

1 Abstract

2 **Background:** Artificial Intelligence (AI) may favorably support surgeons but may result in
3 concern among patients and their relatives.

4

5 **Objective:** To evaluate attitudes of patients and their relatives towards the use of AI in
6 neurosurgery.

7

8 **Methods:** In this two-stage cross-sectional survey, a qualitative survey was administered to a
9 focus group of former patients to investigate their perception of AI and its role in neurosurgery.
10 Five themes were identified and used to generate a case-based quantitative survey administered
11 to inpatients and their relatives over a two-week period. Presented AI platforms were rated
12 appropriate and acceptable using 5-point Likert scales. Demographic data was collected. A Chi
13 Square test was performed to determine whether demographics influenced participants' attitudes.

14

15 **Results:** In the first stage, 20 participants responded. Five themes were identified: interpretation
16 of imaging (4/20; 20%), operative planning (5/20; 25%), real-time alert of potential
17 complications (10/20; 50%), partially autonomous surgery (6/20; 30%), fully autonomous
18 surgery (3/20; 15%). In the second stage, 107 participants responded. The majority felt
19 appropriate and acceptable to use AI for imaging interpretation (76.7%; 66.3%), operative
20 planning (76.7%; 75.8%), real-time alert of potential complications (82.2%; 72.9%), and
21 partially autonomous surgery (58%; 47.7%). Conversely, most did not feel that fully autonomous
22 surgery was appropriate (27.1%) or acceptable (17.7%). Demographics did not have a significant
23 influence on perception.

24

25 **Conclusions:** The majority of patients and their relatives believed that AI has a role in
26 neurosurgery and found it acceptable. Notable exceptions remain fully autonomous systems,
27 with most wanting the neurosurgeon ultimately to remain in control.

28

29

30 Introduction

31 Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the ability for a machine to think and learn. Machine Learning
32 (ML) is a subset of AI where algorithms are trained with variable levels of human direction or
33 supervision to learn patterns by studying large amounts of data and to perform specific tasks
34 without external programming¹. In the last decade, advances in computational power and data
35 storage, and the increasing availability of big digital data sets have contributed to an exponential
36 increase in AI research. AI platforms have the capability to boost productivity and disrupt
37 workflows.

38

39 Healthcare is a major sector promoting AI development with the prospect to augment healthcare
40 providers in decision-making, predicting patients' outcomes and enhancing efficiency^{2,3}. To date,
41 several AI platforms have been described within surgery where they may augment decision-
42 making across all phases of care⁴, including: pre-operative diagnosis and surgical planning^{5,6};
43 intra-operative surgical workflow^{7,8}; providing post-operative reporting⁹ and predicting post-
44 operative outcome¹⁰. Similar assistance has been reported in neurosurgery, especially within the
45 subspecialties of oncology, spinal, and vascular surgery, by using platforms for image
46 interpretation⁹⁻¹¹, pre- and intra-operative planning¹²⁻¹⁵ and outcome prediction¹⁶⁻²⁰. Except for
47 early attempts described on animal models²¹, the development of autonomous AI-guided robotic
48 surgery still requires the development of an appropriate regulatory framework, supported by
49 ethical guidelines and scientific evidence²². Barriers to the adoption of such AI platforms in
50 surgery are probably related to the interactions between patients, surgeons and intelligent
51 computers^{4,23}.

52

53 A greater understanding of the attitudes towards AI of healthcare providers and patients may
54 provide valuable insights and ultimately overcome some of these barriers to adoption. Pinto dos
55 Santos et al.²⁴ found that undergraduate medical students, despite limited understanding of AI,
56 had a clear awareness of its future relevant impact in medicine, particularly in radiology. This is
57 likely to grown as AI systems mature to be usable by non-AI experts¹⁵. Similar findings were
58 encountered in recently performed surveys of clinicians^{25,26}. The attitudes of patients towards AI
59 in medicine have also been explored which has shown a reluctance in being treated solely by AI
60 systems²⁷. Longoni et al.²⁸ identified that "*uniqueness neglect*" was the public's greatest
61 concern. By operating only in standardized processes, AI platforms were incapable of adapting
62 to the specific condition of each individual, divergent from the rest of the population. When a
63 treatment tailored to one's unique characteristics was proposed, the respondents showed a
64 reduced resistance to medical AI platforms.

