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Point of View

Advances in Neonatal Anaesthesia: Artificial Intelligence in Medical Practice: Challenges and the Way Forward

Bhavna Gupta[1], Asim Ghimire[1]

[1]Department of Anaesthesiology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rishikesh, Uttarakhand, India.

ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the capability of computing algorithms to mimic the decision-making capacity of human beings. At the same time, machine learning (ML), a subset of AI, allows the machine to learn from data without explicit programming. Over the recent decade, these technologies have profoundly impacted personalized diagnostics, drug discovery, therapeutics, and medical imaging, and their potential extends to understanding diseases and treatment effectiveness' in pediatric and neonatal care. AI has emerged as a transformative force in modern medical practice, offering innovative solutions across various domains, including anesthesiology. ML algorithms are utilized to classify data and make predictions using supervised ML, which uses labelled datasets to train algorithms for tasks such as prognostic applications, and unsupervised ML, which explores data with minimal human guidance.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Machine learning, Neonatal anesthesia

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing the neonatal anesthesia by enhancing precision safety and individualized care. With the help of predictive analytics, AI can foresee complications like hypoxia or hemodynamic instability allowing timely interventions. In this article, we explore the key role of AI in medical practices pertaining to neonatal anesthesia management.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) IN MEDICAL PRACTICE: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

AI refers to the capability of computing algorithms to mimic the decision-making capacity of human beings. At the same time, machine learning (ML), a subset of AI, allows the machine to learn from data without explicit programming.[1] Over the recent decade, these technologies have profoundly impacted personalized diagnostics, drug discovery, therapeutics, and medical imaging, and their potential extends to understanding diseases and treatment effectiveness in pediatric and neonatal care.[2-6] AI has emerged as a transformative force in modern medical practice, offering innovative solutions across various domains, including anesthesiology. ML algorithms are utilized to classify data and make predictions using supervised ML, which uses labeled datasets to train algorithms for tasks like prognostic applications, and unsupervised ML, which explores data with minimal human guidance. For instance, algorithms capable of real-time analysis of lung biomarkers or respiratory parameters could assist in titrating ventilatory support, predicting post-operative respiratory deterioration in patients with respiratory distress or bronchopulmonary dysplasia, and even customizing anesthetic plans based on individualized risk profiles.[7] For instance, algorithms have been tailored to predict risks such as pneumonia, urinary tract infections, bacterial meningitis, intra-abdominal injuries, and traumatic brain injuries using accessible methodologies.[7] AI has already begun to revolutionize the clinical workflow, decision-making, and patient safety protocols with the rapid advancement we continue to witness in ML, neural networks, and natural language processing.

AI has the immense potential to impact neonatal anesthesia significantly, a meticulous branch that demands precision and the highest safety standards. Neonates present unique anesthetic challenges due to their distinct physiological and pharmacological profiles, requiring meticulous monitoring and intervention. AI has already been utilized in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) to predict late-onset neonatal sepsis by

***Corresponding author:** Bhavna Gupta, Department of Anaesthesiology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rishikesh, Uttarakhand, India. bhavna.kakkar@gmail.com

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analyzing patterns in physiological data, allowing for earlier intervention and improved outcomes[8] and there is a promising future for integrating AI-driven technologies, including predictive analytics, automated monitoring systems, and AI-assisted drug administration,[8] which can enhance perioperative care, optimize anesthesia plans, and reduce adverse events.

One of the remarkable applications of AI in neonatal anesthesia is the development of AI-powered monitoring systems that enable real-time assessment of physiological parameters. Advanced ML algorithms can analyze vital signs, detect early warning signals of hemodynamic instability, and predict complications such as hypoxia, bradycardia, or hypotension. These AI-enhanced monitoring tools provide anesthesiologists with real-time alerts, allowing for timely interventions and improving patient outcomes, but also significantly enhance the safety and efficacy of anesthetic management in neonates with a narrow therapeutic window for most anesthetic agents [Figure 1].

