# Towards a Method of Building Causal Bayesian Networks for Prognostic Decision Support


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**Abstract.** We describe a method of building a decision support system for clinicians deciding between interventions, using of Bayesian Networks (BNs). Using a case study of the amputation of traumatically injured extremities, we explain why existing prognostic models used as decision aids have not been successful in practice. A central idea is the important of modeling causal relationships, both so that the model conforms to the clinicians' way of reasoning and so that we can predict the probable effect of the available interventions. Since we cannot always depend on data from controlled trials, we depend instead on 'clinical knowledge' and it is therefore vital that this is elicited rigorously. We propose three stages of knowledge modeling covering the treatment process, the information generated by the process and the causal relationship. These stages lead to a causal Bayesian network, which is used to predict the patient outcome under different treatment options.



Keywords: Bayesian Networks, Causal Models, Clinical Decision Support


## 1 Introduction

How can a decision-support system assist a clinician deciding between several available treatments (or 'interventions') for a patient? We describe a method of building a decision support system applicable to this problem, based on the use of Bayesian Networks (BNs). Our focus here is on the prediction of the outcome for the patient, given the different treatment options, as if to answer a clinician asking "what is likely to happen to the patient if I do A or B?". Such a prediction is the first step needed to assist a decision maker; the further step from prediction to advice is not considered here.

We have developed the proposed method as part of a project to develop decision support for the treatment of traumatically injured (or 'mangled') extremities, where surgeons must decide whether or not to salvage or amputate the injured limb. We use this case study as a running example to illustrate each stage of the method.

The use of prognostic models in medicine is increasing [1]. Such models make predictions about the course of a disease from one or more predictors. The relationship between the predictors and the outcome does not always need to be causal [2]. On the other hand, when the need is to decide between possible interventions, a causal relationship between the intervention and the outcome is clearly necessary and this is a challenge when, as in our case study, we are depending on data gathered from past cases rather than from a controlled trial.

Randomised controlled trials (RCT) have been the primary way of identifying and measuring causal relations, since randomisation has the potential to reduce the effect of confounding variables. However, it is not straightforward to conduct RCTs for all questions of interest and the cost and time required for generalizable RCTs can be very high. The impracticality of RCTs is especially pertinent for an application such as the treatment of mangled extremity by amputation. Apart from the obvious practical and ethical issues, if an RCT were to be run some evidence of the potential benefits of the trial would be needed.

Our proposal is to develop causal BNs based on a combination of expert medical knowledge and observational data. The knowledge is required to identify the causal relations and the data is used for determining the strengths of these relations. Knowledge is captured through a sequence of models describing the treatment process, the information available and a hierarchy of causal relationships.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: the case study about mangled extremity is first presented in Section 2, with Section 3 covering existing work on prognostic model and decision support for mangled extremity treatment. Section 4 presents the proposed method for building causal BNs. Conclusions and discussions are given in Section 5.

## 2 Case Study: Mangled Extremities

### 2.1 Treatment of Mangled Extremities

Clinicians often have to decide whether to amputate or salvage the extremity during mangled extremity treatment. This decision, with irreversible consequences for the patient, revolves around three possible adverse outcomes, which change in prominence as the treatment progresses.

1. ***Death.*** There is a risk to the patient's life from the injury to the limb. This risk depends on other injuries that may have been sustained at the same time. This risk is most prominent at the first stage of treatment.
2. ***Limb Amputation.*** If the limb loses its blood supply for too long, it becomes unviable and amputation becomes inevitable. The viability of the limb is evaluated as the extent of the injury is accessed and a decision made whether to attempt salvage or to amputate the limb.
3. ***Non-functional limb.*** A salvaged limb may be more or less functional. For some patients a prosthetic limb may be preferable to a non-functional or painful limb; this outcome becomes more prominent when it clear that limb salvage is possible.

