

# Learning Diagnosis from Electronic Health Records

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**Abstract:** In the attempt to build a complete solution for a medical assistive decision support system we proposed a complex flow that integrates a sequence of modules which target the different data engineering tasks. This solution can analyse any type of unstructured medical documents which are processed by applying specific NLP steps followed by semantic analysis which leads to the medical concepts identification, thus imposing a structure on the input documents. The data collection, document pre-processing, concept extraction, and correlation are modules that have been researched by us in our previous works and for which we proposed original solutions. Using the collected and structured representation of the medical records, informed decisions regarding the health status of the patients can be made. The current paper focuses on the prediction module that joins all the components in a logical flow and is completed with the suggested diagnosis classification for the patient. The accuracy rate of 81.25%, obtained on the medical documents supports the strength of our proposed strategy.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The medical domain continues to capture the interest of both researchers and industry. There is a continuous struggle to find the remedy for an incurable disease that, however, does not harm the overall health status of the patient. On the other hand, assistive medical technology is helping patients cope with their suffering such as hearing loss, hand tremors (Smith, 2014), or are in need of physical therapy (Lee, 2015).

Understanding how patients will react based on the medication they are under is an information that can be explored in the personal records of the patients. The manual analysis of the medical records for searching purposes is not feasible due to the heavy increase of data, especially in unstructured format. On the other hand, the massive increase of data should not hinder the exploitation of the Electronic Health Records (referred to in the following as EHRs). It is suggested that 70% of the useful medical information is captured in unstructured text documents (D'Avolio, 2013). The data that can be extracted from these documents and the inferred knowledge transforms the medical records into valuable sources of information.

In the attempt to exploit the medical records, several challenges arise. Typically, the documents are in unstructured format, are written in a domain distinctive language, contain domain specific terms,

abbreviations, and acronyms. A number of text pre-processing steps are required to convert these medical documents into a format that can be easily exploited by machines for knowledge inference purposes. The documents need to be structured and the relevant concepts must be extracted. Understanding the context and being able to identify the word meaning in case of polymorphic words are only a few of the challenges a knowledge extraction system faces. While the research benefits are obvious, a knowledge extraction system enhances the existing medical knowledge bases and supports the improvement of the existing health care systems.

The analysis of the medical data in free text format provides information such as predicting adverse reactions by analysing the interaction of drugs (when combined) or identifying co-morbidity risks, forecasting possible conditions that may occur based on previous studies and cases. The data can be used for designing solutions for recommending investigations for a thorough diagnosis, suggesting diagnosis or follow-up appointments. The patients can benefit from upgraded medical care when the medical records enclosing their medical history, illnesses, allergies, interventions, and many other health related characteristics become accessible at any time by the physicians. On these grounds, the Electronic Health Records systems have been introduced to deliver advanced medical services.

The collection of data about patients modelled as a knowledge base gives more insight into each patient's health status and medical needs. The existence of a knowledge base of former patients previously investigated and diagnosed, benefits along all dimensions: health care, costs, diagnosis, and reduced hospitalization time. Therefore, the ultimate goal of a medical system is obtaining recommendations provided by an assistive decision support system employing such knowledge base. The benefits, to name a few, are the decrease of patient's suffering and a reduced number of medical investigations, qualified both as costs and time interval between the patient's hospitalization and start of treatment, thus initiating the healing process.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows into 6 sections. Section 2 describes how the information extraction and mapping from EHRs is addressed in literature. Section 3 introduces the supervised techniques for predicting patient diagnosis based on the information in their clinical records while Section 4 introduces the general strategy of diagnosing patients. Section 5 describes the experimental setup for classifying the content of an EHR into a specific diagnosis, while section 6 concludes our work and presents the future enhancements and directions.

