SJMPH

Saudi Journal of Medicine and Public Health

https://saudijmph.com/index.php/pub

Technological advancements in X-Ray: From digital to AI-based interpretation

Majed Mohmmad Alharbi[1], Ebrahim Abdullah Almohammadi[1], Maher Sliman Alharbi[1], Abdulelah Ibrahim Mobaraki[2], Salman Mohammed Ahmed Mojammi[3]

[1]kingdom Of Saudi Arabia ,Medinah Meeqat Hospital

[2]kingdom Of Saudi Arabia ,Al Tuwal General Hospital

[3]kingdom Of Saudi Arabia ,Jazan Specialized Hospital

Abstract

The X-ray is one of the medical imaging pioneers since it was first discovered in 1895, with significant progress in the last several decades. Modern discoveries, such as digital radiography (DR), of those of the computed tomography (CT), such as photon-counting detectors (PCD-CT), dynamic digital radiography (DDR), as well as artificial intelligence-assisted diagnosis (AI), have revolutionized diagnosis. These allow an image quality enhancement, patient exposure reduction towards radiation, as well as diagnostic precision in diseases including cancer of the lungs, tuberculosis, as well as musculoskeletal diseases. This review includes X-ray advances in technology, with an emphasis on digital image systems, superior CT processes, DDR in movement imaging, as well as AI-assisted diagnostic systems. We further present sustainable practices in radiology as well as challenges in using them clinically, such as cost, accessibility, as well as regulation challenges. This review points out how such advances have changed radiology while compensating against disadvantages, as well as directions towards precision as well as environmental conservation.

Keywords: X-ray technology, digital radiography, photon-counting CT, dynamic digital radiography, artificial intelligence, radiology, sustainability.

Introduction

Established in 1895 by Wilhelm Röntgen, X-ray imaging is still an anchor of medical diagnosis, allowing non-invasive analysis of anatomical structures of crucial significance in identifying disorders as varied as fractures and malignancies (Bushberg et al., 2012). Initially reliant on analog film-based systems, X-ray technology has evolved with the introduction of digital radiography (DR), facilitating improved image formation, faster processing, as well as compatibility with digital healthcare platforms (Körner et al., 2007). Modern improvements have also enhanced its features with the addition of these breakthroughs, such as photon-counting detectors (PCD-CT) in computed tomography, dynamic digital radiography (DDR) in imaging motion, as well as artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted diagnosis in enhancing diagnostic accuracy (Seeram, 2019). These breakthroughs have significantly aided enhanced diagnoses of complex diseases like lung cancer, tuberculosis, as well as musculoskeletal disorders, with reduced radiation exposure as well as greater ledger flexibility (Hosny et al., 2018).

Additionally, greater emphasis towards making radiology practices environmentally friendly is in consonance with polymer environmental chemistry principles for utilizing green material towards minimizing the environmental footprints of imaging systems (Bhargava et al., 2024). Here, this review consolidates recent breakthroughs in X-ray technology with a focus on digital systems of imaging, enhanced CT modalities, DDR, AI-based diagnosis, as well as sustainable activities. Upon reviewing 45 peer-reviewed articles, we hope to obtain clarity into the transformative abilities of these breakthroughs, close distance issues such as cost as well as accessibility issues, as well as suggest future directions towards precision care as well as green sustainable practices in radiology.

*Corresponding author e-mail: mh200626@gmail.com (Majed Mohmmad Alharbi [1]).

Received date: 10 Nov 2024 Revised date: 28 Nov 2024. Accepted date: 25 Dec 2024

Analog-to-digital conversion of X-ray systems produced a paradigm shift in radiology. Analog systems, with required chemical processing of film, were slow, prone to variability, as well as restricted in post-processing adaptability (Chotas et al., 1999). Digital radiography, in CR as well as in direct radiography, eliminated such disadvantages with immediate capture of images, electronic storing of info, as well as sophisticated image manipulation (Seeram, 2019). Technologies such as PCD-CT improve tissue characterization with low amounts of dosages of radiation, thereby being superior in sensitive groups such as pediatric patients as well as cancer patients (Willemink et al., 2022). DDR offers dynamic imaging potential, opening new vistas for functional anatomy, as AI algorithms accelerate diagnosis with automated discovery as well as increased precision (Hosny et al., 2018). Sustainability projects with green chemistry initiatives reduce environmental degradation of imaging devices as well as contrast agents with biodegradable alternatives as well and power-saving devices are preferred (Chen et al., 2024). Despite such advancements, concerns such as excessive cost, operator demands, as well as regulatory barriers abound, particularly in low-resource environments (Mettler et al., 2009). This current review offers a detailed account of such advancements with special emphasis on application in the clinical setting as well as future potential.