The clinician's concerns about these three treatment outcomes changes as the treatment progresses. The probabilities of the adverse outcomes are both positively and negatively related with each other so it may not be possible to find a decision that minimises all of them. For example, lengthy reconstruction surgeries can salvage patient's limb, but it can also put the patient's life in danger as the patient's physiology may become unstable. In later stages of the treatment, when the physiology is more stable, the patient's risk of death can again increase because of a limb infection, which may become untreatable. Finally, the clinicians may decide to amputate the limb if it is not likely to be functional in the long run. Although the choice of treatment is the same, the underlying reasoning changes significantly through different stages of the treatment.

## 2.2 Experience of the Trauma Unit at the Barts and the London Hospital

The Royal London Hospital (RLH) is an internationally recognised leader in trauma care and trauma research. The trauma unit is the busiest in the United Kingdom treating over 2000 injured patients last year (2010), a quarter of whom were severely injured. The hospital is also the lead for a network of trauma hospitals, the London Trauma System, which provides specialist trauma care for the millions of people living in London and the South-East of England. This trauma system is believed to be the largest of its kind in the world. As a Major Trauma Centre the hospital provides expedient access to the latest technology, treatments and expert trauma clinicians around the clock. Evidence has shown that people who suffer serious injuries need the highest quality specialist care to give them the best chances of survival and recovery.

The predominant mechanism of injury seen at the Royal London Hospital is road traffic collisions followed by stabbings and falls from a height. Nearly half of the trauma patients have an injury to an extremity or the pelvic girdle. A large multidiscipline team manages those with severe limb injuries. This includes emergency physicians, anaesthetists, intensivists, orthopaedic surgeons, plastic surgeons, vascular surgeons and trauma surgeons as well as specialist nurses and therapists. These devastating injuries carry a high mortality and morbidity in a predominantly young population. This multidiscipline approach ensures the best possible outcome for these patients.

**Table 1.** Trauma and Amputation Incidence at RLH

| Year | Total trauma | Extremity or pelvic girdle injury | Lower limb amputation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2004 | 689 | 313 | 6 |
| 2005 | 846 | 392 | 12 |
| 2006 | 1062 | 393 | 8 |
| 2007 | 1289 | 597 | 9 |
| 2008 | 1467 | 659 | 10 |
| 2009 | 1652 | 776 | 8 |
| 2010 | 2082 | 990 | 8 |

### 2.3 Characteristics of this Decision Problem

We can summarise the characteristics of the limb amputation decision problem as follows:

- The treatment pathway is complex and the decision evolves with the treatment.
- Multiple outcomes need to be considered.
- The information relevant to the decision changes with time.

These characteristics suggest the need for modelling of the care pathway and analysis of the information available before a decision model can be developed.

## 3 Prognostic Models

### 3.1 Traditional Prognostic Models

A prognostic model predicts the course of a disease based on several independent predictors. Typically, the relation of the predictors to the model outcome is analysed by multivariate statistical models or similar approaches [3]. The accepted way of selecting predictors is to adjust the variables and check their effects on the outcome in observational data. If an adjustment of a variable is connected to the outcome with statistical significance, the variable can be called as an independent predictor. The danger is that correlation is confused with causation. For example, grey hair is an independent risk factor for heart disease, however, if two men having same age but different hair colours are considered, grey hair does not probably increase the heart disease risk [2]. Therefore, the independent predictors are not necessarily causal factors; they are the factors that are correlated with causal factors according to the available data and selected variables. More extreme examples about variable selection can be seen in some scientific studies where electric-razors or owning refrigerators have been identified as risk factors for cancer [4]. Consequently, the independent predictors and their relations to outcome can be completely different between studies. Predictors with different sets of variables can be statistically accurate but high statistical accuracy of a model does not ensure its clinical acceptance [5] and there are now widely accepted arguments against the use of statistical significance tests and their associated p-values [6]. Clinicians demand models that have reasonable and understandable knowledge base aligned with latest clinical guidelines [7] [8].

On the other hand, there is abundance of domain knowledge about the clinically relevant variables and their causal relations that can be integrated into model building. The main problems of traditional prognostic approaches can easily be overcome if domain knowledge is used.

