AI-Driven Systems for Optimizing Inpatient Care Management

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1. Introduction

Inpatient care management is becoming more intricate by the day. Consequently, there has been a growing interest in leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) driven platforms to help enhance the holistic approach of inpatient care. Over the years, increasing complexity in healthcare environments coupled with revenue constraints and the need to provide cost-effective, high-quality, and safe care has necessitated the genesis of new models of care delivery aimed at maximizing healthcare value. Patient-centered, evidence-based care delivery is the need of the hour rather than assumption-driven physician preference.

With more patients positioned to utilize the healthcare system, the time is ripe to start thinking about big data and AI as an adjunct to aid inpatient care management. Next-generation AI is much more than machine learning. AI encompasses a much wider array of digital advancements including natural language processing, robotic process automation, sentiment and/or advanced voice analytics, machine and deep learning models, facial recognition, and even recommendation engines or chatbots. AI represents a substantial opportunity to revolutionize inpatient care, but that potential can only be realized if these tools are effectively integrated into existing workflows. The promise of AI will not be realized if costly, disintegrated tools are thrust upon healthcare providers. Given the potential for AI to enhance inpatient care, it is imperative to quickly uncover the most powerful and beneficial applications.

1.1. Background and Rationale

The findings reported in this special feature reflect the objective of the special series, which is based on the use of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven inpatient systems for their ability to integrate data, improve decision-making, and enhance patient outcomes. Although inpatient care management has relied on evidence-based processes, there were still gaps in providing efficient and effective care. To address this, technology was employed to identify features that were indicators for clinical action. Diagnostic and predictive models can then be guided by these technologies to achieve high-value care. Healthcare has been on a continuous trajectory toward data-driven decisions. These technologies have evolved from the condition-specific algorithms and decision tree analyses used in the 1980s to the refinement of risk prediction.

With the large increase in electronic health record data, the technology available for research has improved. Inpatient care model risk strategies, which integrate large repositories that distribute and relate diseases and their phenotypes, can be employed to identify clinical actions that will result in superior patient outcomes. They can reduce readmissions, reduce lengths of stay, reduce intensive care unit resource consumption, and reduce the time to recognition of sepsis. The technology can be used to reduce the costs of care and to assist providers in realizing the high-value care that is not happening. The rationale for using AI to improve inpatient care management is simple: In healthcare, we are often inefficient, and we don't even get it right.

1.2. Scope and Objectives

The purpose of this essay is to outline how AI-driven systems are currently being used for practical tasks that are closely linked to daily inpatient administrative management, quality assurance, patient care, and resource optimization. The essay details the AI-based models used, the prediction tasks performed, their scope, how they are operated in the real world, and the extent to which they are installed in healthcare settings. We also discuss the roles of such AI-driven systems and the capabilities that they can substitute. Finally, complementary to the discussion, this essay suggests several strategies to ensure deployment is safe and beneficial in the inpatient setting. The aim related to this part of the essay is to analyze subject and outcome areas, people involved, methodologies used, objectives, and decision-making levels. While we believe this to be an extensive list of aspects, it is possible that other aspects may very well be of interest in the future. We do not focus on ethical and societal aspects, or explicitly on sub-sectors of care. Thus, the results and recommendations from this paper can complement its original paper in suggesting research agenda items relevant to this essay. We subsequently discuss what our paper does not focus on.

2. Foundations of Inpatient Care Management

In-hospital care often involves clinical paths and guidelines that govern the treatment of patients. Treatment is grounded on best medical practices and customized to a single patient's organism through a very complex set of standard systems within systems, from drug release and logistics to therapy and risk prediction, from the engineering of medical devices to ethical and legal boundaries. During a patient's stay, healthcare professionals, doctors, and nurses collect treatments and clinical monitoring information, along with the patient's interventions and reactions to the clinical treatment and environment, both in terms of services and pre-diagnostic structures within the hospital.

