



New developments in imaging in ALS

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Abstract

Neuroimaging in ALS has contributed considerable academic insights in recent years demonstrating genotype-specific topological changes decades before phenoconversion and characterising longitudinal propagation patterns in specific phenotypes. It has elucidated the radiological underpinnings of specific clinical phenomena such as pseudobulbar affect, apathy, behavioural change, spasticity, and language deficits. Academic concepts such as sexual dimorphism, motor reserve, cognitive reserve, adaptive changes, connectivity-based propagation, pathological stages, and compensatory mechanisms have also been evaluated by imaging. The underpinnings of extra-motor manifestations such as cerebellar, sensory, extrapyramidal and cognitive symptoms have been studied by purpose-designed imaging protocols. Clustering approaches have been implemented to uncover radiologically distinct disease subtypes and machine-learning models have been piloted to accurately classify individual patients into relevant diagnostic, phenotypic, and prognostic categories. Prediction models have been developed for survival in symptomatic patients and phenoconversion in asymptomatic mutation carriers. A range of novel imaging modalities have been implemented and 7 Tesla MRI platforms are increasingly being used in ALS studies. Non-ALS MND conditions, such as PLS, SBMA, and SMA, are now also being increasingly studied by quantitative neuroimaging approaches. A unifying theme of recent imaging papers is the departure from describing focal brain changes to focusing on dynamic structural and functional connectivity alterations. Progressive cortico-cortical, cortico-basal, cortico-cerebellar, cortico-bulbar, and cortico-spinal disconnection has been consistently demonstrated by recent studies and recognised as the primary driver of clinical decline. These studies have led the reconceptualisation of ALS as a “network” or “circuitry disease”.

Keywords Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis · Motor neuron disease · Primary lateral sclerosis · Cerebellum · Frontotemporal dementia · Neuroimaging · Magnetic resonance imaging · Biomarkers

Introduction

Neuroimaging in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and other motor neuron diseases (MNDs) has contributed significant insights with regard to the preferential involvement of specific brain regions, phenotype-associated disease burden

patterns, genotype-associated imaging signatures, longitudinal disease trajectories, and, more recently, early brain and spinal cord changes in asymptomatic mutation carriers [1, 2]. Despite this progress, translation of research findings into real-life clinical applications has been disappointingly slow. In this paper, we review some of the emerging trends in MND imaging, highlight the most important methodological advances, discuss some of the most striking conceptual shifts, examine the practical challenges associated with the development of clinical tools, and outline the most pressing research priorities going forward. Instead of adopting a systematic review format, we primarily focus on recent research papers signalling a paradigm shift from descriptive academic analyses to real-life clinical applications.

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Consensus imaging findings

Irrespective of the specific methodology utilised, nearly all robust imaging studies in ALS capture motor cortex, corticospinal tract, corpus callosum, and brainstem degeneration [3–6]. While the involvement of these regions is often regarded as pathognomonic of ALS, the same regions are also affected in PLS, HSP, and to some extent in other neurodegenerative disorders [7–9]. Early ALS imaging studies have primarily focused on the radiological correlates of motor disability and associations with motor phenotypes, whereas more recent studies have evaluated the underpinnings of extra-motor manifestations [10–14] (Fig. 1). With the recognition of neuropsychological deficits in ALS/MND, imaging studies have gradually started evaluating frontotemporal changes [15–17]. While initially extra-motor pathology was primarily associated with GGG GCC hexanucleotide repeat expansions in *C9orf72* [18, 19], more recent papers have clarified that significant frontotemporal atrophy and subcortical pathology in ALS are not unique to *C9orf72* carriers [20]. As clinical data indicates that there is a high incidence of cognitive, behavioural, and extrapyramidal manifestations in ALS, the imaging community has gradually turned their attention to the assessment of subcortical grey matter changes and the integrity of cerebral networks relayed by these structures [21–24]. While sporadically reported over the years, a relatively new frontier of ALS imaging is the assessment

