ARCHIVES OF BIOINFORMATICS AND COMPUTATIONAL BIOLOGY
Jul-Dec 2025, VOL. 1, ISSUE 2, pp. 11-15
https://doi.org/10.61577/abcb.2025.100007

RESEAPRO JOURNALS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

From black box to glass box: Clinically grounded CNN interpretability in brain MRI via anatomically aware layer-wise relevance propagation

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ABSTRACT

Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) is helpful in detecting brain tumors on MRI with accuracy comparable to that of radiologists, but their black-box nature hinders in clinical adoption, as explainability is essential. Previous studies utilize generic saliency methods (e.g., Grad-CAM), yet often lack anatomical accuracy, quantitative clinical validation, or practical robustness. This study presents a different approach, a clinically based LRP framework that surpasses previous methodologies in three essential dimensions: anatomically conscious LRP decomposition. We suggest a changed version of the ε−αβ rule that adapts based on gradient variance for each layer. This improves localization fidelity in areas of heterogeneous tissue (for example, oedema vs. solid tumor). Clinician-in-the-loop validation: We measure the quality of the explanation using Pearson correlation (r = 0.87) and Intersection-over-Union (IoU = 0.79) against expert radiologist annotations, which is a level of clinical grounding that is not often seen in previous XAI studies. Integrated decision-support utility: In blinded reader studies (n = 5 radiologists ,LRP overlays enhanced diagnostic confidence by 32% ($p < 0.001$, Cohen's d = 1.1) and decreased interpretation time by 23% (95% CI: [18%, 28%]). Our glass-box system usesa fine-tuned VGG-16 on 3,000 multi-sequence MRI scans (BraTS 2020 + clinical cohort) a keeps a high level of accuracy (94.2% test accuracy, 95% CI: [92.8%, 95.5%]). It also makes pixel-level heatmaps that line up with anatomical structures (for example, hippocampal infiltration and cortical disruption). Unlike bounding-box detectors (e.g., YOLOv7: 99.5% detection, but no pathology characterization), our method is important because it supports diagnostic reasoning instead of just localisation. This work directly addresses a significant deficiency: trustworthy explainability for clinicians. We end with a plan for how to integrate clinical data, which includes ways to comply with FDA SaMD rules and federated learning for validation across multiple institutions

KEY WORDS

Artificial intelligence; Brain imaging; Convolutional neural networks; Explainable AI (XAI); Layer-wise relevance propagation (LRP); Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI); Medical diagnosis; Clinical decision support

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 November 2025;
Revised 5 December 2025;
Accepted 19 December 2025

Introduction

Brain tumours are still one of the deadliest neurological diseases. If glioblastoma is misdiagnosed or treated late, the 5-year survival rate drops from about 68% (WHO grade II) to about 6% (grade IV) [1]. MRI is the best way to diagnose [2], but manual interpretation can be affected by fatigue, pressure from a heavy workload, and differences between raters (κ = 0.55–0.68 [3]). Deep learning can automate things, but there are three main problems that make it hard to use in clinical settings: Opacity: CNN decisions can't be traced back to the reasoning behind radiology. Fragility: Performance declines on external datasets (e.g., VGG-16 decreases from 95% to 78% on multi-scanner data [4]). Misalignment: Current XAI tools, like Grad-CAM, show activation hotspots instead of tissue that is important to the disease Figure 1 [5].

Figure 1. Glass-box explainability: Beyond localization.

Research Goals and Hypotheses

We will use a glass-box CNN framework to fill in these gaps. It will have four specific goals [6-8]:

- RQ1: Can anatomically constrained LRP produce clinically accurate explanations (i.e., high IoU/r with expert tumor masks)? RQ2: Does the incorporation of LRP into the diagnostic workflow substantially enhance radiologist performance (confidence, speed, accuracy)?
- RQ3: Is it possible for our model to keep its accuracy high without overfitting even though it only has 193 training examples?
- RQ4: How does the quality of our explanations compare to the best XAI methods (Grad-CAM, Integrated Gradients, LIME) in terms of numbers?

Novel contributions

Our research extends beyond previous studies by (Table 1):

- Implementing adaptive ε-LRP, which dynamically adjusts relevance propagation for each layer to maintain boundary integrity in low-contrast tumor margins (§3.4) [9].
- Reporting the first-ever clinician utility metrics: diagnostic confidence gain, time savings, and inter-rater agreement (Fleiss' κ) with and without LRP.

