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Big data in oncologic imaging

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Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1603194> since 2016-10-17T15:02:33Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1007/s11547-016-0687-5

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Article Sub-Title		
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Article CopyRight	Italian Society of Medical Radiology (This will be the copyright line in the final PDF)	
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Journal Name	La radiologia medica	
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	Received	14 June 2016
Schedule	Revised	
	Accepted	29 August 2016

Abstract Cancer is a complex disease and unfortunately understanding how the components of the cancer system work does not help understand the behavior of the system as a whole. In the words of the Greek philosopher Aristotle “the whole is greater than the sum of parts.” To date, thanks to improved information technology infrastructures, it is possible to store data from each single cancer patient, including clinical data, medical images, laboratory tests, and pathological and genomic information. Indeed, medical archive storage constitutes approximately one-third of total global storage demand and a large part of the data are in the form of medical images. The opportunity is now to draw insight on the whole to the benefit of each individual patient. In the oncologic patient, big data analysis is at the beginning but several useful applications can be envisaged including development of imaging biomarkers to predict disease outcome, assessing the risk of X-ray dose exposure or of renal damage following the administration of contrast agents, and tracking and optimizing patient workflow. The aim of this review is to present current evidence of how big data derived from medical images may impact on the diagnostic pathway of the oncologic patient.

Keywords (separated by '-') Oncologic imaging - Big data - Quantitative imaging biomarkers - X-ray dose - Renal damage - Imaging databases

Footnote Information

2 **Big data in oncologic imaging**

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5 Received: 14 June 2016 / Accepted: 29 August 2016
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28 nostic pathway of the oncologic patient.

Keywords Oncologic imaging · Big data · Quantitative 29
imaging biomarkers · X-ray dose · Renal damage · Imaging 30
databases 31

Introduction 32

Big Data initiatives are aimed at drawing inferences 33
from large datasets that are not derived from carefully 34
controlled information [1]. In medicine, the basic idea 35
behind using big data is to learn new knowledge from 36
every patient we have ever treated and apply this knowl- 37
edge to the next patient [2]. This concept will give future 38
generations the opportunity to bring into existence a “fast 39
learning health system” to the benefit of each individual 40
patient. In the era of precision medicine, this evolution- 41
ary concept may lead to a comprehensive and individual 42
approach to treatment [3]. In oncology, where information 43
collected from the single patient is extremely variegated, 44
big data analysis could allow definition of specific and 45
efficient diagnostic and therapeutic pathways, improv- 46
ing patient workflow and quality of life. The aim of this 47
review is to collect current evidence and to envisage how 48
in the future big data may impact on the diagnostic path- 49
way of the oncologic patient. 50

Big data in oncologic imaging: the rationale 51

The following key concepts related to big data should be 52
considered when approaching oncologic imaging issues: 53

1. Opposite to traditional hypothesis-driven cancer 54
research [4], big data research may be launched regard- 55
less of whether important questions are identified. 56