of cerebellar degeneration [25–27]. Cerebellar dysfunction is often exclusively linked to impaired coordination and poor balance, but cerebellar pathology also contributes to cognitive and behavioural manifestations, pseudobulbar affect, alterations of respiratory rhythm, changes in dexterity, impaired appetite regulation, and bulbar dysfunction [28–31]. Recent studies have not only confirmed significant intra-cerebellar disease burden, but also considerable cerebro-cerebellar disconnection [32]. This trend epitomises the evolution of imaging in ALS, namely that early studies focused primarily on the focal degeneration of specific brain structures, whereas more recent papers describe connectivity alterations between relevant brain regions [33], reconceptualising ALS as a network or circuitry disease (Fig. 2). Connectivity in ALS has been evaluated by diverse techniques, diffusion imaging, resting-state functional MRI, EEG data, etc., but irrespective of the primary methodology, progressive disconnection has been captured as a consistent finding. As our clinical understanding of ALS has evolved from a relatively pure “motor-system” disease, to a “multi-system” disorder with frontotemporal [34], extrapyramidal [35, 36], and cerebellar manifestations [37], sensory dysfunction has also been gradually recognised [38, 39] (Fig. 1.). With the reconceptualisation of ALS as a multi-network, multi-region disease, imaging studies have slowly turned their attention to the radiological substrate of non-motor manifestations such as apathy, sensory dysfunction, disinhibition, pseudobulbar affect, deficits in social cognition, alterations in appetite, and so

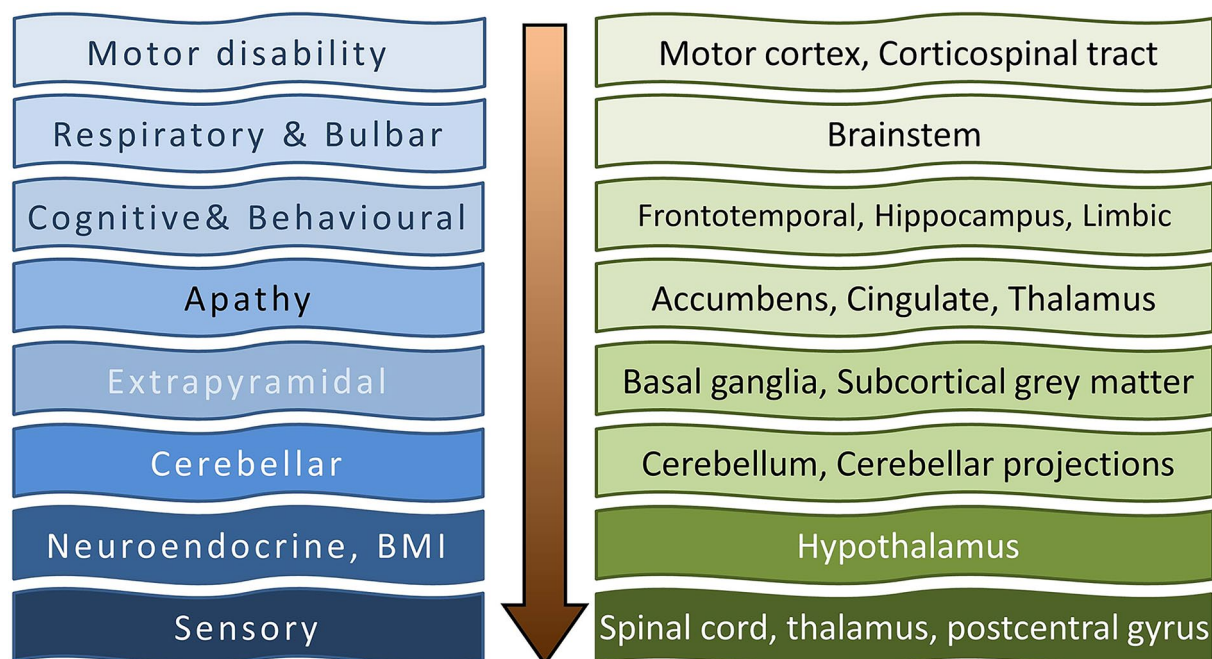


Fig. 1 Expanding the clinical and anatomical spectrum of ALS from motor symptoms to extra-motor manifestations, *BMI* body mass index

ALS as a “network disease”

