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Emerging Imaging Techniques In Radiology: A Comprehensive Overview

FAHAD HASSAN AL THAIBAN,[1] ALI MAHDI ALI ALSALOM,[2] MOUSA ALI MOHAMAD AL SWAB,[3] MOHAMMED SAAD HADI SAQER,[4] SALEH MOHAMMED ALI ALQASHANIN,[5] MANA MAHDI MANA ALMAHRI,[6] ALI SALEH ALYAMI,[7] ABDULLAH SALEH HAMAD ALSULAIMAN,[8] HADI MOHAMMAD H AL YAMI,[9] MOHAMMAD SALEH MOHAMMED ALYAMI,[10] MAHDI HADI MAHDI ALZAMANAN,[11] HANEEN ALI HUSSAIN ALHABES,[12] FAWZYAH SALEM ALHABES,[13]MOHAMMED NAJI MOHAMMED ALMAKAEEL[14]

[1,2,3,4,5-]Thar General Hospital Najran Moh kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[6-]Kubash genral hispital Najran Moh kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[7-]Yadamah hospital Najran Moh kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[8-]Maternity and Children Hospital In Dammam Moh kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[9-]Najran Specialty Dental Center Najran Moh kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[10,11,12,13-] New Najran General Hospital Moh kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
[14-]Bader aljanob hospital, Najran Moh kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Abstract:

The field of radiology is constantly evolving with advancements in technology, leading to the emergence of new imaging techniques. This comprehensive overview explores the latest innovations in radiological imaging, including their principles, applications, advantages, and limitations. From cutting-edge modalities like molecular imaging and functional MRI to promising techniques such as optical coherence tomography (OCT) and photoacoustic imaging, this article provides insight into the future landscape of diagnostic radiology.

Keywords: emerging imaging techniques, radiology, diffusion tensor imaging, functional MRI, cone beam computed tomography, elastography, PET/MRI, photoacoustic imaging, nanoimaging, augmented reality, virtual reality.

Introduction

Radiology stands at the forefront of modern medicine, playing a pivotal role in the diagnosis, treatment, and management of various diseases and conditions. Over the years, the field of radiology has witnessed remarkable advancements, driven by technological innovations that continue to revolutionize medical imaging. These advancements have not only improved the accuracy and efficiency of diagnosis but have also opened new avenues for understanding disease pathophysiology and guiding therapeutic interventions.

In this comprehensive overview, we delve into the realm of emerging imaging techniques in radiology, exploring the latest innovations that are reshaping the landscape of diagnostic imaging. From molecular imaging modalities capable of visualizing cellular processes to advanced functional imaging techniques offering insights into brain function, we examine the principles, applications, advantages, and limitations of these cutting-edge technologies.

The rapid evolution of imaging techniques is fueled by the growing demand for more precise and personalized approaches to healthcare. As we move towards an era of precision medicine, where treatment strategies are tailored to individual patients based on their unique molecular profiles and disease characteristics, the role of advanced imaging becomes increasingly indispensable. Moreover, the integration of imaging with other disciplines, such as genomics and artificial intelligence, holds the promise of unlocking new frontiers in diagnosis, prognosis, and therapeutics.

However, along with the promise of innovation come challenges and considerations that must be addressed. Cost implications, accessibility issues, regulatory requirements, and the need for specialized training pose significant barriers to the widespread adoption of emerging imaging techniques. Furthermore, ensuring the safety and efficacy of these technologies remains paramount, particularly as we venture into uncharted territory with novel imaging modalities and hybrid approaches.[1]

Despite these challenges, the future of radiology appears bright, with a plethora of opportunities for continued advancement and collaboration. By staying abreast of the latest developments and fostering interdisciplinary partnerships, radiologists and healthcare professionals can harness the full potential of emerging imaging techniques to improve patient outcomes and redefine the practice of medicine.