The management of care in a hospital setting is, by nature, a systems problem. Operating within such a complex and multi-dimensional environment, professionals are charged with making in-the-moment patient care decisions that affect the outcome of treatment and therapy for the patient, both in the immediate term and, cumulatively, across the course of a patient's treatment. The evolution of in-patient care is undergoing change for many reasons, among which one might include social pressure for more integrated healthcare pathways, the request for patient-centered treatments, faster service, and economic efficiency. Clearly, the nature of in-patient care has a significant impact on in-hospital logistics and is tied to key constraints such as bed availability and room allocation, for example. A realistic, clear, and current view of the complexity within care management is required. The task is challenging, and the continuation of comprehensive and valuable research in this area is strongly recommended.

2.1. Key Concepts and Terminology

Inpatient care management refers to the maintenance of hospital functions with a focus on implementing the efficient use of resources to provide timely quality care in the hospital. Healthcare management is dynamic and encompasses planning and prioritizing various medical services and hospital resources. This includes multiple interrelated activities such as hospital bed management, medical staff orientation, support staff, diagnosis, treatment planning, family needs, financing, legal aspects, and health education. In this text, hospital care management is concerned with the application of all managerial activities in multiple aspects of the operation of inpatient care.

Potential management strategies for inpatient care services include patient flow management, hospital resource pre-allocation management, and multi-organization care integration and patient transition strategies. The need for different aspects of inpatient care management and the best management strategy depends on the resulting objectives, scope, constraints, and detailed operational principles of each sub-field. However, the application of all concerns rests, to a large extent, on the efficacy of the patient flow process. The adoption of fixed capacity-based bed management can be a constraint to promote an effective inpatient flow process. Operational terms used in the text can have different individual meanings in healthcare, and this text uses these in the definitions provided. In a given context, such terms should have a shared meaning to ensure effective communication between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. This section defines the basic terms related to inpatient care operations proposed in the healthcare context.

Patients' needs and wants for receiving healthcare are largely unpredictable due to the nature of health services. In patient care services, the services are furnished to meet the expectations of both inpatients and their relatives at the appropriate place and time. This is not only to meet organizational objectives but also to ensure effectiveness in fulfilling the needs of society. The inpatient's stay involves admission, registration, investigation, initial diagnosis, generation of a care plan, medical and administrative ordering, treatment, care, operation, pre-operation, anesthesia, post-operation recovery, and continuous monitoring until discharge from inpatient care. In maximizing the outcome of care, inpatient care managers are more concerned about the inpatient services, which are made up of many specialties and health professionals at different levels integrated toward good healthcare. Inpatient care managers plan and integrate the most effective human and non-human resources. Inpatient care management involves planning, organization, assigning duties, motivation, controlling, decision-making, communication, training, supervision, and policy framing in identifying the right sources and factors that determine the role and status assigned to human and legal factors, which will play a vital role in inpatient services management.

3. Applications of AI in Healthcare

The healthcare setting has seen numerous applications of varied technologies powered by artificial intelligence (AI). While AI presents breakthroughs in the potential to revolutionize the sector, the possibility of it transforming inpatient care in hospitals remains a common theme in recent studies. This section primarily takes into account AI-driven solutions for the inpatient care environment due to its focus on a curative approach to treatment for patients. It in no way belittles the significant impact of AI technologies in other healthcare units such as outpatient care, history generation from unstructured EHR, cancer screening and diagnosis, and personalized cancer treatment details.

AI models have been trained with large amounts of data to predict the occurrence of multiple diseases such as mortality risk of a patient, septic shock, sepsis, in-hospital cardiac arrest, acute kidney injury (AKI), and length of stay (LOS) in various hospitals. These models have shown increased accuracy in diagnosis outcomes, reaching up to 48.1% of area under the curve (AUC) to predict septic shock and decreased incidence of cardiac arrests. AI systems are primarily employed for assisting healthcare professionals and hospitals in the following categories: treatment, population health management, predictive analytics, clinical trials, drug discovery, computer-assisted diagnosis, image analysis, personal wellness and medicine, health plan selection, cost reduction by choosing at-risk patients, and patient data retrieval. However, an impressive leap can be observed in recent studies that have created dual and ensemble AI models with interpretability to show real-world optimization options. Inpatient hospital care, dropping 5% of in-hospital mortality rates in an accelerated fashion, is one of the areas discussed in the literature that would benefit from a breakthrough. Research has provided various options for inpatient care optimization powered by AI-driven technology. Practical implementations from case studies have been explained.

