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# Systematic Reviews of Machine Learning in Healthcare: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

The increasing availability of data and computing power has made machine learning (ML) a viable approach to faster, more efficient healthcare delivery. To exploit the potential of data-driven technologies, further integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into healthcare systems is warranted. A systematic literature review (SLR) of published SLRs evaluated evidence of ML applications in healthcare settings published in PubMed, IEEE Xplore, Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO, and the Cochrane Library up to March 2023. Studies were classified based on the disease area and the type of ML algorithm used. In total, 220 SLRs covering 10,462 ML algorithms were identified, the majority of which aimed at solutions towards clinical prediction, categorisation, and disease prognosis in oncology and neurology primarily using imaging data. Accuracy, specificity, and sensitivity were 56%, 28%, and 25%, respectively. Internal validation was reported in 53% of the ML algorithms and external validation in below 1%. The most common modelling approach was neural networks (2,454 ML algorithms), followed by support vector machine and random forest/decision trees (1,578 and 1,522 ML algorithms, respectively). The review indicated that there is potential for greater adoption of AI in healthcare, with 10,462 ML algorithms identified compared to 523 approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). However, the considerable reporting gaps call for more effort towards internal and external validation. Greater accessibility to healthcare data for developers can ensure the faster adoption of ML algorithms.

### Introduction

Along with other sectors, medicine has become a prominent beneficiary of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven innovations, owing to the growing availability of data. The transformation of healthcare began with the widespread adoption of electronic health records (EHRs) in the early 1990s, with up to 93% of primary care doctors using EHR across 24 OECD countries in 2021 (1).

The growing number of new data sources such as sensors, wearables, and mobile applications is transforming healthcare. The digital footprint of a patient's journey produces new insights that inform decision-making processes and makes them readily available for developing machine learning (ML) algorithms.

Therefore, the abundance of data can help healthcare organisations develop a more comprehensive picture of a patient's health over time and also introduce efficiency gains with new data-driven technologies.

As Al's potential to improve health outcomes and increase physician efficiency has been realised, the tech industry is a key player, alongside pharma and medtech, in the healthcare sector.

Several experts claim that medicine is already moving from the past decade that focused on ML development to the subsequent decade, driven by the challenges of ensuring ML algorithm deployment in clinical settings (2).

Although the International Medical Device Regulators Forum (IMDRF) introduced the terms "software as a medical device" (SaMD) and "software in a medical device" in 2013, there have been limited efforts thus far to introduce ML algorithms in healthcare financing system similarly as medical devices and pharmaceuticals.

To understand the state-of-the-art regarding the availability of AI solutions in healthcare, we conducted a review of systematic literature reviews (SLRs) covering ML algorithms developed for medical purposes. The objectives of our research were twofold: First, to describe the number of ML solutions already available in healthcare. Second, we assessed the types of data commonly reported in scientific publications on ML algorithms. Based on our review, we recommend actions for developers and healthcare payers to facilitate AI integration into medicine.

# Methodology

This review was unregistered, and a formal protocol was not prepared. Following the inclusion criteria "SRL" and "ML" were used with additional key terms such as outcome prediction, diagnosis, screening and/or treatment of any disease. Only publications reporting the use of ML in healthcare, written in English and published in peer-reviewed journals until 27 March 2023 were included. Searches were conducted in PubMed (Pubmed. ncbi. nlm. nih. gov), IEEE Xplore (ieeexplore.ieee.org), Scopus (www.scopus.com), Web of Science (www.webofknowledge.com), EBSCO (www.ebsco.com), and the Cochrane Library (www.cochranelibrary.com).

Four researchers (hereafter referred to as reviewers) performed the initial review in three steps.

- 1. <u>Identification</u>: The titles, keywords, and abstracts of all identified publications were independently screened for relevance by two reviewers. Each reviewer decided whether the publication was relevant for further review, and consensus resulted in inclusion or exclusion. Any remaining conflict was resolved through dialogue.
- 2. <u>Full-text screening</u>: The full texts of all publications proceeding to this step were obtained and read independently by two reviewers. Each reviewer decided whether a publication was relevant for inclusion in the review or for data extraction. A consensus resulted in inclusion or exclusion at this step and any remaining conflicts were resolved through dialogue.
- 3. <u>Data extraction</u>: Data were extracted from each SLR in two phases. First, two recent checklists were analysed to define the set of review criteria (3, 4). Second, a random sample of 30 SLRs was analysed to assess the most commonly reported information across the included publications.