### 3.2 Scoring Systems for Mangled Extremity Treatment

MESS, MESI and four other scoring systems have been developed as decision support models for mangled extremity treatment [9]. All of these models grade patient's situation according to several injury-related variables. If a patient's score is above the model's threshold value, the model recommends an amputation. However, the scoring systems have not been widely accepted as a decision support tool by clinicians; we consider some reasons for this below.

Firstly, the scoring systems were developed based on observational data with low sample sizes. For example, MESS [10], which is a widely known scoring system, was developed with data on just 26 patients. Consequently, the high predictive results obtained by the authors were not repeated in later independent validation studies that have higher number of participants (Table 1). Sensitivity and specificity results were similar for other scoring systems as well. Bosse et al.'s multicentre prospective study [11] concluded that the predictive performance of the scoring systems was poor.

**Table 2.** Validation Studies for MESS

| *Validation Study* | *Participants* | *Sensitivity* | *Specificity* |
|---|---|---|---|
| By MESS's developers [10] | 26 | 1 | 1 |
| Robertson, 1991 [12] | 154 | 0.43 | 1 |
| Bonanni et al., 1993 [13] | 89 | 0.22 | 0.53 |
| Durham et al., 1996 [14] | 51 | 0.79 | 0.83 |
| Bosse et al., 2001 [11] | 556 | 0.46 | 0.91 |
| Brown et al., 2009 [15] | 77 | 0.86 | 0.84 |
| Korompilias, 2009 [16] | 63 | 0.87 | 0.71 |

Secondly, the output of scoring systems was the amputation decision itself. As a result, if there is a discrepancy between the model's recommendations and clinician's decisions, the model does not provide any useful decision support apart from implying that this outcome was the decision that was made in the model's training data. Thirdly, the scoring system's performance cannot be assessed in practice by sensitivity and specificity values since these measures represent the similarity between the models' recommendations and clinicians' decisions. A model can have 100% sensitivity and specificity but there is a possibility that both model and the clinician using it were wrong.

### 3.3 Bayesian Networks

Bayesian networks (BNs) are probabilistic graphical models with multiple variables and relevant independence assumptions. The model's structure can be elicited based on domain knowledge.

Verduijn et al. [17] proposed a method for learning BNs specifically for prognosis from observational data. Their approach has several advantages compared to traditional prognostic models since it can represent the reasoning mechanism among intermediate variables. Moreover, in contrast to regression models the multiple stage nature of prognostic decisions can be implemented in BNs. Although BNs are capable of learning more complex relations from observational data, those relations are still not necessarily causal so that making predictions about interventions is not possible with BNs learned purely from data. BNs learned from data also share the same disadvantages with traditional prognostic models related to available data and variable selection.

Causal BNs should have a clear relationship to the complex procedural, associational and hierarchical aspects of the clinical knowledge together with the causal relations. Such knowledge is elicited and verified from multiple experts to minimise the biases. However, communicating through the model becomes more difficult with this additional complexity. Moreover, the risk of introducing a semantic mistake to the model increases. In the following section, we will give examples about such difficulties and introduce a method for overcoming them.

## 4 Knowledge Modelling for Causal Bayesian Networks

Since our proposal to use causal BNs depends on the elicitation of knowledge about causal relationships between variable, explicit knowledge modelling is central to our proposed method. In this section, we describe this knowledge modelling, illustrating it with examples from the case study of mangled extremities.

### 4.1 Method Overview

Our goal is to develop BN models to predict one or more outcome variables, depending on the values of other relevant factors and conditioned on the possible outcomes. The first imperative is therefore to have a clear understanding of all the variables in the model, so before constructing the BN we need to capture knowledge about the entities and attributes relevant to the domain. These entities may relate to different stages of the treatment process and some attributes may have changing values. A complete understanding of the data therefore depends on knowledge of the treatment process. Moreover, the predictions needed for decision support may change through the treatment. A model of this process is therefore our starting point.

