Artificial Intelligence in Orthopaedics: The Future Through the Lens of Knee Surgery

Nihat Demirhan Demirkıran[1], Wolf Petersen[2]

[1]Clinic of Orthopaedics and Traumatology, Amerikan Hospital, İzmir, Türkiye
[2]Clinic of Orthopaedics and Trauma Surgery, Martin Luther Hospital, Berlin, Germany

Rapid advances in robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) have intensified expectations that digitally assisted systems may substantially reshape surgical practice in the near future. Elon Musk recently suggested that robots may surpass competent human surgeons within a few years and outperform even the best surgeons within approximately five years. Although such statements are provocative, they reflect the growing expectations surrounding AI and robotics in healthcare. AI is no longer a distant technological promise in orthopedic surgery; it is increasingly being integrated into clinical workflows through imaging analysis, robotic assistance, predictive modeling, registry-based outcome assessment, wearable sensors, and digital rehabilitation platforms.[1,2] Orthopedic surgery—particularly knee surgery—is becoming an important testing ground for this digital transformation.

For decades, orthopedic surgery has relied on surgical expertise, imaging interpretation, and experience-based clinical judgment. Today, however, the field is entering a more data-driven era of clinical practice, in which diagnosis, treatment planning, surgical execution, rehabilitation monitoring, and outcome evaluation are increasingly supported by integrated digital systems rather than isolated technological tools.[3-5]

This transition should not be viewed merely as the introduction of another surgical technology. AI has the potential to become the central analytical layer of a broader digital orthopedic ecosystem, connecting imaging, robotics, telemedicine, patient-reported outcome measures (PROMs), registry science, wearable sensors, and rehabilitation platforms within a continuous feedback loop.[4-6] The key question is no longer whether AI can perform isolated orthopedic tasks. Rather, the clinically relevant issue is whether AI can be integrated into transparent, validated, and workflow-compatible systems that enhance decision-making across the entire patient care pathway.

Among orthopedic subspecialties, knee surgery may represent one of the most informative settings for evaluating this transformation. Knee surgery possesses several characteristics that make it particularly well suited to AI integration, including high procedural volumes, standardized surgical workflows, imaging-rich diagnostics, measurable functional outcomes, registry-based follow-up, and rehabilitation-dependent recovery pathways. Furthermore, knee surgery has become one of the leading areas for robotic-assisted procedures, digital rehabilitation systems, and outcome-based assessment. Consequently, many of the earliest clinically relevant applications of AI in orthopedics have emerged in knee arthroplasty and sports traumatology.[4,6-8] Knee surgery is therefore not merely an application area for AI; it may serve as a clinical proving ground for determining whether AI can progress from strong algorithmic performance to measurable improvements in patient outcomes.

One of the most mature applications of AI in orthopedics is musculoskeletal imaging analysis. Machine learning and deep-learning algorithms, particularly convolutional neural networks, have demonstrated promising performance in detecting fractures, osteoarthritis, meniscal pathology, and ligament injuries.[3] These systems can analyze large imaging datasets rapidly and consistently and, in some settings, achieve diagnostic accuracy comparable to that of expert clinicians. However, diagnostic accuracy alone should not be equated with clinical value. The more meaningful benchmark is whether AI influences clinical management, reduces diagnostic variability, shortens the time to treatment, or improves patient-centered outcomes without increasing cognitive, economic, or medicolegal burdens.

The impact of AI extends beyond diagnosis. Predictive analytics and machine-learning models are increasingly being used to estimate complication risks, implant survivorship, functional recovery, patient satisfaction, and return-to-sport outcomes.[3,6] A recent study employing supervised machine-learning algorithms for low bone density prediction provides a relevant musculoskeletal example of how routinely available clinical, biochemical, demographic, and behavioral variables can be integrated for individualized risk stratification.[9]

Corresponding author: Nihat Demirhan Demirkıran, Clinic of Orthopaedics and Traumatology, Amerikan Hospital, İzmir, Türkiye
e-mail: drdemirhandemirkiran@gmail.com
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ORCID iDs of the authors: N.D.D. 0000-0002-0724-9672; W.P. 0000-0002-6834-4438.
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This development reflects one of the most important conceptual shifts in modern orthopedics: the transition from generalized treatment algorithms to precision orthopedics driven by continuous data integration.