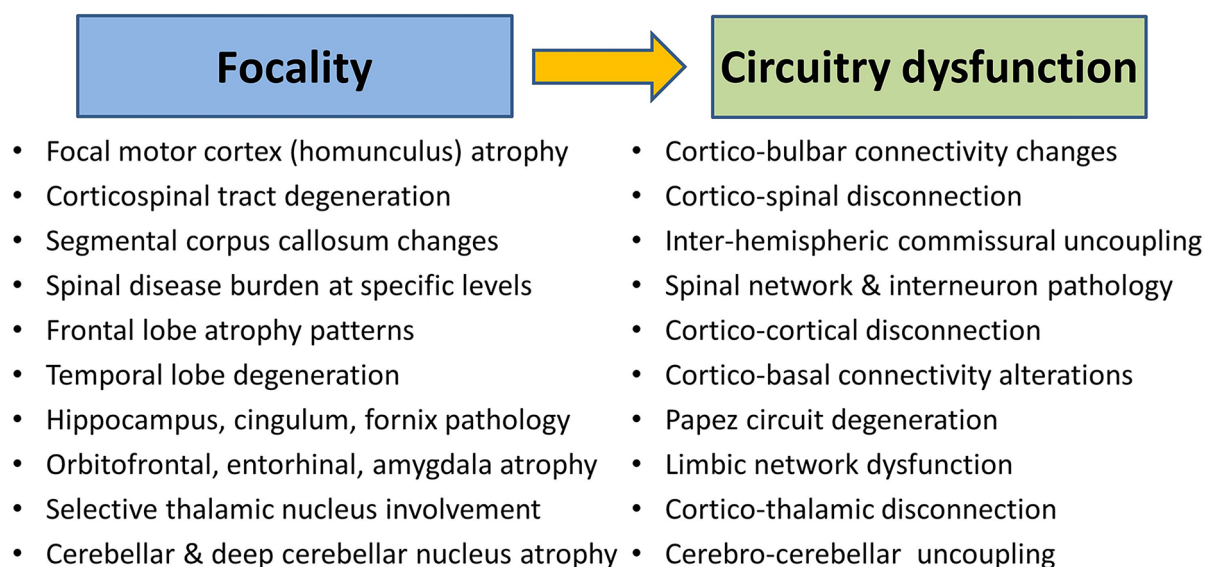


Fig. 2 The reconceptualisation of ALS as a “network disease”: from the description of focal cerebral changes to the evaluation of circuitry dysfunction

on [31, 40–44]. An interesting development in recent years is the targeted assessment of the hypothalamus and linking hypothalamic pathology to neuroendocrine manifestations, such as appetite regulation, weight, and metabolic profiles [45–47]. Another exciting frontier of ALS imaging is spinal cord imaging, which has gained considerable momentum in recent years [48, 49]. For decades, ALS imaging was disproportionately dominated by brain studies, and lower motor neuron components of the disease were strikingly underevaluated. This led to a relatively stereotyped oversight in imaging studies, namely that cerebral disease burden was often directly linked to motor disability overlooking the anterior horn (LMN) components of motor weakness. It is only relatively recently that the entire neuroaxis can be reliably imaged from the motor cortex to muscle. Quantitative spinal imaging has a number of methodological challenges, such as susceptibility to movement, respiratory, and cardiac effects; nonetheless, recent spinal studies readily detect lateral and posterior column degeneration in both symptomatic patients and asymptomatic mutation carriers [50, 51]. Spinal cord imaging in ALS has captured both the lower and upper motor neuron components of ALS pathophysiology and added important insights regarding sensory and respiratory involvement [52]. Muscle imaging in ALS is in its infancy, but important proof-of-concept papers have been published [53, 54]. Whole-body muscle mass reductions have been captured and the underpinnings of bulbar dysfunction also evaluated [55]. From a respiratory perspective, a series of

innovative imaging studies have looked at the brainstem and the spinal and diaphragmatic components of respiratory compromise [56].

Controversies and inconsistencies

Despite the considerable advances in the field of ALS imaging, some inconsistencies persist. Increased connectivity has been reported by multiple studies [57] between various brain regions which are sometimes interpreted as evidence of adaptive or compensatory processes [58]. Others interpret these findings as evidence of decreased inhibition. Nonetheless, increased connectivity detected by resting state fMRI studies are seldom supported by diffusion MRI data, which raises methodological questions regarding the validity of rsfMRI in late-stage ALS. Furthermore, while compensatory and adaptive changes have been suggested by multiple research groups [58], there is no compelling supporting evidence from post-mortem studies showing “hypertrophic” changes, increased synaptic density, or re-myelination. PET studies often show foci of hypermetabolism in various brain regions, especially in the cerebellum, but again, these are unlikely to represent compensatory change and more likely to be consistent with inflammatory change [59]. There are additional concerns about direct clinico-radiological correlations. Cognitive and behavioural changes are often solely attributed to frontotemporal degeneration, overlooking the possible contribution of cerebellar disease to these symptoms

