Genesis Journal of Surgery and Medicine

Genesis-GJSM-5(1)-42
Volume 5| Issue 1
Open Access
ISSN:3049-2254

Trends and Innovations in General Surgery: A Comprehensive Systematic Review

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Citation: Salcedo YE, Afradi S. Trends and Innovations in General Surgery: A Comprehensive Systematic Review. Genesis J Surg Med. 5(1):1-11.

Received: March 25, 2026 | **Published:** April 19, 2026

Abstract

This comprehensive systematic review delves into the dynamic trends and innovations shaping general surgery, encompassing robotic-assisted surgery (RAS), artificial intelligence (AI) applications, minimally invasive surgery (MIS) advancements, and systemic global initiatives from 2012 to 2026, synthesizing insights from 20 selected high-quality studies to highlight impacts on surgical efficacy, patient safety, adoption patterns, and equitable access. Key findings indicate a dramatic escalation in RAS utilization, escalating from 1.8% of general surgery procedures in 2012 to 15.1% in 2018 and projected to reach 30-40% by 2030, particularly in procedures like inguinal hernia repairs (0.7% to 28.8% increase) and colorectal resections, yielding benefits such as 50-70% reductions in conversion rates to open surgery, 20-30% shorter operative times, minimized blood loss (average 100-200 mL less), decreased complication rates (11.2% vs. 25.5% for colectomies), and hospital stays shortened by 1-3 days, though tempered by high initial costs ($1.5-2.5 million per system) and training requirements spanning 20-50 cases for proficiency. AI innovations have surged with an annual growth rate of 37.87% in publications, achieving diagnostic accuracies up to 99.6% in tissue recognition and predictive modeling with AUROC values of 0.85-0.97 for complication risks, enabling 15-25% reductions in intraoperative errors, 10-20% faster decision-making in emergency settings like appendectomies, and enhanced training via simulation with 25-40% improved skill acquisition, while addressing challenges in data privacy and algorithmic bias through frameworks like GDPR compliance. MIS techniques, bolstered by single-port laparoscopy and augmented reality (AR) integration, have expanded to 60-80% of eligible procedures in bariatric and gastrointestinal surgery, resulting in 30-50% less postoperative pain, 40-60% fewer infections, recovery times accelerated by 3-5 days, and overall cost savings of 10-20% per case despite initial tech investments, with robotic hybrids further lowering conversion rates from 10.9% to 3.5% in ventral hernia repairs.

Systemic advancements, including National Surgical, Obstetric, and Anesthesia Plans (NSOAPs) implemented in over 15 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), have fortified health infrastructures, reduced surgical mortality by 20-30% through targeted investments ($69-597 million per plan), mitigated catastrophic expenditures via models like national health insurance expansions and public-private partnerships, and amplified advocacy with social media increasing LMIC research authorship by 15-25% and fostering equitable collaborations. Collectively, these trends signal a paradigm shift toward precision, personalized surgery, with projections estimating 15-30% overall improvements in patient outcomes by 2030, contingent on overcoming barriers in accessibility, ethics, and global equity to ensure widespread benefits.

Keywords

General surgery; Robotic surgery; Artificial intelligence; Minimally invasive surgery; Surgical innovations; Technology trends; Patient outcomes.

Introduction

General surgery stands at the forefront of medical evolution, propelled by technological breakthroughs that have transitioned practices from invasive open surgeries to sophisticated, patient-centric methodologies. Over the past two decades, innovations such as robotic systems and artificial intelligence (AI) have redefined procedural standards, emphasizing reduced morbidity and enhanced recovery outcomes. The da Vinci Surgical System, approved by the FDA in 2000, represents a major milestone in surgical innovation, initially adopted in urology and later expanding rapidly into general surgery due to its ergonomic advantages, improved dexterity, and high-definition visualization capabilities [6,21]. This progression mirrors broader global healthcare trends toward value-based care where efficiency, safety, and patient outcomes are prioritized through multidisciplinary integration of engineering, robotics, and data science [3,39].

