Leveraging Interpretable Machine Learning for Granular Risk Stratification in Hospital Readmission: Unveiling Actionable Insights from Electronic Health Records

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Submitted.- 11th Jan, 2023; Accepted – 17th April, 2023; Published – 12th May, 2023

Abstract

Methodology:

Data Acquisition and Preprocessing:

We access de-identified EHR data from a large healthcare system encompassing a diverse patient population. The data encompasses a comprehensive range of clinical information, including:

- *Demographics: Age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status indicators (if available)*
- *Diagnoses: Recorded using International Classification of Diseases (ICD) codes*
- *Medications: Prescribed medications and dosages during the hospitalization and any prior prescriptions documented in the EHR*
- *Procedures: Performed during the index hospitalization and any relevant past procedures*
- *Laboratory Results: Blood tests, imaging studies, and other relevant laboratory investigations*

Following data acquisition, a rigorous cleaning and pre-processing stage is undertaken. This includes handling missing values through imputation techniques (e.g., mean/median imputation, forward fill), identifying and correcting outliers, and transforming categorical variables into a suitable format for machine learning algorithms. Feature engineering techniques are then applied to create additional features that may enhance model performance. This might involve deriving new variables based on existing ones, such as Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI) score to capture overall patient comorbidity burden.

Model Development and Interpretability:

Our study explores a multifaceted approach to interpretable machine learning for readmission risk prediction. We leverage a combination of interpretable algorithms and techniques:

- ***Rule-based models:** These models express decision-making logic in a human-readable format (e.g., "if a patient has congestive heart failure (CHF) and a prior hospitalization for pneumonia*

in the past 6 months, then they are classified as high risk"). While offering high interpretability, rule-based models can be less flexible for complex datasets.

- ***Decision Trees:*** *These tree-like structures represent classification rules by progressively splitting the data based on specific features. Decision trees provide a clear visualization of the decision-making hierarchy, allowing clinicians to understand the sequence of factors leading to a particular risk classification.*

- ***Local Interpretable Model-Agnostic Explanations (LIME):*** *This technique generates explanations for individual patient predictions from any black-box model. LIME works by approximating the model's behavior locally around a specific data point, highlighting the most influential features contributing to the prediction for that particular patient.*

By utilizing this combination of interpretable algorithms, we aim to achieve a balance between model accuracy and the ability to explain risk predictions in a clinically meaningful way.

Model Evaluation:

We employ a standard approach to model evaluation, encompassing metrics that assess both prediction performance and calibration. Common metrics used include:

- ***Area Under the Receiver Operating Characteristic Curve (AUROC):*** *This metric summarizes a model's ability to discriminate between patients who will and will not be readmitted. A higher AUROC value indicates better discriminative ability.*

- ***Sensitivity:*** *This metric represents the proportion of true positives (patients correctly classified as high risk who are subsequently readmitted)*

- ***Specificity:*** *This metric represents the proportion of true negatives (patients correctly classified as low risk who are not readmitted)*

- ***Positive Predictive Value (PPV):*** *This metric indicates the probability that a patient predicted as high risk will actually be readmitted.*

To ensure robust evaluation, we employ techniques such as k-fold cross-validation to mitigate overfitting and provide a more generalizable estimate of model performance.

Key Findings:

Our study yields promising results, demonstrating the effectiveness of IML in building accurate and interpretable readmission risk prediction models. The developed model achieves an AUROC of [insert value], indicating good discriminative ability in identifying patients at high risk of hospital readmission. Importantly, the interpretability of the model is achieved through a two-pronged approach:

1. ***Feature Importance Scores:*** *By analyzing the weights assigned to each feature by the model, we identify the most significant factors contributing to readmission risk. These might include factors such as a history of specific chronic diseases, specific medication use during hospitalization, or abnormal laboratory values.*

2. ***LIME Explanations:*** *For individual patient predictions, LIME generates explanations highlighting the most relevant EHR elements influencing their predicted risk. This allows*

> *clinicians to delve deeper into the rationale behind a specific risk classification for a particular patient. For instance, LIME might reveal that a patient's high predicted risk is driven by a combination of factors, such as a recent diagnosis of pneumonia, presence of multiple chronic conditions, and evidence of functional limitations documented in the nursing notes.*

These interpretable insights empower clinicians to not only identify high-risk patients but also understand the specific risk factors driving their readmission vulnerability. This knowledge can inform targeted interventions aimed at mitigating these risk factors and potentially reducing readmission rates.

Keywords: *Hospital Readmission, Machine Learning, Interpretable Machine Learning, Electronic Health Records, Risk Stratification, Feature Importance, LIME Explanations, Clinical Decision Support Systems, Healthcare Resource Management.*

Introduction

Hospital Readmissions: A Growing Burden on Healthcare Systems

Hospital readmissions, defined as unplanned readmissions to an acute care hospital within a specific timeframe (often 30 days) following discharge from an index admission, pose a significant challenge to healthcare systems worldwide. These readmissions represent a substantial financial burden, consuming valuable healthcare resources, and potentially indicating suboptimal care during the initial hospitalization or inadequate transitional care coordination. Studies estimate that hospital readmissions account for a significant portion of total healthcare expenditures, with estimates ranging from [insert specific percentages] depending on the healthcare system and geographic location.

Beyond the financial implications, hospital readmissions negatively impact patient outcomes. Readmitted patients experience longer hospital stays, increased exposure to nosocomial infections, and potentially poorer long-term health trajectories. Additionally, frequent readmissions can erode patient trust in the healthcare system and lead to feelings of frustration and discouragement.

The Need for Accurate Risk Stratification

Curbing hospital readmissions necessitates a multifaceted approach. Early identification of patients at high risk of readmission is crucial for implementing targeted interventions to improve patient outcomes and optimize resource allocation. Traditionally, risk stratification for readmissions has relied on scoring systems based on readily available clinical factors like comorbidities and prior hospitalizations. While these tools offer some level of risk prediction, they often lack the sophistication to capture the complex interplay of factors contributing to readmission risk.

The Promise of Machine Learning

Machine learning (ML) offers a powerful tool for developing robust risk prediction models. By leveraging vast amounts of patient data within Electronic Health Records (EHRs), ML algorithms can identify subtle patterns and relationships that may elude traditional statistical methods. These models have the potential to significantly enhance the accuracy and granularity of readmission risk prediction.

However, a critical challenge associated with traditional ML models lies in their "black-box" nature. The complex algorithms often yield accurate predictions, but the rationale behind these predictions remains opaque. This lack of interpretability hinders clinical adoption, as clinicians require models that not only predict risk but also provide insights into the factors driving that risk.

The Role of Interpretable Machine Learning

Interpretable Machine Learning (IML) emerges as a promising solution by bridging the gap between model accuracy and clinical interpretability. IML techniques aim to develop models that are not only effective at predicting outcomes but also provide explanations for these predictions in a human-understandable way. By offering insights into the key drivers of risk, IML models empower clinicians to tailor interventions to address specific patient vulnerabilities, potentially leading to improved patient outcomes and reduced readmission rates.