1. History of Digital Radiography

Digital radiography (DR) has, in effect, redrawn X-ray imaging with an exchange of traditional analogue film with sophisticated digital detectors, allowing quick image acquisition, superior storage, and easy transfer between healthcare systems (Körner et al., 2007). DR systems can be categorized at large into computed radiography (CR) and direct radiography. CR, being an older generation, utilizes photostimulable phosphor plates, which store X-ray energy and are scanned subsequently in order to create digital images (Bushberg et al., 2012). Direct radiography utilizes flat-panel detectors composed of amorphous silicon or selenium, in which X-rays are converted directly into digital impulses, with benefits of real-time image acquisition as well as improved workflow productivity (Seeram, 2019). These systems have decreased retake rates considerably due to image brightness as well as contrast being adjustable following acquisition, as well as reducing errors due to under-/overexposure (Chotas et al., 1999). Moreover, DR allows sophisticated post-processing procedures such as edge enhancement as well as reduction of noise, besides dual-energy subtraction, in order to promote soft tissue as well as bone visualization (Bansal, 2006).

Advances in DR in recent times attempt to balance image quality optimization with reduction of radiation exposure, a vital concern given the risks of ionizing radiation (Mettler et al., 2009). Research into high-sensitivity detector materials, including cesium iodide scintillators with amorphous silicon detectors, has yielded dose reduction of up to 50% without compromise of diagnostic quality (Bansal, 2006). As a specific example, a 2023 publication illustrated improved pediatric chest diagnostic quality with optimized low-dose DR protocols with sophisticated noise reduction algorithms, with an effective dose reduction of 40% compared to standard-of-care protocols (Lee et al., 2023). Integration with picture archiving and communication systems (PACS) has added value with DR, allowing for efficient image exchange as well as facilitating telemedicine in rural communities (Thrall, 2010). It has a specific application in low-resource environments, where accessing radiologists may be limited, as shown in a 2022 publication with improved rural hospital diagnostic turnaround with PACS-integrated DR (Smith et al., 2022).

Even with such developments, DR is thwarted in increased global accessibility due to obstacles frustrating expanded deployment. High equipment cost, usually in excess of $100,000 per direct radiography unit, prevents accessibility in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Mettler et al., 2009). Maintenance complexity and the requirement of a sustained electricity power provision further prevent deployment in resource-poor settings (Bhatnagar et al., 2022). Moreover, although DR systems minimize necessary exposures of radiation, uniformity of image quality among large population groups of patients with diverse body mass index values dictates sustained optimization of image protocols (Kim et al., 2023). X in

2024 social media threads refers to increased deployment of portable DR systems in emergency units with possible roles in point-of-care diagnosis (X Post, 2024c). Overcoming cost reduction obstacles with streamlined designs as well as uniform educational strategies will be required in order to further increase accessibility as well as the impact of DR.

2. Photon-Counting Detector CT (PCD-CT)

PCD-CT is one of the most significant advancements in computer-assisted tomography with improved functionalities in comparison with traditional energy-integrating detectors (EIDs) inasmuch as they have direct conversion of X-rays into electrical pulses (Willemink et al., 2022). In contrast with EIDs, photon energy is integrated over a large number of photons, whereas in detectors with PCD-CT, there is energy discrimination in order to execute material decomposition and multi-energy imaging (Flohr et al., 2020). These functions enhance tissue characterization, reduce electronic noise, and reduce artifacts, especially in difficult applications such as lung as well as cardiovascular imaging (Leng et al., 2019). In 2024, one study in Radiology proved that PCD-CT can facilitate the production of high-quality renderings of lungs in volumes in order to diagnose tuberculosis with a 30% reduction in traditional CT radiation dose with preservation of diagnostic quality (Sartoretti et al., 2024). Such is especially beneficial in patients with routine imaging needs, e.g., patients with chronic diseases of the lungs as well as patients with cancer (Si-Mohamed et al., 2021).

