

Decision support systems for the treatment of community-acquired pneumonia

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Table of Contents

1. Review of community-acquired pneumonia diagnosis and treatment in adults	19
1.1 Community-acquired pneumonia (CAP): definition	23
1.2 CAP incidence, treatment processes and outcomes	23
1.2.1 Incidence and hospital admission	23
1.2.2 Variability in outcomes	23
1.2.3 Costs of CAP hospitalisation	24
1.2.4 Key processes in CAP care	25
1.3 Understanding process performance: workflow	28
1.4 Patient complexity	30
1.4.1 The diagnostic problem	30
1.4.1.1 <i>Presentation</i>	31
1.4.1.2 <i>Chest x-ray (CXR)</i>	31
1.4.1.3 <i>Aetiology and microbiological investigations</i>	33
1.4.2 The risk assessment and treatment problems	37
1.5 Resources at the point of care	40
1.5.1 The Emergency Department (ED) workflow problem	41
1.6 Summary	42
2. Review of community-acquired pneumonia quality interventions	44
2.1 Quality interventions in health care	44
2.2 Clinical decisions, evidence-based medicine (EBM) and decision support	45
2.2.1 Clinical decisions and EBM	45
2.2.2 Decision support	46
2.2.3 Paper-based guidelines	48
2.2.4 Computer-based decision support (CDSS)	50
2.3 Performance of CDSS	52
2.4 CAP quality interventions	54

2.4.1 CAP national consensus statements	54
2.4.1.1 <i>Recommended diagnostic investigations</i>	55
2.4.1.2 <i>Recommendations for risk assessment and site of care</i>	58
2.4.1.3 <i>Recommendations for empirical antibiotic treatment</i>	65
2.4.1.4 <i>Other recommendations</i>	67
2.4.1.5 <i>Implementation of CAP consensus statements</i>	70
2.4.2 Local CAP guidelines	71
2.4.2.1 <i>Efficacy of local guidelines</i>	71
2.4.3 CAP CDSS	73
2.5 CAP diagnosis models	74
2.6 Conclusions on CAP decision support	78
3. Review of interventions to improve antibiotic timing in community-acquired pneumonia	80
3.1 Timing of initial antibiotic as a quality indicator of CAP treatment	80
3.2 Evidence for the relationship between antibiotic timing and outcomes	84
3.3 Predictors of antibiotic delay	88
3.3.1 Patient complexity	89
3.3.2 Resources at the point of care and local policies	90
3.3.3 Attempts to improve initial antibiotic timing for CAP	93
3.4 Summary	99
4. Review of workflow modelling and simulation	101
4.1 Process and workflow assessment and modelling	102
4.1.1 Issues for the design of health care computer-based workflow management systems	103
4.1.1.1 <i>Case individualisation and parallel tasks</i>	103
4.1.1.2 <i>Task monitoring and escalation</i>	104
4.1.1.3 <i>Temporal constraints and triggers</i>	105
4.1.1.4 <i>Event condition action rules</i>	106
4.1.1.5 <i>Web services and data flow support</i>	106
4.1.2 A risk management based workflow framework	107
4.2 Decision modelling	112
4.2.1 Bayesian modelling	112
4.2.2 Odds Ratio (OR) form of Bayes' Theorem	114
4.2.3 Dependence amongst variables	115

4.3 Workflow simulation	116
4.4 Conclusions	118
5. Rationale, study design and hypotheses	120
5.1 Rationale	120
5.1.1 Treatment loss model	122
5.2 Study design	125
5.2.1 Overview	125
5.2.2 Workflow assessment and modelling	125
5.2.3 Diagnosis and risk model selection, construction and validation	126
5.2.4 Alerting simulation	127
5.3 Hypotheses	129
5.3.1 Major hypothesis	129
5.3.2 Minor hypotheses	129
5.3.2.1 <i>Alerting simulation studies</i>	129
5.3.2.2 <i>Process flow assessment</i>	129
5.3.2.3 <i>Diagnostic decision studies</i>	129
5.3.2.4 <i>Construction and validation of the EDM</i>	130
5.3.2.5 <i>Risk decision studies</i>	130
6. Methods	131
6.1 Subjects	131
6.1.1 Qualitative workflow assessment	131
6.1.1.1 <i>Workflow Observation</i>	131
6.1.1.2 <i>Stakeholder assessment</i>	131
6.1.2 Quantitative workflow analysis	132
6.2 Workflow assessment	135
6.2.1 Structural modelling: sequence diagrams	135
6.2.2 Quantification of workflow	135
6.2.2.1 <i>Analysis of process timings</i>	135
6.2.2.2 <i>Inferential statistics</i>	136
6.2.3 Analysis of outcomes	136
6.2.3.1 <i>Descriptive statistics</i>	136
6.2.3.2 <i>Inferential statistics</i>	136
6.3 Analysis of the use of CXR	136
6.3.1 CXR report analysis	136
6.3.2 Assessment of sensitivity and specificity for ED and discharge diagnosis	137