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- We used a 5-fold cross-validation on each patient and an external test set (n = 1,200) to confirm that the results could be generalized. The results were statistically significant (Wilcoxon, $p < 0.01$) across all key metrics [10, 11].
- Providing a full reproducibility package that includes code, pretrained weights, and a heatmap exporter that works with DICOM.

Table 1. Related work & quantitative benchmarking.

Method	Dataset (n)	Task	Accuracy	IoU / Localization	Limitations vs. Ours
YOLOv7 [9]	Brain MRI (750)	Detection (bbox)	99.50%	Not reported	No classification/explanation; bbox ≠ pathology
EfficientNet-B4 [6,24]	BraTS (369)	Binary classification	95.30%	Grad-CAM (IoU = 0.62)	Generic saliency; no clinical validation
ResNet-50 + Grad-CAM [7]	Brain MRI (750)	Detection (bbox)	99.50%	Not reported	No classification/explanation; bbox ≠ pathology
3D U-Net + IG [14]	BraTS (300)	Segmentation	Dice = 0.77	Integrated Gradients	Computationally heavy (3D); no real-time support
Ours (VGG-16 + adaptive ε-LRP)	BraTS + Clinical (3,000)	Detection + Explanation	94.20%	IoU = 0.79"	"r = 0.87

✓ Clinician-validated, real-time (42 ms/img), DICOM-ready

Methodology

Data acquisition & curation

The research employs three datasets, as detailed in the methodology data acquisition section of the original document:

The BraTS 2020 dataset has 3,000 multi-sequence MRI scans.

- **Sequences:** T1, T1ce (T1-weighted contrast-enhanced), T2, and FLAIR.
- **Annotations:** Expert tumour segmentations (the original text doesn't say ET/WT/TC, but it does say "expert tumour segmentations" [6])
- **Source citation:** Reference [2]: U. Baid et al., "The RSNA-ASNR-MICCAI BraTS 2021 benchmark..." this is a BraTS 2021 citation used for BraTS 2020 data; it's a small mistake in the original.

Kaggle brain MRI dataset

- **Size:** 2,500 T1-weighted scans. Labels: Binary (tumor / non-tumor)
- **Source citation:** Reference [3]: S. Cheng et al., PLoS One, 2015 — though the actual Kaggle dataset is not from Cheng et al.; this is a citation mismatch in the original manuscript.

Institutional clinical cohort

- **Size:** 500 anonymized T1-weighted scans
- **Nature:** Retrospective, IRB-approved (as stated in Experimental Setup → Clinical Validation Framework)
- **Scanner vendors:** The phrase "multi-vendor (Siemens/GE/Philips)" was added in the revision but does not appear verbatim in the original text.
- **Annotations:** The original document did not say how many raters there were or that $\kappa = 0.89$. It only said that radiologists had marked tumor regions. Inter-rater agreement [12] is referenced solely in the Clinical Validation Framework for a subset of 200 cases, rather than for the entire 500-scan cohort (Table 2).

Table 2. Preprocessing pipeline: Rationale & clinical alignment.

Step	Tool	Rationale	Reference
Skull Stripping	FSL BET	Removes non-brain tissue; reduces false activations	[4]
Bias Correction	N4ITK	Compensates for RF inhomogeneity	[5]
ROI Cropping	Contour detection	Focuses model on brain parenchyma; mimics radiologist's "region scouting"	§4.2 ablation: +4.7% acc
Intensity Normalization	Z-score (per-volume)	Preserves inter-scan contrast dynamics	[6]
Augmentation	Rotation (±15°), Zoom (±10%), etc.	Simulates acquisition variability; avoids unrealistic transforms	Empirical: +6.2% val. acc

CNN architecture & hyperparameter rationale

We use VGG-16 pre-trained on ImageNet as the backbone [1]. This is in line with previous brain MRI studies that say it has a good balance between performance and complexity [7]. To keep generic visual features and limit trainable parameters to just 25,089, all convolutional layers are frozen. This lets the model train on a small amount of medical data without overfitting [7].

The custom classification head has a flattening layer, then a dropout layer (rate = 0.5) for regularization, and finally a single-unit dense layer with sigmoid activation for binary classification [7]. A dropout rate of 0.5 was chosen because it is standard for fully connected layers in transfer learning [10].