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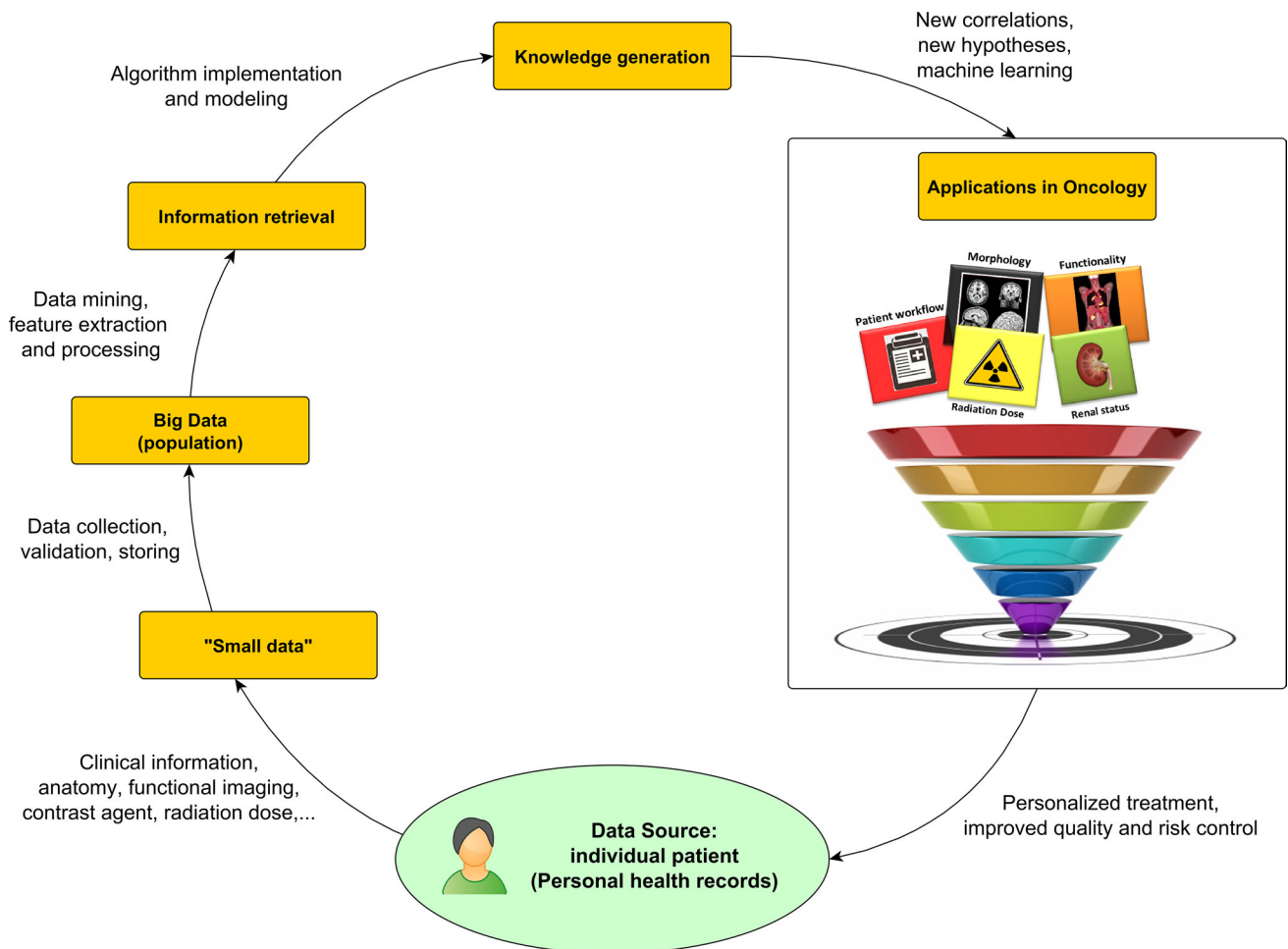


Fig. 1 Circle of medical knowledge in oncology. The individual patient is the source of information and the target of care delivery

- 57 2. Big data in health consists in datasets that are too big,
58 too inhomogeneous, and too complex for healthcare
59 providers to process and interpret with existing tools
60 [5].
- 61 3. Big data is not about implementing one piece of technol-
62 ogy, it also includes data mining and machine learn-
63 ing and offers potential alternative approaches to lever-
64 aging large data resources [6, 7].

65 Cancer fits well into these concepts, as it is a complex
66 disease that changes, evolves, and adapts to the surround-
67 ing environment. Its evolution could be better understood
68 by collecting information from different sources—e.g.,
69 demographic, genetic, imaging, treatment, and outcomes—
70 that could then be processed as big data. In the last two
71 decades, the development of efficient information technol-
72 ogy (IT) infrastructures has allowed digitalization and elec-
73 tronic integration of healthcare information [8]. In 2012,
74 AT&T estimated that the storage requirements for medi-
75 cal archives were increasing by 20–40 % each year, with