65

66 In view of the proposed applications of AI in surgery, and their position as key stakeholders,
67 patient perception should be considered to guide future research, and inform future patient and
68 public engagement. To the best of our knowledge, there are no previous studies in the literature
69 that investigate patient perception of AI in the different surgical specialties. To this end, the aim
70 of this study was to evaluate patient attitudes towards AI applied in neurosurgical procedures.

71 We further appraised to what extent educating patients about AI and its application in surgery
72 influenced their perspectives.

73 **Methods**

74 A cross-sectional two-stage mixed-method quantitative and qualitative survey was performed:
75 (1) to comprehensively appraise people's knowledge about AI and its current applications in
76 healthcare, and to examine their attitudes about AI applied in neurosurgery (qualitative survey),
77 and, (2) to further explore attitudes identified in the first study with a case-based survey with
78 participants including both patients and patients' relatives (quantitative survey). In this study,
79 patients that had undergone surgery for brain tumors were chosen as an exemplar, both because it
80 has been suggested that patients undergoing such high-risk surgery may be particularly
81 concerned about the introduction of new technologies, and because these patients are managed
82 by the senior author.

83 Both surveys were administered following good practice in conducting and reporting of survey
84 research²⁹. Results for both surveys were reported according to the AAPOR standard
85 definitions³⁰: (1) questionnaires with 50%-80% of all applicable questions answered were
86 considered partial responses; (2) questionnaires with more than 80% of all applicable questions
87 answered were considered complete responses. Since the purpose of this study was to recruit
88 patients and their relatives for planning and advising on future research, ethical approval was not
89 required³¹.

90

91 **Qualitative Survey:**

92 The qualitative survey was conducted in September 2019 among patients from UK, who
93 underwent surgical interventions for brain tumors, and had previously expressed an interest in
94 participating in focus group. The questionnaire was designed with accredited qualitative research
95 methods^{29,32} on Qualtrics Survey Platform (Qualtrics, LLC, SAP American Inc. company). The
96 form was sent to the participants, with an invitation link, via email. Two email attempts at
97 contact were made, and the survey was closed after two weeks from its initial distribution.
98 Participants were presented with four open ended questions to ascertain their knowledge of and
99 attitudes towards AI (**Table 1**). Responders likely feelings on undergoing brain surgery with the
100 application of AI platforms were appraised before and after a brief description of AI platforms
101 operated in clinical care.

102

103 **Quantitative Survey:**

104 The quantitative survey was designed to further explore the major themes that emerged from the
105 qualitative survey. Guidelines of good practice in conduct and reporting of survey research had
106 been observed²⁹. The survey was carried out from the 1st October 2019 to the 16th October 2019
107 at the Department of Neurosurgery of our institution. The questionnaire was devised on Qualtrics
108 Survey Platform (Qualtrics, LLC, SAP American Inc. company), and was administered in person
109 using a tablet computer (iPad). Participants were recruited from inpatients and their relatives. For
110 inpatients, the following inclusion criteria were used: (1) undergone brain surgery; (2) adequate
111 capacity to understand and complete the survey; (3) willingness to participate. Relatives of the
112 participating inpatients were invited to complete the survey, and only the ones inclined to be
113 involved were enrolled. A case-based design was adopted. Five cases were illustrated,
114 representing the different roles of AI in neurosurgery, and different levels of involvement and

115 autonomy (**Table 2**). Participants were asked to identify themselves as the patient, and to rate,
116 using 5-point Likert-scales, how *appropriate* – how much they “agree” – with the role of AI
117 platforms described, and how *acceptable* – how “comfortable” they would be – to personally
118 undergo that treatment. Following the last case, an optional comment box was provided to allow
119 participants the opportunity to report any further remarks. Demographic data was collected with
120 an anonymized 7-part multiple-choice questionnaire (**Table 3**) submitted to the participants at
121 the end of the survey. The obtained responses were applied to categorize participants into
122 different groups based on age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education and profession.