All identified publications were entered into the Covidence systematic review software for the remainder of the review. The PRISMA guidelines for reporting systematic reviews were followed (5).

Data extraction was initiated after the initial process. Each SLR was reviewed for basic descriptive statistics, including quality assessment and reporting methods, along with an assignment to one of the three categories.

- 1. Categorization (classification of data into categories or clusters)
- 2. Prediction (making predictions regarding outputs providing historical data)
- 3. Discovery (analysis of the structure of data)

ICD-10 codes were used to analyse the therapeutic area covered by the SLRs, and basic statistics such as the sources of data, accuracy, specificity, and sensitivity were extracted from the included SLRs for each publication included separately along with the methods of validation and handling missing data. Details regarding the external validation with respect to the comparison of AI against humans were also extracted and reviewed, not only from systematic literature reviews but also from primary studies. The details of the types of ML techniques were also extracted, and the number of primary studies reporting the use of different ML algorithm typologies was determined for each SLR included.

### Results

A total of 2,342 SLRs were identified. Based on the title and abstract reviews, 1,233 hits were removed during the identification phase. A total of 686 duplicates were identified (Figure 1). The screening phase included 423 publications. After full-text analysis, 220 articles (6-226) covering 10,462 ML algorithms were finally included in the review (Figure 1).

The number of studies covered by each SLR varied from 4 (166) to 921 (83) articles (Table 1). Approximately 88% of these articles were published between 2020–2021. In total, 74% of studies employed PRISMA or other methods to report their SLR. A quality assessment was not conducted in 117 of the 220 included studies (Table 1). A review of the ICD codes revealed that neoplasms (Chapter II) were the most frequently studied clinical areas, followed by diseases of the nervous system (Chapter VI) (Table 2). As far as the data sources used are concerned, imaging was used most frequently with clinical notes and lab tests following as the second frequently used (Table 2).

Considerable variations were observed across the included publications in terms of ML accuracy, specificity, and sensitivity. ICD-10 Chapters III and XVIII reported the lowest results, while some ML algorithms for ICD-10 II and VI reported 100% accuracy for all three parameters (Appendix 1). In total, 231 of 10,963studies (7 of 220 SLR) provided information about the accuracy, specificity, and sensitivity of all included studies. A total of 3,164 studies (51 SLRs) did not report any results across the three dimensions (Table 3).

Four thousand nine hundred ninety-two of the 10,963studies (103 of 220 SLRs) conducted internal validation procedures. The most common approach was the k-fold cross-validation (1,325 studies), followed by leave-one-out cross-validation (205 cases) (Appendix 2).

Regarding external validation, a comparison of ML with a human comparator was mentioned in 90 of the 10,963studies (Table 4) (227-313). In total, 50 cases provided evidence of comparable performance, 33 (four) publications confirmed the superiority (inferiority) of ML over clinicians and three did not indicate any results. The median number of clinical experts included in the validation was six (range, 1–511).

The methodological approach to the missing data was discussed in 144 studies, with the most common being imputation (Table 5).

In total, over 10,000 ML algorithms were used for the included SLRs (Table 6). The most common modelling approach was neural networks (2,454 studies), followed by SVM and RF/decision trees (1,578 and 1,522 studies, respectively).

### Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt at systematically studying the integration of ML algorithms in healthcare.

The key finding was the low reporting quality of publications dedicated to the development and adaptation of ML algorithms in clinical practice. There was a significant share of studies without data on accuracy (44%), sensitivity (72%), and specificity (75%), as well as internal (65%) and external (99%) validations. Additionally, 10, 819 of the 10, 963 studies (98%) did not report a methodological approach for missing data.

The majority of publications across the 220 SLRs aimed at ML solutions towards clinical prediction and categorisation challenges as well as disease prognosis in oncology and neurology using mainly imaging data. Natural language processing (NLP) was employed mainly in the SLR reporting applications in Chapter XXI, in which clinicians' notes were more likely to be used as data sources. This is consistent with a recent study that revealed that 189 (85%) of 222 FDA-approved medical devices were intended for use by healthcare professionals, while 33 (15%) were intended for use by patients (314).

However, the most frequently published type of ML is the artificial neural network (ANN). ANNs can detect complex nonlinear relationships and interactions between the dependent and independent variables (universal approximators). Deep learning (DL) methods are primarily used in oncological or respiratory disease studies. The increasing use of DL has been observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. A systematic literature review of 34 studies indicated that ML can enhance the sensitivity and specificity of radiographic images compared with radiologists' diagnoses.