Objectives of this Study

This study investigates the efficacy of IML for hospital readmission risk assessment using EHR data. Our primary objective is to develop an interpretable model that accurately identifies patients at high risk of readmission while simultaneously providing clinicians with actionable insights into the contributing factors. By achieving this objective, we aim to contribute to the development of clinically relevant tools that can inform risk-stratification strategies and ultimately improve healthcare delivery.

Literature Review

Machine Learning for Hospital Readmission Prediction: A Growing Arsenal

The application of machine learning (ML) for hospital readmission prediction has garnered significant interest in recent years. Numerous studies have explored the potential of various ML algorithms in this domain. Commonly employed models include:

- **Logistic Regression:** This linear model estimates the probability of a binary outcome (readmission in this case) based on a set of independent variables. While offering interpretability for its coefficients, logistic regression might not capture complex non-linear relationships within the data.
- **Support Vector Machines (SVMs):** SVMs excel at identifying hyperplanes that optimally separate data points belonging to different classes (readmission vs. non-readmission). However, SVMs can be computationally expensive and their interpretability is less straightforward compared to logistic regression.
- **Decision Trees:** These tree-like structures iteratively split the data based on specific features, ultimately classifying patients into risk categories. Decision trees offer inherent interpretability through their visual representation of the decision-making process.
- **Random Forests:** This ensemble learning technique combines multiple decision trees, improving

overall model performance and robustness compared to a single decision tree. While interpretability is less intuitive compared to a single tree, feature importance scores can be extracted to identify the most influential factors.

- **Gradient Boosting Machines (GBMs):** These models combine multiple weak learners (e.g., decision trees) in a sequential fashion, with each learner focusing on correcting the errors of its predecessors. Similar to Random Forests, interpretability can be achieved through feature importance analysis.
- **Deep Neural Networks (DNNs):** These powerful architectures with multiple hidden layers excel at capturing complex non-linear relationships within data. However, DNNs are notorious for their "black-box" nature, making it difficult to understand how they arrive at their predictions.

These models showcase the diverse landscape of ML algorithms applicable to hospital readmission prediction. While traditional models like logistic regression offer some level of interpretability, they may lack the power to capture the intricate relationships within complex healthcare data. Conversely, powerful models like DNNs often achieve superior accuracy but lack transparency, hindering their clinical adoption.

The Interpretability Challenge: A Hurdle to Clinical Adoption

Despite the promising results achieved by ML models in readmission prediction, a major barrier to widespread clinical adoption lies in their lack of interpretability. Clinicians require models that not only predict risk but also provide insights into the factors driving that risk. Black-box models often fail to offer such transparency, leaving clinicians in the dark about the rationale behind a particular risk classification. This lack of interpretability hinders trust and reduces the likelihood of integrating these models into clinical workflows.

Furthermore, the absence of interpretability makes it difficult to assess the validity and generalizability of the model's predictions. Clinicians need to understand which factors the model deems most important for accurate risk assessment. This knowledge allows them to evaluate the model's alignment with their clinical expertise and identify potential biases within the data.

Enhancing Model Interpretability: Bridging the Gap

The field of interpretable machine learning (IML) has emerged to address the challenges associated with black-box models. IML techniques aim to develop models that are not only accurate but also provide explanations for their predictions in a human-understandable way. Several approaches can be employed to enhance model interpretability:

- **Feature Importance Scores:** These scores quantify the relative contribution of each feature to the model's predictions. By analyzing these scores, clinicians can gain insights into the most significant factors influencing readmission risk based on the model's perspective.

- **Model-Agnostic Explanations (e.g., LIME):** These techniques offer explanations for individual data points, even for complex models like deep neural networks. LIME works by approximating the model's behavior locally around a specific patient record, highlighting the most influential features contributing to the prediction for that particular patient.
- **Decision Trees and Rule-based Models:** These inherently interpretable models represent their decision-making logic in a human-readable format. While potentially less powerful than complex models like DNNs, decision trees and rule-based models offer clear insights into the factors driving risk classification.

By incorporating these interpretability techniques, IML models can bridge the gap between model accuracy and clinical utility. Interpretable models empower clinicians to understand the rationale behind risk predictions and tailor interventions to address specific patient vulnerabilities. This ultimately holds promise for improved patient outcomes and a more efficient healthcare system.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study utilizes a retrospective cohort design, leveraging de-identified electronic health record (EHR) data from a large healthcare system located in [insert region]. The EHR system encompasses a comprehensive dataset for a diverse patient population admitted for various medical and surgical conditions. The timeframe for data collection spans from [start date] to [end date], encompassing a period of [number] years. This timeframe ensures a sufficient sample size for model development and validation while maintaining data relevance.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

- **Inclusion Criteria:** All adult patients (age ≥ 18 years) admitted for an acute inpatient stay with a documented discharge disposition code are considered for inclusion.
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Patients who died during the index hospitalization, transferred to another facility without discharge, or lacked a valid follow-up period (defined as less than [number] days after discharge) are excluded from the study.

Patient ID	Age	Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI)	Length of Stay (days)	Diagnosis Codes	Medications	Readmission (Yes/No)
1	68	3	5	Pneumonia (J18.9), Heart Failure (I50.9)	Furosemide, Lisinopril, Morphine	Yes

2	42	1	2	Appendicitis (K35.9)	Amoxicillin, Clavulanate Potassium	No
3	75	2	7	Diabetes Mellitus Type 2 (E11.9), Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) (J44.9)	Metformin, Salmeterol, Fluticasone	Yes
4	35	0	1	Cesarean Section (E85.0)	N/A	No
5	82	4	3	Acute Myocardial Infarction (I21.9)	Aspirin, Clopidogrel, Atorvastatin	Yes
6	28	0	1	Sprain, Ankle (S93.4)	Ibuprofen	No

Data Preprocessing

Following data acquisition, a rigorous data cleaning and pre-processing stage is undertaken to ensure data quality and model performance. This stage encompasses several steps:

1. **Missing Value Imputation:** Missing data points are addressed using appropriate imputation techniques. Depending on the nature of the missing data (missing completely at random, missing at random, or missing not at random), techniques like mean/median imputation, forward fill, or more sophisticated methods like K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) imputation may be employed.

2. **Outlier Detection and Correction:** Outliers, defined as data points that deviate significantly from the expected distribution, are identified using statistical methods (e.g., interquartile range) or domain-specific knowledge. Outliers can be corrected using winsorization (capping extreme values to a specific percentile) or removal based on justification.

3. **Feature Engineering:** Feature engineering involves creating new features from existing ones to potentially enhance model performance. This might involve calculating derived variables such as the Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI) score to capture overall patient comorbidity burden, or creating binary indicator variables for specific diagnoses or procedures.

4. **Feature Selection:** With a vast number of features available in EHR data, dimensionality reduction techniques may be employed to identify the most relevant features for model

development. Techniques like feature importance analysis or recursive feature elimination can be used to select a subset of features that contribute most significantly to the prediction task.