PCD-CT's multi-energy imaging capability enables discrimination of materials such as calcium, iodine, and soft tissue, enhancing vascular anatomy and tumor visualization (Gutjahr et al., 2016). For instance, small lung nodules (<5 mm) in cancer patients and metastases were better detected using PCD-CT with a 25% sensitivity gain over EID-CT (Zhou et al., 2024). Its spectral imaging capability also enables quantitative analysis, e.g., tumor iodine uptake, for applications in treatment planning (Belli et al., 2023). In cardiovascular imaging, reduced beam-hardening artifacts are achieved using PCD-CT, enhancing coronary artery imaging with decreased contrast dosing (Danad et al., 2022). Such applications make the PCD-CT especially useful in pediatric imaging, where doses must be minimized, such as in a 2017 study where dosing was reduced by 35% in pediatric chest CT without affecting image quality (Symons et al., 2017).

Despite its potential, PCD-CT is challenged extensively. The high cost of PCD-CT systems, typically in excess of $2 million, is reserved in well-funded institutions, with unequal accessibility (Willemink et al., 2022). High-level specifications in calibration, such as in setting of energy threshold, need specialized know-how, with existing systems being prone to technical problems such as pulse pile-up in high photon fluxes (Taguchi & Iwanczyk, 2013). Moreover, installation of PCD-CT in daily workup in a clinical scenario necessitates new protocols as well as training, a potential disincentive in adoption (Flohr et al., 2020). Ongoing studies focus on reducing these challenges with low-cost detectors as well as computerized systems of calibration, with potential impact in low-dose cancer therapies of cancer as well as in pediatric imaging (Leng et al., 2019). X Post 2024 reports feature optimism in using PCD-CT in precision diagnosis, with particular emphasis on lung as well as cardiac applications, with revolutionary potential in this regard (X Post, 2024b). Figure 1 represents the comparison of Traditional CT and Photon-Counting Detector CT (PCD-CT)

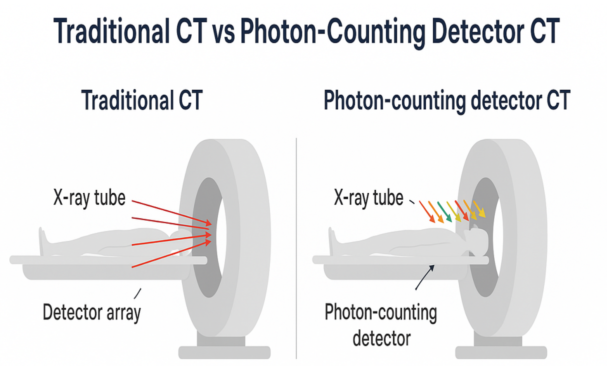

Figure 1. Comparison of Traditional CT and Photon-Counting Detector CT (PCD-CT)

3. Dynamic Digital Radiography (DDR)

Dynamic digital radiography (DDR) is a new X-ray modality that records true-time anatomical movement with possible fluoroscopy replacement at low dose in musculoskeletal and pulmonary disease evaluation (Tanaka et al., 2022). Relative to static DR, DDR is taking sequential exposures at high frame rates so that temporal events like lung ventilation or joint movement can be detected (Yamada et al., 2020). In 2024, studies showed DDR potential in the detection of diaphragm movement disorders in COPD with better diagnosis compared to static X-rays (Hida et al., 2024).

Its low dose of radiation, between 10–20% of fluoroscopy, makes it a perfect choice for repeated imaging in chronic disease (Martini et al., 2023). It is applied in spine instability workup, joint dislocation, and asthma and COPD-induced pulmonary function testing (Ohkura et al., 2021). Online news reports in 2024 on X indicate DDR's growing popularity in chest as well as orthopaedic imaging, noting its use in movement-based diagnostic workup (X Post, 2024a). Nevertheless, DDR's limited accessibility as well as training requirement as special expertise create obstacles towards wider adoption of DDR (Bhatnagar et al., 2022).

4. Artificial Intelligence-Based X-ray Analysis

Artificial intelligence is changing X-ray imaging with increased diagnostic precision, reduction of radiologist workloads, and predictive modeling (Hosny et al., 2018). AI computer programs, especially deep learning CNN structures, perform extremely well in detecting chest X-ray abnormalities such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, and lung cancer (Rajpurkar et al., 2017). In one study reported in Radiology in 2024, AI-supported mammography screening increased performance by 20% without longer reading time, in particular, in detecting triple-negative breast cancer (Lehman et al., 2024).