### 4.2 Modelling the Treatment Process

Decisions about clinical interventions are usually done in iterative stages until the patient is treated. After making an intervention, clinicians observe the results of the intervention, re-evaluate treatment risks, and select a treatment alternative [18]. Activity diagrams (see Figure 1) can be used to identify the decisions that important for the clinical problem, and priorities of these decisions throughout the treatment.

The changing decision priorities in mangled extremities are illustrated by an example about a patient treated by surgeon at RLH following a motor-cycle accident that resulted in severe leg injury and serious bleeding. When the patient arrived at the hospital, his physiology is in a dangerous condition due to bleeding but his limb appears to be anatomically salvageable. A causal BN used for decision-support at this stage will access the physiology-related risk of death, considering the options of a reconstruction operation at this stage, and the possibility of salvaging the limb later. Consequently the model's variables will be mainly about physiology, bleeding and limb injury.

If the patient is resuscitated for a few days until his physiology stabilizes, the clinicians become less worried about physiology-related risk of death. However, the risk of death due to infections may increase as it takes several days for these factors to be observed. The causal BN used at this stage will still provide decision support about the risk of death and possibility of limb salvage but its predictions will be based on infections and renal failure. If the risk of death related to limb injury is also low, the clinicians will evaluate the possibility of anatomical salvage and future functioning of the limb. The causal BN for this stage will be more focused on structure of the limb rather than mechanisms related to death.

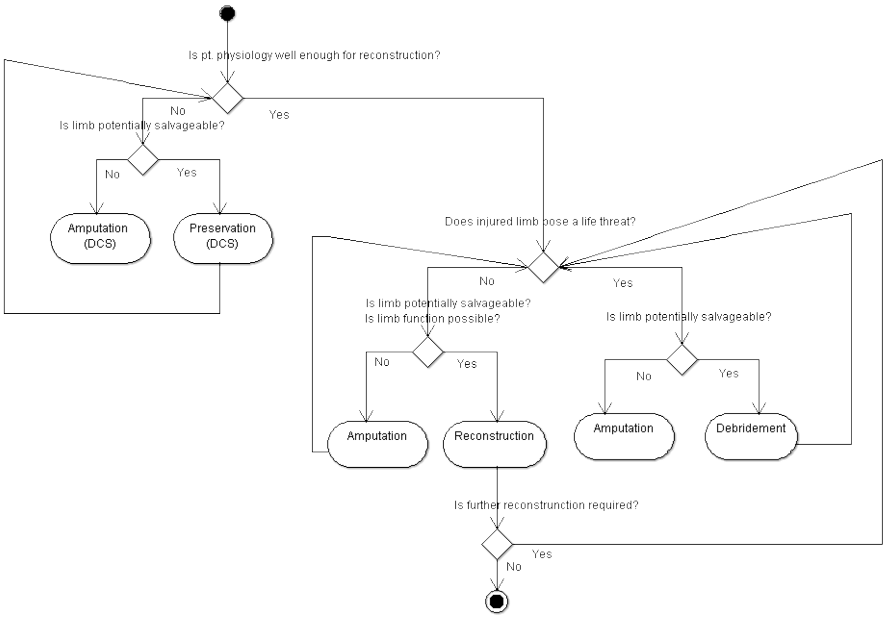


**Fig. 1.** Activity Diagram for Mangled Extremity Decision Making

### 4.3 Modelling Information Arising From Treatment

Information arises from the treatment process: some values (e.g. the patient's age) are available from the start and do not vary; other data result from tests and some values may change with time. The variables used in the BN must be clearly defined, corresponding to an attribute of a defined entity, at a given stage of treatment. Information models that represent the knowledge about relevant entities and their attributes can guide the selection of variables in the BN. Not all the information may be needed in the BN to predict the outcomes of interest at each stage. The changes of relevant entities in different decision-making stages can be seen in the mangled extremity treatment example shown in Section 4.2. In early stages of the decision-making attributes the clinicians are more focused on attributes about patient physiology (Figure 2). In later stages, on the other hand, they evaluate attributes about limb in more detail. The information model can be used with the flow diagram to identify the variables relevant to each decision-making stage.

