Deep Learning Detects Changes Indicative of Axial Spondyloarthritis at MRI of Sacroiliac Joints

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Conflicts of interest are listed at the end of this article.

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Background: MRI is frequently used for early diagnosis of axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA). However, evaluation is time-consuming and requires profound expertise because noninflammatory degenerative changes can mimic axSpA, and early signs may therefore be missed. Deep neural networks could function as assistance for axSpA detection.

Purpose: To create a deep neural network to detect MRI changes in sacroiliac joints indicative of axSpA.

Materials and Methods: This retrospective multicenter study included MRI examinations of five cohorts of patients with clinical suspicion of axSpA collected at university and community hospitals between January 2006 and September 2020. Data from four cohorts were used as the training set, and data from one cohort as the external test set. Each MRI examination in the training and test sets was scored by six and seven raters, respectively, for inflammatory changes (bone marrow edema, enthesitis) and structural changes (erosions, sclerosis). A deep learning tool to detect changes indicative of axSpA was developed. First, a neural network to homogenize the images, then a classification network to train the network were trained. Performance was evaluated with use of area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC), sensitivity, and specificity. P < .05 was considered indicative of statistically significant difference.

Results: Overall, 593 patients (mean age, 37 years ± 11 [SD]; 302 women) were studied. Inflammatory and structural changes were found in 197 of 477 patients (41%) and 244 of 477 (51%), respectively, in the training set and 25 of 116 patients (22%) and 26 of 116 (22%) in the test set. The AUCs were 0.94 (95% CI: 0.84, 0.97) for all inflammatory changes, 0.88 (95% CI: 0.80, 0.95) for inflammatory changes fulfilling the Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society definition, and 0.89 (95% CI: 0.81, 0.96) for structural changes indicative of axSpA. Sensitivity and specificity on the external test set were 22 of 25 patients (88%) and 65 of 91 patients (71%), respectively, for inflammatory changes and 22 of 26 patients (85%) and 70 of 90 patients (78%) for structural changes.

Conclusion: Deep neural networks can detect inflammatory or structural changes to the sacroiliac joint indicative of axial spondyloarthritis at MRI.

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Online supplemental material is available for this article.
Deep Learning Detects Axial Spondyloarthritis at MRI of Sacroiliac Joints

**Key Results**
- This retrospective study comprised 593 patients with suspected axial spondyloarthritis and centrally evaluated MRI examinations of the sacroiliac joints.
- The sensitivity and specificity for the detection of active inflammatory and structural changes were 96% and 76% and 95% and 75%, respectively, in the validation set and 88% and 71% and 85% and 78% in the test set.
- The areas under the receiver operating characteristic curve for the detection of active inflammatory and structural changes were comparable in the validation (0.92 and 0.90, respectively) and test (0.94 and 0.89, respectively) data sets ($P = .38$ and .13).

**Materials and Methods**

**Study Sample**
This retrospective multicenter study used MRI data from three multicenter studies: (a) the German Spondyloarthritis Inception Cohort (GESPIC), an ongoing German multicenter inception cohort study started in 2000 that includes university and community hospitals in Germany (16). Patients included in the current study were recruited between February 2015 and September 2020 at Charité–Universitätsmedizin Berlin. (b) Optimal Referral Strategy for Early Diagnosis of Axial Spondyloarthritis (or OptiRef), a cross-sectional study conducted at Charité–Universitätsmedizin Berlin between October 2016 and February 2018. (c) The ASAS classification cohort, a multinational and multicenter study conducted at university and community hospitals between November 2005 and October 2009. Patients included in the current study were recruited between January 2006 and December 2008.

All MRI scans were centrally evaluated between June 2019 and June 2021.

The inclusion criterion was the availability of semicoronal MRI scans of the sacroiliac joint with T1-weighted sequences and fluid-sensitive fat-suppressed sequences (Fig 1).

The GESPIC (Ankylosing Spondylitis, Uveitis, and Crohn groups) and OptiRef studies were approved by the ethics committee of Charité–Universitätsmedizin Berlin; the ASAS classification study was approved by the ethics committees of the individual study centers in accordance with the local laws and regulations. All studies were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and Good Clinical Practice. Appendices E1 and E2 (online) provide further details.

