Journal of Pharmacovigilance and Drug Safety (JPDS)
ISSN (Print) : 0972-8899
DOI : 10.21276/JPDS

Journal of Pharmacovigilance and Drug Safety

An Official Publication of Society of Pharmacovigilance, India.

Emerging Frontiers in Pharmacovigilance: Harnessing Digital Innovations and AI for Enhanced Drug Safety Monitoring in Modern and Traditional Medicine

Review Article

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Received: 15.08.25
Accepted: 04.09.25

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ABSTRACT

Pharmacovigilance, the science of detecting, assessing, understanding, and preventing adverse drug reactions (ADRs), has evolved significantly since its formal inception following the thalidomide tragedy. This review examines the historical progression of pharmacovigilance, highlighting the limitations of traditional methods and the paradigm shifts driven by technological advancements. It explores the transformative role of digital technologies, including big data analytics, social media integration, and mobile health (mHealth) applications, in enhancing drug safety monitoring. The application of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) in signal detection, natural language processing (NLP), and the development of AI-enabled pharmacovigilance platforms are critically assessed, emphasizing their potential to improve the speed and accuracy of ADR identification. Furthermore, this review addresses the unique challenges and strategies for pharmacovigilance in traditional medicine, where safety profiles are often underreported. It investigates the importance of integrating digital and AI-driven tools to monitor traditional remedies, including the use of blockchain for supply chain transparency. Finally, the review discusses current regulatory frameworks and the importance of global collaboration in establishing standardized pharmacovigilance practices. By synthesizing historical perspectives with emerging digital innovations, this paper underscores the importance of a comprehensive, inclusive approach to drug safety monitoring, aimed at optimizing patient outcomes and reinforcing public trust in both modern and traditional medicinal products.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, Digital Applications and Software, Pharmacovigilance, Adverse Drug Reaction, Modern and Traditional Medicine*

How to cite this article: Arshad Hasan *et al;* Emerging Frontiers in Pharmacovigilance: Harnessing Digital Innovations and AI for Enhanced Drug Safety Monitoring in Modern and Traditional Medicine, J Pharmacovig Drug Safety, 2025;22(2):7-6.

Source of Support: Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None.

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction to Pharmacovigilance

1.1 Background and Definition of Pharmacovigilance

Pharmacovigilance, defined by the World Health Organization as "the science and activities relating to the detection, assessment, understanding, and prevention of adverse effects or any other drug-related problem," has long been recognized as vital to ensuring the safety of medical interventions.[1] Its purpose in modern healthcare extends beyond merely collecting reports of suspected adverse reactions. Indeed, pharmacovigilance efforts aim to foster safer therapeutic outcomes, reduce healthcare costs tied to adverse drug events, and reinforce public trust in medications.[1]

Historically, pharmacovigilance emerged as a formalized field following notable drug safety disasters, such as the thalidomide crisis in the early 1960s.[1] In the ensuing decades, it has steadily expanded and diversified, reflecting growing global concerns about drug safety. With the establishment of regional and international regulatory bodies, as well as increasing collaboration among healthcare stakeholders, pharmacovigilance now plays a central role in monitoring and safeguarding public health worldwide.[2]

1.2 The Significance of Drug Safety Monitoring

Drug safety monitoring directly influences public health outcomes by identifying and mitigating potential risks before they harm larger populations.[3] Adverse drug reactions contribute significantly to healthcare costs—both through direct expenses for treatment of adverse events and through indirect costs such as lost productivity. Consequently, proactive pharmacovigilance measures are essential for optimizing resource allocation and improving patient outcomes.[3]

Furthermore, early detection and prompt management of adverse events not only protect patients but also maintain confidence in the healthcare system. By identifying safety signals and acting on them efficiently, healthcare providers can refine treatment protocols, adjust medication dosages, or, in some cases, withdraw unsafe products from the market.[4] This vigilance underscores why pharmacovigilance is increasingly regarded as a cornerstone of responsible healthcare policy.