[60]. The laterality of radiological findings is relatively poorly characterised, handedness is not always taken into consideration, and often left and right hemispheric changes are averaged. Papers examining the radiological substrate of neuropsychological deficits often overlook the confounding effect of fatigue, apathy, hypoxia, and polypharmacy. The conceptual and methodological risks of direct clinico-radiological associations have been highlighted by a number of opinion papers [61]. Another pitfall of recent papers is the potential over-interpretation of presymptomatic findings. While cortical, white matter, and subcortical grey matter degenerations have been consistently identified in asymptomatic *SOD1* and *C9orf72* repeat expansion carriers [2, 62–64], these changes are likely to be specific to these genotypes and are unlikely to be representative of sporadic ALS. EEG is increasingly utilised in ALS due to its excellent temporal resolution and has confirmed phenotype-associated network alterations [65–67]. However, its practical drawbacks, such as the lack of infratentorial data acquired in most protocols and the indirect inferences on deep-brain function, are seldom acknowledged [68]. Similarly, while MEG is an excellent academic tool and has detected beta-band alterations in asymptomatic mutation carriers [69], its real-life biomarker potential is limited by the lack of its availability at most centres [68]. Compared to other neurodegenerative conditions, MRI is poorly tolerated by patients with ALS, and longitudinal ALS studies suffer from notoriously high attrition rates, hindering the accurate mapping of disease trajectories [70, 71]. Another contentious facet of ALS imaging studies is the choice of control participants. Comparisons to healthy controls limit the interpretation of the specificity of findings. For example, while corpus callosum degeneration is regarded as a hallmark of ALS, it is also seen in a range of other neurodegenerative conditions such as HSP, PLS, CBS, etc. [7, 72]. Similarly, imaging papers highlighting anterior cingulate degeneration, reward network and default-mode network dysfunction, amygdala pathology, and hippocampal atrophy in ALS are of interest, but these changes are not specific to ALS either [22]. It seems therefore paramount to include “disease controls” instead of healthy controls to assess the specificity of imaging findings to ALS. Classifier analyses reporting high accuracy in binary classification schemes when distinguishing ALS from healthy controls may have limited clinical relevance, as in “real-life” clinical scenarios it is seldom the question whether someone is healthy or has ALS. Therefore, the inclusion of disease controls and the implementation of multi-class models seem essential to demonstrate the “real-life” diagnostic utility of computational neuroimaging. The cost implications, complex data processing requirements, and poor tolerability of long imaging protocols also need to be acknowledged. As biofluid markers in ALS are increasingly considered

informative, cheap, and easily acquired [73, 74], the performance of imaging markers and “wet” biomarkers need to be systematically contrasted to assess their comparative detection, monitoring, and prognostic potential [75]. One of the most challenging facets of ALS imaging is attempting histopathological validation, linking in vivo radiological changes to post-mortem observations [76–78] or co-localising imaging and histological data [79–82]. All of these challenges however are increasingly recognised, and more recent projects carefully address them from the inception.

New modalities, new techniques, and new MRI platforms

Standard imaging protocols in ALS typically include high-resolution 3D T1-weighted, diffusion MRI and often either T2-weighted imaging or FLAIR image acquisitions for the visual assessment of microvascular lesion load or comorbid neuroinflammatory changes. Magnetic resonance spectroscopy has long been successfully applied to ALS cohorts [83, 84] and captured motor cortex, thalamic, brainstem, frontotemporal, and hippocampal alterations in the brain [85–89] as well as spinal cord [90] changes. While traditionally implemented as a single-voxel technique, robust multi-voxel MRS papers have also been published in ALS [89, 91]. White matter changes have been traditionally assessed by diffusion MRI implementing various voxelwise and tractography pipelines, but these approaches may be vulnerable to crossing-fibre anatomy. Newer, non-Gaussian diffusion models and other advanced diffusion protocols, such as NODDI, HARDI, and convolution imaging, have brought new insights to our understanding of white matter degeneration in ALS [92–95]. Sodium imaging is another modality which has only been used by a select group of centres and seems to be a useful tool in capturing focal changes [96–98]. Connectomic and graph theory approaches have refined our understanding of network dysfunction in ALS [99]. PET studies have captured both gene-specific [18] and presymptomatic [75] metabolic changes in ALS and combined PET–MR protocols have advanced our understanding of complex pathophysiological processes [75, 100]. Muscle imaging is not routinely performed in ALS, but promising studies have been published [53, 54]. One of the most anticipated technological developments in recent years is the emergence of 7 Tesla MRI platforms. Pilot ALS data has been published from 7 Tesla scanners [82, 101, 102], but the full potential of 7 T imaging is yet to be explored. Another interesting approach is QSM which has been adopted by numerous groups and detected subtle focal changes [103, 104]. Arterial spin labelling is another modality which has only been used by very few centres to date [105, 106]. One of the most important developments