Apnea of prematurity (AOP) is a frequent concern in preterm infants admitted to NICUs, primarily due to the immaturity of the respiratory control system. In the perioperative setting, AOP poses significant challenges for anesthesiologists, as these infants are at an increased risk of post-operative apnea, particularly following sedation or general anesthesia, due to immature respiratory physiology and incomplete organogenesis. Even the choice of anesthetic agents is crucial, as certain volatile anesthetics, opioids, and benzodiazepines can further depress respiratory drive and prolong apnea episodes. Emerging technologies, including AI-driven monitoring systems and machine-learning algorithms, offer potential advancements in predicting and preventing apnea-related complications. They help identify high-risk neonates and optimize perioperative respiratory management strategies, ultimately improving surgical outcomes and reducing post-operative NICU stays.[9,10]

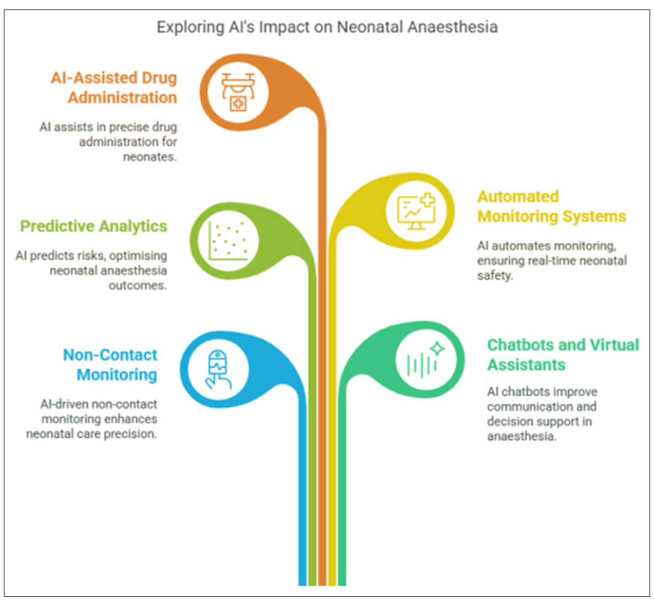

Figure 1: Exploring artificial intelligence (AI) in neonates.

AI-DRIVEN NON-CONTACT MONITORING IN PERIOPERATIVE NEONATAL ANESTHESIA

Continuous monitoring of vital signs, including respiratory rate, heart rate, and body temperature, is essential to detect complications such as hypoxia, apnea, or hemodynamic instability in neonates. Traditional methods rely on sensors that require direct skin contact, which can be problematic in fragile neonates, leading to skin injuries, stress, discomfort, frequent movement leading to signal artifacts, and a very small body size, making the use of standard-size sensors difficult. The advent of non-contact monitoring techniques, such as camera-based recordings and laser Doppler vibrometers, offers a promising alternative for improving perioperative neonatal care.[11,12] Such advanced methods use the power of AI analysis and deep learning algorithms to extract and interpret vital sign data in real-time. The main obstacle in this approach is accurately tracking and monitoring regions of interest and compiling multiple signals to enhance precision. As Lyra *et al.*, showed deep learning models seem more potent in real-time neonatal body temperature monitoring by detailed analysis of camera-based thermal data. Their findings highlight the feasibility of using low-cost, embedded graphics processing unit for continuous monitoring, which could significantly enhance perioperative care in neonatal anesthesia.[11,12]

CHATBOTS AND VIRTUAL ASSISTANTS BASED ON AI

Besides centralized patient care, AI-driven chatbots and virtual assistants can help make communication smoother and optimize clinical decision support. This innovation can be used in parent education, providing clear, detailed, and understandable explanations about neonatal anesthetic procedures, risks versus benefits, and post-operative care guidelines.[11] This can lead to improved parental understanding, reduced anxiety, and better compliance with perioperative care protocols. These AI agents can provide quick access to anesthesia protocols, drug interactions, and evidence-based recommendations to parents of neonates and physicians in real time. In addition, AI models can be explored for simulation and anesthesia training, offering an interactive and useful platform for medical students and house residents to practice and simulate clinical scenarios in a risk-free virtual environment. The potential of AI to improve parental understanding and reduce anxiety should be a source of comfort for anesthesiologists, as it can help them provide better care for their patients and their families.[13,14] Moreover, integrating AI with telemedicine solutions could support real-time remote monitoring and consultation in high-risk neonatal cases, bridging and reducing gaps in expertise and resources in remote regions.

