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Revolutionizing Fine Needle Aspiration Cytology: The Transformative Power of Machine Learning in Image-Guided Sample Collection and Tumor Stratification

Mitesh Gupta *

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Revolutionizing Fine Needle Aspiration Cytology: The Transformative Power of Machine Learning in Image-Guided Sample Collection and Tumor Stratification

Mitesh Gupta *, Praveen Singhal and Abhishek Gupta

Department of Intervention Radiology, National Institute of Medical Sciences, Jaipur, India
* Correspondence: mitesh22in@gmail.com

Abstract: Fine-needle aspiration cytology (FNAC) is a pivotal diagnostic tool in oncology, utilized for evaluating suspicious lesions and stratifying tumors. The incorporation of machine learning (ML) into FNAC has revolutionized accuracy, efficiency, and diagnostic precision. This comprehensive review explores recent advances in FNAC, emphasizing the transformative role of ML in image-guided sample collection and tumor stratification. Leveraging deep learning and other ML algorithms, researchers have improved diagnostic accuracy, minimized unnecessary biopsies, and optimized treatment selection. This article highlights the transformative applications of machine learning in FNAC while addressing its current limitations and future potential.

Keywords: fine needle aspiration cytology (FNAC); machine learning (ML); deep learning (DL); image-guided; BiopsyTumor stratification; diagnostic accuracy; artificial intelligence (AI) in oncology; cytopathology; predictive analytics; automated diagnosis

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Introduction

Fine-needle aspiration cytology (FNAC) remains an invaluable diagnostic tool for evaluating suspicious lesions and stratifying tumors. Despite being minimally invasive and widely used across various medical specialties, FNAC's diagnostic precision is sometimes limited due to observer variability, inadequate sampling, and the subjective nature of morphological interpretation. These challenges often lead to unnecessary surgical excisions, repeat procedures, and delays in initiating appropriate therapy.

Machine learning (ML), particularly deep learning (DL), has emerged as a transformative technology in the medical field. Its application in FNAC has significantly improved accuracy, reproducibility, and efficiency. By leveraging ML algorithms for automated and objective analysis of cytological samples, rapid, accurate, and reproducible classification of malignancies is achievable. This review explores how ML is transforming FNAC, particularly in image-guided sample collection and tumor stratification.

Overview of Fine Needle Aspiration Cytology

Technique and Applications

Fine-needle aspiration cytology involves using a thin, hollow needle to obtain cells from a suspicious mass for microscopic examination. The procedure is typically guided by ultrasound (US) or computed tomography (CT) to ensure accurate sampling.

Applications:

- **Breast Cancer:** FNAC is widely used for evaluating palpable and non-palpable breast lesions.
- **Thyroid Cancer:** It remains the primary diagnostic tool for thyroid nodules.
- **Lymphadenopathy:** FNAC plays a significant role in diagnosing lymphoproliferative disorders and metastatic lymph nodes.

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- **Soft Tissue and Bone Lesions:** The procedure is instrumental in evaluating suspicious bone and soft tissue tumors.
- **Lung and Mediastinal Lesions:** FNAC, often combined with endobronchial ultrasound (EBUS), is used for diagnosing lung and mediastinal lesions.

Challenges in Traditional FNAC Interpretation:

- **Observer Variability:** Different pathologists may provide varying interpretations due to subjective judgment.
- **Inadequate Sampling:** Inadequate cell collection can lead to non-diagnostic results.
- **Morphological Overlap:** Benign and malignant lesions may share similar cytological features, complicating diagnosis.

Machine Learning in Cytology

Machine learning (ML) is a subset of artificial intelligence that uses algorithms to analyze data patterns and make predictions or classifications. In cytology, ML aids in automated image analysis, enabling precise, objective, and reproducible diagnoses.

Types of Machine Learning:

1. **Supervised Learning:** Algorithms are trained using labeled datasets to classify data or predict outcomes.
2. **Unsupervised Learning:** Identifies hidden patterns or groupings within unlabeled data.
3. **Reinforcement Learning:** Algorithms learn through trial and error to achieve a specific goal.

Deep Learning (DL): A subfield of ML involving neural networks with multiple layers (deep networks). Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) are widely used for image classification tasks, making them particularly useful in cytology.

Advances in FNAC Using Machine Learning

Image-Guided Sample Collection

Image-guided FNAC ensures precise and targeted collection of cytological samples. ML algorithms have significantly improved the efficiency and accuracy of this process.

1. Multi-parametric MRI and Glioblastoma

Hu et al. (2015) assessed the feasibility of using machine learning to visualize glioblastoma extent. Their study utilized multi-parametric MRI (mpMRI) and texture analysis to highlight spatial histologic heterogeneity and tumor extent in glioblastoma patients. The authors concluded that machine learning could stratify patients based on the MRI characteristics, thereby aiding personalized treatment decisions (Hu et al., 2015).

2. Image-Guided Raman Spectroscopy for Prostate Cancer

Grajales et al. (2022) proposed an image-guided Raman spectroscopy system for transperineal prostate cancer detection. By combining Raman spectroscopy and multiparametric MRI radiomics, they accurately stratified prostate cancer patients based on their International Society of Urological Pathology (ISUP) grading. This system facilitated precise tumor targeting and improved diagnostic accuracy (Grajales et al., 2022).

