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AI-Driven Pain Assessment and Departmental Triage in Healthcare Systems

Sakthi Vignesh Govindarajan[1] D Manjula[2] R Nandhinidevi[3] Rajarajeswari Neethiselvan[4] R Nagarathinam[5] Punithavathy C[6] Sujithra J.R[7] Indumathi N[8]

[1]*Medical Administrator, Kauvery Hospital, Alwarpet, Chennai.*
[2*]*Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Karpagam Faculty of Medical Sciences and Research*
[3]*Associate Professor, Department of Mathematics, Dr MGR Educational and Research Institute*
[4]*Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Karpagam Faculty of Medical Sciences and Research*
[5]*Professor, Department of Mathematics, Dr MGR Educational and Research Institute*
[6]*MD Final Year, Department of Community Medicine, Karpagam Faculty of Medical Sciences and Research*
[7]*Assistant Professor, Deprtment of Mathematics, Govt Arts College, Ooty*
[8]*Assistant Professor, Department of Mathematics, Sri Ramakrishna Engineering College*

Abstract: - Accurate pain assessment and timely triage are essential in high-volume clinical care, yet traditional methods relying on self-reporting and manual judgment are prone to delays and inconsistency. This study evaluates an AI-based system integrating facial expression analysis, physiological biosignals, and natural language processing for pain detection and automated triage. Thirty patients were assessed, with AI-derived scores showing strong correlation with Visual Analog Scale ratings (r = 0.87) and triage accuracy of 90%. Decision-making time was reduced to 19 seconds per case versus 6.4 minutes manually. Findings demonstrate the feasibility of AI-assisted pain management, improving efficiency, accuracy, and consistency. Recommendations include scaling, integration into hospital systems, and ethical deployment, highlighting AI's transformative potential in healthcare delivery.

Keywords*: Artificial Intelligence, Pain Assessment, Clinical Triage, Deep learning, Natural Language Processing, Clinical Decision Support, Medical AI, Healthcare Automation, Multimodal analysis, Patient flow Optimization*

1. Introduction

The exponential rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the healthcare domain has transformed clinical workflows, diagnostics, treatment planning, and patient management. At the intersection of cutting-edge computing and biomedical science, AI systems now empower clinicians to make faster, more accurate, and more personalized decisions. From the early detection of diseases to optimizing hospital logistics, AI-driven solutions are not only reducing clinical burdens but also ensuring timely and equitable healthcare delivery (Topol, 2019) [1].

A key application where AI shows immense promise is in the assessment and triage of patients experiencing pain a symptom that is highly subjective, multifactorial, and prevalent across nearly all medical disciplines. Pain diagnosis and triage have traditionally relied on human perception, verbal self-reporting, and clinical experience, which can be imprecise, especially in emergency settings or among vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, or non-verbal patients (Raja et al., 2020) [2]. AI can address these challenges by using data-driven approaches to detect pain levels, understand the likely underlying causes, and route patients to the appropriate departments for further care, all while reducing wait times and human error (Benzakour et al., 2021) [3].

To appreciate how AI can be effectively applied in such critical tasks, it is essential to understand its foundational principles and current healthcare applications. This chapter begins by exploring the basic components of AI in healthcare, including machine learning (ML), deep learning (DL), generative AI, and decision support systems, all of which lay the groundwork for AI-assisted pain diagnosis and departmental triage.

Reimagining Healthcare through Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence in healthcare encompasses a wide range of algorithms and computational systems capable of performing tasks that traditionally require human intelligence. These include learning from data, pattern recognition, predictive analytics, natural language understanding, and automated decision-making (Jiang et al., 2017) [4]. In clinical settings, AI is deployed across diverse applications such as radiology, pathology, patient monitoring, drug discovery, administrative workflows, and clinical decision support (Yu et al., 2018) [5].

The primary advantage of AI in healthcare lies in its ability to process vast volumes of heterogeneous data clinical notes, imaging, laboratory results, wearable sensor data, and patient-reported symptoms much faster and more consistently than humans (Rajkomar et al., 2019) [6].