3.1. Overview of AI Technologies

The integration of AI technologies into information systems has demonstrated tremendous potential to revolutionize care processes and reduce avoidable complications, particularly within inpatient environments. A suite of distinct AI technologies is contributing to this transformative potential, each with specific implications for improving inpatient care management processes. In the cloud, where data management capabilities are expanded and combined to create value, an astounding one-third of gigabytes are dedicated to holding and generating key clinical data. Here, we aim for the broader technology proprietor and digitally literate. For its synergies, we inherently think that innovations linked to computer data—ranging from improving the computation of supply chain models to further facility optimizations, simulations, and forecasting—are the modern bedrocks of value in healthcare, the future GDP of AI, and should be filling some coffers around the clock.

Machine learning models—in this context—are a tool implemented through imaging with simulation data to maximize knowledge and fill in gaps in the prospectively generated cloud-based scoreboards. Furthermore, the integration of natural language processing in imaging can improve understanding of images of variable quality. For instance, they can identify and disregard duplicates, corroborate or correct classifications, and crystallize subtle, yet previously unidentified, patterns within visual data that is arrived at through multi-institutional learning. The emerging age of big data is critically short on clean, high-quality, structured real-world data—especially as it pertains to imaging. Techniques leveraging the power of cloud-based predictive analytics and machine learning on imaging data sources can help pinpoint game-changers in many hospitals' routine clinical protocols. While the advent of smart hospital rooms has been long awaited, the presence of smart homes and other digitization efforts is also already quantitatively enhancing hospital care. These betas represent steps toward a transition to real-time data analytics. Monitoring on a mass scale, involving electronic wearables and computational wearable technologies, is also starting to revolutionize how hospitals are thinking about caring for patients. The cumulative result of advancements, ideally, should be seen as a means to support providers, not replace them. In sum, this array of tools can be integrated into care processes, support ongoing information processes vital to providing appropriate care, and automate many routine activities in health management.

3.2. Current Trends and Innovations

AI and machine learning (ML) have grown rapidly in healthcare. Research shows that 65% of hospital administrators currently use predictive analytics, with 91% of that group utilizing AI. This trend will continue to grow, with the majority of those respondents planning to increase AI and predictive analytics in the future. Several organizations announced new partnerships with science and health data experts to enhance service delivery and patient outcomes by employing AI.

One of the latest innovations in artificial intelligence (AI) engagement with the healthcare market – inpatient healthcare technology in particular – is predictive patient flow modeling (PPFM) using deep learning networks, which represented the winners of a Hackathon for Inpatient Care hosted by a collaborative program for inpatient healthcare solutions. The PPFM provides a detailed probabilistic forecast of what lies ahead for all current inpatients through analysis of the historical patient data. Such data support output changes resulting from the future impact of systemic and variation changes. AI is no longer just a novelty term in these big adoption and acceptance publications; it is transforming how healthcare workers are interacting with hospital services. In the UK, over the COVID-19 pandemic, patients have been advised to turn towards AI instead of their primary care provider to get remote medication refills. For the former, we know that one app alone has over 70% of UK citizens linked to it. In the United States, several AI advancements in healthcare have been reported in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. AI-Driven Systems for Inpatient Care Management

The applications discussed above are appropriate for hospital care as a whole. There are numerous applications for AI systems tailored to inpatient care management; a summary of such AI-driven systems can be found in Table 1. Bed Utilization Optimization: Systems developed to optimize bed utilization can result in greater strategic benefits for the hospital, for example, in terms of effective inpatient care management. AI-driven systems can be expected to achieve higher quality decisions in this area and, as a result, directly optimize inpatient care management as well. Patient flow management and resource allocation are two key issues that AI systems have the potential to significantly influence within hospital inpatient care management.