123

124 **Data Analysis:**

125 The first survey responses were analyzed qualitatively looking for major themes in participants
126 answers. Participants’ knowledge about AI was evaluated with the first question (**Table 1 – Q1**).
127 Participants’ responses to the second question (**Table 1 – Q2**) were reviewed to identify major
128 themes proposed to apply AI systems in neurosurgery. Responses obtained before and after the
129 brief description of AI (**Table 1 – Q3 and Q4**) were compared to perceive if appropriate
130 information influenced patients’ acceptance of AI in neurosurgery. The second survey responses
131 were analyzed quantitatively by calculating the proportions of responders finding the use of AI
132 appropriate and acceptable for each case. Following this, statistical correlation was examined
133 between participants’ perception on appropriateness and acceptance of AI in neurosurgery and
134 demographics. Demographic data was dichotomized into: gender (‘male’ and ‘female’); age
135 (‘age 45 or less’ and ‘age 46 or greater’); ethnicity (‘white’ and ‘non-white’); religion
136 (‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’); educational level (‘A-levels or less’ and ‘Degree or more’);
137 specialization (‘Specific field of specialization’). Statistical analysis was performed on
138 Vassarstats (Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, USA) using Chi-square 2x5 contingency tables.
139 Tests were run between dichotomized pairs, comparing, separately, the appropriateness and
140 acceptability rates, reported by responders for each presented case, with respect of
141 demographics. A value of $p < 0.001$ was considered statistically significant, accounting for the
142 Bonferroni correction ($n = 30$)³³.

143 **Results**144 **Qualitative Survey**

145 A total of 20 complete responses were gathered in the first stage survey. Over half of the
 146 participants (11/20; 55%) confirmed their knowledge about AI, describing it as a “computer
 147 program”, “system”, or “software”, competent in supporting humans in “decision-making”. Four
 148 participants (20%) asserted that AI consisted of “robots” and that they were “responsible for
 149 replacing the human workers” or “capable of performing the surgery”. The remaining responders
 150 (5/20; 25%) declared their absolute lack of knowledge about AI. The twenty responses to the
 151 second question (**Table 1 – Q2**) were analyzed to identify major themes for the role of AI in
 152 neurosurgery. In some of the responses, more than one role was mentioned. A total of five AI
 153 functions in neurosurgery were highlighted (**Table 4**): (1) pre-operative interpretation of
 154 imaging (4/20; 20%), (2) operative planning (5/20; 25%), (3) real-time alert of potential
 155 complications (10/20; 50%), (4) partially autonomous surgery (6/20; 30%), and (5) fully
 156 autonomous surgery (3/20; 15%).

157

158 Overall, participants were willing to undergo brain surgery supported by AI platforms – 35% of
 159 them (7/20) reported to be “happy” to do so (**Table 1 – Q3**). Nine of the responders (45%) stated
 160 that the following criteria had to be met for them to be operated on with an AI-assisted
 161 neurosurgeon: (1) receiving clear and exhaustive information by the neurosurgeon about the
 162 exact application of the adopted AI system and its involvement in the surgery itself (4/20, 20%);
 163 (2) AI systems used only to support the neurosurgeons and not to replace them (4/20; 20%); (3)
 164 further research before their application (2/20; 10%). Four participants (20%) expressed their
 165 fear in undergoing AI-assisted brain surgery.

166

167 Responses to the fourth question (**Table 1 – Q4**) displayed a definite change in perception in
 168 seven participants (35%). These participants were more comfortable undergoing AI-assisted
 169 brain surgery when better informed about the role of AI as supporting, rather than replacing,
 170 neurosurgeons (3/20; 15%), and the valuable information AI can provide to neurosurgeons (4/20;
 171 20%). Suggestions to comprehensively educate the patients before surgery were reported (2/20;
 172 10%). Two participants (2/20; 10%) were somewhat more comfortable undergoing AI-assisted
 173 brain surgery, but still had concerns over the potential improper use of clinical information,
 174 especially for financial purposes. The remaining eleven participants (55%) reported no
 175 differences in their attitudes as they were already inclined in receiving the abovementioned
 176 surgery (8/20; 40%) or because of their strong apprehension towards new technologies in surgery
 177 (3/20; 15%).