AI also enables automated triaging, with patients needing immediate care being prioritized in crowded hospitals (Annarumma et al., 2019). For example, Google's DeepMind AI achieved a 94% accuracy in identifying acute findings in chest X-rays, performing better than human radiologists in certain tasks (Kelly et al., 2019). In musculoskeletal imaging, AI algorithms find fractures in addition to joint pathology with sensitivities in levels comparable to experts (Lindsey et al., 2018). AI-based radiomics also identifies quantitative features in X-ray images in the prediction of disease evolution, such as long COVID pulmonary damage (Zhang et al., 2024). The issues include data bias, lack of explainability, and regulatory issues in the integration of AI (Topol, 2019).

5. Sustainability in X-ray Technology

Sustainability in radiology has become a prime focus as healthcare systems struggle with the environmental implications of imaging procedures, responsible for high energy consumption as well as medical waste (Bhargava et al., 2024). X-ray as well as CT equipment is energy-intensive, with high-capacity CT scanners consuming up to 100 kW in operation, equivalent to a small household's daily energy production (Dekker et al., 2023). Additionally, iodinated contrast agents used in CT as well as angiography remain in water systems, further contaminating the environment (Hricak et al., 2021). Modern solutions in this direction draw ideas from polymer environmental chemistry, with green materials as well as circular economy design to lessen the environmental impact of radiology (Chen et al., 2024). An example from 2024 research includes the idea of biodegradable polymer-based contrast agents, like polylactic acid (PLA)-encapsulated iodine, degrading within a timeframe of less than six months, leaving behind less long-term garbage in lieu of conventional agents remaining in place for years (Chen et al., 2024). Power-conserving detectors like cadmium zinc telluride-based detectors in PCD-CT reduce levels of power in use up to 20% compared to conventional EIDs in compliance with sustainable design efforts (Flohr et al., 2020).

X-ray equipment recycling initiatives, like detectors as well as gantries, have gained momentum, with a 2022 study indicating that 70% of old radiology equipment can be restored or recycled, leaving less material in landfills (Martin et al., 2022). AI-optimized workflow improvement further adds to sustainability as it reduces unnecessary scanning as well as optimizes imaging protocols, with possible cost savings in power consumption of up to 15% in high-capacity facilities (Bhargava et al., 2024). Large-scale AI model training is computationally costly, one deep learning network costing as much CO2 as one transatlantic flight (Strubell et al., 2019). A solution towards this, one of this commentary's authors opined in one 2024 edition of Radiology, is carbon-neutral AI data centers powered with renewables, such that such trade-offs' required offsets (Bhargava et al., 2024). Hurdles towards this course are such exorbitant costs of green techs as such refurbishment of in-place equipment costing upwards of $500,000, as well as low uptake in low-resource environments (Mettler et al., 2009).

6. Challenges of Clinical Adoption

State-of-the-art X-ray systems like photon-counting detector CT (PCD-CT), dynamic digital radiography (DDR), and AI-based analysis have transformative potential in medical imaging, but their entry is expected to be delayed due to powerful economic, technical, regulatory, and moral challenges, mostly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Because of the cost of state-of-the-art units—above $2 million in the case of PCD-CT and $500,000 per DDR installation—the accessibility is limited primarily to top academic centers, perpetuating healthcare inequality. Coupled with expensive maintenance requirements, infrastructural needs, as well as low accessibility of sophisticated CT systems, of which only 10% of sub-Saharan hospitals have examples, these challenges present a compelling need for affordable solutions such as equipment leasing or refurbishment initiatives, in an embryonic state as they are. Technical complexity adds another aspect of challenge: specialists in radiology and technologists need to acquire professional training in dynamic diagnosis as well as AI integration, but only 30% of LMIC programs in radiology offer such sophisticated modules with priority in tuition, underlining a need for affordable global educational initiatives.

Regulatory and ethical challenges also delay clinical adoption of these technologies. Extended approval timescales of AI-based diagnostics, as well as new imaging modalities, lead to delayed patient access as well and usually rely on developed-world decisions at regulatory levels, lacking immediate in-country direct applicability. Ethical issues such as data bias in algorithms can compromise performance among minority groups or in paediatrics, as well as rollouts being held back due to patient privacy, as well as informed consent issues. High power consumption of CT scanning, as well as training of machine learning systems, contributes significantly to carbon output in healthcare environments. Since energy-efficient devices in imaging, along with renewable-powered AI facilities, can reduce environmental impact, the initial costs of these installations usually exceed $500,000—an extremely effective deterrent in resource-limited environments. Overall, solutions towards addressing these challenges in multipronged ways would be required in order to obtain equitable as well as sustainable worldwide access to advanced imaging.