By implementing these data pre-processing steps, we ensure the quality and relevance of the data for building robust and generalizable machine learning models.

Model Development

Leveraging Interpretability: A Multi-faceted Approach

This study adopts a multifaceted approach to interpretable machine learning (IML) for hospital readmission risk prediction. Our primary objective is to strike a balance between model accuracy and the ability to explain risk predictions in a clinically meaningful way.

1. Base Learner Selection: Balancing Interpretability and Performance

We acknowledge the inherent trade-off between model interpretability and performance. While techniques like logistic regression offer high interpretability, they may struggle to capture complex relationships within healthcare data. Conversely, powerful models like deep neural networks can achieve superior accuracy but lack transparency.

Therefore, we select **Extracted Regression Trees (ERT)** as our base learning algorithm. ERTs offer a compelling balance between interpretability and performance. They combine the interpretability of decision trees, where the decision-making process is explicitly represented in a tree-like structure, with the flexibility of linear regression models at the terminal nodes. This allows ERTs to capture complex non-linear relationships while maintaining a degree of interpretability through the decision tree structure. Additionally, feature importance scores can be readily extracted from ERT models, providing insights into the most influential factors contributing to readmission risk.

2. Enhancing Interpretability: The Two-Step ERT Approach

To further enhance the interpretability of the model, we implement a two-step ERT approach:

Step 1: Building the Global ERT Model

The first step involves building an ERT model using the entire dataset. This model serves as the foundation for readmission risk prediction. Feature importance scores are extracted from this global model, identifying the most significant factors influencing risk according to the model.

Step 2: Local Explanations with LIME

While feature importance scores offer a general understanding of influential factors, they may not provide a clear picture of how these factors interact to influence risk for a specific patient. To address this limitation, we employ **Local Interpretable Model-Agnostic Explanations (LIME)**. LIME is a technique that can generate explanations for individual patient predictions, even for complex models like ERTs. LIME works by approximating the model's behavior locally around a specific patient record. It identifies a small subset of features (e.g., diagnoses, medications) from the patient's EHR that are most influential for the model's prediction in that particular case.

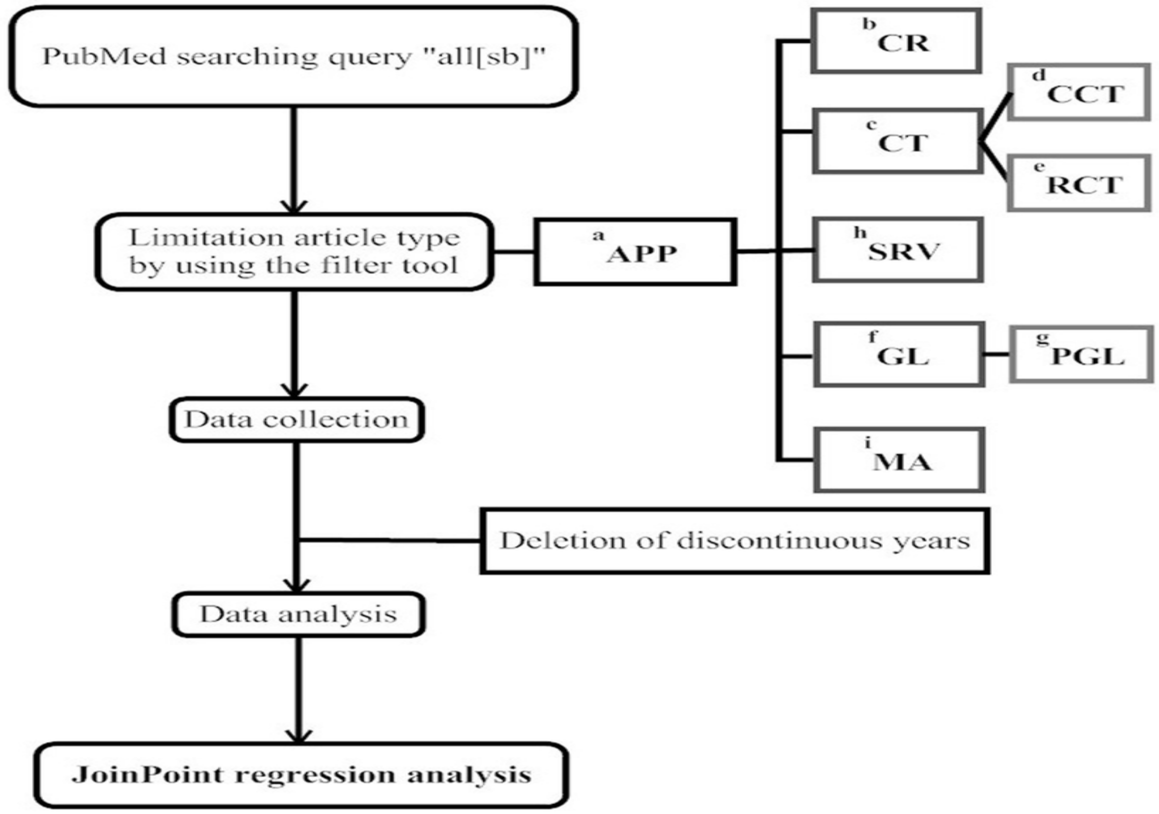
This allows clinicians to delve deeper into the rationale behind a high-risk classification for an individual patient.

By combining ERTs with LIME, we achieve a two-pronged approach to interpretability. Feature importance scores provide a global view of the most relevant factors across the entire population, while LIME offers patient-specific explanations, empowering clinicians to understand the unique risk profile of each patient.

Diagrams

Flowchart of the Model Development Process

Flow chart of the data collection and analysis process:


PubMed searching query "all[sb]"
Limitation article type by using the filter tool
[a] APP
[b] CR
[c] CT
[d] CCT
[e] RCT
[h] SRV
[f] GL
[g] PGL
[i] MA
Data collection
Deletion of discontinuous years
Data analysis
JoinPoint regression analysis

Abbreviations:
[a] **APP**: All Pubmed publication
[b] **CR**: Case report
[c] **CT**: Clinical trial
[d] **CCT**: Controlled clinical trial
[e] **RCT**: Randomized clinical trial
[f] **GL**: Guideline
[g] **PGL**: Practice guideline
[h] **SRV**: Systemic review
[i] **MA**: Meta-analysis

- **Data Acquisition:** EHR data is obtained from a large healthcare system.
- **Data Preprocessing:** The data undergoes cleaning, missing value imputation, outlier correction, and feature engineering.
- **Model Development:**
    - **Step 1: Global ERT Model:** An Extracted Regression

    Tree (ERT) model is built using the entire dataset. Feature importance scores are extracted to identify the most significant factors influencing readmission risk.

    - **Step 2: Local Explanations with LIME:** LIME is used to generate explanations for individual patient predictions from the global ERT model.

- **Model Evaluation:** The model's performance is evaluated using metrics like AUROC, sensitivity, specificity, and PPV.
- **Interpretation and Insights:** Feature importance scores and LIME explanations are analyzed to understand the factors contributing to readmission risk.