The most clinically relevant potential of AI may arise not from isolated algorithms but from longitudinal systems that integrate preoperative imaging, surgical planning, intraoperative variables, rehabilitation metrics, wearable-sensor data, PROMs, and registry outcomes.[4,5] However, such systems will be valuable only if they close the loop between prediction and action. Identifying risk alone is insufficient unless the resulting information leads to a safer operation, a more appropriate implant strategy, an optimized rehabilitation pathway, or a more realistic shared decision-making process with the patient.[10]

Total knee arthroplasty (TKA) represents one of the clearest examples of this evolution. Achieving optimal alignment, implant positioning, and soft tissue balancing remains essential for implant longevity and patient satisfaction. AI-assisted planning systems and robotic technologies increasingly enable surgeons to incorporate patient-specific anatomical and biomechanical characteristics into operative workflows.[11] Current robotic systems primarily function as passive or semi-active assistants; however, future intelligent surgical platforms may extend beyond technical guidance alone. By integrating preoperative characteristics, intraoperative sensor data, postoperative imaging, and longitudinal PROMs, these platforms may support surgeons in selecting individualized alignment and balancing strategies that optimize functional outcomes rather than focusing solely on radiographic targets. Nevertheless, the critical question in knee arthroplasty is not whether AI and robotics can improve technical precision, but whether such improvements translate into better function, greater patient satisfaction, enhanced implant survivorship, and increased healthcare value.

Sports medicine and ligament surgery represent another rapidly expanding area for AI integration. In anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction, machine-learning models have been developed to predict graft failure, estimate reinjury risk, assess rehabilitation progress, and optimize return-to-sport timelines.[7,8] These models increasingly incorporate multidimensional datasets, including biomechanical measurements, movement analyses, strength asymmetries, psychological readiness, and surgical variables. For athletes and other high-demand patients, the greatest value of AI may lie in shifting return-to-sport decisions from fixed time-based protocols to continuously updated, individualized risk profiles.

Digital rehabilitation may become one of the most impactful future applications of AI in knee surgery. Wearable sensors, smartphone-based rehabilitation platforms, and remote monitoring systems increasingly enable continuous assessment of patient adherence, joint motion, gait quality, strength recovery, and functional performance.[12-15] Early evidence supporting digital rehabilitation after knee surgery is encouraging. Sensor-based telerehabilitation systems have been associated with improved patient adherence, while recent reviews suggest that digital rehabilitation following ACL reconstruction and TKA may achieve outcomes comparable to, or in certain domains superior to, those of conventional physiotherapy with respect to PROMs, muscle strength, range of motion, and patient engagement.[12-14] Furthermore, randomized studies involving patients with anterior knee pain indicate that digital therapeutics may improve pain and functional outcomes compared with standard care.[15] Nevertheless, digital rehabilitation should be evaluated according to the same standards applied to surgical innovations, including reproducibility, safety, adherence, equitable access, cost-effectiveness, and meaningful improvements in patient outcomes.

Despite these promising developments, several major challenges continue to limit the widespread implementation of AI in orthopedics. Many currently available models remain dependent on retrospective datasets, lack robust external validation, and demonstrate uncertain generalizability across institutions and patient populations.[16,17] Furthermore, AI systems are inherently influenced by the quality and diversity of the datasets on which they are trained, raising concerns about algorithmic bias and potential healthcare inequities. The increasing use of “black-box” deep-learning systems also introduces important concerns regarding explainability, transparency, and physician accountability.[16,17]

A particular concern in surgical disciplines is that AI systems may generate inaccurate or misleading recommendations while presenting them with apparent confidence. Unlike conventional software errors, mistakes produced by complex machine-learning algorithms may be difficult to identify because the underlying reasoning process is often opaque. Consequently, continuous physician oversight, rigorous external validation, prospective evaluation, and the development of clinically interpretable AI systems remain essential prerequisites for the safe implementation of AI in clinical practice.[16]

