Explainable AI (XAI) for Clinical Decision Support: Assessing Trust and Performance in Diagnostic Imaging

Author: Henry Wallace **Affiliation:** Department of Data Science, University of Oxford (UK)

Email: henry.wallace@ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Explainable artificial intelligence (XAI) is rapidly becoming central to the safe and trustworthy deployment of deep learning systems in diagnostic imaging. While deep models have achieved or exceeded human-level performance on many imaging tasks, their opaque decision processes undermine clinician trust and complicate regulatory approval and clinical integration. This article provides a comprehensive, scholarly, and practical treatment of XAI for clinical decision support (CDS) in diagnostic imaging. We synthesize theoretical foundations (interpretability vs. explainability), categorization of XAI methods (saliency, perturbation, surrogate, concept-based, and counterfactual explanations), evaluation frameworks (fidelity, plausibility, stability, and utility), human factors and trust calibration, algorithmic and dataset biases, robustness and safety, and regulatory/ethical considerations. We present concrete experimental protocols for rigorous technical and user-centered evaluation, illustrate best-practice deployment pipelines, and propose a research agenda linking model-centered metrics with clinician-centered outcomes. Throughout, we ground claims with peer-reviewed evidence and policy documents and include the two references you requested. This manuscript is written to be submission-ready for a peer-reviewed journal and includes extended methodological appendices and recommended evaluation checklists.

Keywords: explainable AI, interpretability, diagnostic imaging, clinical decision support, saliency maps, counterfactual explanations, trust, evaluation, regulation.

1. Introduction

Advances in deep learning have produced remarkable diagnostic tools in radiology, pathology, and other imaging domains. Landmark systems—such as deep convolutional networks trained on large chest X-ray datasets—have demonstrated performance comparable to practicing clinicians in selected tasks (e.g., Rajpurkar et al., CheXNet). arXiv However, despite accuracy gains, adoption in clinical workflows remains limited. A central bottleneck is lack of transparency: black-box models provide predictions without clear rationales, creating a barrier to clinician trust, responsible oversight, and regulatory acceptance (Huff et al., 2021). PMC

Explainable AI (XAI) aims to make model behavior intelligible to stakeholders through post-hoc explanations and inherently interpretable model architectures. For diagnostic imaging, XAI includes pixel-level saliency maps (e.g., Grad-CAM), perturbation-based attribution, surrogate rule explanations,

concept activation analyses, and counterfactual examples. Each technique offers different trade-offs in fidelity (how accurately the explanation reflects model internals), interpretability (how easily a human can understand the explanation), and clinical usefulness (whether the explanation aids decision making). This article reviews, formalizes, and synthesizes these trade-offs with the specific goal of assessing both trust and performance for clinical decision support systems (CDSS) in diagnostic imaging.

We organize this paper as follows: Section 2 clarifies definitions and theoretical foundations. Section 3 surveys XAI techniques and categorizes them for imaging tasks. Section 4 proposes rigorous evaluation metrics linking computational properties to clinical utility. Section 5 details experimental protocols and datasets. Section 6 delves into human factors and trust: how clinicians perceive, use, and misuse explanations. Section 7 covers robustness, fairness, and safety. Section 8 discusses regulation, legal and ethical aspects. Section 9 presents recommended deployment pipelines and governance. Section 10 concludes with a research roadmap. Throughout, we highlight practical recommendations and list open challenges.

2. Definitions and Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Interpretability vs Explainability

Interpretability broadly denotes the degree to which a human can understand the internal mechanics of a model without additional aids; intrinsically interpretable models include simple linear models, decision trees, and certain rule sets. Explainability usually refers to post-hoc methods that generate artifacts (visualizations, textual rationales, feature attributions, counterfactuals) that *explain* a black-box model's decisions to humans (Ribeiro et al.; Selvaraju et al.). Distinguishing these is important because post-hoc explanations can be plausible yet unfaithful to internals — producing explanations that mislead users about how the model actually reasons (see Section 4). Foundational surveys (Huff et al., 2021; Selvaraju et al., Grad-CAM) have formalized many of these distinctions. PMC+1

2.2 Stakeholders and Intended Explanation Use

XAI for clinical imaging must satisfy multiple stakeholders with different goals: radiologists (clinical decision-making support), multidisciplinary tumor boards (case synthesis), regulators (safety and auditability), patients (explainability for informed consent), and engineers (debugging and model improvement). The "right" explanation depends on the stakeholder's intent—transparency for audits differs from actionable cues for clinicians.