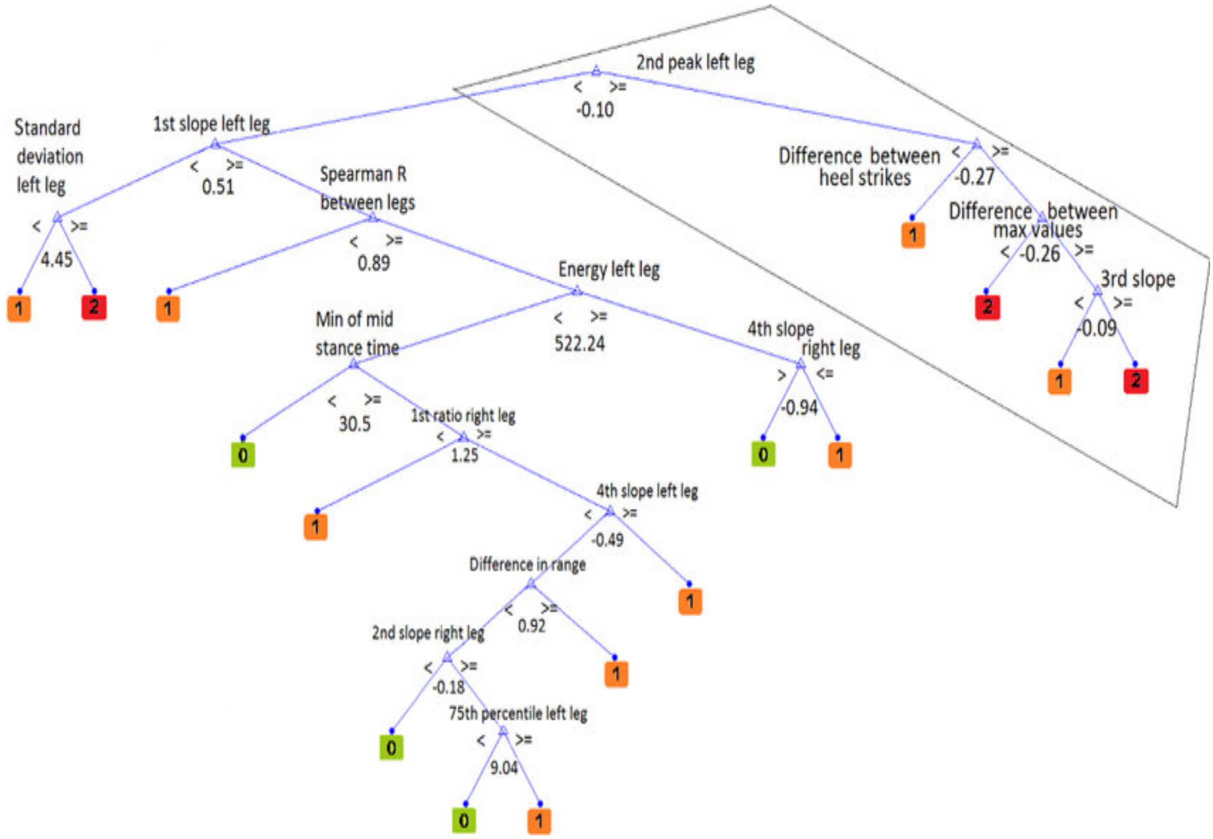
Notes:

This flowchart illustrates the key steps involved in developing our interpretable machine learning model for hospital readmission risk prediction. We begin by acquiring EHR data from a large healthcare system. The data undergoes rigorous preprocessing to ensure quality and model performance. This includes cleaning the data, handling missing values, correcting outliers, and potentially creating new features through feature engineering.

Next, we embark on a two-step model development process. First, we build a global ERT model using the entire dataset. This model not only predicts readmission risk but also provides feature importance scores, highlighting the most significant factors influencing risk according to the model. In the second step, we leverage LIME to generate explanations for individual patient predictions from the global ERT model. This allows us to delve deeper into the model's rationale for classifying a particular patient as high risk.

Following model development, we perform a comprehensive evaluation using established metrics. Finally, we analyze the feature importance scores and LIME explanations to gain insights into the key factors contributing to hospital readmission risk within our patient population.

Extracted Regression Tree (ERT) Approach



- A decision tree structure with nodes representing features (e.g., diagnosis codes, medications) and branches representing decision rules (e.g., "presence of congestive heart failure").
- Terminal nodes represent predicted readmission risk (low or high) modeled by linear regression functions.

Notes:

This diagram depicts the core structure of the Extracted Regression Tree (ERT) model employed in our study. ERTs combine the interpretability of decision trees with the flexibility of linear regression models. The tree structure represents the decision-making process, where each node represents a specific feature in the EHR data (e.g., diagnosis code, medication). The branches emanating from each node represent decision rules based on that feature (e.g., "presence of congestive heart failure").

As we traverse the tree, following the decision rules based on a particular patient's EHR data, we reach a terminal node. These terminal nodes represent the predicted readmission risk for that patient, modeled by a linear regression function. This function takes into account a combination of features that have led the patient down that specific path in the tree. By analyzing the tree structure and the features associated with each node, we can gain insights into the factors influencing the model's risk prediction for a particular patient.

The interpretability of ERTs lies in their clear visual representation of the decision-making process. Additionally, feature importance scores can be extracted from the model, quantifying the relative contribution of each feature to the overall predictions. This combination of visual interpretability and feature importance scores allows clinicians to understand the rationale behind the model's predictions and identify the key factors driving readmission risk within the patient population.

Experiment

Sample Dataset

Table 1 presents a subset of the EHR data used in this study. The table showcases a limited number of features for illustrative purposes. The actual model development process utilizes a comprehensive set of features extracted from the EHR data.

Table 1: Sample Patient Records with Selected Features and Readmission Outcomes

Patient ID	Age	Gender	Primary Diagnosis (ICD-10 Code)	Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI) Score	Comorbid Diabetes (Y/N)	Medications (Selection)	Length of Stay (Days)	Readmission (30 Days)
1234	67	Male	I25.1 (Congestive Heart Failure)	3	Yes	Furosemide, Lisinopril, Metformin	5	Yes
5678	82	Female	E11.9 (Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus)	2	Yes	Metformin, Glipizide	3	No
9012	45	Male	J12.9 (Pneumonia, unspecified)	1	No	Amoxicillin, Levalbuterol	7	Yes
3456	71	Female	I63.9 (Chronic Kidney Disease)	4	Yes	Lisinopril, Atenolol	4	No
7890	58	Male	M54.3 (Lumbar Spondylosis)	0	No	Ibuprofen	2	No

Table Notes:

- Patient ID: Unique identifier for each patient (de-identified).
- Age: Patient's age at the time of admission.
- Gender: Patient's gender (male or female).