in the evolution of scanner technology is that imaging data can be acquired much faster than before which is crucial in ALS, as patients can only tolerate short protocols as the disease advances. Post-mortem imaging has enabled ultrahigh-resolution grey and white matter acquisitions which have refined our understanding of ALS pathology [79, 82]. Co-registration of histopathology and MRI data has improved dramatically and the availability of validated, open-source software and robust free imaging pipelines have also given impetus to ALS research. Access to data repositories such as ADNI has provided an opportunity to test analysis pipelines on non-ALS cohorts. Cloud computing and high-performance multi-core institutional platforms have sped up analyses significantly when a large amount of data has to be pre-processed, spatially registered and segmented. ALS-specific imaging meetings, NISALS, ENCALS, etc., have facilitated informal knowledge exchange and fostered international collaborations. Large multi-centre studies with harmonised protocols have helped to overcome the cohort size limitations of single-centre studies [107–109].

Machine-learning and cluster analyses

Machine-learning (ML) studies have dominated nearly all facets of ALS research in recent years from diagnostic categorisation to prognostication [110–116] (Fig. 3). There is a consensus among ALS neurologists that by the time patients meet diagnostic criteria, considerable degenerative changes

have taken place hindering the effectiveness of pharmacological interventions. Diagnostic delay has a considerable literature in ALS and the average interval between symptom onset and formal diagnosis is in the range of 10–14 months [117]. The specific factors contributing to diagnostic delay, the most common misdiagnoses, and the incidence of unnecessary interventions are also well researched [118–120]. The protracted diagnostic journey in ALS has considerable pragmatic ramifications, the chief among which is delayed entry into pharmaceutical trials. One of the purported roles of machine-learning applications in ALS is the confirmation of a suspected diagnosis relatively early based on the recognition of disease-associated biomarker patterns [121] (Fig. 3). After a series of studies reporting good categorisation accuracy in binary classification models [51, 122], recent studies have shown advances in multi-class classification [123, 124]. The majority of recently published studies speculate on the clinical utility of these models and how similar models could be developed into viable diagnostic, monitoring, and prognostic applications. Some have proposed concordance with pathological staging schemes [76, 125], while others focus on prognostication [111, 116]. While the long-term prospects of ML in ALS imaging are clear, the practical challenges are also well recognised. For example, distinguishing early ALS from PLS is notoriously challenging based on brain data alone [124]. ML models risk being overfitted to local data in single-centre studies, and protocol harmonisation is a key barrier to larger multi-site studies. Despite these challenges, a number of promising