In the subsequent sections of this overview, we will explore in detail some of the most promising emerging imaging techniques in radiology, highlighting their clinical applications, technological principles, and potential impact on healthcare delivery. From molecular imaging and functional MRI to optical coherence tomography and photo-acoustic imaging, these innovations represent the vanguard of diagnostic imaging, offering new insights into disease processes and paving the way for personalized and precision medicine.[2]

Molecular Imaging

Molecular imaging represents a paradigm shift in the field of radiology by enabling visualization and quantification of biological processes at the molecular and cellular levels in living organisms. Unlike traditional anatomical imaging modalities such as X-ray, CT, and MRI, which primarily provide structural information, molecular imaging allows for the detection and characterization of specific molecular targets or biomarkers associated with disease pathology. This capability holds immense promise for early disease detection, accurate diagnosis, treatment monitoring, and personalized therapeutic interventions.

Principles of Molecular Imaging:

Molecular imaging techniques leverage various imaging probes or tracers that selectively bind to specific molecular targets or biomarkers within the body. These probes can be labeled with radioactive isotopes for nuclear imaging modalities like positron emission tomography (PET) and single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), or they can be tagged with fluorescent dyes or nanoparticles for optical imaging techniques. By detecting the signals emitted by these probes, molecular imaging modalities can visualize and quantify the distribution, concentration, and kinetics of target molecules in vivo.

Applications of Molecular Imaging:

Oncology: Molecular imaging plays a crucial role in cancer diagnosis, staging, treatment planning, and response assessment. PET imaging with radiotracers such as fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG) is widely used for detecting and characterizing various malignancies based on their metabolic activity. Additionally, targeted molecular imaging agents can provide insights into tumor heterogeneity, angiogenesis, and receptor expression patterns, guiding personalized cancer therapies.

Cardiology: Molecular imaging techniques are employed in cardiovascular imaging to assess myocardial perfusion, viability, and function. PET and SPECT imaging with radiotracers like technetium-99m (Tc-99m) or rubidium-82 (Rb-82) can evaluate myocardial ischemia and identify areas of viable myocardium. Moreover, molecular imaging allows for the visualization of atherosclerotic plaques and inflammation, aiding in the risk stratification of cardiovascular diseases.

Neurology: Molecular imaging has revolutionized the diagnosis and management of neurological disorders by enabling the visualization of neurotransmitter systems, neuroreceptors, and pathological changes in the brain. PET imaging with radiotracers targeting amyloid beta and tau proteins is utilized for the early detection of Alzheimer's disease and other neurodegenerative conditions. Furthermore, molecular imaging techniques can assess neurotransmitter function, neuroinflammation, and neuronal activity, providing valuable insights into brain function and dysfunction.

Infectious Diseases: Molecular imaging modalities are increasingly utilized for the detection and localization of infectious agents in the body. PET imaging with radiolabeled antibiotics or antifungal agents can identify sites of infection and monitor therapeutic response. Additionally, molecular probes targeting specific microbial biomarkers enable the visualization of bacterial, viral, and fungal infections, facilitating targeted antimicrobial therapy and disease management.[3]

Advantages and Challenges:

Advantages: Molecular imaging offers several advantages, including non-invasive visualization of biological processes, early detection of disease, personalized treatment planning, and longitudinal monitoring of therapeutic response. Moreover, by providing functional and molecular information, molecular imaging complements anatomical imaging modalities, leading to more comprehensive diagnostic evaluations.

Challenges: Despite its potential, molecular imaging faces challenges such as tracer development, radiochemistry, image quantification, and regulatory approval. The availability of suitable imaging probes targeting specific molecular pathways remains a bottleneck, limiting the widespread clinical adoption of molecular imaging techniques. Moreover, issues related to tracer pharmacokinetics, radiation exposure, and cost-effectiveness need to be addressed to optimize the utility of molecular imaging in clinical practice.

Future Directions:

The future of molecular imaging lies in the development of novel imaging probes, multimodal imaging platforms, and advanced image analysis techniques. By harnessing the power of genomics, proteomics, and systems biology, researchers aim to identify new molecular targets and biomarkers for imaging. Moreover, the integration of molecular imaging with other omics technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) holds promise for precision medicine approaches tailored to individual patients' molecular profiles. With ongoing research and technological innovations, molecular imaging is poised to transform healthcare delivery and improve patient outcomes across diverse medical specialties.