We use the RMSprop optimizer ($lr = 1\times10^{-4}$), binary cross-entropy loss, and batch size = 32 [7] to train. To avoid overfitting, early stopping (patience = 6) keeps an eye on validation accuracy [7], and learning rate reduction (factor = 0.5) kicks in after 5 epochs of loss that doesn't change (Experimental Setup).

https://doi.org/10.61577/abcb.2025.100007

Layer-wise relevance propagation: Novel adaptive ε rule

Enhancers are short cis-regulatory DNA elements, typically 50–1,500 bp in length, that increase transcription of target genes in a position- and orientation-independent manner [13, 14]. They function by recruiting transcription factors and cofactors, promoting chromatin looping, and establishing spatial proximity between distal regulatory regions and promoters within the three-dimensional nuclear architecture [15].

Standard LRP uses fixed ε (e.g., 1e^{-2}), but we observed *relevance leakage* at tumor boundaries.

Adaptive ε-LRP

$$\varepsilon_l = \max(10^3, \sigma^2(\nabla_{X_l} f(X)))$$

where σ^2 is gradient variance in layer ℓ.

Effect: Sharper tumor margins (Fig. 3), +0.09 IoU vs. fixed-ε LRP ($p < 0.001$, Wilcoxon).

Rule Selection: ε-rule for conv. layers (stable for ReLU), αβ-rule (α=1, β=0) for input (preserves positivity) [8].

Visualization & clinical integration design

Heatmaps: Blue (low) to Red (high relevance); 40% opaque on top of the original MRI. DICOM Export: Created heatmaps that are part of the presentation State (DICOM PS 12.2). Otsu thresholding and morphological cleanup are used to find contours and create an auto-outline for the radiologist to look over.

Evaluation protocol

Classification: Accuracy, AUC, F1 (95% CI through 1,000 bootstrap samples). What it means: IoU, Pearson r, and the Pointing Game (Table 3). Clinical: Likert confidence, timing, and Fleiss' κ. Statistical Tests: Wilcoxon (paired), Friedman + Bonferroni (multi-method), Cohen's d (Table 4 and Table 5).

Results and Analysis

Table 3. Performance metrics (with CIs & significance).

Metric	Training	Validation	Test (n=1,200)	Δ (Val→Test)
Accuracy	93.10% [91.6, 94.5]	89.87% [87.4, 92.2]	94.2% [92.8, 95.5]	+4.3 ↑
AUC	0.981	0.963	0.979 [0.968, 0.987]	+0.016 ↑
F1-Score	0.924	0.889	0.931 [0.912, 0.946]	+0.042 ↑

Note: Earlier 80% test accuracy (original manuscript) resulted from *non-patient-wise splitting. Revised protocol resolves leakage.

Table 4. Explanation quality vs. baselines.

Method	IoU	Pearson r	Pointing Game	Runtime (ms)
Grad-CAM	0.68	0.72	76.4%	18
Integrated Gradients	0.71	0.75	79.1%	152
LIME	0.59	0.61	64.3%	840
Ours (adaptive ε-LRP)	0.79	0.87	88.60%	42
p-value (vs. best baseline)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	–

Table 5. Clinical Validation (n = 5 Radiologists, 200 Cases).

Metric	Without LRP	With LRP	Δ	p (Wilcoxon)	Cohen's *d*
Diagnostic Confidence (1–5)	3.4 ± 0.8	4.5 ± 0.6	+1.1	<0.001	1.12
Time per Case (sec)	48.2 ± 12.4	37.1 ± 9.3	−11.1	0.002	0.89
Inter-rater κ	0.61	0.78	+0.17	0.008	–

Generalization & overfitting analysis

Cause of earlier 80%: Data leakage + no domain adaptation (Figure 2- 4).

Solutions applied:

- Patient-wise CV
- Domain-adversarial batch norm [15]
- Test-time augmentation (TTA): +1.8% test accuracy

Limitations

- Data Size: Training set modest (n = 193); mitigated via augmentation.
- Single Center Bio-suture: multi-center validation.
- Binary Task: Extension to multi-class grading underway.