## 2 BACKGROUND

Along with the EHRs and EHRs systems adoption, a number of studies were conducted to evaluate their impact and the users' satisfaction (Edsall and Adler, 2008). By the year 2011, in the USA, the EHR systems had been adopted by 54% of the physicians and 85% of the adopters reported being content and satisfied while using these systems. However, one half of the physicians not using an EHR system said they were planning on purchasing one. These indicators are provided by (Jamoom, et al., 2012). The increasing trend on EHRs adoption is introduced in (Hsiao and Hing, 2014) who report an 18% adoption by the office-based physicians in 2001. The adoption rate reached 78% in 2013 on the same medical cohort.

For tagging the information captured in the EHRs, a number of annotation tools were made available. The authors in (Jonquet, et al., 2009) focus their research on annotating biomedical textual information via an ontology-based web service. A collection of over 200 biomedical ontologies and terminology repositories were integrated. They were collected from the UMLS ontology repository

(Bodenreider, 2004) and the NCBO bioportal ontologies (Musen, et al., 2012). The authors propose a two-step mapping approach. First, a syntactic concept recognition step is employed using a dictionary of terms generated from the UMLS ontology repository and the NCBO bioportal ontologies. Then, the annotations were augmented with the knowledge extracted from other ontologies. A semantic distance was computed to generate new annotations considering the sibling relations defined in the ontologies, while an ontology-mapping component propagated the annotations via the mappings between the ontologies. One challenge faced when mapping text to ontology is the ontology selection, as a consequence of the increasing number of available ontologies, reported by the authors in (Jonquet, et al., 2010).

Extracting semantic relations from text is a crucial step towards natural language understanding, and towards creating a structured representation of the content. Although the relation extraction task is a well-known problem it is still not trivial. Applied to the healthcare domain it gets even more difficult, due to the lack of grammar rules and jargon-rich nature of the text. Some of the approaches dealing with relation identification between concepts in discharge summaries are reviewed below.

The task of relation identification is essential in the automated and semi-automated ontology development. The authors in (Doing-Harris, et al., 2015) exploited the synonymy and hierarchical relations existing between the concepts and based on the tf/idf frequency, and constructed semantic vectors. Another use case for the relation identification between concepts was proposed in (Henriksson, et al., 2014). The authors examined a solution for establishing the relations between synonyms and abbreviations and their corresponding mappings on concepts from the medical domain. The generalization of the proposed approach derived from the use of semantic spaces extracted from two different corpuses of medical data, namely a corpus of clinical documents and a corpus of medical journal articles. The performance measurements of the study are reported as recall: 0.39 for abbreviations to long forms, 0.33 for long forms to abbreviations, and 0.47 for synonyms.

The authors in (Albin, et al., 2014) proposed a method to identify the relations between medical concepts exploiting the UMLS ontology collection and implementing the onGrid Web platform. The platform allowed for efficient transitive queries and conceptual relation identification. The relations were assessed between any two sets of biomedical concept

relations and the relations within one set of biomedical concepts. The proposed solution was exemplified on the disease-disease relation. The semantic distance between concepts was computed based on the semantic type of the concepts as defined in the UMLS. The relations were defined as weak when the concepts belong to the abstract types found closer to the root of the UMLS semantic network. For imposing an order on the relations, a formula was introduced to identify the closeness between concepts, which led to the construction of a relation matrix.

Supervised Machine Learning techniques and rule-based methods had been proposed for identifying the values associated to the medical concepts in clinical documents. The authors in (Doan, et al., 2012) proposed an ensemble classifier composed of a rule-based system, a supervised classifier (SVM) and a CRF model to recognize medication information from clinical text. The features extracted to build the classification model included word features, POS tags, morphologic features (to capture the affix information), orthographic features, history features, and semantic tag features.

Addressing the same task of mapping values to medical concepts, the authors in (Jiang, et al., 2014) exploited the information in the RxNorm ontology to identify the medication concepts. The error analysis showed that a number of synonyms, abbreviations and misspelled words contributed to reducing the value of the recall.