2.3 Types of Explanations (High-level taxonomy)

We adopt a practical taxonomy that will inform subsequent evaluation:

1. **Saliency / Attribution explanations**: Pixel- or region-level importance maps (e.g., Grad-CAM, integrated gradients) that highlight image areas most responsible for a prediction. CVF Open Access+1

2. **Perturbation-based explanations**: Methods that estimate effect of occluding or altering input regions (occlusion sensitivity, LIME variants) to measure prediction change. GitHub+1
3. **Surrogate models and rule extraction**: Global or local surrogate models (e.g., decision trees fit to a model's outputs) that provide human-readable rules approximating behavior.
4. **Concept-based explanations**: Methods that relate model internal representations to clinically meaningful concepts (TCAV, concept activation vectors), enabling explanations in domain language.
5. **Counterfactual explanations**: Minimal realistic changes to an input that flip a model's prediction, offering causal-style what-if rationales (GANterfactual, diffusion-based counterfactuals). PMC+1
6. **Example-based explanations**: Prototypes, nearest neighbors, and case retrieval that show similar historical images and their outcomes.

Each category trades off between *fidelity* (are the explanations faithful to the model?) and *interpretability* (are they comprehensible and actionable to clinicians?). Later sections present metrics to quantify both.

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3. Survey of XAI Methods for Diagnostic Imaging

This section summarizes prominent XAI methods, their algorithmic formulations, strengths, and limitations for medical imaging.

3.1 Gradient-based saliency (e.g., Grad-CAM, Integrated Gradients)

Gradient-based methods propagate gradients from an output (e.g., class logit) to input pixels or feature maps to compute importance scores. Grad-CAM produces coarse, class-discriminative heatmaps by weighting feature maps in the last convolutional layer by gradients (Selvaraju et al.). It is widely used in imaging because it is architecture-agnostic and computationally cheap. However, studies have shown that heatmaps can be spatially diffuse, sensitive to architecture choices, and at times misleading when models rely on spurious confounders (e.g., markers, laterality cues) rather than pathology (Selvaraju et al.; Huff et al.). CVF Open Access+1

Advantages: fast, directly tied to gradients (model internals), easy visualization. **Limitations:** coarse localization, low resolution without guided combinations, susceptibility to gradient saturation and attribution ambiguity; may not reflect causal importance.

3.2 Perturbation and occlusion methods (LIME, occlusion sensitivity)

LIME (Local Interpretable Model-agnostic Explanations) constructs a local surrogate linear model around an instance by perturbing input regions and fitting local weights. In imaging, variants modify the neighborhood definition to make perturbations realistic. Occlusion sensitivity systematically masks patches of the image and measures output change.

Perturbation methods are often more faithful to functional output changes but are computationally expensive and sensitive to perturbation semantics (how you occlude matters). GitHub+1

3.3 Concept activation vectors (TCAV) and concept-based XAI

TCAV measures the sensitivity of model predictions to user-defined concepts (e.g., calcification, pleural effusion) by computing directional derivatives in feature space that align with concept vectors. Concept methods can bridge the semantic gap between pixel maps and clinician reasoning, but require curated concept datasets and may omit unknown but salient features.

3.4 Surrogate models and rule extraction

Fitting decision trees or linear models to replicate model outputs provides global approximations that can be inspected. Surrogates can expose systemic biases and failure modes but may lack fidelity if the original model is highly nonlinear.

3.5 Counterfactual explanations and generative approaches

Counterfactuals answer "what minimal change would this image require to change the diagnosis?" Recent methods use GANs, autoencoders, or diffusion models to generate realistic counterfactuals that avoid unrealistic perturbations (Mertes et al.; newer diffusion approaches). Counterfactuals are intuitively appealing for clinicians because they mimic differential diagnostic reasoning, but they require careful constraints to preserve clinical realism. PMC+1

3.6 Example-based and case-retrieval explanations

Showing similar historical cases with known outcomes leverages clinicians' case-based reasoning. Retrieval systems can be augmented with relevance weighting to emphasize clinically salient features. This method aligns well with radiology practice but depends on curated, annotated case libraries and raises privacy concerns.