1.3 Scope of the Review

While pharmacovigilance has traditionally centred on modern pharmaceuticals, the widespread use of traditional and herbal medicines necessitates a broader scope.[5] In many regions, traditional remedies play a significant role in primary healthcare, yet their safety profiles are often underreported or poorly understood. This review, therefore, includes the application of pharmacovigilance principles to both modern and traditional medicinal products, highlighting the need for a comprehensive, inclusive approach to drug safety monitoring.[5]

Access this article online	
Website: www.journalofsopi.com	For Reprints
DOI: 10.21276/jpds.2025.22.02.02	Contact at editorjournalsopi@gmail.com

In parallel, rapid technological advances—particularly in the fields of data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI)—offer transformative possibilities for enhancing pharmacovigilance practices.[6] AI-driven systems can rapidly analyse large data sets from electronic health records, social media platforms, and other digital sources, thereby improving the speed and accuracy of adverse event detection. This paper will examine emerging digital tools and AI methodologies that promise to reshape how pharmacovigilance is conducted, discussing both the opportunities and challenges these innovations bring.[6]

2. Historical Perspectives in Pharmacovigilance

2.1 Early Pharmacovigilance Efforts

The field of pharmacovigilance gained formal recognition in the aftermath of the thalidomide tragedy in the early 1960s. This event, wherein the use of thalidomide during pregnancy led to severe birth defects, underscored the urgent need for systematic drug safety monitoring.[7] Governments and healthcare authorities worldwide responded by establishing regulatory frameworks to oversee medication safety.

One key development was the creation of dedicated surveillance systems designed to collect and analyse adverse drug reaction (ADR) reports from healthcare professionals, patients, and pharmaceutical companies.[7] These early systems often relied heavily on paper-based processes and manual reviews, which, while groundbreaking at the time, also highlighted the challenges of collecting and analysing large volumes of data.

International collaboration further strengthened pharmacovigilance efforts with the founding of the Uppsala Monitoring Centre (UMC) under the aegis of the World Health Organization. The UMC was instrumental in creating global databases of reported ADRs and fostering cooperation among national pharmacovigilance centers.[8] This global network marked a pivotal step in uniting diverse healthcare systems around the shared goal of enhancing drug safety.

2.2 Limitations of Traditional Methods

Despite these early advances, traditional pharmacovigilance approaches faced a number of limitations. A common hurdle was underreporting—healthcare providers and patients did not always submit ADR reports, either due to time constraints, lack of awareness, or perceived uncertainty about causality.[9] Additionally, spontaneous reporting systems were prone to biases, as certain types of events or patient populations were less likely to be captured.

Another prominent limitation was the reactive nature of these traditional surveillance methods.[10] Because analyses were often triggered by individual case reports or clusters of adverse events observed after drugs were already in wide circulation, significant time lags could occur before emerging safety signals were recognized. This delayed response could compromise patient safety and complicate efforts to identify risk factors or develop intervention strategies.

2.3 Paradigm Shifts Leading to Modern Surveillance

In recent years, the adoption of electronic health records (EHRs) and automated databases has revolutionized pharmacovigilance.[11] Unlike paper-based systems, digital platforms allow for real-time data collection, quicker analysis, and the integration of diverse data sources. This shift has enabled more robust signal detection by pooling large volumes of patient information from multiple healthcare settings, thereby enhancing the overall sensitivity and specificity of pharmacovigilance activities.[11]

Alongside these technological developments, there has been a growing emphasis on proactive risk management. Regulatory bodies and healthcare organizations now encourage continuous monitoring of drugs throughout their life cycle, rather than focusing solely on post-marketing surveillance.[12] This proactive stance encompasses ongoing benefit-risk assessments, targeted safety studies, and the use of advanced analytical tools to identify and mitigate potential hazards before they reach critical levels. These combined efforts underscore a new era in drug safety—one that leverages both technology and policy innovation to protect patient well-being more effectively.[12]

3. Digital Transformations in Pharmacovigilance

3.1 Role of Big Data Analytics

The exponential growth of healthcare data has created new opportunities for enhancing pharmacovigilance through big data analytics. Large-scale healthcare databases and real-world evidence (RWE) are increasingly leveraged to track drug safety by integrating patient information from diverse sources, including hospital records, outpatient visits, and pharmacy dispensation logs.[13] This approach enables more comprehensive detection and analysis of adverse events across different patient populations and clinical settings.