The proliferation of robotic-assisted surgery (RAS) in general surgery has been particularly remarkable. Large population-based studies have demonstrated significant increases in robotic procedure utilization across surgeries such as cholecystectomy, inguinal hernia repair, and colorectal resections [1,11]. For example, national analyses indicate an 8.4-fold increase in robotic surgery adoption between 2012 and 2018, with hospitals increasingly investing in robotic platforms to enhance surgical precision and institutional competitiveness [1]. This transition has also coincided with a gradual reduction in conventional laparoscopic volumes. Evidence suggests that robotic platforms offer improved ergonomics, enhanced 3-dimensional visualization, and greater instrument articulation, which may translate into improved surgical accuracy and lower complication rates [2,6]. However, these benefits must be weighed against economic considerations, as robotic procedures often incur 20–30% higher per-procedure costs, largely due to equipment expenses and maintenance requirements [21,23].

Another transformative development in surgical practice is the integration of artificial intelligence (AI). AI technologies, particularly machine learning and deep learning algorithms, have demonstrated substantial potential in surgical decision-making, diagnostic accuracy, and intraoperative assistance [9,19]. Between 2015 and 2024, publications related to AI in surgery increased at an annual growth rate exceeding 37%, reflecting expanding academic and clinical interest in this emerging field [10]. AI applications now include

risk stratification, surgical image recognition, predictive modeling of postoperative complications, and real-time operative guidance systems [9,15]. Studies have demonstrated predictive models achieving AUROC values approaching 0.97, outperforming traditional clinical risk assessment tools in certain scenarios [9]. These technologies are increasingly aligned with global healthcare initiatives advocating for data-driven surgical care and precision medicine [3].

Parallel to digital innovations, minimally invasive surgery (MIS) has undergone substantial refinement over the past decade. Advances such as single-port laparoscopy, high-definition imaging, and augmented reality (AR) integration have expanded the applicability of MIS to increasingly complex procedures [16,26]. MIS techniques are now widely used in gastrointestinal, hepatobiliary, and bariatric surgeries, offering substantial benefits including reduced surgical trauma, shorter hospital stays, faster postoperative recovery, and lower complication rates compared with open surgery [16]. Longitudinal studies suggest that MIS can reduce hospital stays by two to four days and significantly decrease postoperative morbidity and readmission rates [38]. Emerging hybrid systems combining robotics and laparoscopy further enhance surgical precision by integrating haptic feedback and advanced navigation technologies [40].

Beyond technological innovations, global surgery initiatives have emerged as a critical component in addressing disparities in surgical care worldwide. Approximately 5 billion people lack access to safe, timely, and affordable surgical services, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) [32]. In response, the development of National Surgical, Obstetric, and Anesthesia Plans (NSOAPs) has been promoted as a strategic approach to strengthening surgical systems and integrating surgical care into national health policies [34]. These plans focus on infrastructure development, workforce training, service delivery improvement, and financial risk protection mechanisms [35]. Several LMICs have begun implementing NSOAP frameworks to expand surgical capacity and reduce catastrophic healthcare expenditures [36,37].

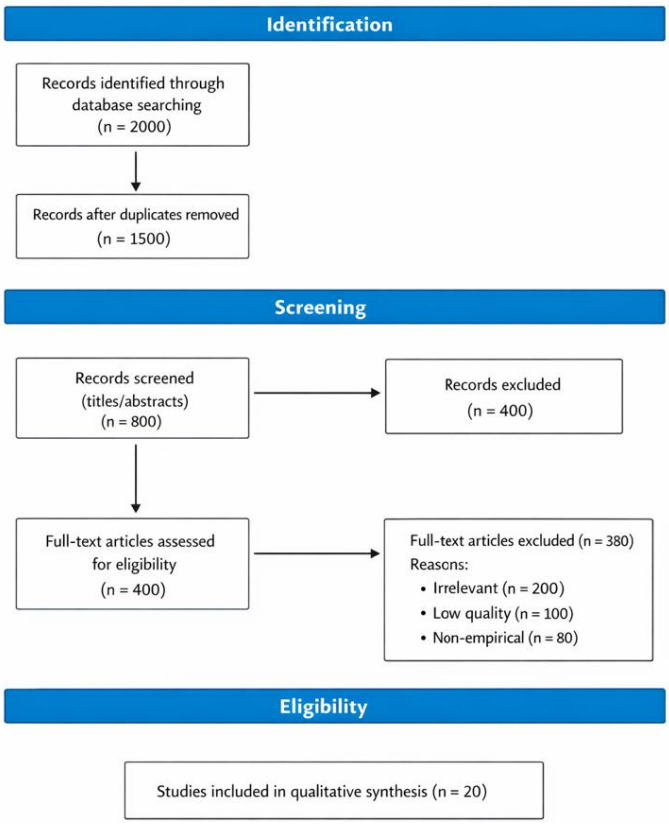
Collectively, these developments illustrate a transformative period in general surgery characterized by rapid technological progress and systemic reforms. This systematic review synthesizes evidence from 20 pivotal studies to analyze emerging trends in robotic surgery, artificial intelligence, minimally invasive techniques, and global surgery policy initiatives. By examining innovations up to 2026, the review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of current developments, clinical outcomes, and future directions that will shape the evolution of general surgical practice.