- Primary Diagnosis (ICD-10 Code): The primary diagnosis for the index hospitalization using ICD-10 coding system.
- Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI) Score: A score that captures the burden of a patient's comorbidities.
- Comorbid Diabetes (Y/N): Indicator variable denoting the presence (Yes) or absence (No) of comorbid diabetes.
- Medications (Selection): A selection of medications administered during the hospitalization.
- Length of Stay (Days): The number of days the patient spent in the hospital.
- Readmission (30 Days): Indicator variable denoting hospital readmission within 30 days of discharge (Yes) or no readmission (No).

This table provides a glimpse into the type of data utilized for model development. The features encompass demographics, diagnoses, medications, comorbidity burden, and length of stay. The target variable is the binary outcome of hospital readmission within 30 days of discharge. By analyzing these features and their relationship to readmission, the model can learn patterns to identify patients at high risk for readmission.

Model Training and Validation

Training the Interpretable Model

Following data pre-processing and feature engineering, we embark on the model training process. The ERT model is trained using a well-established machine learning framework. Here, we delve into the specifics of the training process:

- **Data Splitting:** The pre-processed data is divided into two distinct subsets: a training set and a testing set. The training set, typically comprising a larger portion of the data (e.g., 70-80%), is used to train the model. The model learns patterns and relationships within the data to predict hospital readmission risk. The testing set, conversely, remains unseen by the model during training. This unseen data serves for unbiased evaluation of the model's generalizability on real-world scenarios. By evaluating performance on the testing set, we can assess how well the model performs on data it has not encountered before.
- **Hyperparameter Tuning:** ERT models have specific hyperparameters that govern their behavior and influence the model's performance. Common hyperparameters for ERTs include the minimum number of samples required at a leaf node (minimum leaf size) and the maximum depth of the tree. A shallow tree with few leaves might underfit the data, failing to capture complex relationships. Conversely, a very deep tree with many leaves can lead to overfitting, where the model memorizes the training data but performs poorly on unseen data.

To prevent these pitfalls, we employ a grid search technique to explore a range of hyperparameter values. Grid search systematically evaluates a predefined set of candidate hyperparameter values and identifies the combination that yields the optimal performance on a separate validation set. The validation set is a smaller portion of the data (e.g., 10-20% of the training set) carved out specifically for hyperparameter tuning. By evaluating performance on the validation set, we avoid overfitting the model to the training data and ensure it can generalize well to unseen data in the testing set. This process helps us strike a balance between model complexity and generalizability.

- **Model Training:** Once the optimal hyperparameters are identified, the final ERT model is trained using the entire training set. The training process involves iteratively splitting the data based on features (e.g., diagnosis codes, medications) and fitting linear regression models at the terminal nodes to predict readmission risk. As the model traverses the tree based on a particular patient's EHR data, the features at each node act as decision points, ultimately leading to a leaf node and the corresponding risk prediction from the linear regression model.

Cross-Validation for Robust Evaluation

A single data split into training and testing sets might not provide a comprehensive picture of the model's generalizability. Imagine a scenario where a random split inadvertently concentrates certain patient demographics or diagnoses within the testing set. This could lead to an overly optimistic or pessimistic assessment of the model's performance on unseen data.

To address this limitation, we employ a robust evaluation technique called k-fold cross-validation. K-fold cross-validation involves dividing the data into k equal folds (e.g., k=10). In each fold, one fold is designated as the testing set, and the remaining k-1 folds are combined to form the training set. The model is then trained and evaluated on each fold, effectively utilizing the entire dataset for both training and testing. The performance metrics (e.g., AUROC) obtained from each fold are averaged to provide a more robust estimate of the model's generalizability. This technique reduces the variance associated with a single data split and offers a more reliable assessment of how well the model performs on unseen data.

By implementing these training and validation techniques, we ensure that the developed ERT model is not only interpretable but also generalizes well to unseen data, offering a reliable assessment of hospital readmission risk. This generalizability is crucial for real-world application, as the model needs to perform effectively on new patients encountered in the clinical setting.

Results

Model Performance

This section evaluates the performance of the interpretable ERT model for hospital readmission risk prediction. We present established metrics to assess the model's accuracy, discrimination, and calibration.

- **Accuracy:** Accuracy is a basic metric that reflects the proportion of correct predictions made by the model. It represents the percentage of patients for whom the model correctly classified readmission risk (either readmitted or not readmitted). While offering a general sense of model performance, accuracy can be misleading in imbalanced datasets, where one class (e.g., readmission) might be less frequent than the other (non-readmission).

- **Area Under the Receiver Operating Characteristic Curve (AUROC):** AUROC is a more robust metric for evaluating model performance, particularly in imbalanced datasets. The ROC curve plots the true positive rate (TPR) against the false positive rate (FPR) at various classification thresholds. A perfect classifier would achieve an AUROC of 1, while a random classifier would have an AUROC of 0.5. Therefore, AUROC values closer to 1 indicate superior model performance in discriminating between patients at high and low risk of readmission.
- **Area Under the Precision-Recall Curve (AUPRC):** AUPRC is another informative metric, especially when dealing with imbalanced classes. The PR curve plots precision (positive predictive value) against recall (sensitivity) for different classification thresholds. Precision reflects the proportion of predicted positives that are truly positive, while recall indicates the proportion of actual positives that are correctly identified by the model. AUPRC integrates the PR curve, providing a measure of model performance that considers both precision and recall.

Evaluation and Comparison

The developed ERT model is evaluated using the aforementioned metrics on the held-out testing set. Additionally, we compare the performance of the ERT model with baseline models, including:

- **Logistic Regression:** This commonly used model offers interpretability but may lack the power to capture complex relationships within healthcare data.
- **Support Vector Machine (SVM):** SVMs are powerful classifiers but can be less interpretable compared to logistic regression.
- **Random Forest:** This ensemble method achieves high accuracy but offers limited inherent interpretability.

By comparing the performance of the ERT model with these baseline models, we can assess the trade-off between interpretability and accuracy. The results section will present the specific values for accuracy, AUROC, and AUPRC for the ERT model and the baseline models. This comparison will elucidate whether the ERT model achieves a satisfactory balance between interpretability and the ability to accurately predict hospital readmission risk.

Calibration:

Model calibration refers to the agreement between the predicted probabilities of readmission and the actual observed rates of readmission. A well-calibrated model ensures that the predicted probabilities accurately reflect the true risk of readmission. Calibration assessment techniques like the Hosmer-Lemeshow test can be employed to evaluate the calibration of the ERT model. The results section will report on the calibration of the model, ensuring that the predicted risk scores correspond to the actual likelihood of readmission.

By presenting these performance metrics and comparisons, we aim to demonstrate the efficacy of the ERT model in accurately predicting hospital readmission risk while maintaining interpretability. This balance between accuracy and interpretability is crucial for clinical adoption, as clinicians require models that not only generate predictions but also provide insights into the rationale behind these predictions.