Enabling efficient search across medical information while submitting primitive or abstract queries has been investigated by the authors in (Boaz and Shahar, 2003). They proposed the IDAN project that allowed for employing temporal ontologies for querying medical specific information contained in databases.

### 3 METHODOLOGY FOR MINING DATA FROM EHRS

In our previous study (Bărbăntan and Potolea, 2015) we proposed a strategy for implementing a medical Assistive Decision Support System. The proposed system can handle as input any type of unstructured medical documents from EHRs to radiology reports or medical prescriptions. The documents need to be pre-processed using specific Natural Language Processing tasks, followed by the semantic analysis. Once the semantic information is associated with the input data, the extraction of relevant concepts can be

completed. The concept identification and the specific semantic categories enable the definition for a structure for the input documents. In the attempt to provide a structure to the documents the information must be grouped into sections, such as symptoms, diagnosis, medication, follow-up appointments, investigations, and medical history. The obtained structured information was filtered and classified such that custom decisions about the health status of the patients can be made. The final objective triggers the type of solution, that may consist in a search in the documents for specific concepts, or may represent an evaluation of the <concept, value> pairs, while the prediction solution collects all the knowledge and uses it to evaluate the health status of a new patient.

To evaluate and predict the health status of a patient we need to understand the methodology of diagnosis making and we need to be able to extract from a patient's EHR the relevant data that can be used in determining the diagnosis. Figure 1 shows how the data is extracted and analysed when assessing the health status of a patient based on his medical record. In a Data Mining (referred to in the following as DM) approach, disease understanding is translated into training models for each diagnoses while patient evaluation is represented by how similar the health status of an investigated patient is to the previously patterns generated in the training phase, thus to each disease' specific features.

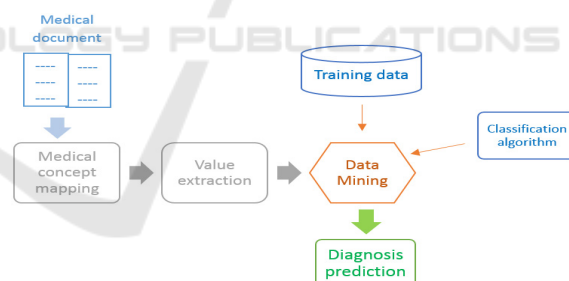


Figure 1: Methodology for extracting knowledge and diagnosis prediction.

#### 3.1 Information Extraction from Raw Data

Collecting representative and valuable data to solve any particular DM problem is still a challenge. To identify the relevant features for representing a disease, several data properties must be satisfied. The features must have a good coverage upon the instances and situations such that the false negative rate is minimized. The features must not be redundant and should be represented in the most efficient data formats, whether as numbers, strings or dates. When

all these conditions are satisfied, a DM algorithm can be expected to achieve the best performances.

The topic we are currently addressing in this paper is the prediction of the health status of a patient, namely if he/she suffers from a specific. To tackle this challenge, the medical concepts need to be identified and associated with the corresponding values as examined for each patient, thus identifying the pair <concept, value>. The values can either be explicitly stated in the text as numbers or strings, or they can be inferred based on the context.

## 3.2 Information Exploration

Once the medical concepts have been identified along with their associated values, the data can be exploited to tackle various tasks using DM strategies. Such tasks include identifying the relation between the extracted concepts or predicting the patient's diagnosis. The solution for extracting knowledge from EHRs follows the general DM process as stated also in (Alag, 2009). The first step in developing the learning approach is understanding the purpose of the solution and defining a strategy of achieving it in the setup imposed by the content. Identifying the relations between concepts becomes a problem of finding patterns in data.

### 3.2.1 Relation Identification

Concept relation identification represents a step towards establishing the structure of documents, leading to a conceptual map for representing the documents. The concept relation identification process involves an initial step where the relevant concepts are identified. Identifying the relations assists in predicting future behaviours or trends and recognizing patterns in data. Nevertheless, identifying the relations between the concepts can be exploited as a learning tool. They are useful for identifying co-morbidities and help understanding and learning medical conditions and inferring new relations between them.

