

INTEGRATION OF AI IN SURGICAL WORKFLOW OPTIMIZATION: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into surgical workflows has emerged as a transformative development in modern healthcare. With the growing complexity of surgical procedures and the need for improved precision, efficiency, and outcomes, AI offers tools to support clinical decision-making across the perioperative continuum. From preoperative planning to intraoperative guidance and postoperative outcome prediction, AI has demonstrated promising potential to optimize surgical care.

Objective: This narrative review aims to explore how AI technologies are currently being applied in surgical planning, intraoperative navigation, and outcome prediction, while critically examining the barriers to integration and identifying directions for future advancement.

Main Discussion Points: The review discusses key thematic areas including AI applications in preoperative imaging and simulation, real-time intraoperative decision support, and predictive analytics for postoperative outcomes. It also highlights methodological limitations in current literature, such as small sample sizes, inconsistent outcome measures, and limited external validity. Challenges related to ethical concerns, data quality, algorithmic transparency, and clinical adoption are also addressed.

Conclusion: While AI has shown potential to enhance surgical accuracy, efficiency, and personalization, the current evidence base is limited in scope and quality. Clinicians and researchers must collaborate to develop standardized protocols and conduct rigorous multicenter trials to validate AI tools. Addressing existing research gaps will be crucial for integrating AI safely and effectively into everyday surgical practice.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Surgical Workflow, Intraoperative Navigation, Outcome Prediction, Surgical Planning, Narrative Review.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the landscape of modern healthcare, with surgery emerging as one of the most impacted domains. Globally, more than 310 million major surgeries are performed annually, many of which are complex procedures involving significant risks of complications, extended recovery times, and substantial costs. The pressing need to improve surgical safety, precision, and efficiency has propelled the integration of advanced digital tools, particularly AI-based technologies, into surgical workflows (1). These innovations aim not only to support surgeons in making more informed decisions but also to personalize surgical care, reduce variability in outcomes, and increase access to high-quality operative care worldwide. Over the last decade, AI has progressed from theoretical applications to practical implementation in surgical settings (2). AI-powered tools are now being applied across the entire surgical continuum—from preoperative planning to intraoperative navigation and postoperative outcome prediction. For instance, deep learning algorithms have demonstrated capabilities in analyzing complex imaging datasets for accurate anatomical mapping, helping surgeons visualize and plan procedures with enhanced precision (3). Robotic-assisted surgery, augmented by AI algorithms, is now commonly used to perform minimally invasive operations with improved dexterity, stability, and control, ultimately reducing complications and recovery times (4,5). Furthermore, intraoperative AI systems are being developed to interpret real-time visual and sensor data, offering immediate feedback that enhances surgical accuracy and minimizes intraoperative errors (6,7).

Despite these promising advances, several critical gaps persist in the literature and clinical practice. Much of the current research remains fragmented, with limited consensus on standardized metrics to evaluate AI effectiveness across different surgical subspecialties. The majority of published studies are focused on specific organs or surgical systems, such as hepatobiliary, colorectal, and neurosurgical procedures, often lacking broader generalizability (8,9). Another major limitation is the variability in data quality and representation, as AI models require large, diverse datasets for training, and many current models suffer from biases due to homogenous data sources (10). Additionally, integration into existing clinical workflows presents logistical, technical, and ethical challenges, including interoperability with hospital information systems, real-time processing capabilities, algorithmic transparency, and data privacy concerns (11,12). This narrative review aims to comprehensively examine the current and emerging roles of AI in surgical workflow optimization. The objective is to synthesize available literature that explores how AI supports surgical planning, guides intraoperative decisions, and predicts postoperative outcomes. By highlighting the technological advances, practical implementations, and remaining obstacles, the review seeks to bridge the gap between innovation and real-world clinical utility.

The scope of this review encompasses a broad spectrum of surgical applications of AI. It includes studies involving the use of AI for 3D simulation and organ segmentation in preoperative phases, real-time navigation tools integrated with augmented reality and robotic platforms during intraoperative procedures, and machine learning models for predicting surgical risk and recovery outcomes. Sources include peer-reviewed articles published within the past five years, focusing primarily on narrative reviews, observational studies, and early clinical trials that report on AI integration in general surgery, neurosurgery, hepatobiliary, colorectal, and cardiac surgical domains. Studies that address AI implementation challenges, ethical considerations, and the development of regulatory frameworks are also considered within the review's scope. The need for a focused review on AI in surgical workflow optimization is increasingly urgent. As healthcare systems continue to grapple with workforce shortages, rising patient loads, and growing procedural complexity, the potential for AI to augment human performance and improve system efficiency becomes even more relevant. Furthermore, the rapid pace of technological development risks outpacing ethical and regulatory frameworks, creating the possibility of unstandardized, inequitable, or even harmful implementations. This review seeks to contribute a structured understanding of how AI can be safely, effectively, and equitably incorporated into surgical practice. By providing clinicians, researchers, and healthcare policymakers with a cohesive analysis of the current landscape and future directions, this work aims to facilitate the informed adoption of AI technologies in surgery and support ongoing innovation in patient-centered care.

