas) [17].

Future Directions

It is crucial to view AI as a complementary tool to the expertise of dermatologists, rather than a replacement or standalone solution. Ethical factors, such as patient privacy and the handling of medical data, are paramount. Moreover, ensuring that decisions made by AI algorithms are explainable and based on inclusive data is vital for their effective and responsible integration into healthcare. This approach is necessary to prevent the worsening of existing healthcare disparities in dermatology [14].

The current state of AI applications in dermoscopy goes beyond superficial assessments, exploring the intricacies of accuracy, limitations, and challenges associated with existing algorithms. Real-world clinical settings pose unique challenges, including diverse patient populations and variable image qualities, demanding a nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of AI in skin cancer detection. There is a need for ongoing research to contribute substantially to the ongoing discourse on optimizing AI technologies for routine clinical implementation.

Synthesizing existing knowledge, current literature gaps identify pivotal areas for future research aimed at advancing AI-based tools for skin cancer detection. These encompass algorithm refinement to accommodate diverse skin types and conditions, addressing challenges related to interpretability and transparency, and the exploration of novel approaches to further elevate diagnostic accuracy. By underscoring the urgency for further in-depth research and development, the review lays a comprehensive foundation for future investigations poised to refine and optimize AI's pivotal role in early skin cancer detection, ultimately enhancing patient outcomes.

Conclusion

Our review provides a comprehensive analysis and overview of using AI in clinical dermatology practice. AI will continue to change the management of how certain health care providers manage skin lesions, such as PCPs monitoring the lesion or referring the patient to dermatology, while optimizing patient outcomes. Limitations to widespread AI use in dermatology includes limited learning data for the AI algorithm, and underrepresentation of multiple diverse skin tones during the AI training process. However, AI has made significant advancements in recent years and continues to evolve and be a tool that is useful for PCPs, primary care clinicians, and dermatologists for skin lesion management.

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