A key application of big data analytics lies in the mining of electronic health records (EHRs), insurance claims, and patient registries to identify potential safety signals.[14] By employing sophisticated statistical and machine learning models, researchers and regulators can spot trends and correlations that might otherwise remain unnoticed in smaller datasets or traditional spontaneous reporting systems. These analyses can be further refined by linking clinical outcomes with demographic variables, comorbidities, and medication dosages, ultimately contributing to more tailored risk management strategies.[13]

3.2 Integration of Social Media Platforms

Beyond formal healthcare databases, social media platforms represent a rapidly evolving frontier for pharmacovigilance. Patients and caregivers often share personal experiences, including adverse drug reactions, on social networks in real time.[15] By monitoring these discussions, public health authorities and pharmaceutical companies can gain immediate insights into emerging issues, supplementing traditional sources of ADR data.

Nevertheless, extracting meaningful information from social media poses several challenges, including the need for advanced natural language processing (NLP) tools to navigate informal language and slang.[15] Moreover, ethical and privacy considerations arise when scraping and analysing personal posts, necessitating strict adherence to data protection regulations and the safeguarding of user anonymity.[16] Despite these challenges, the potential speed and breadth of social media surveillance make it a valuable component of modern pharmacovigilance.

3.3 Mobile Health (mHealth) Applications

Mobile health (mHealth) technologies have rapidly expanded in recent years, presenting new avenues for patient-driven pharmacovigilance. Smartphone applications can empower individuals to report adverse drug reactions (ADRs) directly, bypassing traditional reporting barriers such as limited time and resources for healthcare professionals.[17] Some applications provide alerts and guidance when patients experience unusual symptoms, improving the timeliness and accuracy of ADR reporting.

Wearable devices further enhance continuous monitoring by capturing physiological and behavioural data—such as heart rate, sleep patterns, and daily activity levels—that can be correlated with medication use.[18] This real-time, granular data offers deeper insights into drug safety profiles, particularly for chronic conditions where long-term treatment outcomes are critical. As mHealth technologies evolve, so too does their potential to transform pharmacovigilance, fostering a more patient-centred and proactive approach to drug safety monitoring.[17,18]

4. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Drug Safety Monitoring

4.1 Machine Learning–Based Signal Detection

Machine learning offers robust tools for identifying previously unrecognized patterns or signals in large adverse event databases.[19] **Supervised learning** techniques, such as random forests and support vector machines, rely on labelled training data to classify known and potential adverse drug reactions (ADRs). **Unsupervised learning** methods, including clustering and anomaly detection, can uncover hidden relationships by grouping similar cases or flagging outliers without explicit labels.[19]

Numerous case studies highlight the advantages of machine learning over traditional statistical signal detection methods in terms of sensitivity and specificity. For instance, machine learning systems have demonstrated the ability to detect rare or emergent safety issues more rapidly, reducing the lag time between initial signal emergence and eventual regulatory action.[20] Such improvements in timeliness and accuracy are critical for safeguarding public health, especially in complex healthcare environments where new drugs and treatment strategies are constantly introduced.[20]

4.2 Natural Language Processing (NLP)

Natural language processing (NLP) has become instrumental in automating the extraction of ADRs from unstructured text source including clinical notes and scientific publications. By analysing sentence structure, medical terminology, and contextual clues, NLP algorithms can identify potential adverse effects and map them to standardized vocabularies.[21] This automated process significantly reduces the manual labor and time required to sift through vast amounts of data.