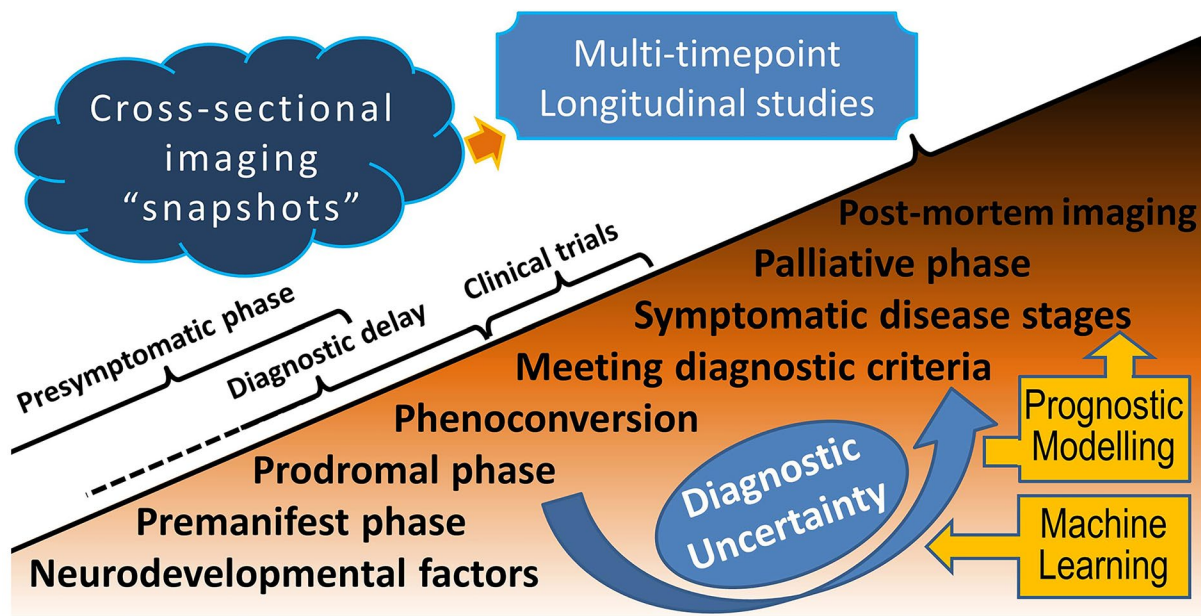


Fig. 3 Longitudinal imaging in ALS captures progressive neurodegenerative processes spanning the entire biological course of the disease. Machine-learning frameworks may be developed into viable diagnostic and prognostic applications

national [123], single-centre [126], and multi-site studies have been published [116]. A key criterion to appraise the proposed ML initiatives in imaging is whether the model offers additional insights to basic clinical observations, such as, does it predict likely clinical outcomes, survival [110, 116, 127], projected disability, phenoconversion [128], response to therapy, likely genotype for targeted screening, etc. [129]?. Additional clinical roles of ML applications include distinguishing incipient ALS from mimics such as PLS, multifocal motor neuropathy, HSP, etc., and predicting likely disease progression rates [129]. Clearly, recent ML studies in ALS have just started scratching the surface, demonstrating that blinded data sets can be categorised into diagnostic or phenotypic groups relatively accurately, and some prognostic information may be derived, including pathological stage, survival, and phenoconversion [113, 114, 121, 128]. With the emergence of large data sets in ALS, either generated by tertiary referral centres, research consortia, or pharmacological trials, there is also an opportunity to identify small, clinically, or radiologically distinct sub-phenotypes within relatively heterogeneous data samples. A number of studies have performed various cluster analysis approaches to identify subgroups within the clinical spectrum of ALS [130–132]. The classical approach is the stratification of patients by various clinical staging systems and then describing the associated radiological profiles. An alternative, data-driven approach is merging all imaging data irrespective of clinical characteristics, and “let the data talk” by running cluster analyses, identifying “outliers”, and unravelling inherent subgroups with distinctive neuroradiological patterns. Such approaches have revealed unique subgroups with cerebellar disease [130], frontotemporal involvement [131], and frontoparietal dysfunction [132].

Non-ALS motor neuron diseases

While the neuroimaging literature of MND is dominated by ALS studies, radiological changes in other motor neuron diseases are increasingly well characterised. Large radiological studies have been conducted in spinal and bulbar muscular atrophy (SBMA or Kennedy’s disease) and some cerebral changes have been captured by various research groups [133]. Cerebral and spinal cord changes have been studied in adult SMA, capturing spinal grey matter atrophy as well as cerebral changes [134]. Primary lateral sclerosis (PLS) is one of the best studied non-ALS MNDs, where extensive subcortical, cerebellar, and frontotemporal changes have been described [8, 9, 72, 135]. PLS is also a template condition to study the radiological underpinnings of pseudobulbar affect [41, 136]. The cerebral imaging signature of PLS is very similar to what is observed in ALS, and distinguishing the two based on brain MRI data alone is challenging [124]. Post-poliomyelitis syndrome (PPS)

has been traditionally associated with widespread cerebral changes, but recent studies have not only detected limited brain pathology, but also identified increased brainstem, cerebellar, and occipital partial volumes, accompanied by increased fractional anisotropy in the corticospinal tracts [137–139]. Despite the interest in SBMA, PLS, and PPS, the radiological signatures of low-incidence ALS mimics such as Mill’s disease or Hirayama disease are primarily presented as case reports or case series [140–143]. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of ML studies that would include non-ALS MND phenotypes to test their models’ efficiency in distinguishing these conditions from ALS.