178

179 **Quantitative Survey:**

180 In total, 107 complete responses were collected within the two-week study period. Most
 181 participants were female (62/107; 57.9%), white (87/107; 81.3%), with most responders being 46
 182 years old or older (56/107; 52.3%). The majority identified themselves as religious (64/107;
 183 59.8%) and had completed GCSEs or A-levels (59/107; 55.1%). Participants’ attitudes toward

184 the appropriateness of the presented AI platforms are demonstrated in **Figure 1**. The largest
185 number of responders (88/107; 82.2%) found appropriate – to some degree (35/107; 32.7%) or
186 entirely (53/107; 49.5%) – the application of AI for real-time alert of potential complications
187 (**Table 2 – Case 3**). Similar numbers of participants (82/107; 76.7%) believed that it was
188 appropriate to use AI for pre-operative interpretation of imaging (**Table 2 – Case 1**) and
189 operative planning (**Table 2 – Case 2**). AI systems capable of performing parts of the surgery
190 autonomously (**Table 2 – Case 4**) was considered appropriate by over half of the participants
191 (62/107; 58%). On the other hand, few responders (29/107; 27.1%) felt it would be appropriate
192 for an AI system to perform the surgery entirely autonomously (**Table 2 – Case 5**).

193

194 For each AI system, participants' acceptability rates partially diverged with the reported rates of
195 perceived appropriateness (**Figure 2**). The majority of participants reported they would feel
196 comfortable – both “extremely” and “somewhat” – in the event of being treated with the systems
197 presented, when used for operative planning (80/107; 75.8%), intraoperative real-time alert of
198 potential complications (78/107; 72.9%), and pre-operative interpretation of imaging (71/107;
199 66.3%). Less than half of the responders would accept AI system performing autonomously parts
200 of the surgery (53/107; 47.7%), and few (19/107; 17.7%) would personally accept being operated
201 on by an AI platform performing autonomously the entire operation.

202

203 There was no significant difference in the perception of different demographic groups towards
204 the presented cases. In addition, three major themes emerged among the open-ended comments
205 (**Table 5**): (1) acceptance of AI systems applied as support rather than substitute the
206 neurosurgeon (8/20; 40%); (2) predilection in interacting with a human doctor capable of
207 sympathizing with patient's feelings (4/20; 20%); (3) importance of performing further research
208 on AI, especially regarding the accuracy of data used for its development (3/20; 15%).

209 Discussion

210 In healthcare, the introduction of innovative technologies is intended to facilitate healthcare
211 providers' jobs and improve patients' management and outcomes³⁴. AI has the capacity to
212 disrupt a wide range of surgical workflows from intelligent diagnostic tools, image analysis
213 algorithms, operative planning and scheduling and intra-operative support with robotic systems.
214 In neurosurgery, image analysis algorithms have been developed to rapidly detect and categorize
215 vertebral compression fractures¹⁰, cerebral aneurysms¹¹ and brain tumors⁹. A number of machine
216 learning algorithms have also been used to prognosticate in neurosurgical patients including risk
217 assessment of vasospasm following subarachnoid hemorrhage²⁰, survival prediction in traumatic
218 brain injury¹⁹, and in patients with glioblastoma receiving bevacizumab treatment¹⁶. Such
219 pervasive disruption from a single technology is unprecedented and there is an urgent need to
220 ascertain patient attitudes towards the implication of the introduction of AI systems into surgery,
221 particularly in neurosurgery.

222
223 In this two-stage survey, we present one of the most comprehensive assessments of the attitudes
224 of neurosurgical patients and their relatives towards AI in neurosurgery. In the first stage of the
225 survey, we found that more than half of the responders (55%) provided a partially accurate
226 definition of AI, with the 25% of participants totally unaware of it. Coupled to this, there was
227 evidence that people's understanding of AI applied in medicine somewhat differed from the
228 actual state of the technology. This phenomenon is likely due to the way AI has been reported in
229 the media with exaggerated claims on the technology capabilities and implications³⁵.