Beyond formal clinical documents, NLP methodologies are increasingly applied to patient-generated content on online forums and social media platforms, facilitating real-time analysis of drug safety concerns.[22] For example, comments on medication side effects can be filtered and categorized by NLP engines, enabling rapid detection of emerging safety signals. While these data sources can provide immediate insights, ensuring the accuracy and completeness of user-generated content remains a challenge, underscoring the need for ongoing refinement of NLP systems.[22]

4.3 Deep Learning and Neural Networks

Deep learning, a subset of machine learning, employs layered neural network architectures to model complex patterns in high-dimensional data. In pharmacovigilance, deep learning techniques have been used to predict drug–drug interactions, anticipate ADRs, and refine risk-benefit assessments.[23] For example, recurrent or convolutional neural networks can process time-series or textual data, revealing intricate associations among multiple drugs and patient factors.

However, these complex models introduce challenges such as data quality requirements, computational intensity, and limited interpretability.[24] Deep learning algorithms often function as “black boxes,” making it difficult to discern how specific inputs lead to specific outputs. Consequently, researchers and regulators emphasize the importance of explainable AI strategies, which aim to clarify algorithmic decision-making processes for end-users, including clinicians and patients.[24]

4.4 AI-Enabled Pharmacovigilance Platforms

Cutting-edge pharmacovigilance platforms seek to integrate NLP, big data analytics, and machine learning into unified systems that streamline the surveillance process.[25] By combining multiple analytical methods, these platforms can aggregate data from electronic health records, social media, and other digital repositories, then apply AI-driven algorithms to identify safety signals in real time. Moreover, automated alert systems can notify healthcare practitioners, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and regulatory authorities as soon as significant trends or anomalies emerge.[25]

As these technologies mature, they hold promise for **personalized drug safety monitoring**, in which patient-specific factors—such as genetic markers, comorbidities, and lifestyle variables—are integrated into predictive models.[26] Over time, this individualized approach could enable the development of tailored pharmacovigilance strategies, ensuring that drug therapies are optimally monitored and managed based on each patient’s unique risk profile.[26]

5. Pharmacovigilance in Traditional Medicine

5.1 Importance of Monitoring Safety in Traditional Remedies

The global use of herbal and traditional medicinal products has seen a marked increase in recent years, driven by factors such as cultural preference, perceived safety, and ease of access.[27] Despite their widespread consumption, these products often lack the rigorous testing and standardized regulatory oversight applied to modern pharmaceuticals.[28] Consequently, adverse events may be underreported or overlooked, posing a risk not only to individual patients but also to public health systems.[28]

Moreover, traditional remedies can vary significantly in their composition based on geographic origin and preparation methods, which complicates efforts to establish consistent safety profiles. As consumer demand continues to grow, the development of robust pharmacovigilance frameworks that address the unique characteristics of traditional medicines has become an urgent priority.[27]

5.2 Unique Challenges in Reporting and Data Collection

Capturing accurate adverse event data for traditional medicines entails several distinct challenges. In many regions, cultural beliefs and linguistic barriers deter patients from reporting potential side effects, as there may be limited awareness of the mechanisms for pharmacovigilance or a belief that “natural” products cannot be harmful.[29] These underreporting hampers efforts to identify and evaluate risks associated with herbal and traditional therapies.

Additionally, non-uniform nomenclature and the frequent use of multi-ingredient formulations can make it difficult to pinpoint which component—or combination of components—is responsible for adverse effects.[30] Without standardized naming conventions or product labelling, accurate data collection and signal detection become more complex, thus necessitating specialized methodologies and collaborative efforts among researchers, regulators, and traditional medicine practitioners.[29,30]

5.3 Digital and AI Strategies for Traditional Medicine Safety

Advanced digital and AI-driven tools show promise in addressing some of these challenges by enabling more systematic monitoring of traditional remedies. AI algorithms can help decode complex polyherbal interactions by analysing large datasets of patient records, chemical compositions, and known drug–herb interactions.[31] These algorithms also have the potential to detect adulterants—such as undeclared pharmaceutical ingredients—thereby enhancing product authenticity and consumer safety.[31]

Blockchain technology, with its decentralized and tamper-resistant ledger system, offers an additional layer of security for supply chain transparency.By tracking each step of the production and distribution process, from sourcing raw herbal materials to final consumer delivery, stakeholders can verify the authenticity and quality of the product. Such traceability may also facilitate quicker recall actions when safety concerns arise.[32]