**MRI Sequence Parameters**
Most examinations in the training set were performed with a 3.0-T MRI scanner (Skyra, Siemens Healthineers). The most common T1-weighted sequence was a turbo spin-echo sequence with repetition time of 652 msec, echo time 11 msec, and echo train length of four. The most used fluid-sensitive sequence with fat suppression was the fast spin-echo short tau inversion-recovery sequence with repetition time between 5000 and 7760 msec, echo time of 230 msec, inversion time of 200 msec, and echo train length of 12. Appendix E3 and Tables E1–E7 (online) provide more details.

**Data Labeling**
The training set included MRI scans of the sacroiliac joints (Fig 1) from the GESPIC–Ankylosing Spondylitis, GESPIC-Crohn, GESPIC-Uveitis, and OptiRef cohorts. Data from 73 of 477 patients in the training set (15%) were randomly selected as the validation set. Each MRI scan was evaluated by six trained raters (F.P., T.D., V.R., J.R., M.T., and D.P) with 5–15 years of experience in axSpA. Raters were blinded to clinical data, as they evaluated pseudonymized versions of the MRI scans and did not have access to the other raters’ assessments. This was ensured by the use of a specifically developed online tool. MRI scans from the ASAS classification cohort (4) were used as the external test set. MRI scans were evaluated by seven experienced raters (R.G.L., X.B., W.P.M., and four other raters) with more than 15 years of experience, as described previously (4).

All raters evaluated whether active inflammatory changes indicative of axSpA were present. If so, they evaluated specific changes, such as bone marrow edema fulfilling the ASAS definition, capsulitis, joint space enhancement, inflammation, and enthesitis. The same strategy was used for structural changes: the...
raters first assessed the presence or absence of structural changes compatible with axSpA globally, then specific changes (erosions, fat lesion, fat metaplasia in the erosion cavity, sclerosis, ankylosis, and bone buds).

In all sets, the reference standard for the global presence or absence of active inflammatory and structural lesions indicative for axSpA as well as global compatibility with the diagnosis of axSpA was defined as agreement among at least four raters. In the training set, if there was no majority decision, images were assessed in a consensus rater session.

To assess the performance of nonexpert raters, three board-certified radiologists (K.K.B., L.C.A., and J.L.V., with 5, 6, and 11 years of experience, respectively) with no special training in axSpA independently reviewed each MRI scan in the test set. Votes of these raters were not included in the ground truth. Appendix E4 (online) provides more details.

Model Training
The use of multiple scanners in this study introduced heterogeneity into the data, complicating the training of neural networks. Therefore, we first developed a three-dimensional U-Net architecture for MRI denoising, artifact reduction, and homogenization of intensity distribution between MRI scans (Fig 2). We then trained a three-dimensional dual-encoder residual neural network 101 to classify active inflammatory changes or structural changes indicative of axSpA (Fig 3). Gradient-weighted class activation mappings were used to provide visual explanations for the models’ decision. The inference time (ie, the combined time of preprocessing and prediction) for the models was measured during testing. Appendixes E5–E7 (online) provide a detailed description of the methods. All code is available at https://github.com/kbressem/spa.

Statistical Analysis
Statistical analysis was performed using R (version 4.0.4, the R Foundation) and the “tidyverse,” “irr,” “boot,” and “pROC” libraries (17–19). The classification models were evaluated on the validation and test sets. Receiver operating characteristic curves and the respective areas under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUCs) were calculated. Sensitivity, specificity, and accuracy were calculated on the validation and test sets with use of an identical cutoff (previously calculated for the validation set). The 95% CIs for the AUCs were estimated by bootstrapping, and the CIs for metrics were calculated with use of the Clopper-Pearson test. Interrater agreement and agreement between models and raters were assessed using the Fleiss κ statistic. Bootstrapping was applied to compare two AUCs. The Fisher test was used to compare sensitivity and specificity and prevalence. \( P < .05 \) was considered indicative of statistically significant difference.