Supporting clinical observations

One of the most valuable contributions of neuroimaging is the exploration of the underpinnings of specific clinical manifestations (Fig. 4). Imaging has helped to unravel the pathological bases of behavioural impairment, apathy, extrapyramidal manifestations, respiratory dysfunction, pseudobulbar affect, language impairment, sensory alterations, cerebellar dysfunction, alterations in appetite, weight loss, bulbar symptoms, and spasticity [29, 31, 39, 40, 46, 93, 144, 145]. Neuroimaging has also helped to validate emerging clinical criteria [146, 147], pathological [76, 77, 125, 148, 149], clinical, and cognitive staging systems [14, 43, 150–153], etc. Clinical phenomena such as split-hand and split-leg signs [154] have been explained from an evolutionary perspective [155] and linked to cerebral connectivity patterns [156, 157]. There is also a notion that brain regions that have developed “recently” in evolutionary terms underpinning phylogenetically “novel” skills such as pincer grip, phonation, and executive and language functions are particularly vulnerable to ALS [155, 158, 159] (Fig. 4).

Other advances from the research field

Specific imaging patterns have been linked to specific phenotypes such as bulbar-onset disease, spinal-onset disease, cognitive phenotypes, and various disease stages. Genotype-specific imaging signatures have been proposed in association with *C9orf72*, *SOD1*, and *ATXN2* [13, 21, 160]. One of the most important research contributions to neuroimaging in ALS is the characterisation of presymptomatic brain and spinal cord changes in asymptomatic mutation carriers [2, 50, 62–64, 161] (Fig. 3). Brain [64] and cord [90] alterations have been described in *SOD1* mutation carriers long before the projected phenoconversion. Spinal cord [50] and brain [62–64] changes have also been detected in association with hexanucleotide repeat expansions in *C9orf72* long before symptom onset. These studies all support the notion that a long presymptomatic phase precedes phenoconversion