THEMATIC DISCUSSION

AI in Preoperative Surgical Planning

One of the most extensively explored areas of AI integration in surgery is preoperative planning. The use of deep learning and machine learning models has significantly advanced image analysis, allowing for precise anatomical segmentation and identification of critical structures. AI-powered simulations now enable surgeons to virtually explore and rehearse complex procedures before entering the operating room. For example, AI has facilitated 3D liver segmentation and volumetry in hepatobiliary surgery, optimizing resection margins and preserving functional tissue, thereby improving safety and outcomes (1). Similarly, in neurosurgery, AI tools have aided in

tumor margin identification and surgical route planning, enhancing surgeon confidence and reducing intraoperative surprises (2). Despite these advances, challenges persist regarding the generalizability of these tools across diverse patient populations, as training data are often institution-specific and lack demographic diversity.

Intraoperative Navigation and Augmented Decision-Making

AI-driven intraoperative support systems, particularly those integrated with robotic platforms, have proven instrumental in guiding real-time surgical maneuvers. Robotic systems like the da Vinci Surgical System, enhanced with AI, have enabled greater precision and stability during minimally invasive procedures (3). Furthermore, image-guided surgery has been augmented by AI through real-time identification of anatomical landmarks, blood vessels, and potential complications. Intraoperative neurosurgical workflows, for instance, benefit from AI-based tools that assist in trajectory alignment and risk assessment during tumor resection (2). In colorectal and hepatobiliary surgery, AI systems have been linked with fluorescence imaging to improve visualization of vital structures (1,4). However, integration into clinical practice is often hindered by concerns over latency, lack of transparency in decision-making algorithms, and reliance on high-quality intraoperative imaging, which may not be uniformly available.

Predictive Analytics for Surgical Outcomes

Another promising area of AI application is outcome prediction. By analyzing preoperative and intraoperative data, AI models can predict complications, estimate recovery times, and stratify patient risk. These models have been especially impactful in cardiac and colorectal surgeries, where predicting postoperative complications such as anastomotic leaks, sepsis, or readmissions is crucial for planning postoperative care (5,6). For example, AI-based tools have outperformed traditional scoring systems in forecasting mortality and morbidity following cardiac procedures (7). Nevertheless, these predictive tools remain underutilized in clinical workflows due to limited explainability and physician skepticism about algorithm-derived recommendations.

AI in Postoperative Monitoring and Rehabilitation

The use of AI in postoperative settings is expanding, particularly in monitoring recovery and identifying early signs of complications. AI algorithms can continuously evaluate vital signs and postoperative metrics to detect deviations from expected recovery trajectories. Such systems enable early intervention and have been associated with reduced lengths of stay and readmission rates (8,9). Additionally, AI facilitates the customization of rehabilitation protocols based on individual patient data, ensuring more efficient resource use and improved patient outcomes. However, real-world implementation of these tools is often complicated by integration issues with existing electronic health records (EHRs) and concerns over patient data privacy.

Ethical, Regulatory, and Integration Barriers

While AI's potential to revolutionize surgical workflows is increasingly recognized, several barriers hinder its seamless integration into routine clinical practice. Ethical considerations such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and informed consent are significant. For instance, if an AI system trained primarily on data from a single population is used across a broader demographic, its predictions may not be valid, leading to disparities in care (10). Additionally, the lack of clear regulatory guidelines for approval and oversight of AI tools contributes to a cautious adoption pace. Clinicians also cite workflow disruption and a steep learning curve associated with AI tools as barriers to clinical use. Until AI platforms are seamlessly embedded into existing systems and clinicians are adequately trained, the full benefit of these innovations may remain untapped.

