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Artificial Intelligence in Diagnostic Dental Radiology: A Comprehensive Review

Wael Najem[1,*], Hesham I. Habibi[2], Hadeel Izeit[3], Amjed Alrmieh[4], Mohammed Gendel[5]

[1]Department of Biomedical Engineering, Faculty of Medical Technology ،University of Zawia, Libya.

[2]Department of Orthodontics, Faculty of Dentistry, University of Zawia, Libya.

[3]Department of Biological Sciences/Biomedical Sciences, Libyan Academy Misrata, Libya.

[4]Department of Conservative Dentistry, Faculty of Dentistry, University of Zawia, Libya.

[5]The Multidisciplinary Clinic of Zawia, Libya.

*Corresponding author: Wael Najem, Email: w.najem@zu.edu.ly

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence has quietly revolutionized how we approach diagnostic dental radiology, bringing remarkable new capabilities for automatically spotting and categorizing oral diseases. This review takes stock of where AI currently stands in dental imaging, with particular attention to deep learning applications across bitewing X-rays, panoramic films, and cone-beam CT scans. We examine how convolutional neural networks are being deployed to catch cavities, evaluate gum disease, analyze root canal needs, and plan implant procedures. Recent research shows these AI systems can match dental specialists in accuracy for detecting cavities between teeth (achieving AUC scores above 0.90) and identifying infections at root tips, all while cutting interpretation time by as much as 60%. That said, real-world adoption faces significant headwinds: scarce labeled datasets, built-in algorithmic biases, regulatory red tape, and the persistent “black box” problem that makes deep learning decisions difficult to interpret. Drawing together evidence from publications between 2019 and 2024, this article offers clinicians and researchers a balanced look at what AI can and cannot do in dental radiology today and where it might be headed tomorrow.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, deep learning, dental radiology, computer-aided diagnosis, convolutional neural networks, cone-beam CT.

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INTRODUCTION

Bringing artificial intelligence into diagnostic dental radiology marks a genuine turning point in how we deliver oral healthcare, with the potential to sharpen diagnostic precision, ease the burden on clinicians, and bring consistency to interpretations across different practice settings. Dental radiology produces enormous quantities of imaging data that seem almost tailor-made for machine learning, yet reading these images remains labor-intensive and surprisingly inconsistent studies show general dentists disagree on cavity detection 20-40% of the time.[1] The shift to digital imaging in the 1980s set the stage for computational analysis, but it took the arrival of deep learning particularly convolutional neural networks to make truly independent diagnostic tools a reality.[2]

Several converging pressures make AI adoption in dentistry increasingly urgent: rising patient demand, workforce shortages, and the pressing need to catch disease early. Deep learning models can analyze radiographic images in the blink of an eye, picking up subtle patterns that escape even experienced human eyes, while newer explainable AI techniques give clinicians visual explanations for why the algorithm reached a particular conclusion.[3] Still, moving from promising algorithm to reliable clinical tool demands rigorous testing, regulatory clearance, and careful workflow integration that respects the dentist's ultimate decision-making authority. This review brings together the latest advances, clinical applications, and ongoing obstacles in AI-assisted dental radiology.

FUNDAMENTALS OF AI IN DENTAL RADIOLOGY

Deep Learning Architectures

Convolutional neural networks serve as the workhorse of contemporary dental imaging AI, automatically learning hierarchical features straight from raw pixels without requiring engineers to manually specify what to look for. In dental radiology, these networks typically borrow knowledge from models pre-trained on ImageNet (such as ResNet, VGG, and EfficientNet) to compensate for the relatively modest size of dental datasets.[4] These architectures shine at identifying localized problems like cavities and root tip infections, using convolutional filters that capture progressively sophisticated patterns from simple edges and textures to complete anatomical structures.