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4. Evaluating Explanations: Metrics and Protocols

Rigorous evaluation of XAI is necessary to prevent misleading explanations and to quantify benefits in clinical practice. We propose a multi-axis evaluation schema:

4.1 Fidelity (faithfulness to model internals)

- **Feature-perturbation fidelity**: degree to which regions flagged as important, when perturbed, change the model prediction. Perturbation-based metrics provide direct measures of causal impact but depend on perturbation realism.
- **Model-inversion fidelity**: measure whether explanations align with internal representations (e.g., whether attributed neurons correspond to concept vectors).

Quantify using drop-in-confidence or AUC degradation when removing top-k% important pixels.

4.2 Plausibility (alignment with human reasoning)

- **Expert agreement**: overlap between saliency maps and clinician-annotated pathology (IoU, Dice), or correlation with expert localization scores. Note: high plausibility does not guarantee fidelity (models may use different features while producing similar heatmaps).
- **User-rated helpfulness**: clinician surveys scoring explanations for usefulness, clarity, and trust.

4.3 Robustness and stability

- **Perturbation invariance**: stability of explanations to small, semantically irrelevant image changes (noise, rotations, intensity shifts). Explanations should not vary wildly with minor input transformations.
- **Method stability**: agreement across explanation algorithms for a given model input.

4.4 Discriminative utility and decision impact

- **Decision improvement**: does the explanation improve clinician accuracy, sensitivity, specificity, or diagnostic speed when combined with model predictions? Randomized controlled evaluations with clinicians are the gold standard.
- **Trust calibration**: measured by appropriate reliance (the clinician accepts model when correct and rejects it when wrong). Poor explanations can lead to over- or under-reliance.

4.5 Computational and human factors metrics

- **Time to comprehension**: how long clinicians take to interpret an explanation.
- **Cognitive load**: measured via standardized instruments (NASA-TLX).
- **Interpretation error rate**: frequency of incorrect conclusions drawn from explanations.

A sound evaluation protocol combines computational and human-centered metrics: quantify fidelity first (to ensure explanations reflect model behavior), then plausibility, then human usability and clinical impact (Chen et al.; Huff et al.). Empirical literature reports frequent disconnects between computational plausibility and clinician utility, demonstrating the necessity of end-to-end evaluation. Johns Hopkins University+1

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5. Experimental Design and Datasets

5.1 Dataset considerations

Quality XAI evaluation requires datasets with: (1) diagnostic labels; (2) pixel-level annotations (for plausibility metrics); (3) diverse patient populations to assess fairness; (4) metadata (scanner type, acquisition parameters) to detect dataset artifacts; and (5) curated concept annotations for concept-based methods. Public datasets (ChestX-ray14, MIMIC-CXR, ISIC for dermatology) provide starting points but may lack dense localization labels; private, well-

annotated institutional cohorts are often necessary for clinical-grade evaluation. (Rajpurkar et al.; broader imaging surveys). arXiv+1

5.2 Recommended experimental pipeline

1. **Model training**: train baseline diagnostic model(s) (e.g., ResNet, DenseNet) using appropriate cross-validation and strict patient splits to avoid leakage.
2. **XAI method selection**: implement a suite of XAI methods (Grad-CAM variants, integrated gradients, LIME adaptations, TCAV, counterfactual generators).
3. **Computational evaluation**:
    - Measure fidelity (perturbation tests), plausibility (IoU against localization labels), stability (noise, augmentations).
    - Assess method-specific hyperparameters (e.g., upsampling methods for Grad-CAM) via sensitivity analysis.
4. **Human-centered evaluation**:
    - **Reader studies**: randomized crossover designs where clinicians interpret images with (a) model prediction only, (b) model + explanation, (c) model + alternative explanation. Primary endpoints: diagnostic accuracy, time, and trust calibration.
    - **Think-aloud and qualitative interviews**: understand cognitive processes and failure modes.
5. **Ongoing monitoring**:
    - Post-deployment surveillance for explanation drift, dataset shift, and emergent biases.

5.3 Off-the-shelf vs. task-specific XAI

Not all XAI methods generalize across imaging tasks. Saliency maps that assist in detection tasks may be less helpful for subtle classification tasks (e.g., predicting molecular subtype from imaging). Tailor explanations to clinical questions.

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6. Human Factors and Trust in Clinical Decision Support

6.1 Psychological aspects of trust

Trust in AI systems is multifaceted—competence (performance), predictability (consistency), and explainability (understandability) contribute to clinician trust. Empirical studies show that explanations can increase perceived transparency but do not reliably improve reliance calibration; in some cases, plausible but unfaithful explanations increase over-trust, causing clinicians to accept erroneous model outputs. Therefore, explanations must be faithful to avoid misleading users. PMC+1

6.2 Appropriate reliance and automation bias

Automation bias occurs when users defer excessively to automation despite contrary evidence. XAI can either mitigate or exacerbate automation bias depending on its fidelity and presentation. Interventions include: (a) presenting confidence intervals and uncertainty; (b) surfacing counterfactuals that highlight failure cases; (c) designing UI that encourages active verification rather than passive acceptance.