In our previous work (Porumb, et al., 2015), (Bărbăntan, et al., 2016) we proposed the ReMED strategy for relation identification between medical concepts. We tackled this task by constructing a knowledge base with examples of the different relation types and generating a model via a SVM classifier. The created training dataset was assessed in several feature setups. The relation identification proposed solution was feature engineered. For each pair of concepts, a number of features was extracted. The feature vector was built starting from the bag of

words representation of the input data and progressively enhanced with features grouped into the following categories: context, lexical, syntactic, and grammatical. The features were typically Boolean, but for a few, the mapped value was integer or real. To identify the final ReMED model, a best feature setup was determined employing a trade-off between precision and recall.

### 3.2.2 Diagnosis Identification

To automatize the disease identification logical path followed by a physician, the steps followed need to be translated in machine understandable rules. All the knowledge of a physician has to be fed as training data to an algorithm to learn patterns for classifying each disease. The health status of the patient has to be transformed and mapped to be consistent with the structure of the training data such that the patient can be evaluated. Employing a Machine Learning strategy for diagnosis identification, the physician's knowledge needs to be transformed into examples from which the algorithm to learn patterns.

The Clinical Problem Solving course introduces a general description into the physician's reasoning during the diagnosis process (Lucey, MD, 2015). Following the general flow of understanding what causes a disease and how to identify it, we defined an automatic method for making informed decisions about patients' health status. The diagnosis making process follows the general pattern illustrated in Figure 2 and described in the following.



Figure 2: Understanding what causes a disease.

When assessing the health status of a patient, the physician performs the following examinations. He knows how things normally work and classifies the investigated condition as normal functioning, if applicable. When things do not follow the normal path, the patient's health is labelled as abnormal functioning which leads to the investigation of the syndromes and diseases that cause the abnormal functioning. The physician continues the investigation by capturing the isolated clinical signs and symptoms that result from the abnormal functioning, grouped into syndromes. The ultimate goal is determining what types of diseases cause the syndromes and proposing a treatment plan and an attempt at predicting the evolution of the health status of the patient.



## 4 FROM PATIENT APPOINTMENT TO DIAGNOSIS

The flow in section 3.2.2 introduces the flow of diagnosis identification in a general setup. The evaluation must consider actual concept values, as a pair <concept, value>. For example, the existence of *albumin* in an EHR is not relevant unless associated with a laboratory result. To be aligned with the DM terminology, we will refer to in the following the medical concepts as features. Because each feature has to satisfy particular conditions such as normal and abnormal ranges, data type, or fall in specific categories, these conditions must be converted into machine-readable rules. To do this we assign to the evaluated features their corresponding data types and define the ranges, either categorical or numerical. The actual mapping is performed based on the content of the medical document, and after the actual medical concepts were identified from the text.

### 4.1 Medical Concepts Identification

In our previous work, we introduced the MedCIN solution (Bărbăntan, et al., 2014), (Bărbăntan, et al., 2015), (Szenasi, et al., 2015), for assigning categories (disease, symptom, medication, procedure) to the medical concepts, we have defined several terminology lists, by querying the SNOMED-CT ontology, as follows: we extracted the instances which are related to the categories and identified the correspondences between the concepts and the terminology lists. To identify the content, the categories, we explored the semantic class classification as defined in the ontology. A class includes all the concepts assigned to a given semantic type. From each semantic class we extracted all the instances along with the following information: id, preferred label and all the alternative labels. The alternate labels as defined in SNOMED-CT are actually the synonyms of the concepts, representing other possible terminologies for a selected concept. Each instance is pre-processed following the same steps which were employed for the input documents: POS identification, stop words removal and lemmatization.