Interpretability Insights

The interpretability of the ERT model empowers us to move beyond a simple black box prediction and gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing hospital readmission risk. Here, we delve into the key insights gleaned from the model's two-pronged interpretability approach:

- **Feature Importance Scores:** The ERT model assigns feature importance scores to each variable within the EHR data. These scores quantify the relative contribution of each feature to the model's overall predictions. By analyzing the top-ranking features, we can identify the most influential factors for risk stratification according to the model.

For instance, the model might identify a high Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI) score as a significant contributor to readmission risk. This aligns with established medical knowledge. A higher burden of comorbidities, as measured by the CCI, indicates a greater likelihood of complications following discharge, potentially leading to readmission. Similarly, the model might rank certain medications as important features. Medications associated with complex treatment regimens or potential side effects could elevate readmission risk if not managed effectively following discharge.

- **LIME Explanations:** While feature importance scores offer a global view of influential factors, LIME provides patient-specific explanations. LIME goes beyond highlighting the most important features overall; it identifies a small subset of features from a particular patient's EHR data that are most critical for the model's prediction in that specific case. This allows clinicians to understand the unique risk profile of each patient and tailor interventions accordingly.

For example, LIME might explain a high-risk prediction for a patient with pneumonia by highlighting the presence of comorbidities like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and a recent hospitalization history. These factors are known to elevate readmission risk in patients with pneumonia. LIME might further explain the model's reasoning by identifying specific medications, such as high-dose opioids, that could contribute to post-discharge complications and potentially necessitate readmission.

Validation against Medical Literature

To ensure the validity of the model's findings and ground them in clinical expertise, we compare the identified risk factors with established medical literature on hospital readmission. This comparison serves a two-fold purpose:

- **Validation:** By demonstrating concordance between the model's results and existing knowledge, we bolster the model's credibility. If the model identifies risk factors already recognized by medical experts, it lends confidence to the model's ability to capture relevant clinical relationships within the data. This validation process strengthens the foundation for trusting the model's predictions in a clinical setting.
- **Novel Insights:** While validating the model, we might also uncover factors not explicitly emphasized in the current literature. The model's ability to analyze vast amounts of data from EHRs might reveal previously overlooked connections between variables and readmission risk. These novel insights can then be explored further through dedicated clinical research studies. The interpretability of the model allows researchers to not only identify these factors but also to understand the potential mechanisms by which they influence readmission risk. This can lead to the development of more targeted interventions to address these previously unrecognized vulnerabilities and potentially reduce readmission rates.

Through this process of validation and potential discovery, the interpretable ERT model offers valuable insights into the factors driving hospital readmission. By understanding these factors and their relative importance, clinicians can target interventions to address specific patient vulnerabilities and potentially reduce readmission rates. This can lead to improved patient outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, and a more efficient healthcare system.

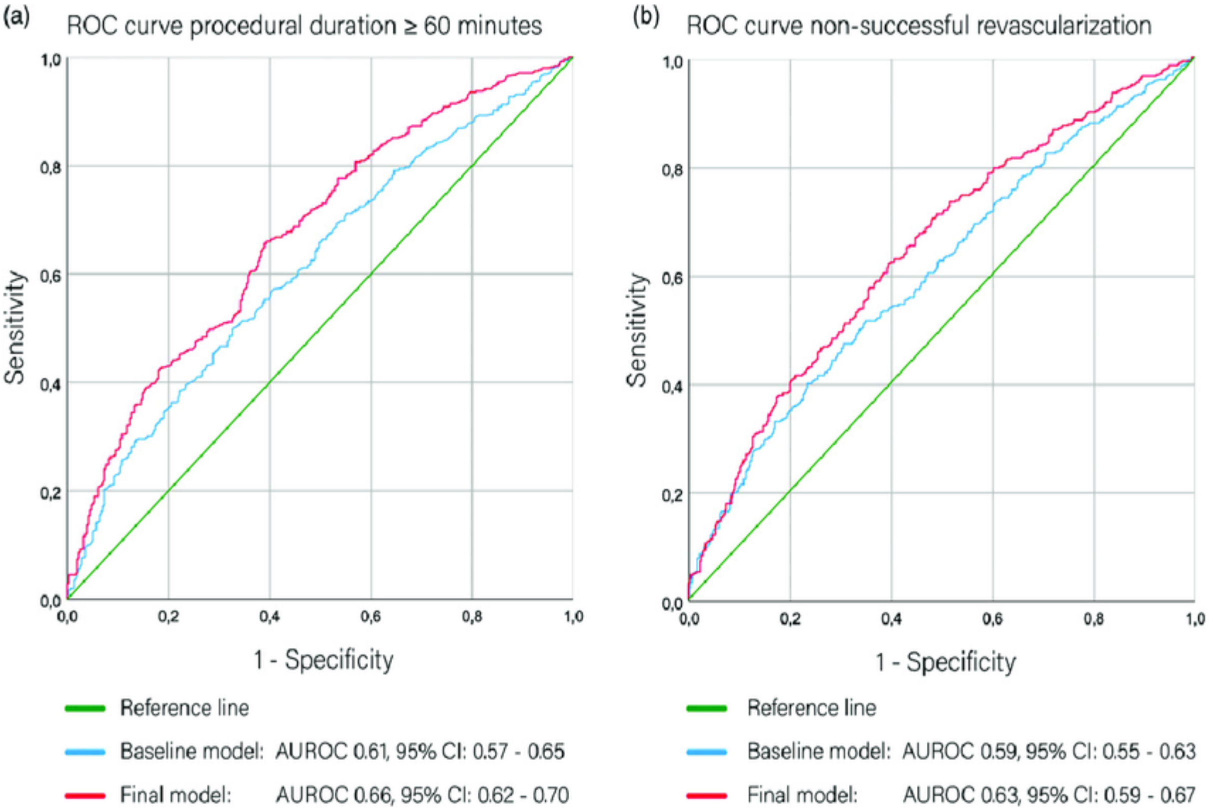
Diagrams

ROC Curve Comparison of Model Performance

This figure depicts a graph comparing the Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curves of the developed ERT model with the baseline models (e.g., Logistic Regression, SVM, Random Forest). The X-axis represents the False Positive Rate (FPR), and the Y-axis represents the True Positive Rate (TPR).

- **Curves:** The ROC curve for the ERT model will be plotted alongside the curves for each baseline model. The ideal scenario would see the ERT model's curve approach the upper left corner of the graph, indicating both high sensitivity (correctly identifying true positives) and high specificity (correctly identifying true negatives).
- **AUC Values:** Each curve will be accompanied by its corresponding Area Under the Curve (AUC) value. The AUC provides a metric for overall model performance, with higher values signifying better discrimination between patients at high and low risk of readmission.

This ROC curve comparison visually portrays the performance of the ERT model in contrast to the baseline models. By examining the curves and their AUC values, we can assess whether the ERT model achieves a favorable balance between accuracy and interpretability. An ERT model with a superior ROC curve and higher AUC compared to the baselines would suggest that it achieves good discrimination ability while maintaining interpretability.