Our review indicated that apart from neural networks, SVM is the most frequently used after deep neural networks. The highly similar performance of SVM, particularly in terms of classification accuracy, makes them rank among the most popular ML classifiers. In addition to deep networks and SVM, RF is most often used. It is an ensemble bagging technique whereby numerous decision trees are combined to obtain the results. This process combines bootstrapping and aggregation. The key advantage of this approach is that it can be used for classification and regression problems; hence, this is likely one of the reasons it is used in cardiology. Although RF can provide higher diagnostic accuracy and reduce variance without increasing bias, the operating time might be extensive in clinical situations. However, boosted methods known to improve the performance of the corresponding methods have not been extensively encountered.

This study has several limitations. First, our review was limited to literature reviews; consequently, certain information might have been misunderstood if it had not been presented in a given SLR. There may have been some over-counting of the number of ML algorithms identified. We did not have sufficient details to understand whether any of the publications used the same data source. Second, we did not review studies that were missed in any SLR; hence, we could have a biased picture of the utilisation of ML in healthcare. Third, we restricted the review to studies published in English, thus potentially introducing a selection bias towards particular countries. Finally, publication bias cannot be excluded, as reports of unsatisfactory/unsuccessful ML applications are rarely encountered; thus, the actual performance of ML could be overestimated. Several techniques may be reported differently and may be missed or incorrectly categorised. For example, principal component analysis (PCA) was also reported in the included SLRs, despite not being strictly an ML algorithm but a dimensionality reduction technique.

Finally, the main focus in evaluating ML performance was accuracy/sensitivity/specificity, which is relevant in classification problems such as disease diagnosis; however, prediction models such as length of stay (LoS) can be evaluated through other parameters such as residual mean square error (RMSE) or the coefficient of determination (R<sup>2)</sup>.

Despite these limitations, this review provides important insights into the current state of AI integration in the healthcare sector. This indicates that over 10,000 ML algorithms have been developed for healthcare systems. This is not surprising, considering that AI is becoming a major driver of innovation in healthcare. For example, the number of patents granted solely for digital communication or medical technologies will almost double that for drugs by 2022 in Europe (315). A rough comparison indicates that fewer than 60 drugs and over 100 ML/AI-enabled medical devices have been approved annually by the FDA since 2019 (up to 523 until the end of January 2023) (316).

There is an evident gap between the development and utilisation of ML algorithms in healthcare, prompting us to elicit recommendations for both developers and payers.

# **Recommendations for ML developers in healthcare**

With respect to accuracy, specificity, and sensitivity, the results of our review appear promising at first glance. It must be considered an impressive picture, with 12 therapeutic areas (out of 22 ICD chapters) having access to ML algorithms with an accuracy of 100%. In addition, five ICD chapters had scores above 88% (Appendix 1). However, to understand the clinical usability of AI, a review of such absolute numbers may not provide a full picture. The adoption of ML algorithms in clinical settings requires further validation. The lack of testing of the predictive power on separate datasets may overestimate ML performance in practical situations. Validation and cross-validation lead to more accurate estimates of the performance of the ML model on an unseen dataset. This was the most common approach, but it was found in only 15% of the included 10,462 studies (Appendix 1). Cross-validation divides the sample into k subsets, with k subsets used as the test set/validation set and k-1 subsets for training. The model was trained on the training data and predictions were made using the model on the testing data. The

sensitivity and/or specificity were averaged by testing multiple times on k-fold data subsets. As most of the data were used for fitting, the k-fold approach significantly reduced the bias and variance, as most of the data were also used in the validation set. That is, it reduces the risk of undertraining when a large amount of noise is introduced into the training data and, consequently, bias. It helps prevent overfitting, which occurs when the model attempts to learn each detail and noise of the data, leading to poor model performance on test sets (317).

The adoption of an appropriate methodology for validation is the bare minimum to approach the concept of effectiveness introduced for pharmaceuticals. An adequate amount of data is also important for ensuring the best ML accuracy, specificity, and sensitivity. The cross-validation performed better with larger datasets. This is vital, particularly when one considers the importance of ML for diagnosis which initiates the sequence of subsequent actions. Hence, it is up to the correct prediction that we can allow the healthcare system to be effective and efficient. This helps to effectively optimise treatment pathways for previously diagnosed patients. The availability of data enables healthcare professionals to use predictive modelling techniques for prevention and prophylaxis actions more than ever.