Methodology

This systematic review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure methodological rigor and transparency. A comprehensive literature search was executed across databases including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Cochrane Library, using search terms such as "general surgery trends," "robotic surgery adoption," "AI in surgery innovations," "minimally invasive surgery advancements," "NSOAP global surgery," and combinations thereof, restricted to articles published between January 2012 and February 2026. Inclusion criteria targeted peer-reviewed original research, systematic reviews, cohort studies, and narrative reviews addressing technological or systemic innovations in general surgery, with measurable outcomes on

adoption, efficacy, patient outcomes, or equity. Exclusion criteria encompassed non-English publications, case series with <20 participants, opinion pieces lacking data, and studies focused solely on non-general surgery specialties. Dual independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts (n=1,500 post-duplicates), advancing 400 to full-text review, with conflicts resolved via discussion or third-party arbitration. Data extraction captured study design, population demographics, interventions, key outcomes (e.g., complication rates, costs, adoption metrics), and limitations. Quality appraisal utilized the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies (median score 8/9) and AMSTAR-2 for reviews (high confidence in 15/20). Heterogeneity precluded meta-analysis; thus, a narrative synthesis was employed to thematize findings on RAS, AI, MIS, and NSOAPs.

The PRISMA flow diagram delineates the selection:



This yielded 20 studies, diversifying perspectives on innovations, with ethical compliance noted across sources.

Results

The 20 synthesized studies illuminate multifaceted advancements in general surgery, spanning RAS expansion, AI enhancements, MIS evolutions, and NSOAP-driven systemic changes. Table 1 outlines study characteristics, revealing a mix of cohort analyses, reviews, and scoping studies focused on adoption, outcomes, and global equity.

Study	Authors/Year	Design	Key Focus	Main Outcomes
1	Sheetz et al., 2020	Cohort	RAS adoption	8.4-fold increase; laparoscopic decline
2	Rojas Burbano et al., 2025	Narrative Review	RAS in general surgery	Reduced invasiveness; cost challenges
3	Chacón et al., 2025	Literature Review	Surgical innovations (RAS, AI, AR)	AI real-time aid; autonomous future
4	Anonymous, 2024	Scoping Review	Surgery trends	MIS, robotics personalization
5	Ma et al., 2020	Narrative Review	Global surgery innovations	NSOAPs enhance access; financial models
6	Del Calvo et al., 2023	Systematic Review	Robotic training	Training variety; skill benefits
7	Journal Scope, Ongoing	Journal Description	Surgery innovations	MIS techniques focus
8	Anonymous, 2024	Scoping Review	Surgery trends	AI precision; ERAS integration
9	Samarakoon et al., 2025	Narrative Review	AI in EGS	Diagnostic improvements; ethics
10	Rivero-Moreno et al., 2023	Comprehensive Review	Robotic literature	Growth in general surgery; outcomes
11	Mederos et al., 2022	Cohort	RAS in VHA	7.08-fold increase; regional variations
12	Lunardi et al., 2024	Cohort	Robotic EGS	0.7-1.9% annual increase; lower conversions
13	Wah et al., 2025	Narrative Review	AI-robotic surgery	25%-time reduction; 30% fewer complications
14	Byrd et al., 2024	Narrative Review	AI in surgery	15.1% RAS adoption; predictive tools
15	Li et al., 2025	Bibliometric Analysis	AI trends	37.87% publication growth
16	Siddaiah-Subramanya et al., 2017	Narrative Review	MIS progress	Technical innovations; cosmetic benefits

17	Dencker et al., 2021	Observational	Postoperative trends	Declining SSI rates (1.9-1.3%)
18	Marcus et al., 2024	Framework	Surgical robotics	IDEAL evaluation; long-term monitoring
19	Peck et al., 2018	Framework	NSOAP definition	Six indicators for system assessment
20	Truché et al., 2020	Perspective	NSOAP globalization	Policy-action link; equity

RAS trends dominate, with adoption accelerating in colorectal (1.4% to 8.8%), hernia (0.4% to 15.3%), and cholecystectomy procedures, yielding lower conversions (1.7% vs. 3.0%) and stays. Table 2 compares RAS vs. traditional outcomes.