AI AND MACHINE LEARNING IN NEONATAL DIFFICULT AIRWAY MANAGEMENT

AI and ML are extremely rapid fields of advancement that are applied to improve patient safety; two examples of their applications are predicting sepsis with vital signs and radiological image analysis and recognition of tumors. These tools are widely used in the adult population, and applications are being explored in pediatric difficult airway management as well. AI uses complex algorithms and statistical models to analyze and interpret data with no or limited human input, and AI can solve complex problems that may be difficult for human intelligence to solve.[15] Although specific applications for neonatal difficult airway management have not been developed, a few applications, like sepsis predicting application with streaming vital signs and application doing radiologic image-analysis and recognition of tumors, have been used in adult difficult airway management and can have implications in neonatal populations.[15] ML is a field of AI that uncovers latent, nonlinear relationships in data and then creates predictive or prescriptive tools from the data. In contrast, traditional statistical methods focus on inference. Considering that neonatal populations are extremely uncooperative and constantly hinder airway assessment during anesthesia checkups, 2D and 3D facial structure analysis via these aforementioned applications can be a great addition to the pre-anesthetic checkup of neonates.[15]

ML can be used to find out the ease of intubation preoperatively. Connor and Segal[16] developed a computer model that divided a patient as easy or difficult to intubate based on analysis of photographs of patients' faces. Cuendet *et al*.[17] developed an automated face-analysis algorithm to find morphologic traits related to difficult intubation using available visual databases. Another unique dimension of ML is Real-time guidance during airway procedures. Matava *et al*.[18] created an algorithm that classified vocal cords and tracheal airway anatomy in real-time during video laryngoscopy and bronchoscopy and labeled the airway anatomy on the videolaryngoscopy screen for real-time clinical decision support during the airway procedure.

AI IN PREDICTING HEMODYNAMIC INSTABILITY IN NEONATES

Neonates during anesthesia are immensely prone to hemodynamic instability due to an immature cardiovascular system and a higher prevalence of congenital cardiovascular abnormalities. Hatib *et al*. (2018) developed an ML algorithm to predict hypotension based on high-fidelity arterial waveform pressure analysis. This could predict hypotension almost 15 min prior in adults, which is also used in neonatal populations nowadays. This analyzes heart rate variability, blood pressure trends, and perfusion index to predict hypotension before it occurs.[19]

AI ASSISTANCE IN NEONATAL REGIONAL ANESTHESIA

Finding accurate and precise landmarks for regional anesthesia manually is difficult and has high failure rates. Although ultrasonography based regional anesthesia aids a lot in locating landmarks, it comes with challenges such as precise needle localization in obese patients, reflection hindering the localization, and a lack of technical skills. Viderman *et al*. (2022) used deep learning for real-time nerve detection in ultrasound-guided regional anesthesia.[20]

AI-DRIVEN CLOSED-LOOP ANESTHESIA SYSTEM

Titrating doses of drugs such as propofol and remifentanyl in neonates poses several challenges in comparison to adult populations, as small fluctuations or alterations in drug amount can significantly alter hemodynamic parameters and more rapid changes in parameters. A study by Liu *et al*. (2011) showed that closed-loop control of anesthesia based on bispectral index guided propofol administration reduced drug overdose by almost 30% in pediatric populations, which can be of great value for neonatal anesthesia.[21]

LOGISTICS OF THE OPERATING ROOM (OR)

AI is also helpful for improving OR logistics, increasing efficiency, and utilizing resources. Scheduling systems based on AI analyze patient-related data, occupancy, and case complexity, making case sequencing more effective, reducing delays, and optimizing workflow efficiency. These features are beneficial in neonatal anesthesia, where prompt intervention is key. In addition, AI-based robotic anesthesia systems are being developed to assist in accurate and precise drug delivery, adjust anesthetic depth based on real-time