The U-Net architecture and its derivatives have emerged as the go-to choice for segmentation tasks, enabling precise tracing of dental structures, decayed areas, and bone loss from periodontal disease. For three-dimensional CBCT datasets, 3D-CNNs and Vision Transformers process volumetric data to locate periapical cysts and plan implant placement.[5] Recent studies indicate that hybrid CNN-ViT models surpass traditional architectures when classifying dental anomalies, as they capture both fine local details and broader contextual relationships.[6]

Explainable AI in Dentistry

The inherent opacity of deep learning models presents a serious obstacle to clinical acceptance. Explainable AI methods such as Gradient-weighted Class Activation Mapping (Grad-CAM) produce heatmaps that highlight which regions of a radiograph influenced the model's decision, helping build clinician confidence.[7] Research demonstrates that when dentists review AI predictions alongside these saliency maps, their diagnostic confidence rises by 25% and agreement rates improve markedly.[3] However, current explainability approaches may oversimplify complex decision boundaries, potentially giving clinicians a misleading sense of how reliable the model actually is.

APPLICATIONS BY IMAGING MODALITY

Intraoral Radiography

Bitewing and periapical films remain the most frequently used dental imaging modalities, making them natural candidates for AI automation. Deep learning models achieve AUC values between 0.90 and 0.96 for detecting cavities between adjacent teeth on bitewing radiographs performance on par with experienced specialists and notably better than general dentists.[8] CNNs trained on periapical images show 92% sensitivity for infections at root tips, reducing the false-negative rates that often delay necessary root canal treatment[2]. Multi-center validation studies confirm that AI-assisted interpretation cuts diagnostic time by 40-60% while boosting inter-observer agreement from κ=0.58 to κ=0.78.[9]

Panoramic Radiography

Panoramic radiographs present distinct challenges due to image distortion and overlapping anatomical structures. Despite these complications, AI systems effectively identify impacted teeth, leftover root fragments, and jaw lesions. One deep learning model trained on 14,000 panoramic radiographs achieved 95.7% accuracy in classifying wisdom tooth impaction patterns.[10] For assessing periodontal disease, CNNs analyzing panoramic images correlate strongly with clinical measurements of attachment loss (r=0.81), opening possibilities for population-level screening.[1] Even so, panoramic AI applications remain constrained by inconsistent image quality and artifacts stemming from patient positioning errors.

Cone-Beam Computed Tomography

CBCT delivers three-dimensional anatomical detail essential for complex procedures. AI processing of CBCT volumes automates the segmentation of maxillofacial structures, achieving Dice coefficients of 0.85-0.92 for identifying teeth and bone.[11] In implant planning, deep learning models recommend optimal implant dimensions and positioning by evaluating bone volume and anatomical limitations, compressing surgical planning from hours to minutes.[5] In endodontics, 3D-CNNs detect vertical root fractures with 89% sensitivity outperforming conventional 2D radiographic evaluation.[12] Nevertheless, CBCT AI confronts hurdles including substantial computational requirements, limited availability of annotated 3D datasets, and radiation exposure considerations that restrict routine use.

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

Dental Caries Detection

Cavity detection represents the most developed AI application in dental radiology. A systematic review encompassing 42 studies found that deep learning models achieved pooled sensitivity of 89% and specificity of 91% for cavities between teeth, significantly surpassing traditional diagnostic approaches.[13] Multi-stage detection frameworks first isolate individual teeth, then classify specific surfaces, minimizing interference from surrounding anatomy.[14] On digital bitewing radiographs, an attention-guided CNN correctly identified 94% of dentin-level cavities that at least one clinician on a consensus panel had missed.[15]

Particularly noteworthy is AI's value in catching decay early. A model trained on 12,000 images detected enamel lesions with 87% accuracy, enabling preventive intervention before the decay progresses to cavitation.[16] Performance does vary by tooth type and surface, however; cavities on chewing surfaces prove more challenging due to superimposition of cusp anatomy.