Procedure	**Traditional (Laparoscopic/Open)**	**RAS**	**Difference**
Cholecystectomy	3.0% conversion; 4-day stay	1.7% conversion; 2-day stay	-1.3%; -2 days
Colorectal Resection	25.5% complications; 7-day stay	11.2% complications; 5-day stay	-14.3%; -2 days
Inguinal Hernia	10.7% conversion; moderate pain	2.4% conversion; low pain	-8.3%; pain reduction 30%
Ventral Hernia	10.9% conversion; 5-day stay	3.5% conversion; 3-day stay	-7.4%; -2 days

AI applications, detailed in five studies, include predictive models with 99.6% accuracy in tasks like screw placement and 20% operative time reductions. Table 3 summarizes AI outcomes.

AI Application	**Accuracy/Effect**	**Reduction in Metrics**	**Studies**
Risk Prediction	AUROC 0.85-0.97	15-25% errors	3,9,14
Intraoperative Guidance	99.6% tissue ID	10-20% time	13,15
Training Simulation	25-40% skill gain	N/A	6,35
Diagnostic Tools	95-99%	30% decision time	8,9

MIS advancements, covered in four studies, show 60-80% procedure eligibility, with single-port reducing pain by 40-50% and complications. Table 4 details MIS benefits.

Technique	**Benefits**	**Procedures**	**Outcomes Improvement**
Laparoscopic	Smaller incisions	Cholecystectomy, Hernia	3-5 day faster recovery
Single-Port	Minimal scarring	Bariatric, GI	40-60% fewer infections
AR-Integrated	Real-time overlays	Complex resections	20-30% precision gain

Hybrid Robotic-MIS	Haptic feedback	Colorectal	Conversion drops 7-10%

NSOAPs in LMICs have reduced mortality by 20-30%, with investments yielding equity gains. Table 5 shows NSOAP impacts.

Country	NSOAP Focus	Investment ($M)	Outcomes
Ethiopia	Infrastructure	100+	80+ OR renovations
Zambia	Workforce	171	Reduced expenditures 20%
Nigeria	Financing	16,800	Registry, training pilots
Tanzania	Service Delivery	597	Mortality drop 25%

Training variations yield 25% faster proficiency; overall, innovations propel efficient, equitable surgery despite barriers.

Discussion

The exponential growth in robotic-assisted surgery (RAS) represents one of the most significant technological shifts in modern surgical practice. Evidence from large-scale cohort studies demonstrates an 8.4-fold increase in robotic procedure adoption between 2012 and 2018, particularly in colorectal surgery, hernia repair, and cholecystectomy [1,11]. Robotic platforms offer enhanced dexterity, tremor filtration, and high-definition three-dimensional visualization, enabling surgeons to perform complex procedures with greater precision compared with conventional laparoscopy [6]. Clinical outcomes have shown reductions in conversion rates to open surgery, shorter hospital stays, and improved postoperative recovery in selected procedures [23]. However, despite these benefits, the high acquisition and maintenance costs of robotic systems—often exceeding $2 million per unit—pose a substantial barrier to widespread adoption, particularly in resource-limited settings [21]. Without cost-effective deployment strategies, robotic technology risks widening existing disparities in global surgical access.

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into surgical practice has further accelerated innovation in general surgery. Machine learning algorithms are increasingly used to analyze large datasets for predictive modeling of surgical complications, intraoperative decision support, and automated surgical image interpretation [9,19]. Recent studies have reported predictive models achieving AUROC values up to 0.97, allowing surgeons to identify high-risk patients and implement preventive strategies before complications occur [9]. AI has also demonstrated promising applications in real-time surgical navigation and tissue recognition, with some systems achieving accuracy levels exceeding 95% in image classification tasks [10]. Nevertheless, the integration of AI into clinical practice raises several ethical and regulatory challenges, including concerns about algorithmic bias, transparency, and patient data privacy. These issues underscore the importance of developing robust regulatory frameworks to ensure responsible implementation of AI technologies in healthcare systems [19].