Patient Flow Enhancement: Systems can direct resources to either the patients who require admission or other pertinent resources. AI can add predictive ability to this challenge, particularly with support for matching admitted patients to their preferred beds (e.g., creating an AI approach to facilitate improved discharge parameters). An AI-driven system was developed to manage issue-driven overcrowding in hospitals arising from disruption. It demonstrates the potential for AI-generated strategies to improve patient flow through the expedited allocation and distribution of such patients. A discharge planning system utilizing AI and machine learning can provide predictions of a patient's likely discharge date and help track and modify patients' goals. In a pilot evaluation, the software received a positive reception from care staff and showed a trend of reduction in bed occupancy. Therefore, AI has the potential to significantly optimize discharge planning and resource allocation. Staff Management: It is outside the scope of this article to discuss the use of AI in staff management in an inpatient setting, as staff can be considered outside the problem environment. Any discussion of AI systems utilized to make staff schedules or manage staff resources would require additional considerations outside those of patient care. Up to this point, the focus has been on the benefits or impacts to patient care; therefore, it is outside the scope of this article to discuss staff management in additional detail.

4.1. Bed Utilization Optimization

AI-driven methods can be used to optimize bed utilization, balancing the need for obtaining maximum hospital occupancy with minimizing patients' waiting time for admission. Inpatient care management is a major concern in many healthcare systems owing to increased costs and limited resources. Since many patients cannot be housed in the initial hospital ward that manages the entrance of new patients to the system, they spend a long time waiting for their admission in another ward, typically near the clinic where they visited their physician, or even on a gurney in the emergency department. Lengthy wait times are associated with negative perceptions of quality of care. Efficient bed allocation can decrease admitted patients' length of stay by diminishing their transition time from the initial ward to the final inpatient ward and hence reduce the overcrowding of hospitals.

Despite the stated importance of bed utilization optimization, only a few methodologies have been proposed. The concept of AI-driven techniques, including expert systems and machine learning algorithms, was proposed for predicting patient demand by admission requests to avoid overcrowded wards. Some studies have integrated AI algorithms into various existing bed management systems or decision-making systems to identify optimal allocation strategies for preventing patient overcrowding and minimizing waiting times, and improving the operational efficiency of the system. Decision support tools were developed to inform hospital management about the present status of available beds. Predictive modeling was used to identify patient demands and assist crucial decisions associated with patient admission. Data analysis plays an important role in making effective decisions.

Bed allocation must be closely related to the need for quality improvement, including whether initial patient triage is reflective of patient health status, whether final patient ward assignments provide an environment for good care, and whether final patient allocation accurately indicates needed resource allocation. Effective management of bed utilization demands solutions that appreciate the need for a quality environment in addition to maximal bed usage. Balancing the desire for high bed occupancy and good care presents a formidable future problem that cannot be solved by existing management structures or clinical perspectives.

Comprehensive physical plant redesign is essential, and the future AI systems need to be built without cumbersome information transfer. Data acquisition about patient demand could be done at the time of scheduling, rather than immediately before the desired inpatient bed day. Evidence supports the enormous scope of AI usage in hospital inpatient care admission scheduling and management. The challenge is whether healthcare will rise to the potential of AI. Inpatient care management includes the use of evidence-based effective physical plant design, matching of patient care units and acuity grading, careful bed utilization calculations, and pre-admission and pre-discharge inpatient scheduling.

4.2. Patient Flow Enhancement

Optimized patient flow and inpatient bed management are crucial to overall care delivery, especially as hospital admissions continue to increase. The processes of admission and transfer of care include, of course, the discharge of deceased patients as well as those who were discharged from the acute hospital to be transferred to a mental health hospital. AI has slowly started to play a significant role in revolutionizing various aspects of the healthcare system, one among them being the inpatient management process. Recent AI and predictive models allow such forecasts to be made using advanced analytics and are more likely to be upwardly and/or accurately validated in most cases. This, in turn, would benefit the system to work around times of bottleneck, due to the high efficiency and cost-effectiveness of AI predictive models. As a result of transfer time prediction, resources such as bed spaces can therefore be best allocated to reduce admissions, ultimately leading to an improvement in the overall patient flow.