Periodontal Disease Assessment

Quantifying bone loss from periodontal disease on radiographs is tedious and varies considerably between examiners. AI systems streamline this process by identifying cementoenamel junctions and alveolar crests, calculating bone loss to the nearest millimeter with mean absolute error of just 0.5mm compared to manual measurements.[17] Deep learning models analyzing panoramic radiographs can stage periodontitis according to CDC-AAP criteria with 84% concordance with clinical staging.[1]

Recent progress incorporates longitudinal analysis, tracking bone level changes over time to predict disease progression. A recurrent neural network processing sequential radiographs forecasted sites at high risk for future attachment loss with 79% accuracy.[18] Such predictive capabilities could transform periodontal maintenance from rigid six-month schedules to personalized, risk-based protocols.

Endodontic Applications

AI strengthens endodontic diagnostics by identifying infections at root tips, mapping root canal anatomy, and predicting treatment outcomes. A CNN trained on periapical radiographs detected periapical radiolucencies with 91% sensitivity, including subtle lesions smaller than 2mm in diameter.[19] For treatment planning, AI algorithms automatically trace root canal systems from CBCT data, identifying accessory canals in 78% of cases versus 42% by human observers.[20]

Machine learning models also forecast endodontic treatment success based on preoperative radiographic characteristics. A gradient boosting classifier incorporating 16 radiographic parameters achieved 85% accuracy in predicting lesion healing at 12 months outperforming empirical clinical judgment.[21]

Implantology and Oral Surgery

CBCT-based AI systems are transforming implant planning by automating bone quality assessment and anatomical risk mapping. Deep learning models segment the inferior alveolar nerve canal with mean surface distance error of 1.2mm critical for avoiding nerve injury.[22] For bone volume quantification, CNNs classify bone density according to Misch categories with 90% accuracy, enabling precise implant selection.[5]

In oral surgery, AI identifies impacted teeth and pathological conditions that might complicate extractions. A study of 3,800 panoramic radiographs showed that AI detected impacted canines with 96% sensitivity and reduced interpretation time from 3 minutes to 18 seconds per image.[10]

Pathology Detection

AI applications extend to identifying cysts, tumors, and developmental abnormalities. A deep learning system analyzing panoramic radiographs distinguished between radicular cysts and keratocystic odontogenic tumors with 88% accuracy, using texture analysis patterns imperceptible to human observers.[23] In oral cancer screening, CNNs identified malignant features in intraoral radiographs with 86% sensitivity, though specificity (73%) remains inadequate for standalone screening.[24] For developmental anomalies, AI detected early signs of osteogenesis imperfecta in dental radiographs with 91% accuracy, facilitating timely referral.[6]

CRITICAL CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Dataset Limitations

Developing robust AI models faces severe constraints from the shortage of large, publicly available, annotated dental radiographic datasets. Most studies depend on single-institution data (typically fewer than 1,000 images), limiting how broadly findings apply. Inter-observer variability in establishing ground truth kappa values of 0.5-0.7 for cavity detection among dentists introduces noise that undermines model performance.[8] Weakly supervised learning approaches show promise but currently lag 5-10% behind fully supervised methods in accuracy.[13]

Algorithmic Bias

Dental AI systems risk perpetuating or worsening health disparities if training data lacks diversity. A recent analysis found that commercial cavity detection algorithms showed 15% lower sensitivity for images from low-resource clinics, likely reflecting differences in equipment quality and patient demographics.[25] Bias can also emerge from uneven tooth type distribution, with models performing better on molars than premolars due to imbalances in training data. Fairness-aware training and geographically diverse validation cohorts are essential yet rarely implemented.

Clinical Validation and Integration

Despite encouraging technical performance, few dental AI systems undergo rigorous clinical validation. A systematic review of 112 studies found that only 8% conducted prospective clinical trials; the remainder relied on retrospective datasets.[26] Real-world deployment encounters practical obstacles including:

- **Workflow disruption**: PACS integration problems lead 30% of dentists to abandon AI tools within six months.[2]
- **Computational delays**: CBCT analysis can require 5-10 minutes on standard hardware unacceptable for time-sensitive decisions.[5]
- **Model drift**: Performance degrades 3-7% annually as imaging protocols and patient populations evolve.[3]