Generally, the larger the dataset, the greater the statistical power and chances of better prediction. A negative relationship between sample size and classification accuracy has already been reported (317, 318), and it is important to note that as many as 83 out of 220 systematic literature reviews did not provide information regarding the size of the datasets used for ML algorithm development. Simultaneously, the majority of the included SLRs reported a large variance between the smallest and largest sample sizes, despite having similar clinical objectives (Table 1). However, it is not only the size of the training dataset that has significant importance, but also the variability of the available data. Insufficient diversity in training datasets can lead to inadequate generalisation of the model outputs to different patient populations. Training models on multi-institutional datasets can be the most effective in combating model deterioration, and directly combating existing biases in training data can also mitigate their impact. Some studies have indicated that other sources of potential variety driven by medical device manufacturer software are adopted, in which AI models trained on cardiac magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans provide different accuracy results from different scanners (319), and more than two-fold differences were found in the error rate between two different optical coherence tomography (OCT) scans (320). The limited diversity in the data used for ML is a problem, and a scoping review of publications related to AI that appeared in PubMed in 2019 revealed that over half of the datasets used for clinical AI originated from either the US or China (321). In addition, the U.S. and China contributed over 40% of the publications (321). Barriers to accessing data lead to the overutilisation of available datasets. For instance, there are only four major databases in ophthalmology, ESSIDOR, DRIVE, EyePACS, and Eophtha, with unknown publicly available datasets for ophthalmological images in 172 countries that constitute roughly 45% of the global population (322).

Cross-validation also helps to ensure that the best ML model is used for a given decision problem. When studies published comparative data, the results indicate that results differ for different ML methods used on the same datasets. For instance, across 12 studies using deep neural networks for ECG analysis to

detect structural cardiac pathologies, the predictive accuracy of the neural network DL models was superior to that of expert interpretations by board-certified cardiologists. The same was found in the comparison of computer-aided detection (CAD) systems with 53 general endoscopists for detecting early neoplasia in patients with Barrett's oesophagus (BE). The CAD achieved higher accuracy than any of the clinicians, regardless of the level of endoscopic expertise (323); in both cases, details regarding the choice of the clinical group were missing.

It should be noted that less than 1% of the included studies reported external validation. This is a significant gap in the evidence. This has two specific consequences for its implementation in clinical practice. For true external validation, a tuned algorithm must be applied to a new set of data from different sources. The ultimate objective was to ensure the generalisability of the results with the adoption of ML across various care compositions. As Bang and colleagues mentioned in their systematic literature review: "CAD algorithms demonstrated high accuracy for the automatic endoscopic diagnosis of oesophageal cancer and neoplasms. The limitation of a lack of performance in external validation and clinical applications should be overcome" (20).

Our findings are similar to those of another review of DL studies that focused on the comparison of ML against human comparators covering the period from 2010 to June 2022. Only ten RCTs (including eight ongoing RCTs) and 81 non-randomised clinical trials compared diagnostic algorithm performance against clinicians (324). In another systematic literature review of 82 publications, only 14 studies compared the diagnostic performance of DL models based on medical imaging with that of healthcare professionals (325).

# **Recommendations for regulators and payers**

Will improvements in both internal and external validations make ML algorithms directly eligible for registration and refundable? While the former is likely more about internal validity, as its primary objective addresses the risk-benefit ratio, the latter may be more about external validity, as its primary objective is to address the value for money. Therefore, the next question is how regulators and public payers should balance the requirements with respect to the evidence of the usability of ML algorithms against the need to ensure safety and treatment effectiveness. First, given the existence of strict regulations for both market regulation and pricing and reimbursement for pharmaceuticals and medical devices, it is necessary to enquire whether similar hurdles of evidence generation should also be introduced for ML algorithms. To address this issue, we introduce two random facts: only approximately 12% of drugs entering clinical trials are ultimately approved by the FDA (326), and the average time to reimbursement for innovative treatments in Europe is 511 days (327). Hence, some claim that overregulation may harm innovation. However, the development of the majority of Al-driven innovations may be relatively short compared to other time-consuming research and development technologies, and there is potential for greater disruption in the healthcare sector by ML algorithms than what we have witnessed thus far. Therefore, the types of regulations that should be developed to support the adoption of ML algorithms remain unclear. Overall, there is a need to establish a matrix of criteria to assess the ability of AI solutions to be integrated into healthcare systems. There are already several recommendations in this respect, such

as a scoping review of 72 guidelines that, among others, identified quality criteria regarding the development, evaluation, and implementation of ML in healthcare (328). Other experts have suggested grouping ML algorithms into one of the following categories: assistive, augmentative, or autonomous (329).