Results

Data Set Characteristics
The data set consisted of 389 patients from the three GESPIC groups, 411 patients from the OptiRef cohort, and 278 patients from the ASAS classification cohort. After exclusion of patients without the required MRI sequences (296 in the training and validation sets and 148 in the test set) and with incomplete labeling (27 in the training and validation sets and 14 in the test set), 369 patients (mean age, 38 years ± 12 [SD]; 194 men) from GESPIC, 108 patients (36 years ± 11; 57 women) from the OptiRef cohort, and 116 patients (36 years ± 9; 70 women) from the ASAS cohort were included in our analysis.

Active inflammatory changes consistent with axSpA were present in 197 of 477 patients (41%) in the training and validation
sets, and 172 of 477 (36%) fulfilled the ASAS definition. In the test set, the prevalence was significantly lower, with 25 of 116 patients (22%) having inflammatory changes; 21 (18%) fulfilled the ASAS definition ($P = .03$). The prevalence of structural changes was also significantly different, with positive findings in 244 of 477 patients (51%) in the training and validation sets and in 26 of 116 patients (22%) in the test set ($P < .001$). The Table provides a detailed overview of the prevalence of active inflammatory and structural changes as well as characteristics of the patients included.

**Interrater Agreement**
No majority consensus was achieved in 51 of 477 MRI scans (11%) in the training and validation sets (15 of 125 scans [12%]...
in GESPIC–Ankylosing Spondylitis, five of 102 scans [5%] in GESPIC–Crohn, 18 of 142 scans [13%] in GESPIC–Uveitis, and 13 of 108 scans [12%] in OptiRef), and these scans were adjudicated in a consensus reading session.

Overall, the raters achieved substantial agreement in both data sets evaluated. In the validation set, Fleiss $\kappa$ values of 0.62 (95% CI: 0.50, 0.74) were achieved for active inflammatory changes, 0.61 (95% CI: 0.50, 0.71) for changes fulfilling the ASAS definition, and 0.71 (95% CI: 0.61, 0.80) for structural changes. In the test set, the agreement of the seven raters as measured by the Fleiss $\kappa$ statistic was 0.63 (95% CI: 0.53, 0.74) for active inflammatory changes, 0.65 (95% CI: 0.54, 0.77) for the detection of changes compatible with the ASAS definition, and 0.73 (95% CI: 0.64, 0.83) for structural changes.

### Baseline Characteristics of Patients in Different Study Cohorts after Data Selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>GESPIC-AS ($n = 125$)</th>
<th>GESPIC-Crohn ($n = 102$)</th>
<th>GESPIC-Uveitis ($n = 142$)</th>
<th>OptiRef ($n = 108$)</th>
<th>ASAS Cohort ($n = 116$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (y)*</td>
<td>36 ± 10 (33 [28–45])</td>
<td>37 ± 13 (35 [27–47])</td>
<td>41 ± 13 (39 [31–50])</td>
<td>36 ± 11 (34 [28–43])</td>
<td>36 ± 9 (36 [21–41])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>M 79 (63) F 46 (37)</td>
<td>M 47 (46) F 55 (54)</td>
<td>M 68 (48) F 74 (52)</td>
<td>M 51 (47) F 57 (53)</td>
<td>M 46 (40) F 70 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back pain, current</td>
<td>121 (97)</td>
<td>121 (97)</td>
<td>119 (95)</td>
<td>119 (95)</td>
<td>119 (95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflammatory back pain, current</td>
<td>21 (17)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>9 (6)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>43 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of back pain (y)†‡</td>
<td>11 ± 9.7</td>
<td>8 ± 8</td>
<td>13 ± 10</td>
<td>7 ± 7</td>
<td>8 ± 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral arthritis, current</td>
<td>21 (17)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>9 (6)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>43 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthesitis, current</td>
<td>40 (32)</td>
<td>8 (8)</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
<td>10 (9)</td>
<td>33 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dactylitis, current</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>8 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflammatory bowel disease, ever</td>
<td>9 (7)</td>
<td>102 (100)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>8 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute anterior uveitis, ever</td>
<td>27 (22)</td>
<td>12 (12)</td>
<td>142 (100)</td>
<td>12 (11)</td>
<td>20 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psoriasis, ever</td>
<td>18 (14)</td>
<td>6 (6)</td>
<td>15 (11)</td>
<td>11 (10)</td>
<td>17 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family history of SpA</td>
<td>49 (39)</td>
<td>30 (29)</td>
<td>16 (11)</td>
<td>15 (14)</td>
<td>32 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human leukocyte antigen B27 positivity</td>
<td>109 (87)</td>
<td>12 (12)</td>
<td>111 (78)</td>
<td>64 (59)</td>
<td>47 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-reactive protein (mg/L)†</td>
<td>13.1 ± 17.7</td>
<td>10.2 ± 25.4</td>
<td>4.7 ± 7.6</td>
<td>4.0 ± 6.5</td>
<td>3.3 ± 13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosed with axial spondyloarthritis</td>
<td>125 (100)</td>
<td>10 (10)</td>
<td>74 (52)</td>
<td>57 (53)</td>
<td>89 (77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active inflammatory changes indicative of SpA at MRI of sacroiliac joints</td>
<td>86 (67)</td>
<td>11 (11)</td>
<td>57 (40)</td>
<td>43 (40)</td>
<td>25 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active sacroiliitis at MRI according to the ASAS definition</td>
<td>75 (60)</td>
<td>11 (11)</td>
<td>47 (34)</td>
<td>39 (37)</td>
<td>21 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural changes indicative of SpA at MRI of sacroiliac joints</td>
<td>124 (99)</td>
<td>13 (13)</td>
<td>64 (45)</td>
<td>43 (40)</td>
<td>26 (22)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—Unless otherwise specified, data are numbers of patients, with percentages in parentheses. The training and validation sets consisted of data from the German Spondyloarthritis Inception Cohort (GESPIC) and Optimal Referral Strategy for Early Diagnosis of Axial Spondyloarthritis (OptiRef) cohort. The test set consisted only of data from the Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society (ASAS) cohort. AS = ankylosing spondylitis, SpA = spondyloarthritis.