5.4 Case Studies

Several countries have successfully integrated traditional medicine into their national pharmacovigilance programs, demonstrating that systematic surveillance of these products is both feasible and beneficial.[33] For instance, programs that incorporate traditional practitioners and patient education campaigns have led to increased reporting rates and more accurate data collection. These initiatives underscore the importance of culturally sensitive outreach and collaboration in achieving meaningful pharmacovigilance results.[33]

Real-world implementations also provide valuable lessons regarding the complexity and resource requirements of monitoring traditional medicines.[34] Some programs have faced obstacles related to insufficient funding, lack of training for healthcare providers, and the absence of standardized documentation systems. Nevertheless, these experiences highlight the potential for improvement through targeted policy reform, stakeholder engagement, and the adoption of digital innovations that streamline adverse event reporting.[34]

6. Regulatory Frameworks and Global Collaboration

6.1 Current Regulatory Guidelines

Regulatory frameworks for pharmacovigilance are guided by several prominent agencies, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and the World Health Organization (WHO), which provide overarching guidelines to ensure drug safety and efficacy.[35] In parallel, regulatory bodies are increasingly focusing on validating artificial intelligence (AI) tools and establishing robust risk assessment protocols to accommodate the rapid evolution of digital health technologies.[36]

6.2 Standardization and Data-Sharing Initiatives

A key component of effective pharmacovigilance is the standardization of adverse event terminology. The use of systems such as MedDRA (Medical Dictionary for Regulatory Activities) facilitates uniform reporting and analysis, thereby enhancing data comparability across different regions and healthcare systems.[37] Moreover, collaborative initiatives among stakeholders—including international organizations like the International Council for Harmonisation (ICH), WHO, and various national agencies—play a critical role in establishing data-sharing platforms and harmonizing reporting standards across borders.[38]

6.3 Bridging the Gap Between Modern and Traditional Pharmacovigilance

As traditional and herbal medicines become increasingly popular worldwide, integrating their safety data into mainstream pharmacovigilance systems has become imperative. Recent policies advocate for the inclusion of adverse event data related to herbal and complementary medicines within established monitoring frameworks, ensuring that these products are subject to similar safety assessments as conventional drugs.[1] Additionally, cross-border research and technology exchange initiatives are pivotal in overcoming regional disparities, facilitating a more unified approach to drug safety monitoring, and fostering innovation in the field.[39]

7. Ethical, Legal, and Social Considerations

7.1 Data Privacy and Security

Large-scale data collection and AI-driven analytics introduce significant risks regarding the protection of sensitive health information. The aggregation of vast amounts of personal data can lead to potential breaches and misuse if not handled correctly, highlighting the need for robust security measures.[40] In this context, strict regulatory frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in the United States are essential to ensure compliance and safeguard individual privacy.[41]

7.2 Bias and Fairness in AI Systems

AI systems used in pharmacovigilance are only as reliable as the data on which they are trained. Inadequate or non-representative training data can introduce biases, potentially resulting in disparities in patient care and undermining trust in AI-based decisions.[42] To counteract these issues, strategies aimed at curating inclusive and representative datasets are critical. Such strategies may include continuous monitoring for bias, diversifying data sources, and involving multidisciplinary teams to guide the development of equitable AI systems.[43]

7.3 Informed Consent and Patient Autonomy

Ethical considerations in the use of digital tools and AI in pharmacovigilance extend to issues of informed consent and patient autonomy. Patients must be fully aware of how their data is being collected, stored, and analysed, ensuring that they retain control over their personal information.[44] Balancing public health benefits with individual privacy rights remains a challenge, requiring transparent communication and strict adherence to ethical standards that protect patient interests while enabling valuable data-driven insights.[45]