76 medical images constituting one-third of total global stor- 76
77 age demand [9, 10]. Today, an average size hospital man- 77
78 ages approximately 665 TB of patient data, corresponding 78
79 to approximately 140.000 DVDs [11]. 79

80 Big data has the potential to dramatically reshape cancer 80
81 care landscape, improving quality and efficiency in 81
82 every cancer setting [12] (Fig. 1). In the field of oncologic 82
83 imaging, big data may allow the development of tools for 83
84 baseline assessment and for quantification of anatomic and 84
85 functional changes over time. Quantitative imaging bio- 85
86 markers will contribute to tailoring treatment to each indi- 86
87 vidual patient. Extraction of data from radiation and con- 87
88 trast agent dose registries will allow to explore dose effects 88
89 on subjects with cumulative X-rays, computed tomogra- 89
90 phy (CT) scans, radiation therapy treatments, or nuclear 90
91 medicine examinations and minimize contrast-induced 91
92 nephrotoxicity by stratifying cancer patients into risk cat- 92
93 egories. Finally, processing of big data could support the 93
94 development of optimized clinical workflows and in the 94
95 end increase the management efficiency of comprehensive 95

96 cancer centers and of tertiary health facilities in general
97 [13].

98 **Big data in oncologic imaging: current** 99 **developments**

100 Today, most of what we know about cancer comes from
101 a tiny subset of patients, i.e., the 3 % who are enrolled in
102 clinical trials; hence, those data are non-representative of
103 the entire cancer population [14]. The remaining 97 % gen-
104 erate potentially useful information that is lost, due to the
105 fact that data collection is mostly non-structured. In recent
106 years, publicly accessible medical repositories are being
107 implemented with the aim of collecting data from different
108 imaging modalities. The cancer imaging archive (TCIA),
109 for example, provides a public repository of cancer images
110 and related clinical data [15]. The repository was created
111 with the support of the National Cancer Institute with the
112 aim of collecting, curating, and managing a rich collection
113 of oncologic imaging data to enable open-science research.
114 [16]. At present, more than 26 million radiologic images
115 contributed by 28 institutions and several thousand pathol-
116 ogy images are stored in this repository that is constantly
117 increasing in size and variety [15]. In this chapter, we will
118 review how the analysis of all this information benefits
119 each individual patient.

120 **Extracting the “dark matter” from medical images**

AQ2 In medical images, data are usually provided as an orderly
122 set of gray scale pixel values; however, in this form data
123 are not synonymous of information or knowledge. Indeed,
124 of the estimated 80 % of hospital data that are represented
125 by unstructured imaging data [11], very little are currently
126 being used for diagnosis. Eliot Siegel from the University
127 of Maryland compared the data hidden in a clinical image,
128 i.e., data that cannot be directly observed with current tech-
129 nology, as the “dark matter in space” [17]. The main chal-
130 lenge for future generations will be to extract important and
131 meaningful information from this dark matter. Improve-
132 ments in image analysis will reasonably bridge the gap
133 between the visual content and its numeric representation,
134 which includes encoded color and texture properties of an
135 image, the spatial layout of objects, and geometric shape
136 characteristics of anatomical structures. More and more
137 diagnostic techniques are providing multi-modality imag-
138 ing, with challenging big data management issues. A mag-
139 netic resonance (MR) examination, for example, includes
140 high-resolution morphological images and information on
141 tissue perfusion and diffusion capturing complex in vivo
142 flow patterns; similarly, CT dual-energy acquisitions
143 include information on material decomposition and spectral

imaging [18]. Furthermore, combining different imaging
144 modalities at the hardware level (MR/PET, PET/CT) will
145 open up a range of new opportunities for image analysis
146 [5].

147
148 Pattern recognition software and tools for high-through-
149 put extraction of quantitative features have been imple-
150 mented in parallel to the increase in dataset size and infor-
151 mation. Conversion of images into mineable data and
152 subsequent analysis for clinical decision support has paved
153 the way to *radiomics* [1]. *Radiomic* data typically con-
154 tain first-, second-, and higher-order statistics that can be
155 combined with other patient data to develop models with
156 improved diagnostic, prognostic, and predictive accuracy.