### 4.2 Assigning Values to Medical Concepts

Once the medical concepts have been identified, their values need to be mapped based on the data definition constraints. Each medical concept has a specific type,

which can fall in one of the specific DM data types: continuous, Boolean or nominal. To identify each category, the following strategies were established. While the solution for quantifying nominal data is the definition of lists of terms and the solution for assessing continuous data is the numeric patterns, when it comes to quantifying the existence of mentioned medical conditions deep semantic analysis needs to be involved. When evaluating a medical concept that is described within a category, post-processing steps may be involved when the actual category is not specified in the text.

## 5 SUPERVISED APPROACH FOR DIAGNOSING PATIENTS FROM EHRS

This section describes the instantiation of the proposed methodology on a specific disease. The training and testing setups are detailed along with the evaluations performed. In the attempt to implement and evaluate the proposed methodology a dataset containing data about patients that suffer from Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) was referenced.

### 5.1 The CKD Dataset

The dataset used for training the model is the CKD dataset (Lichman, 2013) from UCI. The dataset is designed to be used for predicting Chronic Kidney Disease in patients and the data was collected from an Indian hospital on a period of 2 months from 400 patients (250 that suffered from CKD and 150 that did not suffer from CKD). To assess the health status of the patients, 24 attributes were measured, such as age, blood components statistics, and the presence of underlying conditions such as anaemia, hypertension or coronary artery disease.

The CKD model was created by training the data using the implementation of the Bayes classifier from Weka (Hall, et al., 2009). The evaluation accuracy on the training data on a separate test set using 10-fold cross-validation, was 98.75% as only the condition of 5 patients was not correctly predicted.

### 5.2 Feature Vector Mappings

The data structure and representation from the training data imposes the way the test set is built. For each type of attribute (nominal and continuous) specific rules have been defined such that the values from the text can be mapped to the features. Figure 3

shows that the distribution of continuous and nominal data types in the training dataset is similar. Each EHR instance was converted with the proposed knowledge extraction technique into an instance.

For evaluating whether patients suffer from CKD based on the content in their EHRs, the document which is received in an unstructured format is passed through a number of transformations that allow for the identification of the features that describe the health status and assess their corresponding values.

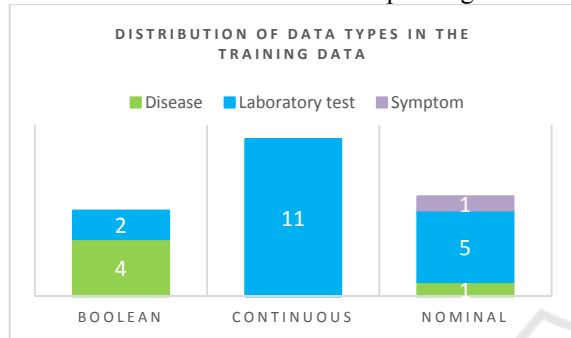


Figure 3: Feature count per data type in the training data.

While the relevant medical concepts are identified using the strategy described in section 4.1, extracting their values is presented in the following.

### 5.2.1 Continuous Value Extraction

Laboratory tests, patient age, blood pressure, weight or height are evaluated as continuous values. Once these concepts were identified, an analysis followed that evaluated the relation of the concept with the continuous values identified in the text to identify whether a number is associated to the concept. To map the results to the correct attribute, equivalence classes were defined for each attribute. For example, the age attribute was identified in documents as “y/o”, “year old” or “age”, while the pedal edema attribute was found as “lower extremity edema” or “peripheral edema”. The condition is imposed by the training data as the data type associated to age is continuous. Not mentioning the actual numeric age of the patient assigns the unknown value to the feature age “?”, just like in the case of an ambiguous mention of age such as “elderly” or “young”.

### 5.2.2 Nominal Value Extraction

Assessing a tumour’s stage or the degree of spread of a rash imposes a comparison with similar evaluations. There are cases when a feature can be evaluated only in a limited number of ways, thus each feature instance falls under a category. In the particular case of medical data, the nominal features can be either

strings, such as appetite <good, bad>, or numeric values, such as Specific Gravity defined by the following ranges <1.005, 1.010, 1.015, 1.020, 1.025>. To map the values from the documents to the categories defined in the training data, a dictionary of nominal strings has been used and in the case of numeric ranges, the extracted values were mapped accordingly.