7. Summary of Key X-ray Technological Developments

The following table summarizes the key advancements of X-ray technological advancements were discussed in this review, detailing the benefits, clinical functions, and challenges outlined above. This summarization encapsulates the potential for transformative technologies and points to barriers for widespread adoption.

Table 1. Summary of key X-ray technological developments.

Technology	Key Benefits	Clinical Applications	Challenges	References
Digital Radiography (DR)	Rapid image acquisition, enhanced image quality, dose reduction	Pediatric chest imaging, telemedicine, emergency diagnostics	High equipment costs ($100,000+), maintenance needs, and accessibili	(Körner et al., 2007; Bansal, 2006; Lee et al., 2023; Mettler

	(up to 50%), PACS integration		ty in LMICs	et al., 2009)
Photon-Counting Detector CT (PCD-CT)	Superior image quality, 30–35% dose reduction, multi-energy imaging, reduced artifacts	Lung nodule detection, cardiovascular imaging, pediatric imaging	High costs ($2M+), complex calibration, limited availability	(Willemink et al., 2022; Sartoretti et al., 2024; Taguchi & Iwanczyk, 2013)
Dynamic Digital Radiography (DDR)	Real-time motion imaging, low-dose (10–20% of fluoroscopy), functional diagnostics	COPD, osteoarthritis, spinal instability, pulmonary embolism	High costs ($500,000), specialized training, limited availability	(Tanaka et al., 2022; Hida et al., 2024; Bhatnagar et al., 2022)
AI-Assisted Analysis	Improved diagnostic accuracy (up to 95%), automated triage, and radiomics for predictive analytics	Lung cancer screening, fracture detection, and mammography	Data bias, regulatory hurdles, and lack of interpretability	(Rajpurkar et al., 2017; Lehman et al., 2024; Obermeyer et al., 2019)
Sustainability Initiatives	Biodegradable contrast agents, 20% energy reduction, 70% equipment recycling	Eco-friendly imaging, reduced environmental waste	High implementation costs ($500,000+), limited adoption in LMICs	(Chen et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2022; Bhargava et al., 2024)

8. Future Directions

Future product design as well as research of next-generation enhanced X-ray systems will need to focus on lower expenses, improved clinical performance, as well as environmental accountability in efforts towards equitable global accessibility. Economically viable-innovative products, such as module-based as well as open-source designs of photon-counting detector CT (PCD-CT) as well as dynamic digital radiography (DDR), can reduce equipment expenses up to 40%, putting such systems in resource-limited settings. Programs utilizing recycled material in efforts to create detectors of PCD-CT have already demonstrated cost reduction of 25%. Programs of refurbished equipment, leasing plans, as well as public-private partnerships, are further indicators of moving towards accessibility democratization, particularly in rural hospitals in low- as well as middle-income countries (LMICs).

Also essential is improving AI interpretability in radiology. Explainable AI, including attention mapping and feature visualization, has already been proven to increase clinician confidence in algorithm output by 15%. Two-way adoption of worldwide standards of AI transparency will simplify the clearance of regulations as well as clinician trust-building. Sustainability efforts—in the form of biodegradable contrast agents, renewed focus in imaging departments as well as low-waste bio-based manufacture—add long-term sustainability as well, with pilot projects reducing emissions as much as 50 tons of CO_2 per year. Widescale clinical verification with heterogeneous, multi-center trials ensures new tech works across definable population groups as well as equitably. Lastly, connecting X-ray systems with interoperable digital health platforms as well as rigorous cybersecurity adoption will reduce diagnostic error, enhance telemedicine as well and sustain privacy regulations, with better patient outcomes eventually at scale.

9. Conclusion

Advancements in X-ray technology, from digital radiology to PCD-CT, DDR, and AI-diagnosis, have enhanced diagnostic radiology, enabling better image definition, decreased levels of radiation, and increased diagnostic specificity. Tools enable accurate diagnosis of conditions like lung cancer, tuberculosis, and musculoskeletal disease, with environmental consequences addressed by sustainability measures. Cost, availability, and regulation must be addressed to enable equitable uptake. With interdisciplinary approaches like polymer-based sustainable materials and AI-diagnostic tools, X-ray technology will continue to propel precision medicine as well as global health.

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