Controversies and Gaps in the Literature

Despite considerable progress, gaps remain in understanding the long-term clinical impact of AI in surgery. Few prospective trials have rigorously assessed AI tools in real-world surgical settings. Additionally, there is limited evidence on how AI affects surgeon decision-making dynamics and whether it introduces over-reliance or complacency. Moreover, discrepancies exist among published studies regarding model performance, especially when tested outside the original development environment (11,12). These inconsistencies underscore the need for transparent, multicentric datasets and standardized evaluation frameworks to ensure reproducibility and generalizability. In summary, AI has demonstrated tangible benefits in preoperative planning, intraoperative navigation, outcome prediction, and postoperative care. While the literature is promising, significant challenges related to generalizability, ethics, regulation, and clinical integration remain. Addressing these issues through rigorous validation, stakeholder collaboration, and adaptive learning frameworks will be essential to unlock the full potential of AI in surgical workflow optimization.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND LIMITATIONS

Despite the growing enthusiasm surrounding the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into surgical workflows, a critical analysis of the current body of literature reveals notable limitations that affect the strength and applicability of existing evidence. One of the most prevalent issues across studies is the lack of high-quality, randomized controlled trials (RCTs). The majority of available data stems from observational studies, retrospective analyses, and pilot implementations, which are inherently limited in their ability to establish causal relationships. Without the methodological rigor of RCTs, findings on AI efficacy remain susceptible to various forms of bias and confounding factors, making definitive conclusions challenging (13). Another common limitation lies in small sample sizes, which are frequently observed in studies evaluating AI-based surgical planning or intraoperative decision support tools. These limited cohorts restrict the statistical power and fail to capture the variability observed in broader clinical populations. Furthermore, many studies are conducted within single institutions or specific surgical subspecialties, resulting in narrow data sets that may not reflect the full diversity of patient anatomy, surgical techniques, and operative environments. As a consequence, the findings often lack external validity and cannot be confidently generalized to other contexts or healthcare systems (14,15).

Methodological biases also pervade the literature. Selection bias is evident in studies that predominantly enroll patients with uncomplicated surgical profiles or procedures deemed more amenable to AI intervention. Such biased sampling creates an overly optimistic picture of AI's capabilities while excluding high-risk or complex cases, which may present a different set of challenges for machine learning models. Additionally, performance bias emerges from the lack of blinding in many trials, as surgical teams are often aware of AI-assisted inputs during interventions, potentially influencing clinical decision-making and outcome assessments subconsciously (16). Another significant issue is the variability in outcome measures used across studies. Definitions of surgical success, complication rates, and recovery metrics differ considerably, making it difficult to compare results or conduct robust meta-analyses. For instance, while some studies emphasize short-term outcomes such as intraoperative blood loss or operative time, others focus on long-term metrics like recurrence rates or functional recovery. This lack of uniformity in reporting outcomes creates ambiguity around what constitutes meaningful benefit and complicates efforts to synthesize evidence systematically (17).

Publication bias further distorts the perceived value of AI in surgery. Studies with positive or statistically significant results are more likely to be published, whereas negative or inconclusive findings often remain unpublished or relegated to grey literature. This selective reporting skews the available evidence base and may inflate the apparent effectiveness of AI interventions. As a result, the literature may overrepresent successful implementations while underreporting real-world challenges, failures, or instances of neutral impact (18). A key concern limiting the clinical translation of current findings is the question of generalizability. Most AI models are developed and validated using data from single-center experiences, specific patient populations, or limited geographic regions. These models are frequently trained on homogeneous datasets that do not account for ethnic, anatomical, or procedural variability, reducing their applicability to broader populations. Additionally, few studies explicitly test model performance in external validation cohorts, a step that is critical for assessing robustness and adaptability in diverse clinical environments (19).

Lastly, ethical and regulatory considerations remain underexplored in the current body of research. Many studies fail to address how algorithmic recommendations are integrated into surgeon workflows or how accountability is maintained in cases where AI suggestions contradict human judgment. There is also insufficient attention given to patient perspectives, informed consent regarding AI use, and the impact of such technologies on clinician autonomy and trust. These gaps suggest that while the technical feasibility of AI in surgery is advancing rapidly, the surrounding ethical, legal, and human factors are not receiving equivalent attention in the literature. In conclusion, while the reviewed studies collectively underscore the transformative potential of AI in surgical workflow optimization, the evidence base is currently limited by methodological flaws, inconsistency in outcome measurement, and insufficient consideration of generalizability and real-world applicability. Addressing these limitations through well-designed multicenter trials, standardized reporting practices, and broader ethical frameworks will be essential to move from conceptual promise to widespread clinical impact.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The integration of artificial intelligence into surgical workflows holds significant promise for enhancing clinical outcomes, optimizing decision-making, and streamlining perioperative care. Based on the reviewed literature, one of the most immediate implications for clinical practice is the potential of AI to support surgeons in preoperative planning through advanced imaging interpretation, anatomical mapping, and patient-specific simulations. These tools allow for more accurate risk assessment and enable personalized surgical