Syndromes or diseases are usually evaluated using Boolean values. For these concepts their presence or ruling out is relevant, that is why, for the Boolean value extraction a negation analysis is required. The negation was identified and assessed with the NegEx (Chapman, et al., 2001) strategy for syntactic negation identification, and our PreNex strategy for morphologic negations, introduced in our previous work (Bărbăntan and Potolea, 2014). In the particular case, the underlying conditions of hypertension, diabetes mellitus or coronary artery disease are cues for the CKD.

## 5.3 CKD Evaluation

For identifying the patterns in evaluating whether a patient suffers from CKD, we applied a supervised learning algorithm on the CKD dataset. The training consisted of the Bayes classifier evaluated in a 10 folds cross-validation setup. For classifying the medical instances, the information from a medical record, was converted into a feature vector which contained the values extracted from the medical record.

Due to the limited amount of publicly available annotated medical data, our experiments were limited in regard to the number of documents. To evaluate the concept extraction and value extraction, the medical documents have been processed.

The EHR samples for evaluation were collected from the MTSamples dataset (Helpline, 2010) and consisted of 32 EHRs: 16 describing patients suffering from CKD and 16 not suffering from CKD. The evaluation of the EHRs consisted in the classification of 1211 sentences which lead to the filtering, classification and assessment of 15828 words. The condition for selection these particular samples related to the investigations presented in the EHRs, namely all patients have in common the features used for determining the presence of the CKD. The results of the classification showed an accuracy of 81.25%, for the 32 new EHR instances.

## 5.4 Discussion

There are some issues that need to be discussed concerning the content of the HER sampled involve

in the evaluation and the information contained in the knowledge base. While the knowledge base is composed of features that describe the CKD medical condition, these features were not always present in the EHR of a patient suffering from CKD. For this reason, three of the instances belonging to the CKD class were empty, thus their classification was incorrect due to the missing information requested by the knowledge base. This finding deepens our understanding regarding the way the investigations are conducted in the medical domain. It is a known fact that the strategies for determining the cause of patients' suffering are different across institutions, and thus, across medical doctors. These findings support the premise that the collection and linkage of as many sources of data as possible, even if their structure and purpose may seem dissimilar, leads to more accurate solutions.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The present research explores strategies for handling the transformation of the unstructured data into structured format via a knowledge transformation flow. The output of the transformation enables the classification of the input unstructured text, represented by EHRs, into a specific diagnosis. While the current solution covers a single diagnosis, we propose extending the training dataset with further diagnoses, thus extending the feature vector with features that are present when assessing the presence of specific diseases. The current status of the medical Assistive Decision Support System covers complete solutions for automatically structuring medical documents and extracting relevant medical concepts via the PreNex and MedCIN strategies, while the prediction module is argued in favour, being validated with an actual use case.

The proposed strategy represents the final step in our proposed medical Assistive Decision Support System, introduced in our previous research (Bărbăntan and Potolea, 2015). Starting from raw medical data, the proposed solution infers the appropriate suggestion to each specific task (further investigations, diagnosis or medication). The solution enables the transformation of the medical documents – which are usually stored in unstructured format – into a structured format by exploring and applying a taxonomy based mapping technique. This technique involves the extraction of the relevant terms from the text assisted by a domain specific terminology and a context based classification. A number of pre-processing steps are involved in normalizing both the

input text (unstructured data) and the terminology sources (structured data), which proved to carry a significant role. The filtering step which allows for the discrimination between medical and non-medical concepts proves to be an efficient method. In the selection of the terminology sources (WordNet and SNOMED-CT) their ability to cover the biomedical domain and also to obtain accurate information was considered.

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