6.3.3 Interaction of CXR with workflow	137
6.3.3.1 <i>Descriptive statistics</i>	137
6.3.3.2 <i>Inferential statistics</i>	137
6.4 Diagnosis model	137
6.4.1 Qualitative model	137
6.4.2 Quantitative Model	138
6.4.3 Early diagnostic model (EDM)	140
6.5 EDM validation, calibration and assessment of dependence amongst predictor variables	140
6.6 CAP risk modelling	141
6.6.1 Validity and accuracy of the Australasian Triage Score (ATS) for CAP	141
6.6.2 Accuracy of CAP-specific risk models	141
6.7 Combining diagnosis, risk and workflow modelling for alerting simulation	142
7. Results	147
7.1 Overview	147
7.2 Qualitative process flow assessment	148
7.2.1 Common pathways in CAP treatment	148
7.3 Quantitative workflow assessment	153
7.3.1 Local CAP database	153
7.3.2 Key process timings	154
7.3.3 Correlations between process timing	156
7.3.4 Association of primary diagnosis with process times	158
7.3.5 Association of site of antibiotic delivery with process times	160
7.3.6 Association of primary diagnosis and antibiotic treatment site	162
7.3.7 Effect of Australasian Triage Score (ATS) on process timing	162
7.3.7.1 <i>Time to ED physician assessment by ATS</i>	162
7.3.7.2 <i>Time to first CXR by ATS</i>	163
7.3.7.3 <i>Time to antibiotic by ATS</i>	164
7.3.7.4 <i>The effect of ATS beyond time to ED physician assessment</i>	167
7.4 Accuracy of CXR and its association with primary diagnosis, site of care and antibiotic timing	168
7.4.1 Accuracy of CXR in comparison to primary and discharge diagnoses	168
7.4.2 Relationship between CXR and ED primary diagnosis	169
7.4.3 Relationship between CXR result and time to antibiotic	170

7.5 Early diagnosis model (EDM) validation and predicted impact on processes and outcomes	171
7.5.1 EDM data	171
7.5.2 Comparison of receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curves	172
7.5.3 EDM calibration	173
7.5.4 EDM model and threshold selection	174
7.5.5 Effect of dependency between predictor variables	174
7.5.6 Theoretical effect of EDM on mortality and processes	175
7.5.7 Correlations between process timings in patients identified by the EDM	176
7.6 Risk model assessment	176
7.6.1 Accuracy of the ATS for the prediction of CAP complications	176
7.6.2 Comparison of CAP-specific risk models and the ATS	178
7.7 Antibiotic alerting simulations	180
7.8 Association between process and mortality	185
7.8.1 Association between antibiotic timing and mortality	185
7.8.2 Effect of primary diagnosis and CXR result on outcome	187
8. Discussion	188
8.1 Overview	188
8.2 Summary of findings in terms of hypotheses	189
8.3 Contributions to current knowledge	193
8.4 Process flow analysis	194
8.4.1 CAP primary diagnosis, site of treatment and delay to treatment	196
8.4.2 Triage score and delay to treatment	197
8.5 Analysis of CXR accuracy and its impact on CAP diagnosis and treatment	198
8.5.1 Patient complexity and workflow pathways	200
8.6 EDM construction and validation	201
8.7 Risk decision studies	204
8.8 Alerting simulations	206
8.8.1 Simulated impact of an alerting system on antibiotic timing	206
8.8.2 Theoretical impact of an alerting system on CAP mortality	208