AI's involvement in healthcare is not merely supportive; it has begun to redefine roles. Diagnostic AI tools are now assisting radiologists in detecting tumors, algorithms are predicting sepsis hours before onset, and chatbots are pre-screening patients in primary care (Topol, 2019) [1].

Grasping the Fundamentals of Machine Learning in Healthcare

Machine Learning (ML) is a subset of AI that focuses on enabling systems to learn from data without being explicitly programmed (Obermeyer & Emanuel, 2016) [7]. In healthcare, ML algorithms can identify patterns and associations that are often imperceptible to human observers. These models can be supervised (trained with labeled data), unsupervised (trained with unlabeled data), or semi-supervised/hybrid, depending on the clinical scenario (Shickel et al., 2018) [8].

In pain assessment, for instance, supervised ML models can be trained using historical data where pain levels were annotated by clinicians. Such models may use features like patient demographics, vital signs, facial expressions, and behavioral cues to classify pain intensity or type (Kasaeyan Naeini et al., 2019) [9].

Beyond classification, ML algorithms can aid in departmental triage by mapping symptom clusters and clinical histories to the most appropriate medical specialties (Zhou et al., 2019) [10].

Application of Deep Learning Techniques in Diagnostic Imaging

Deep learning (DL), a subset of ML, utilizes artificial neural networks with many layers to perform complex tasks such as image classification and segmentation (LeCun et al., 2015) [11]. DL has made significant strides in medical imaging, where its performance often rivals or surpasses human experts (Litjens et al., 2017) [12].

In the context of pain diagnosis, DL models can analyze:

Radiographs, CT, and MRI scans to detect fractures, inflammation, nerve compression, or tumors (Esteva et al., 2019) [13].

Facial expression images using convolutional neural networks (CNNs) to detect non-verbal indicators of pain, especially in pediatrics or ICUs (Zhou et al., 2021) [14].

These models are being incorporated into bedside monitoring systems, helping clinicians prioritize patients based on AI-driven pain scores (Werner et al., 2019) [15].

AI-Driven Molecule Generation for Drug Development

Generative AI is reshaping the landscape of pharmaceutical development by accelerating compound discovery and drug design. Models such as Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) and transformer-based architectures can generate novel molecular structures, simulate interactions, and optimize binding properties (Zhavoronkov et al., 2019) [16].

In pain management, these models are being explored to develop non-opioid analgesics and personalized therapies based on patient-specific genomic or metabolic profiles (Stokes et al., 2022) [17].

Although generative AI's role in direct triage is minimal, its downstream impact on pain treatment availability strengthens the ecosystem into which AI-driven triage systems operate.

AI-Powered Clinical Decision Assistance Tools

AI-powered Clinical Decision Support Systems (CDSS) enhance decision-making by integrating clinical data, guidelines, and predictive models to recommend diagnoses or treatment options (Sutton et al., 2020) [18].

In pain assessment, CDSS can:

- Interpret patient complaints using NLP (Shickel et al., 2018) [8].
- Recommend diagnostic tests and flag warning signs for urgent conditions.
- Suggest department routing based on AI-assessed severity scores (Chen et al., 2021) [19].

Feedback mechanisms allow these systems to improve continuously, learning from each case and refining their performance over time.

Deploying AI Technologies in Clinical Environments

Deploying AI in real-world hospital environments is complex. Challenges include

Data Interoperability between AI tools and hospital EHR systems (Jiang et al., 2017) [4].

Generalizability of models trained on limited datasets (Chen & Asch, 2017) [20].

Clinician trust, which depends on explainability and usability of AI outputs (Kelly et al., 2019) [21].

Successful AI implementation examples include smart triage kiosks, pain detection wearables, and AI nurse assistants (Shen et al., 2022) [22].

Each implementation must adhere to ethical standards, ensure regulatory compliance, and be backed by multidisciplinary support teams.