* Data are means ± SDs, with the medians in parentheses, IQRs in brackets, and ranges in curly braces.
† In patients with back pain.
‡ Data are means ± SDs.
Deep Learning Detects Axial Spondyloarthritis at MRI of Sacroiliac Joints

### Detection of Active Inflammatory Changes Indicative of axSpA

Compared with the reference standard (majority decision of all experienced raters), the model for the detection of active inflammatory changes showed an AUC of 0.92 (95% CI: 0.83, 0.97) and an accuracy of 61 of 73 patients (84% [95% CI: 73, 91]) in the validation set. In the test set, there was no significant difference in performance, with an AUC of 0.94 (95% CI: 0.84, 0.97) and an accuracy of 87 of 116 patients (75% [95% CI: 66, 83]; \( P = .38 \)), despite a significantly lower prevalence (\( P = .03 \)).

In the validation set, the model had a sensitivity of 26 of 27 patients (96% [95% CI: 81, 100]) and specificity of 35 of 46 patients (76% [95% CI: 61, 87]) for detecting active inflammatory changes. In the test set, the model sensitivity was 22 of 25 patients (88% [95% CI: 69, 97]) and specificity was 65 of 91 patients (71% [95% CI: 61, 80]).

For the detection of active inflammatory changes fulfilling the ASAS definition (bone marrow edema), the AUC and accuracy on the validation set were 0.86 (95% CI: 0.73, 0.90) and 60 of 73 patients (82% [95% CI: 71, 90]), respectively. In the test set, the model showed an AUC of 0.88 (95% CI: 0.80, 0.95) and an accuracy of 90 of 116 patients (78% [95% CI: 69, 85]; \( P = .75 \)). The model’s sensitivity in the test set was similar at 18 of 21 patients (86% [95% CI: 64, 97]; \( P = .25 \)), with a corresponding specificity of 72 of 95 patients (76% [95% CI: 68, 86]; \( P = .19 \)).