strategies, ultimately improving surgical precision and reducing intraoperative errors. Moreover, real-time AI-driven intraoperative guidance systems can assist in identifying critical structures, minimizing complications, and facilitating minimally invasive techniques, thereby contributing to shorter hospital stays and faster recovery times (20). In the postoperative setting, AI tools have begun to demonstrate their utility in monitoring patient recovery and predicting complications. By continuously analyzing vital signs and recovery patterns, these systems can trigger early interventions that improve patient safety and reduce the likelihood of readmissions (21). However, for these technologies to become mainstream, there is a pressing need to educate clinicians on their use and to develop intuitive interfaces that seamlessly integrate with existing surgical workflows. Building clinician trust in AI outputs remains a crucial step in adoption, particularly for applications that influence intraoperative decisions or treatment plans.

From a policy and regulatory standpoint, the growing application of AI in surgery calls for the development of standardized clinical guidelines and oversight mechanisms. Current use remains largely unregulated, and there is no uniform framework for evaluating the safety, efficacy, and ethical implications of AI algorithms in surgical contexts. Regulatory bodies must work closely with clinicians, data scientists, and ethicists to establish guidelines that address data security, algorithmic accountability, and real-time decision-support standards (22). Furthermore, the implementation of AI should be guided by policies that ensure equitable access across institutions, especially in low-resource settings where disparities in technology adoption could exacerbate healthcare inequalities. Despite promising findings, the review highlights several unresolved questions and key areas for future research. One major gap is the lack of robust evidence on long-term clinical outcomes associated with AI-assisted surgery. Most existing studies focus on technical feasibility and short-term perioperative metrics, but there is limited data on patient-centered outcomes such as quality of life, functional recovery, and long-term morbidity. Additionally, few studies explore how AI affects surgeon behavior, team dynamics, or decision-making hierarchies during operations, all of which are critical for understanding its broader impact in surgical environments (23,24).

The variability in outcome measures, heterogeneous patient populations, and differing surgical contexts across studies also underscore the need for greater standardization in AI research. Future studies should aim to use consistent endpoints and well-defined inclusion criteria to facilitate cross-study comparisons and meta-analyses. Moreover, multicenter trials with diverse populations are essential to assess the generalizability of AI models and to mitigate the biases introduced by homogeneous training datasets. To strengthen the evidence base, upcoming research should prioritize prospective, randomized controlled trials that compare AI-assisted surgical workflows against conventional methods. These trials should be adequately powered and include long-term follow-up to assess outcomes beyond the immediate perioperative period. In addition to clinical outcomes, such trials should evaluate usability, integration efficiency, and surgeon trust. Moreover, the inclusion of explainability metrics in AI models is critical, as black-box algorithms may hinder clinician acceptance and regulatory approval (25). Finally, interdisciplinary research teams—including clinicians, computer scientists, engineers, and ethicists—should collaborate to develop AI systems that are not only accurate but also transparent, ethical, and adaptable to various surgical settings. In summary, this review underscores the transformative potential of AI in surgical workflow optimization, while also identifying the critical steps needed to advance from early innovation to routine clinical use. The field stands at a pivotal moment where thoughtful research design, comprehensive policy-making, and clinician engagement will be key to ensuring that AI fulfills its promise of safer, more precise, and more efficient surgical care.

CONCLUSION

The integration of artificial intelligence into surgical workflow optimization represents a transformative advancement with the potential to enhance preoperative planning, support real-time intraoperative decision-making, and predict postoperative outcomes more accurately. This narrative review has synthesized evidence indicating that AI applications can improve surgical precision, reduce complication rates, and enable more personalized and efficient care. While these developments are promising, the current literature is largely based on observational studies, single-center data, and heterogeneous methodologies, which limits the overall strength and generalizability of the findings. Consequently, the reliability of current evidence remains moderate, underscoring the need for cautious interpretation. Clinicians should begin exploring the use of validated AI tools in suitable scenarios, while remaining mindful of their limitations and the importance of human oversight. For researchers, future work should prioritize well-designed multicenter trials, standardized outcome measures, and investigations into the ethical, regulatory, and human factors surrounding AI adoption. Expanding this evidence base through rigorous and transparent research will be critical to safely and effectively integrating AI into routine surgical practice.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Neda Feroze	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Dur-e-Shahwar*	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Jawad Ali Raza	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Adeel-ur-Rehman	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Sabeen Sultana	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Ayesha Huma	Substantial Contribution to study design and Data Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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