3. Machine Learning to Predict Lung Nodule Biopsy Method

Sumathipala et al. (2019) developed a machine learning model using CT image features to predict the most suitable biopsy method for lung nodules, minimizing invasive procedures. Their pilot study showed that machine learning algorithms could distinguish between CT-guided and bronchoscopic biopsy methods, thereby reducing unnecessary procedures (Sumathipala et al., 2019).

4. Rapid Point-of-Care Assessment of Core Needle Cancer Biopsies

Keshavamurthy et al. (2019) described a machine learning-based spectroscopy system for the rapid assessment of core needle biopsies. This system combined spectral data with machine learning algorithms to classify cancer biopsies, providing an accurate, rapid, and non-invasive diagnostic tool (Keshavamurthy et al., 2019).

5. The Cytopathologist in the Hospital-Based FNAC Clinic

Sauer et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of cytopathologists performing their own FNACs using ultrasound (US) guidance. The study outlined how the adoption of US-guided FNAC

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improved diagnostic accuracy and patient outcomes, enabling cytopathologists to integrate image-guided sampling into their practice (Sauer et al., 2018).

Tumor Stratification Using Machine Learning

Accurate tumor stratification is crucial for personalized therapy. Deep learning and other machine learning algorithms have played a significant role in enhancing stratification accuracy.

1. Artificial Intelligence-Based Assessment of PD-L1 in Lymphoma

Yan et al. (2024) utilized artificial intelligence to assess PD-L1 expression in diffuse large B-cell lymphoma, allowing for precise tumor stratification (Yan et al., 2024).

2. Gleason Scoring for Prostate Core Needle Biopsies

Ao et al. (2023) showed how convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and stimulated Raman scattering microscopy could improve Gleason scoring for prostate biopsies (Ao et al., 2023).

3. Machine Learning in High-Risk Breast Lesions

Bahl et al. (2018) used a machine learning model to predict pathological upgrades and minimize unnecessary surgical excisions of high-risk breast lesions (Bahl et al., 2018).

4. Molecular-Image Cytometry in Oncology

Weissleder and Lee (2020) emphasized the potential of automated molecular-image cytometry in stratifying cancer patients for optimal treatment selection (Weissleder and Lee, 2020).

5. Deep Learning in Breast Biopsy Interpretation

Mullooly et al. (2019) applied deep learning to delineate histologic correlates of mammographic breast density, improving stratification in women referred for diagnostic breast biopsies (Mullooly et al., 2019).

6. Recent Advances and Researches in the Field of Fine Needle Aspiration Cytopathology

Goyal (2023) reviewed recent advances in fine-needle aspiration cytopathology, emphasizing the role of machine learning in improving diagnostic accuracy (Goyal, 2023).

Classification Systems and Automated Diagnosis

1. Sydney System for Lymph Node FNAC

Kanhe et al. (2023) evaluated the Sydney system for stratification of lymph node FNAC. Their retrospective study at a tertiary care center supported the system's accuracy (Kanhe et al., 2023).

2. FNAC Classification of the Breast

Khoury and Sneige (2021) discussed classification approaches for breast FNAC cytopathology, highlighting the advances brought by machine learning (Khoury and Sneige, 2021).

3. Deep Learning in Cytology

Brooks et al. (2020) explored the impact of deep learning on cytology accuracy, providing a framework for future automated diagnostic approaches (Brooks et al., 2020).

4. Automated Molecular-Image Cytometry and Analysis in Modern Oncology

Weissleder and Lee (2020) emphasized the potential of automated molecular-image cytometry in stratifying cancer patients for optimal treatment selection (Weissleder and Lee, 2020).

5. Stimulated Raman Scattering Microscopy Enables Gleason Scoring of Prostate Core Needle Biopsy

Ao et al. (2023) showed how convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and stimulated Raman scattering microscopy could improve Gleason scoring for prostate biopsies (Ao et al., 2023).

6. Recent Advances and Researches in the Field of Fine Needle Aspiration Cytopathology

Goyal (2023) reviewed recent advances in fine-needle aspiration cytopathology, emphasizing the role of machine learning in improving diagnostic accuracy (Goyal, 2023).

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite significant advancements, challenges persist in machine learning for FNAC, including:

- **Data Quality and Quantity:** Training ML models requires large, high-quality datasets that are often unavailable.
- **Generalizability:** Models trained on specific datasets may not generalize well to diverse populations.
- **Regulatory and Ethical Issues:** Ensuring patient privacy and compliance with regulatory standards remains a priority.

Conclusion

Machine learning has revolutionized fine-needle aspiration cytology, improving sample collection and tumor stratification. By leveraging deep learning and other advanced algorithms, researchers have enhanced diagnostic accuracy, minimized unnecessary procedures, and paved the way for personalized cancer treatment. Future research should focus on overcoming current challenges to fully realize the potential of machine learning in FNAC.

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