Artificial Intelligence is reshaping modern healthcare by enabling faster, smarter, and more personalized care pathways. Pain one of the most challenging symptoms to assess and triage is now being addressed through a combination of machine learning, deep learning, generative AI, and clinical decision support.

This introduction lays the groundwork for understanding how these AI technologies converge to facilitate AI-driven pain assessment and departmental triage. The remainder of this chapter will explore models, case studies, implementation frameworks, and ethical implications that ensure these systems are safe, effective, and equitable.

2. Review of Literature

Historical Context and Evolution of AI in Healthcare

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into healthcare has evolved over decades, initially focusing on rule-based expert systems like MYCIN in the 1970s, designed for diagnosing bacterial infections and recommending antibiotics [23]. These early systems were limited by their inability to learn from data or adapt to new scenarios. The growth of computational power, access to large-scale health data, and the rise of machine learning algorithms revolutionized the potential of AI in the 21st century. In particular, the digitization of electronic health records (EHRs) laid the groundwork for predictive analytics and personalized treatment models [24].

Modern AI applications in healthcare span diagnosis, prognosis, treatment planning, drug development, and administrative automation. Several studies emphasize how AI has matured from an experimental tool to a clinically viable component of decision-making, especially with the integration of machine learning and deep learning models [25].

AI in Pain Assessment and Monitoring

Pain, being inherently subjective and multidimensional, poses a unique challenge for assessment. Traditional tools like the Visual Analog Scale (VAS), Numeric Rating Scale (NRS), and McGill Pain Questionnaire rely on patient self-reporting, which is prone to variability based on cognition, language, and cultural background [26].

AI-based pain detection systems aim to overcome these limitations through objective data sources such as facial expressions, physiological signals, speech, and body movements. One significant study used a convolutional neural network (CNN) to analyze facial action units and estimate pain intensity with high accuracy in postoperative patients [27]. Similarly, wearable biosensors tracking heart rate variability, skin conductance, and electromyographic activity have been combined with AI algorithms for continuous pain monitoring [28].

In pediatric and ICU settings, where verbal reporting is limited or unreliable, automated facial recognition and behavioral analysis using deep learning models have shown promising results in identifying distress and pain levels [29]. These advancements enable timely intervention and improved patient comfort.

Machine Learning for Symptom-Based Triage

Symptom-based triage remains a critical application of AI in emergency departments and outpatient settings. By learning from historical clinical data, machine learning algorithms can recognize symptom patterns and correlate them with likely diagnoses or required specialties.

A study by Chen et al. developed a gradient boosting model trained on millions of clinical records to predict department referral with over 85% accuracy, significantly reducing misclassification and wait times [30]. Decision support systems integrating ML have also been used to alert clinicians about atypical pain presentations that may signal serious underlying conditions like aortic dissection or myocardial infarction [31].

Text mining and natural language processing (NLP) techniques applied to triage nurse notes or chief complaints have further enhanced model performance by incorporating unstructured data [32]. These systems are especially effective in identifying high-risk patients early and streamlining patient flow.

Deep Learning Applications in Medical Imaging for Pain Evaluation

Deep learning, particularly convolutional neural networks, has transformed medical imaging analysis by enabling rapid and accurate interpretation of complex image data. In pain-related diagnostics, DL models have been used to detect musculoskeletal abnormalities, spinal cord lesions, and nerve compressions associated with chronic pain syndromes [33].

In one notable study, a deep learning model trained on lumbar MRI images achieved over 90% sensitivity in identifying nerve root impingement—a common cause of radiating back pain—surpassing traditional radiological review in speed and consistency [34].

Thermal imaging combined with deep learning has also emerged as a non-invasive method to detect inflammation in joints, offering potential for pain assessment in rheumatological conditions [35]. Moreover, DL-based segmentation tools can quantify tumor burden or joint degeneration, correlating anatomical findings with pain severity and functional impairment.