Another important limitation is the persistent gap between technological innovation and real-world clinical utility. Although many AI systems demonstrate excellent performance under experimental conditions, relatively few have undergone prospective validation or been shown to improve clinically meaningful outcomes in randomized or pragmatic clinical settings. Technological sophistication alone cannot justify widespread adoption. In knee surgery, relevant endpoints should extend beyond measures of accuracy, alignment, or predictive performance to include patient satisfaction, functional recovery, revision risk, complication reduction, rehabilitation adherence, cost-effectiveness, workflow feasibility, and reproducibility.[17] Current applications, emerging opportunities, and ongoing challenges of AI in orthopedics, with particular emphasis on knee surgery, are summarized in Table 1.

The future of orthopedics will likely be shaped by the integration of AI with robotics, augmented reality, virtual reality, telemedicine, digital rehabilitation, and intelligent surgical simulation systems.[4] AI-assisted simulators may increasingly support orthopedic education and surgical training, while telemedicine platforms and wearable technologies may transform postoperative monitoring and long-term follow-up. However, this future should not be framed as a competition between surgeons and machines. A more realistic and clinically responsible model is one of human-AI collaboration, in which surgeons remain accountable for clinical judgment,

TABLE 1. Current and Emerging Applications of Artificial Intelligence in Orthopaedics with Emphasis on Knee Surgery.

Domain	Current clinical integration	Emerging future potential	Remaining challenges
Imaging and diagnosis	AI-assisted analysis of radiographs and MRI for osteoarthritis, meniscal and ligament injuries	Automated multimodal imaging interpretation and earlier detection of subtle pathology	External validation, imaging heterogeneity, explainability
Predictive analytics	Machine learning models for complication prediction and functional outcome estimation after TKA and ACL reconstruction	Personalized risk stratification and precision orthopaedic decision-making	Dataset bias, limited generalizability, prospective validation
Surgical planning	AI-assisted preoperative planning and patient-specific alignment strategies	Dynamic planning systems integrating biomechanics, PROMs, and registry data	Integration into routine workflow, interoperability
Surgical execution	Robotic-assisted surgery improving implant positioning and reproducibility in TKA	Intelligent intraoperative systems capable of real-time decision support	Cost, learning curve, unclear long-term superiority
Sports medicine	AI-based video and motion analysis for ACL injury mechanisms and rehabilitation assessment	Real-time biomechanical surveillance and individualized injury prevention	Standardization of movement-analysis platforms
Digital rehabilitation	Wearables and remote monitoring systems for postoperative follow-up and rehabilitation tracking	Adaptive rehabilitation platforms with continuous feedback and return-to-sport optimization	Patient compliance, data security, regulatory concerns
Registry and outcome integration	Collection of PROMs and longitudinal surgical outcome data	Continuously learning AI ecosystems integrating preoperative, intraoperative, and postoperative data	Data governance, interoperability, ethical concerns
Ethical and legal considerations	Initial frameworks addressing bias, transparency, and accountability	Development of explainable and trustworthy AI systems in orthopaedics	Liability, privacy, physician responsibility

AI, artificial intelligence; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging; TKA, total knee arthroplasty; ACL, anterior cruciate ligament; PROMs, patient-reported outcome measures.

communication, ethical decision-making, and operative execution, while AI supports pattern recognition, risk estimation, workflow efficiency, and continuous learning.

Ultimately, AI should be evaluated not by its ability to replace orthopedic surgeons, but by its capacity to improve the quality, consistency, transparency, and patient-centeredness of surgical decision-making. Knee surgery, with its high procedural volume, measurable outcomes, technologically adaptable workflows, and rehabilitation-dependent recovery pathways, may become one of the defining laboratories for this transformation. The future of orthopedics will likely belong neither to AI alone nor to traditional experience-based practice, but to hybrid systems in which human expertise and intelligent technologies continuously inform and enhance one another. The central question for orthopedics is therefore not whether AI can outperform surgeons in isolated tasks, but whether surgeons can develop trustworthy human–AI systems that improve patient-centered outcomes. Knee surgery may be one of the first fields in which this question is answered.

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