6.3 Designing human-AI interaction

- **Progressive disclosure**: show compact explanations by default, allow clinicians to drill down to more detailed rationales.
- **Contextualization**: explanations should connect to clinical vocabulary (e.g., "peripheral consolidation" rather than pixel coordinates). Concept-based methods help here.
- **Actionable outputs**: beyond saying "this area is important", the system should suggest next steps (e.g., recommend additional imaging, second opinion).

Human-centered design principles must guide XAI integration to ensure clinical workflows are enhanced rather than burdened (Johns Hopkins systematic review on human-centered XAI). Johns Hopkins University

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7. Robustness, Fairness, and Safety

7.1 Spurious correlations and shortcuts

Models can learn dataset artifacts (e.g., markers, laterality labels, demographic cues) that correlate with outcomes in training but are not causally related to pathology. Explanations can help detect such shortcuts (if saliency maps highlight labels), but they can also be misleading if they mask these issues. Rigorous stress testing and causal analyses are necessary.

7.2 Distribution shift and explanation drift

Explanations may change when input distributions shift (new scanners, populations). Monitor explanation stability over time and re-evaluate explanations under domain shifts.

7.3 Fairness and subgroup performance

Explainability should include subgroup audits: do explanations look different across sex, race, age, or disease subtypes? Disparities in interpretability can worsen inequities (some groups receiving less useful explanations). Collect and report subgroup metrics for both performance and explanation quality.

7.4 Safety mechanisms

- **Hard constraints**: prevent the system from making high-risk recommendations without human sign-off.
- **Flagging and escalation**: when model confidence is low or explanations are unstable, force human review.
- **Simulation of rare failure modes**: use generative models to produce edge-case images to test explanation behavior.

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8. Regulatory, Legal, and Ethical Considerations

Regulators increasingly require transparency and robust evidence for AI/ML-based medical devices. The FDA's Action Plan and evolving guidance emphasize lifecycle management, real-world performance monitoring, and documentation of changes to AI systems (FDA AI/ML Action Plan and subsequent guidance). U.S. Food and Drug Administration+1

8.1 Regulatory expectations for explainability

While regulators do not prescribe a specific XAI technique, they require that manufacturers provide sufficient evidence that the device is safe, effective, and well-understood. Explainability contributes to audit trails, root-cause analysis, and clinician training materials. Documenting explanation algorithms, their limitations, evaluation metrics, and human factors testing is essential for submissions.

8.2 Liability and transparency

Who is responsible when an AI-supported decision leads to harm? Clear delineation in product labeling (intended use, human oversight requirements), informed consent where appropriate, and rigorous clinical evaluation mitigate legal risks. Transparent explanations that accurately reflect model behavior support post-market investigations.

8.3 Ethical principles

Adopt principles of beneficence (improving outcomes), non-maleficence (avoiding harm via misleading explanations), justice (equitable performance), and autonomy (support clinician and patient decision-making). XAI design must respect patient privacy — example-based explanations should de-identify or aggregate cases.

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9. Practical Deployment Pipeline and Governance

We recommend a staged, safety-first deployment pipeline:

1. **Preclinical development**:
    - Train model on curated datasets and implement a suite of XAI methods.
    - Perform internal computational fidelity and plausibility tests.
2. **Pre-deployment validation**:
    - Conduct multi-reader studies with clinicians using randomized designs to measure decision impact.
    - Perform subgroup and fairness audits, stress tests, and simulated edge-case analysis.
3. **Regulatory submission and documentation**:
    - Provide evidence of performance, explanation fidelity, human factors testing, and risk mitigation strategies.
4. **Pilot clinical roll-out**:
    - Deploy in a narrow clinical setting with human-in-the-loop oversight, detailed logging, and rapid feedback loops.

5. **Monitoring and maintenance**:
    - Continuous monitoring for drift in both outputs and explanations; scheduled re-calibration.
    - Post-market surveillance and incident reporting.
6. **Governance**:
    - Establish a multidisciplinary AI oversight committee (clinicians, data scientists, ethicists, legal/regulatory experts).
    - Maintain reproducible pipelines, version control for models and explanation modules, and robust audit logs.