Regulatory and Ethical Considerations

Regulatory pathways for dental AI devices remain fragmented. While the FDA has cleared several AI algorithms for cavity detection, post-market surveillance is minimal, and adverse event reporting is voluntary.[26] Ethical concerns include:

- **Erosion of professional autonomy**: Over-reliance may gradually degrade dentists' diagnostic skills.
- **Liability ambiguity**: Unclear responsibility when AI misses pathology that a human might have caught.
- **Informed consent**: Patients are rarely informed about AI involvement in their diagnosis.[6]

Transparency guidelines such as TITAN (Transparency in Reporting of Artificial intelligence) are emerging but not yet widely adopted in dental literature.[16]

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Multimodal Integration

The next frontier involves combining radiographic data with intraoral photographs, clinical charts, and genomic information to build comprehensive diagnostic models. A pilot system merging bitewing radiographs with periodontal probing measurements improved periodontitis staging accuracy from 84% to 93% compared to radiographs alone.[1] Similarly, integrating CBCT with intraoral scans enables AI-guided surgical navigation with real-time feedback.[27]

Federated Learning

Privacy concerns restrict data sharing across dental institutions. Federated learning allows collaborative model training without centralizing protected health information, potentially creating broadly generalizable models from thousands of decentralized practices.[3] Early trials show 5-8% accuracy improvements over single-institution models while safeguarding patient privacy.[25]

Self-Supervised Learning

Self-supervised pretraining on unlabeled dental images can reduce annotation requirements by 70-80%. By learning anatomical representations from millions of unlabeled radiographs, models achieve performance approaching fully supervised methods using only hundreds of labeled examples.[28] This approach proves especially valuable for rare conditions where labeled data is scarce.

Real-Time Chairside AI

Edge computing devices promise immediate AI analysis right at the dental chair. A prototype system processes intraoral radiographs within 2 seconds, overlaying cavity predictions on live images for instant patient communication.[15] Such immediate feedback could reshape treatment planning conversations and patient education.

DISCUSSION

The evolution of AI in dental radiology reflects rapid maturation from experimental prototypes to commercially available clinical tools. High-performance systems now exist for focused tasks like cavity detection and implant planning, yet generalized oral diagnostic reasoning remains beyond reach. Evidence consistently shows AI performs best as a collaborative partner study demonstrate that dentist-AI teams outperform either working alone, with AI flagging subtle lesions and dentists providing contextual interpretation.[29]

However, the field faces a replication crisis. Many published algorithms fail external validation due to dataset shifts and methodological inconsistencies. The emphasis on area-under-curve metrics often overshadows practical outcomes like time saved, cost-effectiveness, and patient satisfaction. A recent trial found that while AI reduced cavity detection time by 50%, it increased false positives by 15%, potentially triggering unnecessary overtreatment.[15]

Algorithmic bias demands urgent attention. Models trained on university hospital data may not transfer well to community practices serving underserved populations, potentially widening health disparities.[25] Regulatory frameworks must require diverse validation cohorts and continuous performance monitoring after deployment.

Explainability remains essential. While heatmaps offer visual feedback, they do not always correspond to genuine pathological features, risking misinterpretation.[7] Standardized interpretability benchmarks and clinician education on AI limitations are crucial.

CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence has firmly established itself within the dental radiology landscape, delivering concrete benefits in diagnostic accuracy, efficiency, and standardization. From spotting subtle cavities between teeth to planning complex implant surgeries, AI demonstrates clinical value that can enhance patient care. Yet widespread adoption depends on addressing critical challenges: ensuring algorithmic fairness across diverse populations, validating real-world performance through prospective trials, integrating seamlessly into clinical workflows, and maintaining transparency through explainable AI.

The future lies not in AI replacing dentists, but in synergistic partnerships where algorithms handle routine pattern recognition while clinicians apply contextual judgment and patient-centered care. Success will be measured not by algorithmic sophistication, but by improved oral health outcomes, reduced disparities, and enhanced practitioner well-being. As the field advances toward multimodal, self-supervised, and federated learning paradigms, rigorous clinical validation and ethical deployment must remain paramount priorities.

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