230
231 Initial resistance towards innovative technologies may interfere with the implementation of
232 systems advantageous for care providers and patients. Several studies focused on the importance
233 to establishing trust between people and AI presented in different areas of interest³⁶⁻³⁸. The
234 recommendations from these studies, include: (1) introducing new AI applications in gradual
235 phases to the public, highlighting their principal role of assistant rather than autonomous
236 systems; (2) engaging in clear and transparent dialogue with the public, detailing the specific
237 functions and benefits related to AI; (3) providing statistical data from previous testing to support
238 the safety of AI. Responses obtained in our qualitative survey displayed similar findings. The
239 brief information on current AI systems applied in medicine generated evident changes in
240 participants attitudes and perceptions. In spite of the difficulty in relieving people from their
241 concerns, seven responders (35%) said they felt more comfortable towards AI when aware of its
242 role in supporting the neurosurgeons. Furthermore, one of the responders, previously unwilling
243 to undergo AI-assisted brain surgery, accepted the described AI systems when aware of their
244 application as supportive tools rather than autonomous robots. These results, along with
245 comments from two participants (10%), suggested that patient education will increase their trust
246 in AI and their willingness in being operated on by AI-assisted neurosurgeons.

247
248 Our survey highlighted clear concerns from respondents about being operated on by a fully
249 autonomous surgical robot system. These findings are analogous to studies on the public
250 attitudes towards autonomous vehicles in aviation and car transport^{37,38}. These studies reported

251 people's resistance to autonomous systems but acceptance in technologies assisting the
252 conductor. Such studies have identified fears within the public that they will be replaced by
253 superior technologies, anxiety that systems will lose control, and difficulties in identifying
254 concrete benefits and prospected risks^{34,37,38}. Public lack of awareness distorts their perception of
255 AI, giving the impression of autonomous systems rather than supportive tools³⁹. These
256 misconceptions result in greater skepticism and distrust toward the application of AI in
257 healthcare, due to the false belief of AI providing standardized medical care, unable to
258 administer treatments tailored to patients' unique characteristics and symptoms - "*uniqueness*
259 *neglect*"²⁸. Conversely, in accordance with similar findings in different fields, less resistance was
260 reported for AI systems providing assistance to healthcare providers^{24,37,39}.

261
262 Overall, participants found appropriate AI platforms designed to act as support for the
263 neurosurgeon, with the purpose of improving the surgical outcome and reducing the risks of
264 complications. At the same time, responders largely disagreed with AI systems performing
265 surgery entirely autonomously. Of interest, respondents appeared to be comfortable with the
266 concept of partially autonomous surgery, but less so when they were asked if they happy as the
267 patient to undergo partially autonomous surgery. These results were consistent with similar
268 findings reported in literature, underlining the importance, for the patients, to relate with human
269 doctors, to receive a unique treatment according to their decision, and their resistance towards
270 autonomous systems^{4,24,27,28,37}.

271
272 The present study has several limitations. The qualitative methodology selected for the first
273 phase of the study was aimed at examining patients' general knowledge and main concerns
274 regarding AI with the purpose of creating the quantitative survey. Despite the small sample size,
275 and the selection of patients who expressed their interest in being part of a focus group, the *a*
276 *priori* aim of identification of major themes was accomplished, suggesting a likely external
277 validation of the collected findings. The quantitative survey sample size was small and a
278 convenience sample of patients which may limit the ability to generalize the findings. Patients
279 with brain tumors may perceive their illnesses as more severe, which may bias their responses
280 away from AI given the grave impact of complications. However, although neurosurgical
281 patients may be more reluctant to the use of AI in neurosurgery, the perceived attitudes were
282 mostly positive, supporting the principle findings that most patients would find AI appropriate
283 and acceptable also in other surgical specialties. Definitions and clarifications of the presented
284 cases were meant to improve participants' understanding of the displayed AI platforms;
285 however, due to the self-completion of the survey, it was impossible to probe whether they fully
286 comprehended the cases. Nonetheless, current evidence suggests that self-completed surveys are
287 more accurate as responders do not attempt to please the interviewer⁴⁰.

288
289 Future research should include patients undergoing other procedures such as elective spinal
290 surgery, to obtain a greater understanding of attitudes towards AI within a wider and more
291 heterogeneous neurosurgical population.

292 Conclusions

293 Our survey highlighted patient awareness of AI but demonstrated a limitation of their
294 understanding of the current state of the technology. Importantly, the survey showed clear
295 concerns from patients and their relatives about the use of fully autonomous surgical robotic
296 systems in their care despite this level of technology currently being a thing of science fiction.
297 Respondents were much more comfortable with the use of AI systems to augment their care and
298 support the surgeon. This highlights the value patients place on maintaining human interaction in
299 their treatment and should be used as a basis for guiding the disruption these technologies are
300 likely to have on the way surgery is practiced in the future.

301

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