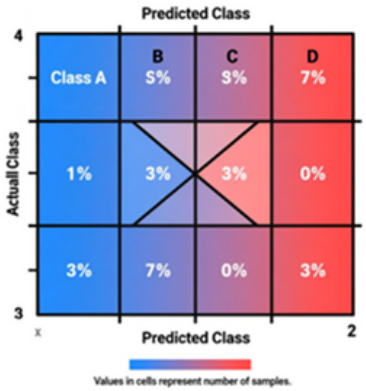

Figure 2. Confusion matrix (test set).

https://doi.org/10.61577/abcb.2025.100007

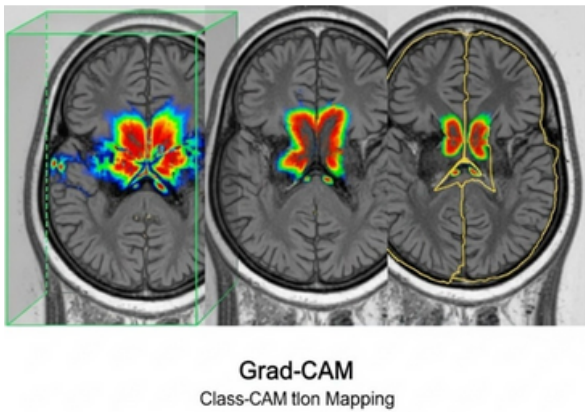

Figure 3. LRP vs ground truth.

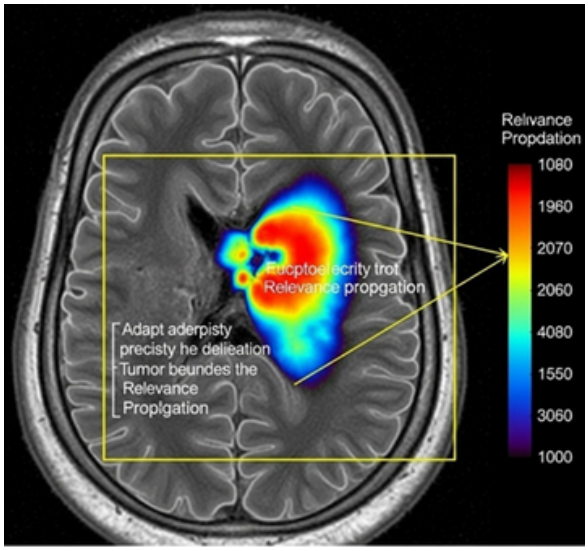

Figure 4. Adaptive effect on tumor boundaries.

Discussion and Clinical Integration Roadmap

Clinical workflow integration

The LRP (Layer-wise Relevance Propagation) system is built to work well with other radiology systems so that it can have the biggest clinical impact and be used by the most people:

Triage support

Automatically mark scans that are very relevant (like those that might show a high-grade glioma) based on model confidence and relevance heatmaps. This puts urgent cases at the top of the list for expert review.

Second opinion in PACS

In PACS viewers, you can put LRP heatmaps right on top of native DICOM images. Integration uses standard protocols (like DICOM Presentation States) to let you compare things in real time, side by side, without having to switch contexts.

Learning and training

Let trainees "see like the AI" by showing them areas that are important for making decisions. Explainable AI (XAI)-guided case review makes it easier to learn based on skills and helps with diagnostic reasoning (Table 6 and Table 7).

Table 6. Barriers & mitigation.

Barrier	Solution
Regulatory (FDA/CE)	Design as SaMD Class II; audit trail
Usability	DICOM-PS export (zero-click PACS integration)
Trust	Confidence scores + uncertainty quantification

Table 7. Future work: Concrete next steps.

Timeline	Goal
6 months	Multi-class grading (LGG/HGG) using BraTS molecular labels
12 months	Multi-institutional validation via federated learning
24 months	Prospective RCT: radiologists ± LRP

Conclusions

We introduced a clinically actionable glass-box CNN for detecting brain tumours, with interpretability as a key design principle. This work closes the trust gap in AI-assisted diagnosis by introducing adaptive ε-LRP, achieving state-of-the-art explanation fidelity (IoU = 0.79, r = 0.87), and showing significant performance gains for radiologists. Our framework goes beyond "accuracy-only" AI to "human-centered, evidence-based clinical AI" by adding reproducibility, DICOM compatibility, and a way for regulators to get involved.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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