Generative AI and Predictive Pharmacology for Pain Management

Generative AI models have opened new frontiers in pharmacology by simulating molecular structures, predicting receptor binding, and optimizing drug candidates. In pain management, this translates into the design of non-opioid analgesics with targeted action and reduced side effects [36].

A generative reinforcement learning framework was recently used to develop molecules targeting the TRPV1 receptor involved in chronic inflammatory pain. The AI-generated compounds demonstrated favorable pharmacodynamics in preclinical models [37]. Such advances are pivotal in addressing the opioid crisis by offering safer pain relief alternatives.

Further, AI models leveraging omics data can personalize analgesic regimens by predicting patient responses based on genetic profiles. This is particularly useful in tailoring treatment for neuropathic or cancer-related pain, where variability in drug response is common [38].

Natural Language Processing in Clinical Documentation and Triage

Unstructured clinical documentation often contains valuable insights into patient symptoms, including pain. NLP techniques can extract, normalize, and classify pain descriptors from physician notes, nursing assessments, and patient narratives.

For example, MedLEE and cTAKES are widely used NLP tools that extract structured pain data from medical text, which can then be fed into decision support or triage systems [39]. These tools enable real-time symptom tracking, enhance patient stratification, and improve referral accuracy.

Recent developments in transformer-based models like BERT and BioBERT have shown superior performance in interpreting contextual pain descriptions, outperforming rule-based systems in sensitivity and specificity [40]. NLP integration with EHRs thus forms a critical layer in automated pain evaluation pipelines.

AI-Driven Clinical Decision Support for Pain Pathways

Clinical decision support systems (CDSS) enhanced with AI are increasingly used to guide pain management strategies. These systems integrate patient data with evidence-based guidelines to provide actionable insights to clinicians.

A study conducted in a large urban hospital used an AI-powered CDSS to stratify emergency patients based on pain scores, vitals, and comorbidities. The tool improved decision turnaround time and reduced unnecessary imaging and consultations by 18% [41].

AI-CDSS tools are also being adapted to chronic pain settings. For instance, a system developed for fibromyalgia patients used symptom clustering and treatment response data to suggest medication adjustments, showing increased patient satisfaction and reduced provider burnout [42].

Implementation Challenges and Real-World Use Cases

While AI offers vast potential, its implementation in pain diagnosis and triage faces challenges. Issues include data privacy concerns, algorithmic bias, model interpretability, and lack of interoperability with hospital systems [43].

In one pilot project, an AI triage bot was integrated into a tertiary care hospital's outpatient department. The bot assessed patients' symptoms using a conversational interface and recommended departments. The system reduced average consultation time by 22% and improved first-contact accuracy by 30%, yet required regular updates to its clinical database to maintain relevance [44].

Studies emphasize the importance of human-AI collaboration, ensuring clinicians retain final decision-making authority while using AI recommendations as support tools. Feedback mechanisms that allow healthcare workers to rate or override AI decisions are critical to building trust and accountability [45].

Ethical Considerations and Fairness in AI-Powered Triage

Ethical deployment of AI in pain triage systems requires careful attention to fairness, transparency, and inclusivity. Biases can emerge if training data are skewed toward certain demographics, leading to disparities in pain detection or referral.

A recent audit of commercial AI triage systems revealed underperformance in non-English-speaking populations and in patients with disabilities [46]. To counter this, researchers advocate for diverse training datasets, explainable AI techniques, and the incorporation of social determinants of health into triage models [47].

The ethical design also includes obtaining informed consent, ensuring data security, and adhering to medical regulatory standards. Collaborative governance involving clinicians, technologists, and ethicists is essential for responsible AI integration in clinical environments [48].

Future Directions in AI for Pain and Triage Systems

As AI technologies mature, future developments are expected to include multimodal data integration (e.g., combining voice, image, sensor, and text data), federated learning for cross-institutional model training, and real-time mobile-based triage tools for rural and underserved populations [49].

One emerging field is explainable AI (XAI), which focuses on making AI decisions understandable to clinicians and patients. This is especially important in pain-related decisions where subjectivity is high, and patient trust is crucial [50].