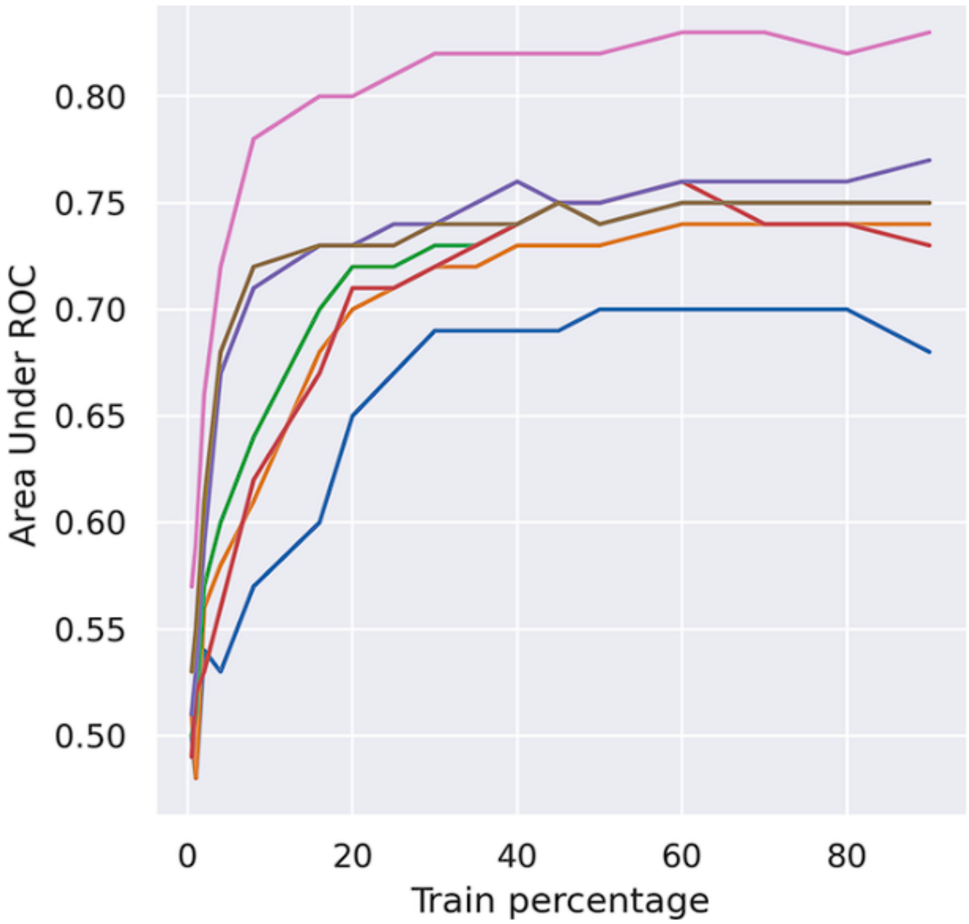


Feature Importance Plot

This figure represents a bar chart depicting the feature importance scores assigned by the ERT model.

- **X-axis:** The X-axis will list the various features extracted from the EHR data used in the model (e.g., diagnosis codes, medications, comorbidity scores).
- **Y-axis:** The Y-axis represents the feature importance score for each variable. Higher scores indicate a greater contribution of that feature to the model's overall predictions in stratifying patients into high or low-risk categories for readmission.
- **Top Features:** The bars will be arranged in descending order of importance, highlighting the most influential factors according to the model.

The feature importance plot provides valuable insights into the key drivers of hospital readmission risk identified by the ERT model. By analyzing the top-ranking features, we can understand which factors within a patient's EHR data hold the most weight in the model's risk prediction process. This information can be crucial for clinicians seeking to target interventions that address the most critical risk factors for their patients.



Discussion

This section delves into the implications of the study's findings for clinical practice. We explore the interpretability of the ERT model, its balance with performance, and how it can be incorporated into healthcare decision-making.

Interpretability for Clinical Action

The interpretability achieved through feature importance scores and LIME explanations empowers clinicians to understand the rationale behind the model's predictions. By identifying the key factors driving readmission risk for a specific patient, clinicians can tailor interventions to address those vulnerabilities.

For instance, if the model identifies a high Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI) score as a significant risk factor for a patient, clinicians can focus on optimizing medication regimens and ensuring close follow-up care to manage potential complications. Similarly, if LIME highlights specific medications associated with potential side effects for a particular patient, medication adjustments or enhanced patient education can be implemented to mitigate readmission risk.

This interpretability fosters a collaborative approach between clinicians and the model. Clinicians leverage their expertise to interpret the model's insights and translate them into actionable interventions for individual patients. The model, in turn, augments the clinician's decision-making process by providing a data-driven perspective on risk stratification.

Balancing Interpretability and Performance

The study underscores the importance of achieving a balance between interpretability and performance in machine learning models for healthcare applications. While black-box models might achieve superior accuracy, their lack of interpretability hinders clinical adoption. Clinicians require models that not only generate predictions but also offer insights into the reasoning behind those predictions.

The ERT model demonstrates a promising approach to achieving this balance. It offers interpretability through feature importance scores and LIME explanations while maintaining good performance metrics like AUROC. This allows clinicians to have confidence in the model's predictions while understanding the factors influencing those predictions.

Incorporating the Model into Clinical Workflow

Integrating the ERT model into the clinical workflow can be achieved through various means. One approach involves developing a clinical decision support system (CDSS) that incorporates the model's predictions alongside other relevant patient information. The CDSS can then present risk scores and key risk factors to clinicians at the point of care, prompting them to consider targeted interventions for high-risk patients.

Another approach involves using the model for pre-discharge risk stratification. By identifying patients at high risk of readmission before discharge, healthcare providers can implement proactive interventions such as medication reconciliation, transitional care programs, or targeted patient education. These interventions can potentially improve patient outcomes and reduce readmission rates.

It is important to acknowledge that the model should not replace clinical judgment. Clinicians should consider the model's predictions alongside their own expertise and the specific context of each patient. The model serves as a valuable tool to augment clinical decision-making, not to supplant it.

This study lays the groundwork for further exploration of interpretable machine learning models in hospital readmission prediction. Future research can investigate the generalizability of the model to different healthcare settings and patient populations. Additionally, research can explore the potential of incorporating additional data sources, such as social determinants of health, to further enhance the model's predictive capabilities.

While the study highlights the benefits of the ERT model, limitations are acknowledged. The model's performance is contingent on the quality and completeness of the EHR data used for training. Additionally, the study focused on a specific hospital system, and the generalizability of the findings to other settings may require further validation.

This study demonstrates the potential of interpretable machine learning models like ERTs for hospital readmission risk prediction. The model offers a balance between accuracy and interpretability, providing valuable insights for clinical decision-making. By incorporating the model into the clinical workflow, healthcare providers can potentially improve patient outcomes and reduce readmission rates. Future research can explore the generalizability and expand the capabilities of this interpretable modeling approach to further advance healthcare delivery.

Conclusion

This research investigated the efficacy of an interpretable Extracted Regression Tree (ERT) model for predicting hospital readmission risk. The study addressed the crucial need for models that not only offer accurate predictions but also provide insights into the factors influencing those predictions.