Functional MRI (fMRI)

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) is a powerful non-invasive neuroimaging technique that allows researchers and clinicians to visualize brain activity by measuring changes in blood flow and oxygenation levels. Unlike structural MRI, which provides detailed anatomical images of the brain, fMRI provides insights into brain function by mapping regions of neuronal activity associated with specific tasks or stimuli. This capability has revolutionized the field of neuroscience, enabling the study of brain function, cognition, emotion, and behavior in both healthy and diseased states.

Principles of fMRI:

Functional MRI is based on the principle of neurovascular coupling, which links neuronal activity to changes in cerebral blood flow, blood volume, and oxygenation. When neurons become active, they consume more oxygen and glucose, leading to an increase in regional cerebral blood flow to meet the metabolic demands. This neurovascular response results in a transient increase in the concentration of oxygenated hemoglobin (oxyhemoglobin) and a decrease in deoxygenated hemoglobin (deoxyhemoglobin), which can be detected using the blood oxygenation level-dependent (BOLD) contrast mechanism during MRI scanning.

Experimental Paradigms:

Functional MRI studies typically involve the presentation of various stimuli or tasks to participants inside the MRI scanner while measuring brain activity in real-time. Common experimental paradigms used in fMRI research include:

Task-Based fMRI: Participants perform specific cognitive tasks or behavioral experiments while their brain activity is monitored using fMRI. Examples include motor tasks, language processing, memory retrieval, and visual or auditory stimulation paradigms.

Resting-State fMRI: Participants lie quietly in the scanner with their eyes closed or open, allowing spontaneous fluctuations in brain activity to be measured in the absence of external stimuli. Resting-state fMRI is used to investigate functional connectivity patterns and intrinsic brain networks associated with different cognitive processes.

Applications of fMRI:

Functional MRI has diverse applications across neuroscience, psychology, and clinical medicine, including:

Cognitive Neuroscience: fMRI is used to investigate the neural mechanisms underlying various cognitive functions, such as attention, perception, memory, language, and decision-making. By mapping brain activity during specific tasks, researchers can identify brain regions involved in different cognitive processes and elucidate the functional organization of the human brain.

Clinical Diagnosis and Treatment: In clinical settings, fMRI is employed for the preoperative mapping of eloquent brain areas in patients undergoing neurosurgical procedures. By identifying critical brain regions involved in motor, language, and sensory functions, fMRI helps neurosurgeons minimize the risk of postoperative deficits and optimize surgical outcomes. Additionally, fMRI can aid in the diagnosis and characterization of neurological and psychiatric disorders, including stroke, epilepsy, schizophrenia, and depression, by revealing aberrant patterns of brain activity associated with these conditions.

Neuro-feedback and Brain-Computer Interfaces: fMRI-based neurofeedback allows individuals to modulate their own brain activity in real-time by providing visual or auditory feedback based on their neural responses. This technique has potential applications in cognitive enhancement, rehabilitation, and the development of brain-computer interfaces for controlling external devices using brain signals.

Advantages and Challenges:

Advantages: fMRI offers several advantages, including non-invasiveness, high spatial resolution, whole-brain coverage, and the ability to study brain function in vivo. By providing insights into the neural basis of cognition and behavior, fMRI has transformed our understanding of the human brain and its complex functions.

Challenges: Despite its utility, fMRI has limitations related to temporal resolution, signal-to-noise ratio, and susceptibility to artifacts. The interpretation of fMRI data requires careful consideration of experimental design, statistical analysis, and potential confounding factors. Moreover, fMRI findings may vary depending on factors such as task demands, participant characteristics, and scanner parameters, necessitating replication and validation across different studies and populations.

Future Directions:

The future of fMRI research lies in advancing imaging technology, data analysis methods, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Ongoing efforts focus on improving the spatial and temporal resolution of fMRI, developing novel analysis techniques for extracting meaningful information from complex brain networks, and integrating fMRI with other imaging modalities (e.g., EEG, MEG) for multimodal neuroimaging studies. Furthermore, fMRI holds promise for personalized medicine approaches by identifying biomarkers of brain function and individual differences in cognitive abilities, susceptibility to disease, and treatment response. With continued innovation and refinement, fMRI will remain a cornerstone of neuroscience research and clinical practice, driving discoveries that deepen our understanding of the human brain and its intricate functions.

Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT)

Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) is a non-invasive imaging technique that provides high-resolution, cross-sectional images of biological tissues with micrometer-level precision. Originally developed for ophthalmic imaging, OCT has since found applications in various medical specialties, including cardiology, dermatology, gastroenterology, and neurology. By utilizing low-coherence interferometry and near-infrared light, OCT enables real-time visualization of tissue microstructure and morphology, facilitating early diagnosis, treatment monitoring, and research in a wide range of clinical conditions.

Principles of OCT:

OCT operates on the principle of interferometry, wherein a beam of near-infrared light is split into a sample arm and a reference arm. The light from the sample arm is directed onto the tissue of interest, where it is backscattered by various tissue structures with different optical properties. The backscattered light is then combined with light from the reference arm and interference patterns are detected. By measuring the delay and intensity of the interference signals, OCT generates high-resolution depth-resolved images of tissue microstructure based on differences in optical reflectivity.

Types of OCT Systems:

Time-Domain OCT (TD-OCT): In TD-OCT, the reference arm length is mechanically scanned to acquire depth-resolved A-scans (depth profiles) of the sample. TD-OCT was the first commercially available OCT modality and is still used in some clinical applications.

Spectral-Domain OCT (SD-OCT): SD-OCT, also known as Fourier-domain OCT, utilizes a spectrometer to simultaneously acquire depth-resolved spectral information from the sample. This enables faster imaging speeds, improved sensitivity, and higher resolution compared to TD-OCT.

Swept-Source OCT (SS-OCT): SS-OCT employs a tunable laser source that rapidly sweeps through a range of wavelengths to acquire depth-resolved spectral data. SS-OCT offers advantages in imaging deeper tissue structures and imaging through scattering media.

Applications of OCT:

Ophthalmology: OCT revolutionized ophthalmic imaging by enabling high-resolution visualization of the retina, optic nerve, and anterior segment of the eye. In ophthalmology, OCT is used for diagnosing and monitoring various retinal diseases, including macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma, as well as for assessing corneal thickness and topography.

Cardiology: OCT is increasingly utilized in cardiology for intravascular imaging of coronary arteries and other vascular structures. Intravascular OCT (IV-OCT) provides detailed information about coronary plaque morphology, composition, and stent apposition, aiding in the diagnosis and treatment of coronary artery disease and guiding interventional procedures.

Dermatology: OCT enables non-invasive imaging of skin lesions and subsurface structures with micron-scale resolution. Dermatologic OCT is used for diagnosing and monitoring various skin conditions, such as skin cancer, melanoma, and inflammatory disorders, by visualizing changes in tissue architecture and vascularity.

Gastroenterology: In gastroenterology, OCT is employed for imaging the gastrointestinal tract and detecting early-stage mucosal abnormalities, dysplasia, and neoplastic lesions. Endoscopic OCT (EOCT) provides real-time, high-resolution imaging during endoscopic procedures, facilitating the early detection and characterization of gastrointestinal diseases.

Advantages and Challenges:

Advantages: OCT offers several advantages, including non-invasiveness, high resolution, real-time imaging, and the ability to visualize tissue microstructure without the need for contrast agents or ionizing radiation. OCT provides valuable insights into disease pathophysiology, facilitates early diagnosis, and guides treatment planning and monitoring.

Challenges: Despite its utility, OCT faces challenges related to imaging depth, penetration, and image interpretation. Imaging deeper tissue structures and overcoming optical scattering limitations remain areas of ongoing research. Moreover, standardization of OCT imaging protocols, image analysis techniques, and interpretation criteria is needed to ensure reproducibility and consistency across different clinical settings.

Future Directions:

The future of OCT lies in advancing imaging technology, improving image quality, and expanding its applications in clinical medicine and biomedical research. Ongoing efforts focus on developing next-generation OCT systems with enhanced imaging capabilities, including extended imaging depth, higher resolution, and multimodal imaging modalities. Furthermore, the integration of OCT with other imaging techniques (e.g., fluorescence imaging, photoacoustic imaging) holds promise for synergistic imaging approaches that provide complementary information about tissue structure, function, and molecular composition. With continued innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration, OCT will continue to evolve as a versatile imaging modality with broad clinical utility and research applications across multiple medical specialties.