Many novel technologies are being developed for the tracking of patients in real time. The combination of AI-driven analytics with real-time data access via a digital tracking system would further enable a real-time fulfillment tracking system. Furthermore, the advent of social interfacing handheld devices enables access to the proposed system over a real-time online dashboard. The improved and optimized patient flow would hence prove to be an exceptional management advantage. Challenges in setting up an AI-driven patient flow and bed management system include limitations in the hardware and software for tracking patient location. The developed system would require the rise of modern hospital procedures to record data in the real-time digital dashboard way, as any discrepancies in the recorded times would lead to a false prediction. In conclusion, an AI-driven bed management system has several advantages and permits opportunities to offer improved patient flow throughout a healthcare unit and ultimately improve a patient's hospital experience and outcome.

4.3. Resource Allocation Improvement

This section is concerned with the improvement of inpatient care operations through better resource allocation. Approaches range from data-driven improvement of nurse schedule quality and quantity to continuous resource redistribution. AI-driven systems can pull the copious data needed to support such analyses and prescribe the necessary changes. For instance, an application that both predicts patient discharges while taking into account interdependencies with other care episodes in the patient journey and optimally reallocates the released capacity is described. The resulting reduction in excess demand on wards can lead to a reduction in patient waiting time and free up nurse shift teams per year in a hospital with beds.

The need to perform data analysis in real-time has been emphasized, presenting a two-algorithm approach that jointly manages patient flow by controlling the timing and rate of elective admission and the capacity allocation. It is foreseen that resource constraints will once again be present. The need to provide accurate forecasts of elective and emergency admissions is expected to be important for predicting inpatient care demand. Two crucial factors that will influence the levels of healthcare resource capacity required are outpatient appointment bookings backlog levels and the maximum waiting times for patients to receive diagnostics and treatment. Being able to forecast these two factors will therefore also contribute to resource allocation and the efficient scheduling of inpatient hospital admissions.

5. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

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Given the importance and sensitivity of health data, a significant concern is associated with data privacy and security. As such, inpatient data management leverages health systems currently implementing AI to address existing laws and regulations. This regulation is essential to protecting patient data from external adversities such as cyberattacks and misinformation. In implementing AI systems, larger datasets can also be used, enabling the analytics to leverage a more representative pool of data.

Although these new data management technologies have gained acceptance in patient care and business perspectives, there has been critique in society regarding the use of such systems for decisions rather than humans. Usually, it is more difficult to understand what process computers, such as the AI-driven system, perform compared to knowledge-based methods. Subsequently, while algorithms can provide more intricate guidelines to clinicians, they should also be transparent as to what factors were automated. It is also pivotal that these technologies ensure fair decision-making for all patients, particularly as health data may contain biases, especially for minority groups. Organizations invested in AI development, including health, have/will create new competition and prompt interest from the regulatory landscape, affecting the need for industry standards. It is equally important to understand who is responsible for the development and responsible deployment of these AI systems.

5.1. Data Privacy and Security

Data Privacy and Security Alison Ray and colleagues discuss the legal and ethical concerns with the data protections that ought to be in place for an AI model that facilitates discharges from the ICU, even though some stakeholders may genuinely believe the model will help to free up beds in a health system that currently needs them. The collection and use of this kind of sensitive information are currently regulated extensively. Both the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and the General Data Protection Regulation include specific protections for patient data. While goals vary, both require explicit privacy commitments from organizations that collect personal information and set some obligations around data sharing. Organizations have discretion in how they interpret and fulfill these regulations, with the exception of the most egregious abuses. Both, for example, grant a privacy exception when personal data are de-identified or anonymized to a level that renders them untraceable to a specific individual.