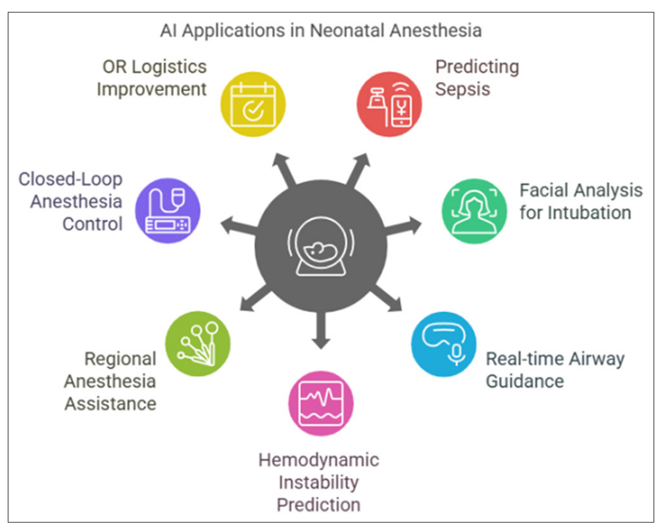

Figure 2: Applications of artificial intelligence (AI). OR: Operation room.

physiological responses, diminish human error, and ensure that patient safety is achieved [Figure 2].

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Although AI opens a whole new dimension toward enhancing neonatal anesthesia, multiple limitations need to be addressed before we go for widespread clinical implementation. The need for large, high-quality datasets to train AI models seems to be a major challenge. In neonatal care, lack of adequate data and unbalanced databases can result in algorithm bias and a fall in accuracy and reliability in real-world settings. This problem is specifically more exposed in the case of rare neonatal conditions, where limited case numbers significantly hinder the development and evolution of predictive models.

Another chief and burning concern is the generalizability of AI-based models. Neonatal populations exhibit vast variations, and algorithms trained on one group may not perform well in different parameters, settings, or patient demographics. Furthermore, the lack of standardized, evidence-based protocols and guidelines for some neonatal conditions makes it more challenging to produce AI-based models that align with best clinical practices. Finally, AI implementation's financial and infrastructural costs can be substantial, particularly in resource-limited settings.

Neonatal physiology poses unique problems, such as rapid and significant hemodynamic shifts like heart rate (HR) and blood pressure (BP) variation, and immature drug metabolism affects pharmacokinetic algorithms. This makes unfavorable, less accurate, and less precise predictions of neonatal outcomes for AI models trained on adults. This might sometimes cause drug overdose, and overmanagement of vital parameters fluctuations.

Handling neonates is a lot more difficult than handling adults due to frequent movements and crying. This creates a more chaotic atmosphere, false alarms in camera-based monitoring, and noise in electroencephalogram (EEG)-based depth-of-anesthesia AI, making it difficult for clinicians to trust these newly developed AI and ML models. Sometimes AI models fail to differentiate between noise and artifacts from normal patterns of monitoring and may memorize those unwanted patterns, creating false interpretations in the future. Sometimes it might be unethical to do trials of AI in neonatal populations. Parental consent might not be given for camera-based monitoring AI models. Many clinicians might be skeptical about using AI as they might fear job displacement, be less reliable, and be more comfortable using traditional methods.

Despite these challenges, ongoing research continues to refine AI-driven tools and software in neonatal anesthesia, and the initial results seem promising. In the future, with more refined systems, AI can bring a total revolution in perioperative neonatal care by improving patient safety, optimizing intraoperative anesthetic management, and improving overall clinical outcomes.

CONCLUSION

AI should be regarded as an adjunct to, rather than a replacement and clinicians must maintain oversight and critical decision-making authority while using AI to augment their capabilities. Moreover, the need for rigorous validation and regulatory approval of AI-driven anesthesia tools is paramount to make sure they are within safety limits and effective enough before widespread adoption in clinical practice. Safe and ethical sharing of neonatal databases among organizations and countries all over the world will be key in training AI models for rare disease, critical, and life-saving moments, finally making it worldwide acceptable. In conclusion, AI will play a vital role in neonatal anesthesia, making enhanced monitoring, personalized anesthetic care, decision support, education, and operational efficiency more and more effective. With ever-evolving technology and ML, interdisciplinary cooperation between concerned anesthesiologists, data scientists, and regulatory authorities will be key in utilizing the full potential of AI while ensuring patient safety and ethical integrity.

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