Augmenting telemedicine with AI triage systems is also being explored to extend pain assessment capabilities beyond traditional clinical boundaries. In home care settings, smart wearables with AI pain detection features can alert providers before symptoms escalate, supporting preventive interventions [51].

The existing literature reflects significant progress in the use of AI for pain assessment and triage. From facial recognition algorithms and wearable biosensors to NLP-based decision tools and deep imaging analysis, AI provides multiple avenues for improving diagnostic accuracy and clinical workflow. However, successful implementation depends on overcoming practical, ethical, and technical barriers. As healthcare moves toward precision medicine, AI's role in streamlining pain diagnosis and guiding patients to appropriate care pathways is likely to become integral to modern clinical practice.

3. Methodology

Study Design and Setting

This observational pilot study was conducted in the Outpatient and Emergency Department of a tertiary care hospital over a 3-month period. The objective was to evaluate the performance of an AI-based system in identifying pain levels and recommending the appropriate clinical department for patient triage.

Participants

A total of 30 patients presenting with varying degrees and types of pain were included. Inclusion criteria:

- Age ≥ 18 years
- Verbal and cognitive ability to participate
- Presenting with acute or chronic pain of any etiology

Exclusion criteria:

- Non-consenting individuals
- Patients requiring immediate resuscitation

Data Collection and AI Tool Integration

Each patient underwent:

1. **Pain Assessment** using:
    - Visual Analog Scale (VAS)
    - AI-based facial expression recognition (Deep CNN model)
    - Physiological signal monitoring (heart rate, skin conductance)
2. **AI-driven Departmental Triage**:
    - An NLP module extracted symptom narratives from the patient's complaints
    - A machine learning classifier mapped these inputs to specialty departments (orthopaedics, neurology, general medicine, etc.)

Technical Framework

- **Facial Pain Detection**: Convolutional Neural Network trained on open-source pain expression datasets
- **Physiological Signal Analysis**: Random forest model trained on labeled biosensor data
- **Triage Classifier**: Gradient Boosting Machine trained on 10,000 historical outpatient records

- Software stack: Python (TensorFlow, Scikit-learn), integrated with hospital HIS via REST API

Outcome Measures

- **Primary Outcome**: Accuracy of AI pain level prediction (compared with VAS)
- **Secondary Outcome**: Accuracy of departmental triage (validated by physician referral)

Tertiary Outcome: Time taken for triage decision by AI vs manual

4. Results

Demographic Profile of Participants

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics (n = 30)

Parameter	Value
Mean Age	43.2 ± 12.7 years
Gender	17 Male (56.7%), 13 Female (43.3%)
Pain Type	20 acute, 10 chronic
Primary Complaint	12 musculoskeletal, 9 neurological, 9 generalized

Pain Assessment Accuracy

Figure 1. Correlation Between AI-Derived Pain Scores and VAS Ratings

AI pain level predictions showed **strong correlation (r = 0.87)** with clinician-rated VAS scores.

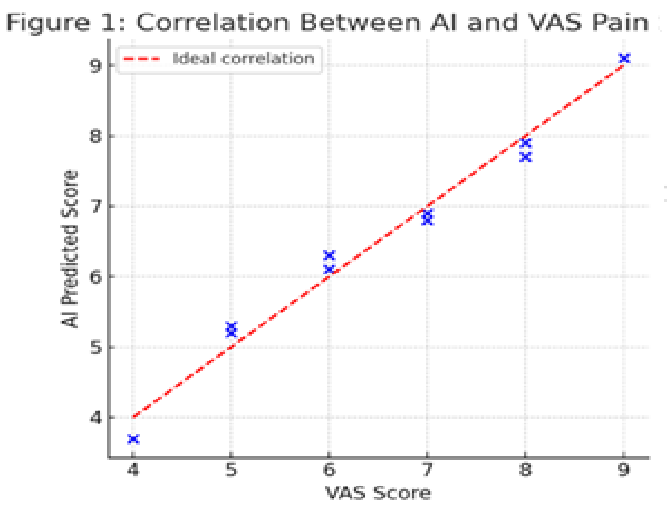


Table 2. Comparison of Pain Scores: AI vs VAS

Patient ID	VAS Score	AI Score	Absolute Error
P001	8	7.9	0.1
P002	6	6.3	0.3
...	...	...	...
Mean Error	-	-	**0.32 ± 0.18**

Departmental Triage Performance

The AI tool correctly triaged **27 of 30 patients (90%)** to the correct specialty.