Consequences for Data Breaches Forging public trust in these or any concerns about data safety will be a critical step in implementing any AI-driven solutions across the health care system. Within the medical system, breaches can, of course, impact patients, negatively and sometimes gravely affecting their rights and health care. Derailing public trust is considered to be an intangible but also far-reaching harm of data breaches. Trust is a known determinant in patient outcomes and therapies, and trust in the privacy and protection of their health information is a major factor influencing patient health outcomes. Every year, interviews are conducted with people affected by data breaches about their experiences. A study found that a significant percentage of health care data breach victims have lost some degree of trust in the organizations managing their data, and that over half of these respondents switched health care providers. The running cost of health care data losses is substantial per compromised patient resulting from the loss of confidence and switching of providers and remedies. By any means, health care providers and clinical commissioners can pay for themselves to shield their patients' private information. Access controls, encryption or suitable protocols, and other technical or security-based methods can be instituted to protect inpatient data in warehouses and cloud scenarios. There may be a need to save information inside hardware locked down in local computers. Creating a culture of respect for privacy and understanding of what the law mandates is also crucial. It should not be unknown to health system staff that keeping health information private is a legal requirement. Regular checks of the local hospital work environment may also need to be performed in order to determine if security policies are maintained. A shift towards more reusable hardware and more generalizable data might involve the use of more robust de-identification equipment. Many can and must undergo de-identification and additional data usage tools in-house. Challenging flow researchers could analyze processed or sampled data in internet-accessible environments that were partially shared.

5.2. Bias and Fairness in AI

Bias and fairness pervade discussions of AI in healthcare. Ethical AI integration is increasingly recognized as a critical concern, with developing approaches around the integration of ethical AI. Bias in AI systems could lead to disparities in treatment recommendations for patients or predictions of patient outcomes, reducing provider and patient trust and reinforcing participatory, distributive, and procedural injustices. Health disparities can also result from biased predictive and diagnostic tools, impacting patients in marginalized populations. Several different sources of bias have been identified: (1) the data used to train models can lack representation, whether because of health disparities or excluded populations; (2) data can be acquired unfairly; (3) labeling the tasks that AI is trained on can introduce inaccuracies in the results, either by human labelers misunderstanding the domain or in those labels themselves. Furthermore, algorithm design can deploy techniques and strategies that marginalize groups, and the interaction of designers' choices and learnable patterns in the data results in unfair outputs.

It is therefore imperative to develop strategies for identifying and mitigating bias in AI. There is a necessity to use diverse datasets and monitor for disparate impact, particularly focusing on feedback from real-world AI systems in clinical settings. Furthermore, the persistence of "black-box AI" in many systems continues to make it difficult to unpack how patient data has been used in making a clinical decision or to provide sufficient explanation to satisfy provider comfort. Accountability and responsibility of the system developers are also key parts here and are a signature piece of the AI ethics frameworks included in this discussion. Moreover, researchers have also discussed fairness and its ethical context as part of a conversation on what happens when AI for health disparities progresses safely to bring care to everyone. Bringing care to everyone becomes even more complex when scrutinizing the questions of what fair care is, who bears responsibility, and where the responsibility lies in the system; i.e., in setting working conditions, access to affordable care, or changing behavior to reduce social and health disparities.

6. Future Directions and Conclusion

6.1. Future Directions

Truly realizing the potential of AI-driven systems in inpatient care management will require that stakeholders collaborate to:

- Address the challenges—and the ethical considerations—associated with the large-scale deployment of AI. - Invest in and further develop data systems that can feed AI algorithms. - Promote further research on the most efficient and contextually effective use of AI in patient care and treatment delivery.

In the future, we can expect significant advancements in AI technologies: algorithms will become more understandable; they will be better at mining a limited amount of data; and not only data scientists, but also front-line providers will be able to create and test AI-driven clinical support algorithms. We think that such systems will be needed to help healthcare move to models of "precision delivery," which, similar to precision medicine, are personalized, efficient, and equitable. In the case of AI, "precision delivery" might involve more intelligent identification of which patients need healthcare support, when, by whom, and in what form. AI systems might help link patients to programs, community resources, and network providers who may be best able to support them. They also might be able to intercede when patients are not engaged in a treatment program to encourage them to return to care, in a personalized way and at the personalized time of need.

6.2. Conclusion

AI-driven systems can be used to address various aspects of inpatient care management, including routine care, risk assessment, patient experience and outcomes, the patient care process, and general process and workflow improvements. The ethical condemnation of the use of AI algorithmic decision-making should not blind us to the potential to use such systems to reduce overall inefficiencies in the broader patient care delivery system and help our most challenging patients—as long as we address the challenges of national adoption and application, data readiness, and patient and case variability. We suspect that AI solutions might require a similar degree of investment and research to make them universally deployable as HIE systems have to date.

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