8.9 Study design limitations	209
8.9.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria	209
8.9.2 Study data availability and reliability	212
8.9.3 Simulation design	213
8.9.4 The association between antibiotic timing and mortality	213
8.9.5 Conclusions on study design	214
8.10 Future work	214
8.11 Conclusions	215
9. Appendix	218
10. Bibliography	230
11. Glossary	270

List of Tables

1.1	JCAHO/CMS key processes for quality of CAP care*	26
1.2	Factors indicating specific aetiology of CAP*	34
1.3	Variation in CAP aetiology by country and care site	35
1.4	Adverse events in empirical versus directed CAP treatment*	39
2.1	Categorisation of decision support	47
2.2	Barriers to compliance with guidelines	50
2.3	Quality of evidence in CAP national consensus statements*	55
2.4	Recommended microbiological investigations for those presenting to hospital	57
2.5	Implementation studies of the PSI	60
2.6	Recommended risk assessment for admission decisions	62
2.7	Variables used in CAP prognosis algorithms cited in national guidelines	63
2.8	Validation studies of CURB and PSI rules: performance on mortality prediction	64
2.9	Inpatient antibiotics recommended by consensus statements	68
2.10	Outpatient antibiotics recommended by consensus statements	69
2.11	Compliance with national consensus statements	70
2.12	Recent studies of the effectiveness of CAP guidelines	72
2.13	Studies of simple CAP diagnostic models	75
2.14	Symptoms used in CAP diagnostic algorithms	76
3.1	Studies of the relationship between antibiotic timing and outcomes	86
3.2	Studies of attempts to reduce delay to initial antibiotic for CAP patients	95
4.1	Factors associated with guideline compliance and preventable harm	108
4.2	Data types from different methods of workflow analysis	111

6.1 CAP database description	132
6.2 Subjects for quantitative workflow analysis	134
6.3 Likelihood ratios used in the CAP diagnosis model	139
6.4 Missing data	142
6.5 Simulation Rules	145
6.6 CRB-65 based triage scoring	146
7.1 Emergency department decisions in CAP care	150
7.2 Estimation of key process timings	151
7.3 Descriptive statistics for time to key process performance	156
7.4 Comparison of 1998 and 2000 samples: percentage treated by 4 and 8 hours	156
7.5 Comparison of 1998 and 2000 samples: process timing correlations	157
7.6 Comparison of 1998 and 2000 samples: process timing correlations for those treated in ED	157
7.7 Comparison of 1998 and 2000 samples: process timing correlations for those with a primary diagnosis of CAP that were treated in ED	157
7.8 Process timing by primary diagnosis (hours)	158
7.9 Process timing by antibiotic delivery site (hours)	160
7.10 Association between primary diagnosis and treatment site	162
7.11 ED Physician assessment timing by ATS	163
7.12 The association between broad CXR criteria and discharge diagnosis	169
7.13 The association between conservative CXR criteria and discharge diagnosis	169
7.14 The association between broad CXR criteria and primary diagnosis	169
7.15 The association between conservative CXR criteria and primary diagnosis	170
7.16 Percentage with delayed antibiotics by CXR result	171
7.17 Pneumonia patients given antibiotics in ED by CXR result	171
7.18 A comparison of literature-derived and local LR's for CAP diagnosis	172
7.19 Commonly co-occurring CAP predictor variables	174
7.20 Joint LR's versus combined LR's: post-test probability of CAP	175
7.21 Correlations between process timings in CAP-positive patients identified by the EDM	176
7.22 Area under the ROC curve for risk models	178

7.23	Difference in area under the ROC curve between risk models.....	179
7.24	Descriptive statistics for simulated antibiotic timing	183
7.25	Median antibiotic timing by mortality (hours)	185
7.26	Association between antibiotic delay and mortality - 1998 sample	186
7.27	Association between antibiotic delay and mortality - 2000 sample	186
7.28	Association between primary diagnosis and mortality - 1998 and 2000 samples.....	187
7.29	Association between CXR result and mortality - 2000 sample.....	187
8.1	Hypotheses and findings.....	191
8.2	CAP treatment pathways: interaction of diagnostic and risk uncertainty.....	201
9.1	Australasian Triage Score (ATS) rules.....	218
9.2	Principle ICD-9 CAP discharge diagnoses.....	223
9.3	Primary diagnoses made in the Emergency Department.....	224
9.4	Presenting complaints of 2003 CAP-negative sample.....	225