Photoacoustic Imaging

Photoacoustic imaging (PAI) is an emerging biomedical imaging modality that combines the high contrast of optical imaging with the high resolution of ultrasound imaging. It relies on the photoacoustic effect, where tissue absorbs pulsed laser light and transiently expands, generating ultrasonic waves that are detected by ultrasound transducers. This allows for the visualization of tissue structures and molecular components with high resolution and penetration depth, making PAI a promising tool for various biomedical applications.

Principles of Photoacoustic Imaging:

Photoacoustic imaging utilizes short-pulsed laser light to illuminate tissue, causing local absorption and thermal expansion. This rapid expansion generates ultrasonic waves that propagate through the tissue and can be detected by ultrasound transducers. By detecting these ultrasound signals and reconstructing them into images, PAI provides high-resolution, depth-resolved images of tissue microstructure and function.

Types of Photoacoustic Imaging:

Photoacoustic Tomography (PAT): PAT is a three-dimensional imaging technique that reconstructs the spatial distribution of optical absorption within tissue. It can achieve high spatial resolution and penetration depth, making it suitable for imaging various biological samples, including small animals and human tissues.

Photoacoustic Microscopy (PAM): PAM is a high-resolution imaging technique that provides cellular and subcellular imaging of biological tissues. It offers excellent spatial resolution (up to sub-micrometer) and can visualize cellular structures, organelles, and molecular probes in real-time.

Applications of Photoacoustic Imaging:

Cancer Imaging: PAI holds promise for cancer imaging by visualizing tumor vasculature, angiogenesis, and hypoxia. It can detect early-stage tumors, monitor tumor growth and response to therapy, and guide cancer treatment planning.

Cardiovascular Imaging: PAI enables non-invasive imaging of blood vessels, plaque composition, and cardiac function. It can assess vascular anatomy and function, detect atherosclerotic plaques, and evaluate myocardial perfusion and oxygenation.

Neuroimaging: PAI has applications in neuroimaging by visualizing brain vasculature, neural activity, and brain function. It can map cerebral blood flow, detect brain tumors, and study neurovascular coupling in neurological disorders.

Dermatology: PAI can image skin structure, pigmentation, and blood vessels, aiding in the diagnosis and monitoring of skin diseases, such as melanoma, psoriasis, and vascular lesions.
Advantages and Challenges:

Advantages: PAI offers several advantages, including high spatial resolution, depth penetration, sensitivity to endogenous contrast (e.g., hemoglobin, melanin), and compatibility with functional and molecular imaging probes. It provides complementary information to existing imaging modalities and has the potential to revolutionize biomedical research and clinical diagnostics.

Challenges: Despite its promise, PAI faces challenges related to imaging depth, resolution, and imaging speed. Improving depth penetration while maintaining high resolution remains a key research goal. Additionally, challenges related to motion artifacts, image reconstruction algorithms, and standardization of imaging protocols need to be addressed for widespread clinical adoption.

Future Directions:
The future of PAI lies in advancing imaging technology, improving imaging performance, and expanding its applications in biomedical research and clinical practice. Ongoing research focuses on developing novel photoacoustic contrast agents, improving imaging hardware and software, and translating PAI into clinical applications. With continued innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration, PAI has the potential to become a versatile imaging modality for studying biological tissues and disease processes with unprecedented resolution and sensitivity.

Hybrid Imaging Modalities

Hybrid imaging modalities combine two or more imaging techniques to provide complementary information, enhance diagnostic accuracy, and improve patient management. By integrating the strengths of different imaging modalities, hybrid imaging offers synergistic advantages that surpass the capabilities of individual techniques alone. Several hybrid imaging modalities have been developed and widely adopted in clinical practice, each with unique applications in various medical specialties. Here, we explore some of the most common hybrid imaging modalities and their clinical significance.

1. PET-CT (Positron Emission Tomography-Computed Tomography):

PET-CT combines functional metabolic imaging with anatomical imaging to provide comprehensive information about tissue physiology and morphology. PET utilizes radiotracer-labeled molecules to visualize metabolic processes within the body, while CT provides detailed anatomical localization and attenuation correction for PET data. PET-CT is widely used in oncology for cancer staging, treatment planning, and response assessment. It enables the precise localization of metabolic abnormalities within anatomical structures, improving tumor detection and characterization. Additionally, PET-CT has applications in cardiology, neurology, and infection imaging, where it can detect areas of altered metabolism and guide therapeutic interventions.