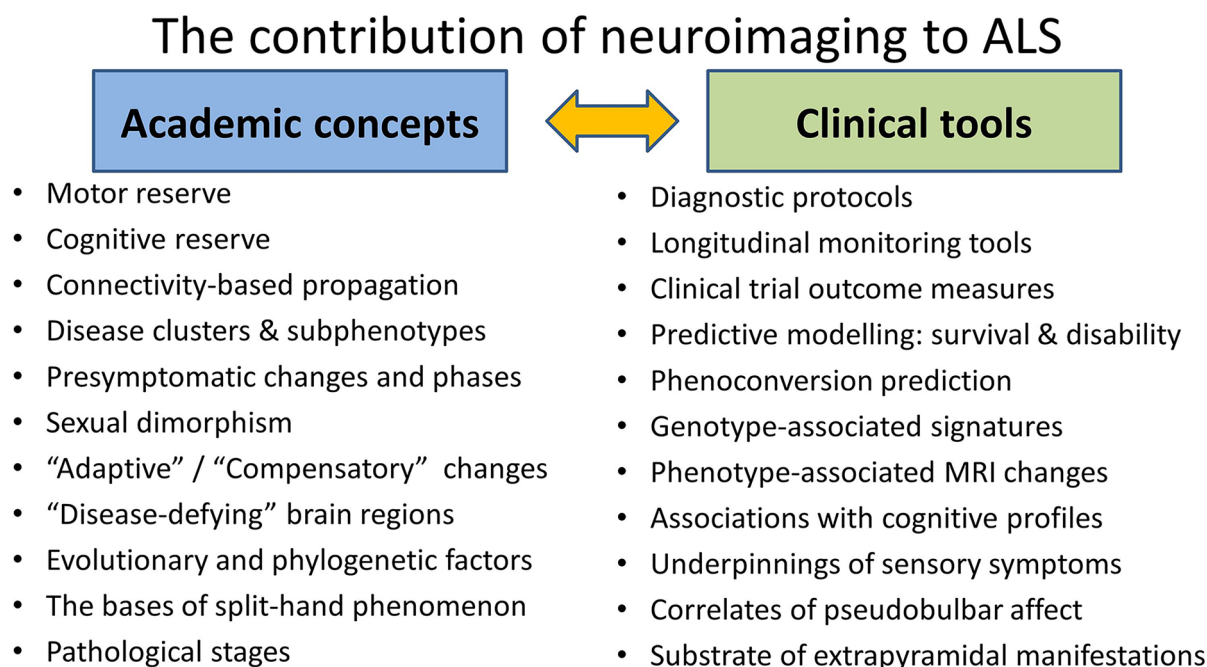


Fig. 4 The role of neuroimaging in ALS: testing academic hypotheses and the development of clinical applications

in ALS [2] and there may also be neurodevelopmental factors at play [161, 162]. More recent studies have shown that neuroimaging data may be helpful in predicting phenoconversion [128], confirming the practical clinical utility of presymptomatic imaging [1]. Academic imaging studies have increasingly evaluated the prevailing biological concepts in ALS such as cognitive reserve [163, 164], motor reserve [165], sexual dimorphism [166, 167], “disease-defying” regions [168], connectivity-based propagation [169], mirror neuron system malfunction [170], spinal interneuron pathology [171, 172], and compensatory and adaptive processes [58]. These studies demonstrate that imaging has an important role in assessing proposed pathophysiological hypotheses *in vivo*. One of the most important achievements of imaging in ALS is the paradigm shift from focality to connectivity and reconceptualising ALS as a network or circuitry disease [156, 173]. Imaging studies have traditionally described focal structural changes often with a disproportionate emphasis on the motor cortex, whereas recent studies focus on network-level dysfunction and the progressive structural and functional disconnection between various brain regions. (Fig. 2). Trans-callosal, interhemispheric connectivity has long been described as a core feature of ALS [5], but cerebro-cerebellar, cerebro-thalamic, cerebro-spinal, and cerebro-bulbar disconnection is increasingly recognised as a key facet of ALS pathophysiology [32, 33, 55].

Future directions, research priorities, and cause for optimism

Despite promising survival and phenoconversion prediction studies [127, 128], MRI-based prognostic modelling is still in its infancy. Future studies should pilot predictive models with regard to the expected age of phenoconversion. Phenotype prediction, i.e. ALS, FTD, or ALS-FTD would also be of clinical relevance in hexanucleotide repeat expansion carriers. A number of insightful spinal studies have been published in ALS, but their real-life utility with regards to monitoring disease progression and distinguishing ALS from PLS, facilitating an earlier diagnosis is yet to be demonstrated [51]. Similarly, a number of elegant studies have now been conducted on 7 Tesla MRI platforms, but its additional value compared to data acquired on 3 Tesla scanners is yet to be demonstrated. While considerable biomarker value has been attributed to MRI-derived metrics [174], the majority of pharmaceutical trials do not consider MRI measures as clinical trial end-points. The development of a reliable pTDP-43 PET tracer would be a landmark achievement, potentially revolutionising our diagnostic and monitoring protocols, but despite promising studies, progress has been relatively slow and a number of challenges remain [175]. Despite the challenges ahead, there is cause for optimism. Data harmonisation efforts have demonstrated the feasibility of large-scale multi-site studies and successful international collaborations have been forged [107–109, 116, 176]. A number of disease-specific consortia now share

data and expertise to develop viable clinical tools. Regular international meetings offer knowledge exchange and networking opportunities. Advances in cloud computing, the availability of institutional high-performance computing systems, open-source machine-learning pipelines, and imaging analysis suites have all contributed to effective data processing and meaningful MRI data interpretation in ALS and other MNDs.

Conclusions

Imaging in ALS and other motor neuron diseases has contributed significantly to our understanding of clinical phenomena and helped to raise awareness of extra-motor manifestations such as frontotemporal, extrapyramidal, and cerebellar dysfunction. The focus of imaging studies has gradually shifted from describing focal brain changes to capturing connectivity alterations and circuitry dysfunction. Dynamic neurodegenerative processes have been detected decades before symptom onset. While academic advances in ALS imaging have not resulted in the development of practical clinical tools, emerging machine-learning studies foreshadow clinically useful diagnostic, prognostic, and monitoring applications.

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Declarations

Conflicts of Interest The authors have no competing interests to disclose.

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