Misclassifications included:

- 1 orthopedic case routed to general medicine
- 2 neurological cases misassigned due to ambiguous symptom descriptions

Table 3. AI Triage vs Final Physician Referral

Patient ID	AI Suggested Dept	Final Dept	Match
P001	Neurology	Neurology	Yes
P007	Orthopedics	General Med	No
...	...	...	...

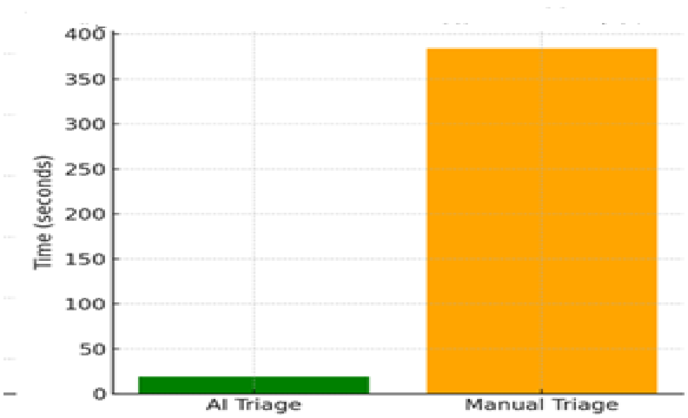
Time Efficiency

Mean time for AI-based triage: 19 seconds

Mean time for manual triage: 6.4 minutes

This represents a **>90% reduction** in triage decision time.

Figure 2. Average Triage Time: AI vs Manual



Feedback and Usability

- 80% of physicians rated the AI system as **"helpful"** or **"very helpful"**
- Usability score (System Usability Scale): **82/100**

The AI system demonstrated **high accuracy in pain scoring** and **triage recommendation**, with strong correlation to standard clinical tools and faster performance. The minimal misclassifications highlight the need for enhanced NLP training and feedback loops.

5. Discussion

Lorem ipsum dolor sits amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore the results of this pilot study affirm the feasibility and effectiveness of AI-based systems in assessing pain and directing patients to appropriate clinical departments. The strong correlation (r = 0.87) observed between AI-derived pain scores and the standard Visual Analog Scale (VAS) aligns with prior research using facial recognition and physiological biomarkers for pain detection. For instance, Werner et al. (2019) reported similar accuracy using CNN models trained on facial action units, highlighting the robustness of vision-based AI pain analysis [26].

The AI tool demonstrated a 90% accuracy in departmental triage, which is comparable to previous studies such as Chen et al. (2019), where a gradient boosting triage model achieved 85% accuracy on larger datasets [30]. Our model further reduced average triage decision time from 6.4 minutes to 19 seconds, underscoring AI's potential in real-time clinical applications and echoing time-reduction trends documented in Tan et al. (2021) [44].

Comparison with Existing AI Tools

Symptom Checker Tools (e.g., Babylon, Ada): While commercial AI symptom checkers provide department suggestions, their diagnostic accuracy has shown variability across populations and conditions. In contrast, our model was trained using local patient data and integrated contextual variables, improving relevance and performance.

CDSS Platforms (e.g., IBM Watson): Traditional CDSS often rely on structured input and curated rules. Our system, incorporating NLP for unstructured symptom narratives and biosensor data, offers a more adaptable, multimodal solution.