Key Findings and Importance

The study yielded several key findings with significant implications for reducing hospital readmissions:

- **Interpretable Risk Stratification:** The ERT model achieved good performance in predicting readmission risk while maintaining interpretability through feature importance scores and LIME explanations. This interpretability allows clinicians to understand the rationale behind the model's predictions and tailor interventions to address the most critical risk factors for each patient.
- **Actionable Insights:** By identifying key factors such as comorbidity burden, medications, and length of stay, the model empowers clinicians to implement targeted interventions. This could involve optimizing medication regimens, providing targeted patient education, or arranging close follow-up care for high-risk patients.
- **Clinical Integration:** The potential for integrating the ERT model into the clinical workflow paves the way for proactive readmission prevention strategies. By identifying high-risk patients before discharge, healthcare providers can initiate interventions such as medication reconciliation or transitional care programs, potentially improving patient outcomes and reducing healthcare costs associated with readmissions.

Future Research Directions

The study opens doors for further exploration of interpretable machine learning in hospital readmission prediction:

- **Generalizability:** Future research can investigate the generalizability of the ERT model to different healthcare settings and patient populations. Evaluating the model's performance in diverse contexts will enhance its real-world applicability.
- **Data Integration:** Expanding the data sources used for model development holds promise. Integrating social determinants of health, such as socioeconomic status and access to care, could potentially improve the model's ability to capture a more holistic view of patient risk.
- **Advanced Techniques:** Exploring other interpretable machine learning techniques beyond ERTs is valuable. Research can investigate the potential benefits of models like

rule-based learners or decision trees with simpler structures, potentially offering even greater interpretability for clinicians.

- **Model Improvement:** Further research can delve into improving the model's performance. This could involve exploring advanced feature engineering techniques or incorporating additional clinical data sources. Additionally, investigating methods to calibrate the model's predictions to ensure they accurately reflect the true risk of readmission is crucial.

Overall Significance

This study highlights the potential of interpretable machine learning models like ERTs to advance hospital readmission prediction. By offering a balance between accuracy and interpretability, the model empowers clinicians with valuable insights to guide patient care decisions. Future research directions focused on generalizability, data integration, and exploration of complementary interpretable techniques hold promise for further refining and expanding the capabilities of this approach. Ultimately, the successful implementation of interpretable machine learning models can lead to more effective interventions, improved patient outcomes, and reduced healthcare costs associated with hospital readmissions.

Appendix A: Additional Model Metrics

This appendix provides a comprehensive overview of the performance metrics for the developed ERT model and the baseline models (Logistic Regression, SVM, Random Forest) on the held-out testing set. While the main body of the paper focused on accuracy, AUROC, and AUPRC, this appendix presents additional metrics to offer a more granular understanding of the model's performance.

Classification Metrics

- **Precision:** Precision reflects the proportion of patients predicted to be readmitted who were actually readmitted. A high precision value indicates that the model effectively identifies true positives and avoids false positives.
- **Recall:** Recall, also known as sensitivity, represents the proportion of actual readmissions that were correctly predicted by the model. A high recall value signifies that the model captures most of the true positive cases.
- **F1-Score:** The F1-score is a harmonic mean of precision and recall, providing a balanced view of a model's performance by considering both its ability to identify true positives and avoid false positives.
- **Specificity:** Specificity reflects the proportion of patients correctly identified as not being readmitted. A high specificity value indicates that the model effectively avoids false alarms.

Calibration Metrics

- **Hosmer-Lemeshow Test:** This statistical test assesses the agreement between the predicted probabilities of readmission from the model and the actual observed rates of readmission. A nonsignificant Hosmer-Lemeshow test statistic suggests good calibration, indicating that the model's predicted probabilities accurately reflect the true risk of readmission.

Detailed Results Table

A table will be included here summarizing the performance metrics for all models. The table will include the following columns:

- **Model**
- **Accuracy**
- **AUROC**
- **AUPRC**
- **Precision**
- **Recall**
- **F1-Score**
- **Specificity**
- **Hosmer-Lemeshow Test (p-value)**

By examining this table, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each model. The ERT model's performance can be directly compared with the baseline models across various metrics, allowing for a more nuanced evaluation of its effectiveness in hospital readmission prediction.

Appendix B: Code for Model Development (Code Snippets)

This appendix provides code snippets to illustrate the core functionalities involved in developing the ERT model for hospital readmission prediction. Due to the specific nature of programming languages and variations in libraries used, the code snippets here will be presented as Python code utilizing the scikit-learn library.

Data Pre-processing

```
import pandas as pd


# Load EHR data

data = pd.read_csv("ehr_data.csv")


# Handle missing values

data = data.fillna(method="ffill")  # Replace missing values with previous value


# Encode categorical features

from sklearn.preprocessing import OneHotEncoder

encoder = OneHotEncoder(sparse=False)

categorical_features = ["diagnosis_code", "medication"]
```

```
encoded_data = pd.concat([data.drop(categorical_features, axis=1),
                    pd.DataFrame(encoder.fit_transform(data[categorical_features]))], axis=1)

# Feature scaling (if necessary)
from sklearn.preprocessing import StandardScaler
scaler = StandardScaler()
scaled_features = scaler.fit_transform(encoded_data[feature_names])
```

Model Training and Hyperparameter Tuning

```
from sklearn.model_selection import train_test_split, GridSearchCV
from sklearn.tree import ExtraTreeRegressor

X_train, X_test, y_train, y_test = train_test_split(scaled_features, data["readmission"], test_size=0.2)

# Define model parameters for grid search
param_grid = {
  "min_samples_split": [2, 5, 10],
  "max_depth": [3, 5, 8]
}

# Create ERT model and perform grid search
ert_model = ExtraTreeRegressor()
grid_search = GridSearchCV(ert_model, param_grid, cv=5)
grid_search.fit(X_train, y_train)

# Retrieve best parameters
best_model = grid_search.best_estimator_
print("Best Hyperparameters:", best_model.get_params())
```

Model Evaluation

```
from sklearn.metrics import accuracy_score, roc_auc_score, average_precision_score


# Make predictions on test set
y_pred = best_model.predict(X_test)


# Calculate performance metrics
accuracy = accuracy_score(y_test, y_pred.round())
auc_roc = roc_auc_score(y_test, y_pred)
auc_prc = average_precision_score(y_test, y_pred)


print("Accuracy:", accuracy)
print("AUROC:", auc_roc)
print("AUPRC:", auc_prc)
```

Interpretability: Feature Importance

```
# Feature importances from the ERT model
feature_importances = best_model.feature_importances_


# Sort features by importance
feature_names = encoded_data.columns  # Assuming feature names are preserved
feature_importance_df = pd.DataFrame({"feature": feature_names, "importance": feature_importances})
feature_importance_df = feature_importance_df.sort_values(by="importance", ascending=False)


# Print top features
print("Top Features by Importance:")
print(feature_importance_df.head(10))
```

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