Still, there is a need for decision-makers (regulators and public payers) to form a common unified approach towards the development of a common set of standards for the assessment of Al-driven health technologies, as ML is seldom jurisdiction-specific. The maximum accuracy varied from 27% (ICD XVIII) to 100% (ICD II) across the included studies. Therefore, the guestion is whether the same rules should be applied, irrespective of the area under consideration. This may require the involvement of clinical experts and a clear understanding of the unmet medical needs in each disease field. Therefore, our recommendations first focus on interoperability in the journey towards unified P&R regulations for ML algorithms. The underlying rationale is to ensure the accessibility of data such as electronic medical records (EMRs) to AI developers. Thus far, there have been limited efforts related to the availability of realworld data (RWD) for validation as eluded earlier. In the era of digital transformation, we should move further and ensure the integration of EMRs with unstructured data. Additionally, healthcare decisionmakers must prepare data repositories to facilitate external validation and invest in local data analytics capabilities to facilitate internal validation. Such efforts should be welcomed by developers, as expressed by many experts (330). The overarching objective is to ensure that ML algorithms have complete access to health-related data irrespective of geographical, demographic, or institutional composition. Without an appropriate understanding of the health problems in question, ML algorithms can only be utilised for the populations and medical conditions for which they were trained, failing to provide any value for populations or concomitant medical conditions that were omitted or underrepresented in the training set owing to racial, ethnic, or simple misrepresentation. Such activities will inevitably bring an additional burden on both payers and developers; however, AI is as good as the data it possesses, as demonstrated in this study.

## Conclusions

There is still unrealised potential for AI in healthcare. Despite the growing number of published ML algorithms, there is limited evidence of their impact on clinical practice.

More evidence related to external and internal validation can drive the change towards a greater, more robust, and safer adoption of AI. Consequently, it may allow payers, clinicians, and patients to increase their trust in ML algorithms. The key is ensuring that AI development is examined through the lens of the health problems in question. Unmet medical needs are heterogeneously shaped by patients and influenced by the care setting, baseline characteristics, and cultural differences. Thus, there is a need to prepare a landing field for ML algorithms for healthcare applications. However, we are not there yet. Hence, by moving forward, AI will only face more challenges. Currently, we are in a different era. Let us be ready with the right data at the appropriate time.

### Declarations

#### **Ethical Approval**

Not applicable

#### Competing interests

None

#### Authors' contributions

K.K. and S.P. wrote the main manuscript text and B.Y. M.H and K.K. prepared all tables and figure. All authors reviewed the manuscript

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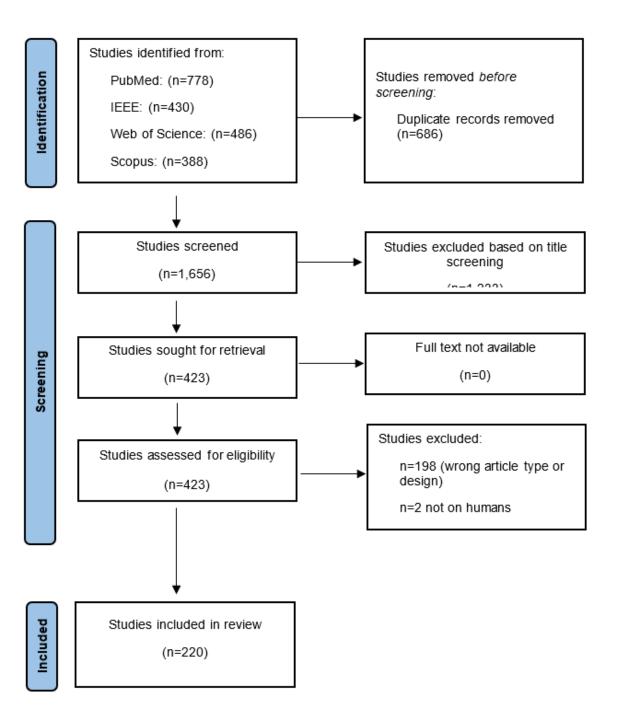
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### Tables

Tables 1 to 6 are available in the Supplementary Files section

### Figures



#### Figure 1

PRISMA flowchart for selection of publications (331).

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