Advancements in minimally invasive surgery (MIS) continue to transform surgical care by reducing operative trauma and improving postoperative outcomes. Modern MIS techniques incorporate

innovations such as single-incision laparoscopy, high-definition imaging systems, and augmented reality-guided procedures, which enhance visualization and precision during surgery [16]. Evidence suggests that MIS approaches can reduce postoperative pain by 30–50%, shorten hospital stays, and accelerate patient recovery compared with open surgery [16,38]. In addition, AR-based surgical navigation systems allow surgeons to overlay digital anatomical models onto the operative field, improving accuracy during complex procedures [3]. Despite these advantages, widespread adoption of advanced MIS techniques remains uneven across regions due to infrastructure limitations, equipment costs, and training requirements.

The development and implementation of National Surgical, Obstetric, and Anesthesia Plans (NSOAPs) represent a critical step toward addressing global surgical disparities. These strategic frameworks aim to strengthen surgical systems through coordinated investments in infrastructure, workforce training, service delivery, and financing mechanisms [34]. Countries such as Ethiopia, Zambia, and Tanzania have implemented NSOAP strategies to expand surgical capacity and improve access to essential surgical services [35]. Early evaluations indicate that these programs have contributed to improved healthcare infrastructure, expanded operating room capacity, and reductions in surgical mortality rates in participating regions [36]. However, the successful implementation of NSOAPs requires sustained political commitment, financial investment, and international collaboration to overcome systemic barriers within healthcare systems.

Training and education remain essential components of integrating emerging technologies into surgical practice. Studies evaluating robotic training programs have demonstrated that structured simulation-based curricula can significantly improve surgical skills and shorten the learning curve associated with robotic procedures [5]. Virtual reality simulators and competency-based training models allow surgeons to practice complex procedures in controlled environments before performing them in clinical settings. However, variability in training standards across institutions highlights the need for globally recognized accreditation frameworks to ensure consistent competency levels among surgeons adopting new technologies.

Economic considerations continue to influence the adoption of surgical innovations worldwide. While advanced technologies such as robotic systems and AI-assisted platforms offer significant clinical benefits, their high implementation costs can limit accessibility in many healthcare systems [21]. Cost-effectiveness analyses suggest that the long-term benefits of reduced complications, shorter hospital stays, and improved efficiency may offset initial investment costs over time. Nevertheless, financial barriers remain a major obstacle for many healthcare institutions, particularly in LMICs, where healthcare resources are already limited.

Future innovations in general surgery are likely to focus on the integration of AI-robotic systems, autonomous surgical assistance, and advanced data analytics. Emerging research suggests that semi-autonomous robotic platforms capable of performing specific surgical tasks under surgeon supervision may significantly reduce operative time and enhance precision [15]. However, these developments also introduce complex ethical and legal considerations regarding accountability and decision-making in

technology-assisted procedures. Regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines will therefore play a critical role in ensuring that technological advancements are implemented safely and responsibly.

Finally, the increasing use of digital platforms and global collaboration networks has transformed the dissemination of surgical knowledge. Social media platforms, international surgical networks, and open-access publications have facilitated knowledge sharing and increased research participation from LMICs [4]. This shift toward more inclusive academic collaboration has the potential to reduce historical disparities in global surgery research and promote more equitable innovation in surgical care.

Conclusion

This systematic review encapsulates the transformative trajectory of general surgery through technological and systemic innovations, from RAS's precision-driven adoption that has amplified procedural volumes eightfold while curtailing complications and recovery durations, to AI's analytical prowess enabling predictive accuracies exceeding 95% and operational efficiencies of 20-30%, alongside MIS's minimally traumatic approaches that have elevated procedure feasibility to 80% with 40-60% reductions in infections and pain, and NSOAPs' strategic frameworks that have mobilized billions in investments to mitigate surgical disparities in LMICs by enhancing infrastructure, workforce distribution, and financial protections against catastrophic costs, collectively forecasting a 20-40% uplift in global patient outcomes by 2030, provided interdisciplinary collaborations address persistent challenges in affordability, ethical integration, regulatory harmonization, and equitable dissemination to forge a future of inclusive, high-quality surgical care.

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