List of Figures

1.1 CAP management as a model for the role of a flexible care plan	21
1.2 Percentage of US Hospitals assessed by JCAHO/CMS by percentage of CAP patients with antibiotic delay < 4 hours (July 2005- June 2006)*	27
1.3 Causes of preventable harm/process performance*	28
1.4 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error	29
1.5 Overview of patient flow and decisions in CAP care by site*	29
1.6 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error: patient complexity	30
1.7 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error: resources	40
2.1 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error: patient complexity, policies and safety mechanisms	45
3.1 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error: resources, policies and safety mechanisms	84
3.2 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error	89
3.3 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error: resources, policies and safety mechanisms	93
4.1 PubMed abstracts referring to workflow published prior to December 2005	102
4.2 Causes of preventable harm/process performance*	107
4.3 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error	109
4.4 Simple workflow sequence diagram.....	110
4.5 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error: patient complexity	112
4.6 Bayes' Theorem.....	113
4.7 OR form of Bayes' theorem*.....	114
4.8 Simple pathophysiological model of the dependence between cough and dullness to percussion	116
4.9 Simple model of process flow	118
4.10 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error	118

5.1 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error	120
5.2 Loss function over time for testing in antibiotic treatment of CAP.....	123
5.3 Hypothesised improvement in antibiotic delivery timing and treatment efficacy with the implementation of an alerting system based on an early diagnostic model and an early risk model: a) pre-intervention, b) post-intervention	124
5.4 Workflow assessment and modelling of CAP antibiotic treatment.....	126
5.5 Construction and selection of diagnosis and risk models	127
5.6 CAP alerting system simulation model	128
6.1 Influence diagram of CAP diagnosis model	138
6.2 Influence diagram of the EDM	140
6.3 Simulation interface.....	143
7.1 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error	148
7.2 Sequence diagram of workflow around patients with low to moderate severity CAP presenting to the emergency department	149
7.2 Sequence diagram of workflow around patients with low to moderate severity CAP presenting to the ED.....	149
7.3 Distribution of key process timings - 1998 sample	155
7.4 Distribution of key process timings - 2000 sample	155
7.5 Distribution of CXR and antibiotic timings by primary diagnosis - 1998 sample	159
7.6 Distribution of CXR and antibiotic timings by primary diagnosis - 2000 sample	159
7.7 Distribution of CXR and antibiotic timings by antibiotic site - 1998 sample	161
7.8 Distribution of CXR and antibiotic timings by antibiotic site - 2000 sample	161
7.9 Distribution of time to physician assessment in the ED by ATS - 1998 sample.....	162
7.10 Distribution of CXR timings by ATS - 1998 sample	163
7.11 Distribution of antibiotic timing by ATS - 1998 sample.....	164
7.12 Percentage delayed antibiotics by ATS - 1998 sample.....	165
7.13 Distribution of time to first antibiotic by ATS - 1998 sample: antibiotic given in the ED	165
7.14 Distribution of time to first antibiotic by ATS - 1998 sample: antibiotic given on the ward.....	166
7.15 Percentage of delayed antibiotics by site of administration by ATS - 1998 sample: antibiotic given in the ED	166
7.16 Percentage of delayed antibiotics by site of administration by ATS - 1998 sample: antibiotic given on the ward.....	167

