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From Algorithm to Action: Exploring Artificial Intelligence for Novel Compound Identification in Substance Use Disorders

Yousra A. El-Maradny*

Pharmaceutical and Fermentation Industries Development Center, City of Scientific Research and Technological Applications (SRTA-City), Egypt

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Introduction

The complexity of substance use disorders (SUDs) demands innovative solutions that go beyond traditional trial-and-error pharmacotherapy. With relapse rates high and therapeutic options often limited, the need for novel, targeted treatments is urgent. Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly in the form of machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) algorithms, is now at the forefront of biomedical innovation, with growing applications in drug discovery [1-5].

AI models can analyze vast chemical libraries, biological data, and clinical records to uncover new molecular entities with potential therapeutic benefit. This transformation—from algorithmic insight to actionable pharmacological discovery—is redefining the timeline and precision of drug development. In the realm of addiction science, AI's role in identifying compounds that interact with key neurochemical pathways, such as dopaminergic, glutamatergic, and opioid systems, is opening the door to more effective and personalized treatment strategies [6-10]

Discussion

Artificial intelligence has evolved from a theoretical tool to a practical engine of discovery in addiction pharmacology. Traditional drug discovery pipelines, which can take over a decade and cost billions of dollars, are increasingly supplemented by computational models capable of simulating biological interactions, predicting compound efficacy, and identifying off-target effects. In the case of substance use disorders, AI algorithms are trained on datasets that include chemical structures, receptor profiles, patient response data, and even behavioral metrics from clinical trials. These models enable high-throughput screening of virtual compounds, drastically reducing the time required to move from hit identification to lead optimization.

One of the most promising applications of AI is de novo drug design, where algorithms autonomously generate molecular structures predicted to have desirable properties. Reinforcement learning and generative adversarial networks (GANs) have been applied to synthesize novel compounds targeting neurotransmitter receptors implicated in addiction, such as the mu-opioid receptor, GABA receptors, or dopamine transporters. Additionally, structure-based drug design models can predict how a novel compound will bind to a target based on three-dimensional molecular configurations, enhancing precision.

Furthermore, AI models are increasingly being integrated with omics data—genomics, proteomics, metabolomics—to personalize treatment discovery. For instance, AI can link genetic polymorphisms in metabolic enzymes or receptor genes with drug response variability, guiding the identification of compounds with optimal therapeutic indices for different patient subgroups. The integration of multi-omics data with compound screening creates a feedback loop that enhances both target validation and clinical translation.

Beyond compound identification, AI assists in predictive toxicology, evaluating the potential adverse effects of newly generated compounds before clinical testing. Algorithms trained on historical toxicity data can flag problematic chemical motifs or suggest modifications to reduce risk. This not only accelerates development but also improves safety outcomes. Importantly, AI is being used not only for new drug development but also for drug repurposing—identifying existing FDA-approved drugs that may be effective in treating SUDs based on structural similarity or functional response predictions.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is transforming addiction drug discovery from a laborious, high-risk process into a streamlined, data-driven pathway. By enabling the rapid identification, optimization, and evaluation of novel compounds, AI holds the potential to reshape how we understand and treat substance use disorders. While challenges related to data quality, interpretability, and ethical implementation remain, the promise of AI-based compound discovery is already being realized in preclinical and translational research. Moving forward, integrating AI technologies into the broader addiction treatment ecosystem—including diagnostics, behavioral interventions, and policy—can create a more effective, personalized, and scalable model of care. In this age of digital innovation, the journey from algorithm to action may be the breakthrough pathway needed to combat the global burden of addiction with precision and compassion.

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***Corresponding author:** Yousra A. El-Maradny, Pharmaceutical and Fermentation Industries Development Center, City of Scientific Research and Technological Applications (SRTA-City), Egypt, E-mail: yousra789@gmail.com

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