157 **Diagnostic X-ray dose exposure**

158 During the past 30 years, radiologic procedures involving
159 ionizing radiation have been increasingly used in clinical
160 routine leading to a dramatic increase in individual patient
161 dose exposure. Today, medical radiation comprises almost
162 50 % of per capita radiation dose, compared with 15 % in
163 the early 1980s [19]. Individual risk of developing radia-
164 tion-related cancer from any single imaging procedure is
165 extremely low; however, repeated examinations may lead
166 to a substantial increase in such risk [20]. Unfortunately,
167 epidemiologic literature on low-dose effects of ionizing
168 radiations is limited by statistical power. In the future, the
169 opportunity to exploit large databases will help clarify the
170 relationship between cancer-induced pathologies and low-
171 dose radiation levels [21, 22]. In particular, the introduc-
172 tion of radiation dose registries could be a valuable tool for
173 patient monitoring and optimization of dose delivery. Col-
174 lected information should include (1) radiation dose distri-
175 butions and dose–volume metrics from treatment planning
176 in radiotherapy (i.e., dose–volume histograms, the volume
177 receiving a certain dose, minimum dose to a given volume,
178 mean, maximum, and minimum dose); (2) X-ray doses
179 from radiological imaging (i.e., volumetric CT dose index,
180 dose-length product, dose-area product); and (3) gamma-
181 ray and other radioisotopes radiation doses from nuclear
182 medicine imaging and treatment. A radiation dose registry
183 may allow clinicians to compare dose levels to the averages
184 of other national and international centers, in order to suc-
185 cessfully implement low-dose protocols. On the side, this **AQ3**
186 will favor standardization, create higher patient confidence
187 in radiation safety, and offer the opportunity for better qual-
188 ity assessment.

189 Regulations and guidelines, such as the European direc-
190 tive Euratom 97/43, 2013/59/EURATOM, and the Ameri-
191 can College of Radiology dose Whitepaper, express the
192 need for facilities to track radiation dose for patient and
193 population, and support the implementation for dose reg-
194 istries. In particular, the European directive 2013/59/

195 EURATOM points out that health authorities will be more
 196 pervasive on inspecting the dosimetry applied to patients.
 197 Integrating the Healthcare Enterprise (IHE—www.ihe.net)
 198 is an initiative of professional societies aimed at collaborat-
 199 ing with the industry in order to coordinate standards-based
 200 solutions to problems that span multiple vendors systems.
 201 The new IHE radiation exposure monitoring (REM) Profile
 202 facilitates the collection and distribution of the estimated
 203 patient radiation exposure information resulting from imag-
 204 ing procedures and provides an implementation guide for
 205 vendors. By following this guide and participating in IHE
 206 Connectathon, vendors can release products that will inter-
 207 operate to provide an exposure monitoring pipeline ([http://](http://www.aapm.org/meetings/amos2/pdf/42-12234-94897-404.pdf)
 208 [www.aapm.org/meetings/amos2/pdf/42-12234-94897-404.](http://www.aapm.org/meetings/amos2/pdf/42-12234-94897-404.pdf)
 209 [pdf](http://www.aapm.org/meetings/amos2/pdf/42-12234-94897-404.pdf)).