7.4 Accountability and Liability

The deployment of AI in drug safety monitoring raises important questions of accountability and liability. When AI algorithms fail or generate incorrect safety signals, it becomes crucial to delineate responsibility among developers, healthcare providers, and regulatory agencies.[24] To address these concerns, evolving regulatory frameworks are emphasizing the need for rigorous oversight and clear guidelines on AI validation and governance, ensuring that all stakeholders are accountable for maintaining high standards of safety and efficacy.[36]

8. Current Challenges and Limitations

8.1 Technical Barriers

One significant challenge in modern pharmacovigilance is the heterogeneity and quality issues inherent in large-scale healthcare data. Variability in data formats, incomplete records, and differences in data collection practices can hinder robust analysis and reliable signal detection.[46] Additionally, advanced machine learning algorithms, while powerful, often operate as "black boxes," making it difficult to ensure transparency and interpretability—factors that are crucial for regulatory acceptance and clinical trust.[47]

8.2 Resource Constraints

The deployment of advanced AI tools for drug safety monitoring faces substantial resource constraints, particularly in low- and middle- income countries where the financial burden can be prohibitive.[48] Beyond financial limitations, there is a pronounced need for skilled personnel who can manage and interpret complex AI systems, as well as for interdisciplinary collaboration among data scientists, clinicians, and regulatory experts to effectively integrate these technologies into existing workflows.[49]

8.3 Integration Bottlenecks

Integrating diverse healthcare IT infrastructures poses another major challenge. Merging data from disparate systems often results in compatibility issues and requires significant standardization efforts to ensure seamless data flow.[50] Additionally, traditional pharmacovigilance frameworks may resist change due to established practices and institutional inertia, further complicating the incorporation of novel digital and AI-driven methods.[51]

9. Future Directions

9.1 Personalized Pharmacovigilance

Advancements in genomics and precision medicine offer promising avenues for tailoring drug safety monitoring to individual patient profiles. Integrating genetic information into pharmacovigilance systems can refine risk assessments and help predict adverse reactions more accurately.[52] Similarly, exploring the role of the human microbiome may yield personalized insights into drug responses, thereby contributing to more precise and effective safety monitoring.[53]

9.2 Expanding AI Capabilities

Emerging AI paradigms such as reinforcement learning and multimodal data fusion are set to revolutionize the analysis of complex pharmacovigilance data, enabling the extraction of deeper insights from heterogeneous datasets.[54] In parallel, the integration of blockchain technology presents a promising solution for secure, decentralized data sharing, ensuring the integrity and traceability of safety data across various platforms.[55]

9.3 Policies and Global Cooperation

Future pharmacovigilance efforts will benefit from harmonized regulatory guidelines that transcend regional boundaries. Coordinated initiatives, such as those promoted by the International Council for Harmonisation (ICH), are crucial for building global data repositories that enhance signal detection capabilities and foster international collaboration.[1,38]

9.4 Interdisciplinary Research

Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for driving innovation in pharmacovigilance. Joint efforts among pharmacologists, data scientists, ethicists, and policy-makers can accelerate the development of more sophisticated monitoring tools.[56] Additionally, actively engaging patients in the co-design of these tools ensures that their perspectives and experiences are integrated, ultimately enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of pharmacovigilance systems.[6]

10. Conclusion

This review underscores that digital innovations and AI are fundamentally transforming pharmacovigilance by enabling more proactive and personalized surveillance, significantly improving the speed and accuracy of adverse event detection.[25] However, despite these notable advancements, challenges persist—particularly regarding data quality, ethical considerations, and the integration of traditional medicine into mainstream pharmacovigilance systems.[31]

The implications for both modern and traditional medicine are profound. There is a pressing need for standardized, global frameworks that recognize and accommodate the diverse range of medicinal products in use today.[1] Equally, fostering collaborative efforts among international regulatory bodies, healthcare providers, and researchers is crucial to ensure comprehensive safety monitoring across all therapeutic modalities.[27]

Moving forward, a call to action is warranted: continuous innovation in AI tools and the expansion of global partnerships are essential to keep pace with the rapidly evolving landscape of drug safety. Moreover, building inclusive data ecosystems that underpin evidence-based pharmacovigilance will be vital to protect public health in an era of increasingly personalized medicine.[14,20]

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