7.17 Time between processes by site of administration by ATS - 1998 sample	168
7.18 Time to antibiotic by CXR result.....	170
7.19 Comparison of literature-based and local data-based EDMs - ROC curve	173
7.20 Comparison of literature-based and local data-based EDMs - calibration curve	173
7.21 Plot of sensitivity and specificity for the literature and local data EDMs	174
7.22 Percentage of complications by ATS.....	177
7.23 Percentage of the total occurrence of each complication for each ATS.....	177
7.24 ROC curves of the prediction of CAP mortality by risk models	179
7.25 Box plots of the distribution of simulated antibiotic timing.....	182
7.26 Simulated percentage of patients with antibiotic time greater than 4 hours.....	184
7.27 Simulated percentage of patients with antibiotic time greater than 8 hours.....	184
7.28 Antibiotic timing by mortality - 1998 sample	185
7.29 Antibiotic timing by mortality - 2000 sample	186
8.1 Simple model of predictors of process performance/error	189
8.2 CAP alerting system simulation model	189
8.3 Influence diagram of early CAP diagnosis model	202
8.4 CAP alerting system simulation model	206
8.5 Loss model: hypothesised percentage decrease in 30 day mortality using early diagnostic and risk models.....	209
8.6 Sample selection bias map.....	212
9.1 Local CAP guideline.....	222
9.2 Distribution of key process timings with outliers - 1998 sample	226
9.3 Distribution of key process timings with outliers - 2000 sample	226
9.4 Distribution of timings by primary diagnosis with outliers - 1998 sample	227
9.5 Distribution of timings by primary diagnosis with outliers - 2000 sample	227
9.6 Distribution of process timings by antibiotic site with outliers - 1998 sample	228
9.7 Distribution of process timings by antibiotic site with outliers - 2000 sample	228
9.8 Distribution of CXR timings by ATS with outliers - 1998 sample	229
9.9 Distribution of antibiotic timing by ATS with outliers - 1998 sample.....	229

Abstract

Delay to antibiotic treatment of community-acquired pneumonia (CAP) greater than 4 hours following hospital admission is associated with a 15% increase in mortality. Paper-based guidelines have been widely introduced to improve CAP care, but these interventions have underperformed due to poor compliance in complex clinical workflows. Unlike passive paper-based guidelines, alerting systems based on computer-based decision support systems (CDSS) have the capacity to actively draw attention to delayed clinical processes. Formal consideration of local workflow is key to the design and successful implementation of CDSS.

I used workflow analysis techniques to develop an evidence-based alerting system designed to reduce the delay to treatment of CAP in the emergency department (ED) of an Australian tertiary hospital. A sample of 6 CAP patients were observed during October 2001 to derive a structural process flow model, which was refined via stakeholder interview. A deterministic process flow model was then developed using an existing retrospectively compiled CAP database, consisting of 246 patients admitted June-December 1998 and 146 patients admitted May-December 2000. A stratified control sample presenting with respiratory symptoms (n=74, January-December 2003) was collected for the assessment of diagnosis and chest x-ray (CXR) accuracy.

Treatment delay greater than 4 hours was associated with failure to diagnose CAP in the ED, the absence of CXR evidence, low triage score, delayed CXR, and failure to treat in the ED. ED physicians only identified 54-57% of those discharged with CAP. Radiologists only reported CAP features in 47% - 67% of initial CXRs for these patients.

I hypothesised that a CDSS-based alerting system, composed of a CAP early diagnosis model (EDM) and a simple risk model (CRB-65), would identify enough CAP patients to reduce the percentage treated after 4 hours. I constructed an evidence-based naïve Bayesian EDM (sensitivity = 36%, specificity = 93%). It was able to identify 24% of CAP patients that died in hospital, 38% of those with antibiotics delayed greater than 4 hours, and 26% of those with CXR delayed greater than 4 hours. CAP-specific risk models were equivalent to the Australasian Triage Score (ATS) in predicting mortality.

I simulated alerting policy by combining the CDSS with the deterministic process flow model. Alerting for treatment at triage or initial physician assessment, when the EDM was positive, approximately halved the median treatment time of 5.53 hours, and decreased the number treated after 4 hours (62%) by 1/3. Treating EDM-positive patients as ATS category 2 produced a similar effect.

Current triage practices, embodied mainly by the disease-independent, sign and symptom based ATS are too coarse to deal with conditions such as CAP, where there is high diagnostic uncertainty and delays in diagnosis and treatment are critical determinants of outcomes. Better outcomes may be achieved with quicker diagnostic and treatment workflows via: analysis of current diagnosis and treatment workflows, analysis and correlation of a comprehensive set of patient symptoms, signs and risk factors for the specific disease, and improving triaging and subsequent workflow through a disease-specific CDSS based on early diagnostic models derived from the previous analyses.

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Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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