### Table: Confusion Matrices for the Performance of the Classification Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Predicted</th>
<th>Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active inflammatory changes</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Predicted</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy (Validation set)</td>
<td>87/116 (75%)</td>
<td>Accuracy (Test set)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity (Validation set)</td>
<td>22/25 (88%)</td>
<td>Sensitivity (Test set)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity (Validation set)</td>
<td>65/91 (71%)</td>
<td>Specificity (Test set)</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Predicted</th>
<th>Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASAS-compatible changes</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Predicted</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy (Validation set)</td>
<td>87/116 (75%)</td>
<td>Accuracy (Test set)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity (Validation set)</td>
<td>22/25 (88%)</td>
<td>Sensitivity (Test set)</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Predicted</th>
<th>Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structural changes</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Predicted</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy (Validation set)</td>
<td>87/116 (75%)</td>
<td>Accuracy (Test set)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity (Validation set)</td>
<td>22/25 (88%)</td>
<td>Sensitivity (Test set)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity (Validation set)</td>
<td>65/91 (71%)</td>
<td>Specificity (Test set)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ASAS = Assessment of Spondyloarthritis International Society

**Figure 4:** Confusion matrices for the performance of the classification models on the test and validation sets for each class compared with the reference standard (consensus of at least four experienced raters). Accuracy, sensitivity, and specificity of individual raters are reported in Tables E8–E10 [online]. Analysis of discordant MRI scans for active inflammatory changes and ASAS-compatible changes showed that imaging artifacts, such as field bias and partial failure of fat suppression, might have led to some false-positive predictions (\( n = 8 \)). The loss of detail after denoising could have led to the fact that small erosions were no longer delimitable, leading to false-negative predictions for structural changes. In some MRI scans (\( n = 3 \)), false-positive predictions for structural changes also seemed to be influenced by degenerative changes.
The confusion matrices of the diagnostic performance of the models for the test and validation groups are shown in Figure 4. Figure 5 compares the performance of the individual raters with that of the models. Figure 6 provides receiver operating characteristic curves of the model performance on the test and validation sets along with sensitivity and specificity estimates for the experienced human raters. Additional information on individual accuracy for each rater is given in Tables E8 and E9 (online).

Figures 7 and E1 (online) indicate example gradient-weighted class activation mappings to visualize the models’ decisions and highlight image regions relevant to model predictions.

**Detection of Structural Changes Indicative of axSpA**

In the validation set, the model had an AUC of 0.90 (95% CI: 0.82, 0.96) for the detection of structural changes and an overall accuracy of 62 of 73 patients (85% [95% CI: 75, 92]). The associated sensitivity and specificity were 35 of 37 patients (95% [95% CI: 82, 99]) and 27 of 36 patients (75% [95% CI: 58, 94]), respectively.

In the external test data, the AUC and accuracy were 0.89 (95% CI: 0.81, 0.96) and 92 of 116 patients (79% [95% CI: 71, 86]), respectively. Compared with the validation set, sensitivity and specificity were similar at 22 of 26 patients (85% [95% CI: 65, 96]; \(P = .22\)) and 70 of 90 patients (78% [95% CI: 66, 84]; \(P = .82\)), respectively.

**Performance of Nonexpert Raters**

The three board-certified radiologists who were not trained in axSpA had a mean sensitivity and specificity of 21 of 25 patients (83% [95% CI: 63, 91]) and 76 of 91 patients (84% [95% CI: 75, 91]), respectively, for detecting active inflammatory changes, 20 of 25 (79% [95% CI: 56, 93]) and 80 of 91 (87% [95% CI: 79, 93]) for active inflammatory changes...
fulfilling the ASAS definition, and 23 of 25 (92% [95% CI: 75, 90]) and 76 of 91 (83% [95% CI: 74, 90]) for structural changes indicative of axSpA. For active inflammatory changes, the model showed similar sensitivity (22 of 25 patients, 88% [95% CI: 69, 97]; \( P = .34 \)) to that of the nonexpert radiologists. Details on the individual performance of the radiologists can be obtained from Table E10 (online).

**Approximation of Inference Time**

Image reading and preprocessing (resampling, bias correction) took an average of 16.2 seconds ± 0.0567 (SD) per image. Denoising with the U-Net took 1.25 seconds ± 0.0151 per MRI scan but had to be applied to T1-weighted MRI scans and fluid-sensitive, fat-suppressed MRI scans individually. The average prediction time for each MRI scan in the entire data set was 7.19 seconds ± 0.0673 on the validation set and 10.5 seconds ± 0.108 on the test set (approximately 100 msec per item). Overall, the estimated inference time for loading, preprocessing, and prediction for a single examination was 18.9 seconds.