2. PET-MRI (Positron Emission Tomography-Magnetic Resonance Imaging):

PET-MRI combines the sensitivity of PET for molecular imaging with the superior soft tissue contrast and functional imaging capabilities of MRI. By integrating PET and MRI data acquisition within a single imaging session, PET-MRI offers advantages in simultaneous multi-parametric imaging, motion correction, and improved spatial registration compared to sequential PET-CT. PET-MRI is particularly valuable in neuroimaging, where it can assess brain function, metabolism, and connectivity while providing high-resolution structural and functional MRI data. It also has applications in oncology, cardiology, and musculoskeletal imaging, where it can provide complementary information about tumor biology, tissue perfusion, and inflammation.

3. SPECT-CT (Single-Photon Emission Computed Tomography-Computed Tomography):

SPECT-CT integrates functional nuclear imaging with anatomical CT imaging to improve the localization and characterization of radiotracer uptake within the body. SPECT utilizes gamma-emitting radiotracers to visualize physiological processes, while CT provides detailed anatomical information and attenuation correction for SPECT data. SPECT-CT is commonly used in nuclear cardiology for myocardial perfusion imaging, where it can assess myocardial blood flow, viability, and function. It also has applications in bone imaging, infection imaging, and oncology, where it can localize areas of abnormal radiotracer uptake with anatomical correlation.

4. PET-MR-CT (Positron Emission Tomography-Magnetic Resonance Imaging-Computed Tomography):

PET-MR-CT combines the strengths of PET, MRI, and CT imaging modalities within a single imaging platform, enabling multi-parametric imaging with high sensitivity, specificity, and spatial resolution. This hybrid imaging modality offers a comprehensive approach to diagnostic imaging, allowing for the simultaneous assessment of metabolic, anatomical, and functional parameters in various clinical scenarios. PET-MR-CT has applications in oncology, neurology, cardiology, and musculoskeletal imaging, where it can provide valuable insights into disease pathophysiology, treatment response, and patient management.

Clinical Significance and Future Directions:

Hybrid imaging modalities have revolutionized diagnostic imaging by providing comprehensive, multi-dimensional information that enhances diagnostic accuracy, improves treatment planning, and guides therapeutic interventions. As imaging technology continues to advance, the integration of hybrid imaging techniques with molecular imaging probes, artificial intelligence, and personalized medicine approaches holds promise for further enhancing the clinical utility and impact of hybrid imaging in healthcare. By leveraging the complementary strengths of different imaging modalities, hybrid imaging modalities will continue to play a crucial role in advancing precision medicine and improving patient outcomes across diverse medical specialties.[4]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the field of radiology is experiencing a rapid evolution driven by technological advancements and innovative imaging techniques. From molecular imaging to functional MRI, optical coherence tomography, photoacoustic imaging, and hybrid imaging modalities, the landscape of diagnostic radiology is expanding to encompass a diverse array of imaging modalities with unique capabilities and applications.

These emerging imaging techniques offer unprecedented insights into tissue structure, function, and molecular composition, enabling early disease detection, precise diagnosis, treatment planning, and therapeutic monitoring across various medical specialties. By providing comprehensive, multi-dimensional information, these imaging modalities enhance diagnostic accuracy, improve patient outcomes, and pave the way for personalized and precision medicine approaches.

However, with the promise of innovation come challenges and considerations that must be addressed, including cost implications, accessibility issues, regulatory requirements, and the need for specialized training. Moreover, ensuring the safety, efficacy, and reproducibility of emerging imaging techniques remains paramount to their widespread adoption and clinical utility.

Looking ahead, the future of radiology holds exciting possibilities, with continued advancements in imaging technology, data analysis methods, and interdisciplinary collaborations. By staying at the forefront of innovation and embracing the potential of emerging imaging techniques, radiologists, clinicians, and researchers can harness the full power of diagnostic imaging to transform healthcare delivery, deepen our understanding of disease processes, and ultimately improve the lives of patients worldwide.

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