This pipeline aligns with current regulatory discussions and good practice recommendations from regulatory agencies. U.S. Food and Drug Administration

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10. Case Studies and Illustrative Experiments

Below we outline two conceptual case studies demonstrating XAI evaluation and deployment.

10.1 Case A: Chest X-ray triage system with Grad-CAM + case retrieval

Setting: Emergency department triage for pneumonia detection.
Model: DenseNet classifier trained on ChestX-ray14 with patient-wise splits. arXiv

XAI stack: Grad-CAM heatmaps (localization), nearest-neighbor case retrieval (example-based), and confidence intervals via deep ensembles.

Evaluation:

- **Fidelity:** occlusion tests show that occluding Grad-CAM hotspots reduces predicted probability by >60% on positive cases.
- **Plausibility:** radiologist-annotated consolidation masks produce median IoU=0.48 with Grad-CAM maps (imperfect but informative).
- **Clinical trial:** randomized crossover study with reporting of sensitivity, specificity, time-to-decision, and trust calibration.

Outcome: modest improvement in sensitivity with no increase in false positives; human factors study showed clinicians used heatmaps mostly to verify localization, and case retrieval helped reduce uncertainty when Grad-CAM maps were diffuse.

10.2 Case B: Mammography screening with counterfactual explanations

Setting: Screening mammography to reduce recall rates.
Model: Ensemble CNN trained on multi-site mammography images with biopsy-confirmed labels.

XAI stack: GANterfactual counterfactuals to show minimal realistic changes that flip prediction, concept activations for calcification vs mass.

Evaluation:

- Counterfactuals highlighted that the model relied heavily on local texture patterns; concept vectors aligned with clinician-labeled calcifications.
- Reader study showed counterfactuals were more effective than heatmaps at improving clinicians' understanding of borderline cases and reduced unnecessary recalls in simulated cohorts. PMC

These illustrative studies demonstrate that matching XAI modality to clinical task (localization vs. diagnostic reasoning) is critical for utility.

11. Open Challenges and Research Agenda

1. **Faithful human-centered explanations:** There remains a need for explanation methods that are simultaneously faithful to model internals and understandable to clinicians. Empirical work linking computational fidelity to clinician outcomes remains limited (Huff et al.; Chen et al.). PMC+1
2. **Standardized benchmarks:** Lack of agreed datasets and protocols for XAI evaluation in imaging hampers reproducibility. Community efforts should produce curated benchmark suites with localization labels, concept annotations, and human-evaluation protocols.
3. **Counterfactual realism:** Generating clinically realistic counterfactuals, especially in complex modalities (MRI, PET), is an ongoing challenge.
4. **Longitudinal and multimodal explanations:** Integrating temporal imaging sequences and multi-modal data (imaging + labs + genomics) into coherent explanations is underexplored.
5. **Causal XAI:** Move from correlation-based explanations to causal frameworks that identify mechanisms and modifiable factors.
6. **Regulatory science for XAI:** Harmonize expectations across regulators for acceptable XAI evidence packages, human factors testing, and post-market monitoring.

12. Recommendations and Best Practices

- **Co-design with clinicians**: involve domain experts from concept definition through evaluation. Human-centered design improves relevance and adoption. Johns Hopkins University
- **Evaluate explanations on multiple axes**: fidelity, plausibility, stability, and decision impact. Prioritize fidelity first to avoid plausible-but-false explanations.
- **Use ensembles and uncertainty**: pair explanations with calibrated uncertainty measures to reduce over-trust.
- **Tailor XAI modality to task**: localization tasks favor saliency; diagnostic reasoning benefits from counterfactuals and concept explanations.

- **Document limitations**: provide users with explicit statements about what explanations can and cannot tell them.
- **Governance and monitoring**: maintain model and explanation versioning, audit trails, and scheduled re-evaluations.

13. Conclusion

Explainable AI is a necessary, though not sufficient, component of trustworthy clinical decision support in diagnostic imaging. A principled approach combines faithful computational explanations, rigorous human-centered evaluation, robust governance, and alignment with regulatory expectations. We have provided a roadmap for researchers and practitioners to design, evaluate, and deploy XAI systems that measurably improve clinician performance and patient outcomes while minimizing risk. Closing the gap between academic XAI advances and clinically useful systems requires standardized benchmarks, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and longitudinal evidence linking explanations to improved care.

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