**Discussion**

Interpretation of MRI scans associated with axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA) requires expertise in characteristic findings of the disease and is time-consuming. We developed a deep learning tool for detecting changes indicative of axSpA at MRI, which was evaluated against the performance of seven international experienced raters. The deep learning tool showed a sensitivity of 88% for detecting inflammatory changes indicative of axSpA.

MRI allows the detection of inflammatory changes at an earlier stage than radiography and is thus increasingly used (20,21). However, correctly identifying and interpreting changes to the sacroiliac joint as characteristic of axSpA can be challenging, especially for nonexperts, who have a lower reliability than experienced readers (8). One reason for this may be the overlap between inflammatory and degenerative findings. For example, bone marrow edema may occur in axSpA due to mechanical stress or in osteitis condensans ilii, making it difficult for nonexperts to make an accurate diagnosis (22,23). In our study, we also observed that radiologists without expertise in axSpA showed a lower diagnostic performance than domain experts did.
A strength of our study is the inclusion of MRI scans acquired on different machines with different settings (thus reflecting real clinical practice), the central standardized evaluation of images by experts, and the use of an external test set. External test sets allow for more realistic evaluation of deep learning models, as recently emphasized in two meta-analyses by Liu et al (24) and Kim et al (25). Our test set had a significantly lower prevalence of axSpA, with the use of different scanners and the deployment of different raters. Nevertheless, our developed models generalized to the new data without a significant decrease in performance.

The generalizability of our models could be due to the large heterogeneity of the training data. Mårtensson et al (26) recently investigated the importance of heterogeneous training. A criticism they presented was that training with curated research data does not represent a realistic clinical setting and will lead to lower performance when the models are applied to data acquired with different scanners and protocols. However, heterogeneous data can also complicate training and require more extensive preprocessing to normalize the images, which is time-consuming. Ran et al (27) and Chauhan and Choi (28) have therefore proposed the use of neural networks to preprocess MRI scans, similar to the approach presented in our study. Our study demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach and the positive impact on generalizability, as shown by the ablation presented in Appendix E8 (online).

Our study has several limitations. First, the consensus of multiple experts was used as the reference standard because there is no true reference standard for the presence of axSpA. Nevertheless, the consensus of multiple readers can still be wrong, possibly introducing noise into the data set and affecting model performance. Second, the prevalence of axSpA in the test set was low, which may introduce uncertainty in the assessment of

Figure 7: Example of gradient-weighted class activation mapping (Grad-CAM) for the classification model. In this MRI scan in a 41-year-old woman with confirmed axial spondyloarthritis, the model correctly predicted the presence of structural changes, active inflammatory changes, and Assessment of SpondyloArthritis international Society–compatible changes. The scan consisted of a semicoronal T1-weighted and a semicoronal short tau inversion-recovery sequence. Changes are best seen in the region of the left sacroiliac joint, where the model also showed the strongest activations. The magnification is approximately X2.
performance. Third, in GESPIC-Uveitis and OptiRef, MRI was performed in only a subset of patients, which could introduce selection bias. Fourth, our models were trained with semicoronal images only, so different orientations could lead to model failure. Fifth, we chose global labels for model training and did not provide a quadrant-based analysis of the sacroiliac joints, which would have allowed a more spatially accurate assessment of different joint regions. Sixth, the diagnostic performance of the models is not evidence of their clinical utility. Further trials are necessary to evaluate if the use of the models translates into a benefit for patients. Finally, because of the variety of scanners and protocols used, we were unable to provide imaging parameters for all MRI scans, which limits the reproducibility of our data. Nevertheless, we believe that the approach used in our study will generalize to new scanner protocols, as it generalized to the test set.

In conclusion, a deep learning tool was developed for the detection of axial spondyloarthritis (axSpA)–associated abnormalities at MRI. The deep learning tool could help clinicians detect inflammation earlier and properly to initiate appropriate treatment in patients with axSpA. In addition, it could serve as a classification tool in clinical trials. Because accurate diagnosis of axSpA depends on experience, our tool could be particularly helpful for hospitals without specialization in axSpA. However, further research is needed to evaluate the clinical value of the gain in accuracy with our deep learning tool and the impact on therapy, ideally in the form of a prospective study.

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