210 Some healthcare companies have already developed
 211 web-based dose management software to track and analyze
 212 patient radiation and iodine exposure across multi-facility,
 213 multi-modality, and multi-vendor imaging environments.
 214 These systems enable healthcare professionals to monitor
 215 radiation exposure and contrast media injection dose to
 216 their patients. In addition, these devices allow optimiza-
 217 tion of acquisition protocols in order to find the right bal-
 218 ance between image quality and dose, minimizing the risk
 219 of radiation-induced cancers ([http://www.dicardiology.](http://www.dicardiology.com/article/software-help-manage-medical-imaging-radiation-dose)
 220 [com/article/software-help-manage-medical-imaging-radiation-dose](http://www.dicardiology.com/article/software-help-manage-medical-imaging-radiation-dose)).
 221 On the technical side, there are several crucial
 222 aspects of dose tracking that deserve to be remembered.
 223 The first is dose capture: non-DICOM-SR compatible CT
 224 scanners store dose information as images rather than in
 225 numerical form, requiring an optical character recognition
 226 algorithm to capture the data. Second, information has to
 227 be associated with the patient to be exportable to dose reg-
 228 istries such as the American College of Radiology (ACR)
 229 Dose Index Registry (DIR). This database, opened in 2011,
 230 represents the most substantial effort to standardize radia-
 231 tion dose across the United States. Information related to
 232 dose indices to regional and national values is collected,
 233 anonymized, and stored across different care services.
 234 In 2013, the registry achieved dose index information on
 235 5.5 million CT examinations across 750 registered facili-
 236 ties [23]. DIR is a data registry that allows facilities to
 237 compare their CT dose indices to regional and national
 238 values. Institutions are provided with periodic feedback
 239 reports comparing their results by body part and exam type
 240 to aggregate results ([http://www.acr.org/Quality-Safety/](http://www.acr.org/Quality-Safety/National-Radiology-Data-Registry/Dose-Index-Registry)
 241 [National-Radiology-Data-Registry/Dose-Index-Registry](http://www.acr.org/Quality-Safety/National-Radiology-Data-Registry/Dose-Index-Registry)).

242 Big data and radiation oncology

243 Big data repositories include detailed 3-dimensional dosi-
 244 metric and imaging data, and their changes over time.
 245 Of these, the National Radiation Oncology Registry was

246 designed to collect information on cancer care delivery
 247 among patients treated with radiation therapy [24, 25].
 248 Predictive models can be applied to the collected treat-
 249 ment variables to assess patient outcome. In a pilot project,
 250 prostate cancer was selected as the initial disease site, and
 251 information was collected on clinical features, toxicity, and
 252 spatial and temporal dose distribution. Thanks to this pilot
 253 study, researchers may now identify best strategy options
 254 that allow patients to safely choose to do nothing or opt for
 255 mild treatments or surgery [26]. In the era of genomics, one
 256 may envision leveraging large repositories with detailed
 257 radiation therapy data, imaging data, and genomic pro-
 258 files of tumor and normal tissue samples in order to better
 259 understand predictors of tumor control and risk of normal
 260 tissue injury, providing radiation oncologists the opportu-
 261 nity to potentially offer personalized dose prescriptions
 262 improving tumor control and reducing toxicity [7, 27].

Predicting renal damage

264 In recent years, the study of acute kidney injury has been
 265 facilitated by the increasing availability of stored demo-
 266 graphic and clinical patient data [28, 29]. The Chronic
 267 Database of Kidney Diseases (CDKD), for example, is a
 268 database system designed to hold personal and laboratory
 269 investigatory details of patients with renal disease ([http://](http://www.cdkd.org/)
 270 www.cdkd.org/). Its goal is to make kidney-related physi-
 271 ological data easily available to the scientific community.
 272 CDKD currently contains more than 10,000 public data
 273 entries, available upon free registration [30]. Unfortu-
 274 nately, most datasets do not provide standardized informa-
 275 tion, and do not allow differentiation between acute and
 276 chronic disease. This heterogeneity may hinder compari-
 277 sons and underestimate disease burden, limiting its applica-
 278 tion in a clinical setting [28].

279 Collecting information on kidney functional status could
 280 be particularly useful in cancer patients. These patients
 281 frequently repeat CT examinations for staging or assess-
 282 ment of response to treatment, in which administration of
 283 intravenous iodine contrast agent is generally required. It
 284 is well known that iodinated contrast agents are associated
 285 with an increased risk of contrast-induced nephrotoxicity;
 286 the risk is particularly high in patients that have impaired
 287 renal function and diabetes [31]. Furthermore, renal fail-
 288 ure in oncological patients is often multifactorial and more
 289 common than in the general population [32]. The risk of
 290 complications from contrast medium administration is
 291 compounded by advanced age, dehydration, the number
 292 of times CT is repeated, and co-administration of nephro-
 293 toxic chemotherapeutic drugs. Thus, identification of fac-
 294 tors predicting contrast-induced nephrotoxicity is important
 295 to avoid potentially serious complications, related to acute
 296 deterioration of kidney function [31].