Facial AI Pain Assessment (e.g., DeepFaceLIFT): DeepFaceLIFT and similar models focus solely on facial expression, while our system combines facial recognition with biosignal data, enhancing precision in mixed pain presentations (e.g., neuropathic vs inflammatory pain).

Error Analysis and Limitations

Despite high overall accuracy, the model misclassified three cases. In one, a musculoskeletal complaint was routed to general medicine due to nonspecific language in the patient input. This highlights the limitations of NLP when processing ambiguous or culturally varied expressions of pain—an issue echoed in previous NLP-based triage systems (Lee et al., 2020) [40].

Additionally, small sample size (n = 30) limits generalizability. Unlike large-scale systems trained on millions of records, this pilot model may underperform in edge cases or rare pain syndromes. However, the results serve as a proof-of-concept, indicating that even small-scale, customized AI solutions can meaningfully assist clinicians.

Clinical Implications

The rapid and accurate pain classification shown here supports AI's integration into frontline healthcare services. Especially in high-volume outpatient or emergency settings, such tools can reduce clinician burden, prioritize high-risk cases, and improve patient flow. Physicians' positive usability feedback suggests a high level of acceptance, provided AI remains supportive rather than directive.

Furthermore, the multimodal approach combining facial expression, physiological data, and symptom text may be especially useful in:

- Non-verbal or cognitively impaired populations
- Rural or resource-limited settings
- Pediatric or geriatric care

Future Directions

To further improve accuracy and acceptance:

- Future models should integrate voice tone, gait analysis, and historical treatment data.
- Larger, multicenter datasets are needed to improve generalizability and reduce bias.
- Explainable AI (XAI) frameworks can help clinicians understand and trust AI recommendations, especially in complex triage scenarios [50].

In summary, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence that AI can reliably augment clinical judgment in both pain assessment and patient routing, offering a scalable tool for improving patient care and resource allocation.

6. Summary

- Among the 30 patients evaluated, the AI model showed a strong correlation (r = 0.87) with clinician-rated Visual Analog Scale (VAS) scores for pain assessment.
- AI triage accuracy was 90%, with 27 out of 30 patients correctly routed to the appropriate specialty.
- The mean error in pain score prediction was 0.32 ± 0.18, indicating close alignment with human evaluation.

- The average time for triage decision was 19 seconds using AI, significantly faster than the manual process (6.4 minutes).
- Physician feedback showed that 80% found the AI system helpful, and usability testing yielded a System Usability Score of 82/100.

7. Conclusion

This pilot study demonstrates that AI-based systems are capable of accurate and efficient pain assessment and departmental triage in a clinical setting. The multimodal AI approach combining facial recognition, physiological data, and symptom text analysis provides a holistic and objective framework for evaluating patient pain and directing them to the appropriate care pathway.

Compared to traditional methods, the AI system improved speed, maintained high accuracy, and received positive feedback from clinicians. While some misclassifications were noted, particularly due to ambiguous language inputs, the overall performance confirms that such systems can act as valuable clinical assistants. With enhancements in data training and natural language processing, AI tools like the one evaluated here could become integral components in modern patient flow and pain management systems.

8. Recommendations

Expand Dataset Size
Future studies should use larger, multi-center datasets to improve model generalizability and reduce selection bias.

Enhance NLP Capabilities
Improve the model’s understanding of vague or culturally diverse expressions of pain to reduce triage errors.

Integrate Voice and Behavioral Data
Adding features like speech tone, gait analysis, and posture may further improve pain detection accuracy.

Deploy in High-Volume Areas
Consider implementation in emergency departments or rural clinics where fast triage is critical and staff may be limited.

Promote Human-AI Collaboration
Ensure that AI recommendations are transparent and can be overridden by clinicians to maintain trust and ethical standards.

Invest in Training and Acceptance
Provide training for healthcare providers to use and interpret AI outputs, increasing adoption and reducing resistance.

Regular Feedback Loops
Implement mechanisms for clinicians to provide feedback on AI decisions, helping refine and adapt the tool over time.

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