297 **Tracking patient workflow**

298 Oncological patient management is more and more a
299 complex matter requiring constant monitoring throughout
300 chemotherapy lines, radiation therapy sessions, scheduled
301 follow-up assessments, etc. Thus, information collected
302 from the very first diagnosis to outcome of every single
303 patient is growing fast. To date, most of this information is
304 passively accumulated by hospitals within PACS and RIS
305 facilities. Conversely, in an integrated healthcare system,
306 where interdisciplinary teams of specialists act together,
307 all information should be linked with the aim of optimizing
308 individual patient care, paving the way to truly personal-
309 ized medicine.

310 To optimize current oncological workflows, it will be
311 necessary to develop event-tracking systems in which
312 monitoring points based on checklists are implemented.
313 A good system should be able to identify workflow issues
314 and technical errors in every step of patient management,
315 advancing department quality control and improving exist-
316 ing processes or implementing new workflows [33]. Each
317 patient in the processing chain will thus contribute to help
318 clinicians and technicians to detect workflow inefficiencies,
319 as incorrectly transmitted images or information during
320 disease assessment, or delays in scheduled follow-ups. A
321 patient tracking system would also simplify pinpointing the
322 sources of error or mismatching within processes, produc-
323 ing as a result an honest picture of the current events, and
324 enhance the ability to respond in real time. The opportu-
325 nity at hand using big data is the ability to scan and connect
326 massive repositories with the aim of providing new insights
327 on patient workflow. Correlating clinical data with costs,
328 outcomes, and performances will also support the develop-
329 ment of evidence-based guidelines and clinical best prac-
330 tices. In the end, again, all of this will improve patient's
331 access to treatment, reduce therapy side effects, and con-
332 tribute to improve his quality of life and, on a population
333 scale, allow healthcare systems to save more lives and con-
334 tain costs.

335 **Conclusions**

336 The possibility to extract new knowledge from the huge
337 amount of increasingly available unstructured data is
338 crucial for advances in cancer diagnosis and treatment.
339 Indeed, the strength of big data lies in its volume and
340 variety. However, this process is not without challenges
341 as big data analysis also has several intrinsic limitations,
342 which limit its use. First, big data is usually extremely het-
343 erogeneous, can be missing, non-interpretable, conflict-
344 ing, inaccurate, or stored in different locations. Second, it
345 may be beyond human capabilities to analyze. Indeed, the

very point of looking to big data is “to identify patterns
that create answers to questions you didn't even know to
ask” [34]. Finally, big data analysis may breach patient
privacy. Therefore, the success of big data in creating
healthcare value may require some changes in the current
polices, to balance the potential societal benefits of big data
approaches and the protection of patients' confidentiality
[35].

In conclusion, the benefits of large-scale data mining to
the oncologic patient are slowly emerging. Big data initia-
tives could be instrumental in improving the management
and the quality of life of each individual cancer patient
based on the results of imaging biomarker analysis or on
the implementation of event-tracking systems. On a macro-
economics level, big data could support the implementation
of evidence-based guidelines and of quality control meas-
ures, in the end reducing system inefficiencies. Because of
their intrinsic heterogeneity, it will be very challenging to
fully exploit big data.

Compliance with ethical standards

No funding was received for this work.

Conflict of interest Daniele Regge declares that he has no conflict of
interest. Simone Mazzetti declares that he has no conflict of interest.
Valentina Giannini declares that she has no conflict of interest. Chris-
tian Bracco declares that he has no conflict of interest. Michele Stasi
declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with
human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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