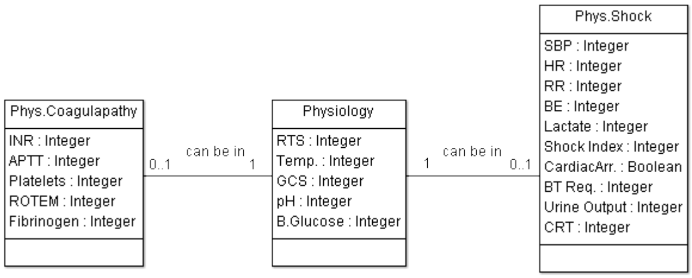


**Fig. 2.** Entities and attributes related to physiology

Multiplicity must also be clarified. In our case study, a patient may have an amputation in each of their two limbs. Moreover, the same limb could be amputated more than once. For example, there are records for 53 patients, 73 limbs and 83 amputation operations in the data from RLH about lower limb amputations. The knowledge about multiplicity relations according to limbs and other entities in mangled extremity decision making can be modelled with class diagrams (Figure 3).

### 4.4 Model Causal Relationships at Different Knowledge Levels

While clinicians usually express their reasoning in small and compact statements, these statements are actually based on series of cause-effect deductions from more complex structures. Methods for representing multiple levels of clinical knowledge have been developed [19]. The causal BNs with less detail abstract the detailed information about a part of a clinical problem. These models can show the main causal relations with fewer variables which is suitable for communication with the experts about the overall model structure. More detailed causal BNs can show more complex relations that could be used for making inferences about detailed mechanisms if there is available data (for example, from a variety of laboratory tests). These models are aligned by the less detailed models through focal nodes. Focal nodes are anchors for the different knowledge levels that describe the same concept and share the same name [19].

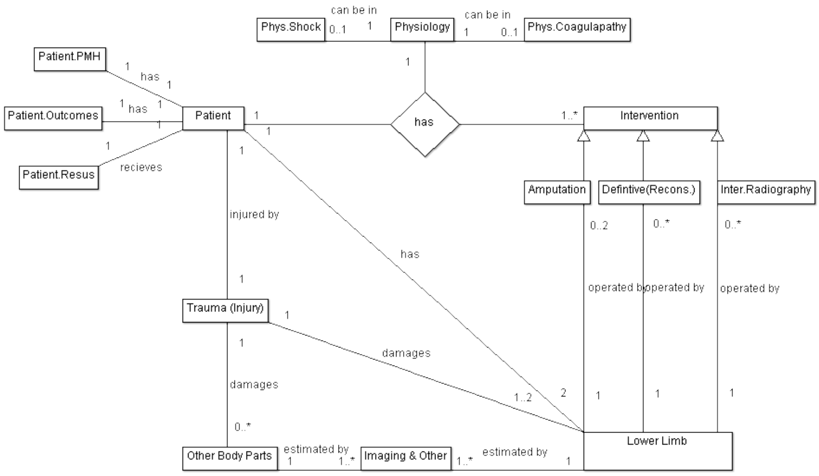


**Fig. 3.** Class diagram of entities related to mangled extremity treatment

An example of causal BNs with different detail levels is shown by a fragment of mangled extremity model (Figure 5). These causal BNs models a part of the physiology related risk of death which is crucial in early stages of the treatment (Figure 1). The feedback relationship between coagulopathy and future course of bleeding has not been represented as a dynamic BN in this illustration for simplicity. The least detailed causal BN shows the overall causal relations between bleeding, circulatory shock, coagulopathy, the risk of death and possible interventions i.e. amputation or rapid surgery. Although this model represents the overall causal relationships, it does not show the two intermediate (temperature, acidosis) variables between shock and coagulopathy. A more detailed version of the causal BN can be built by adding these relations as well as the estimators to assess the degree of shock. This model could bring more explanatory predictions due to additional causal mechanisms it brings. The relation between shock and its 7 estimators can also be explained in more detailed way. For example, urine output that is used for estimating shock is caused by perfusion in the kidneys. The increase in respiratory rate (RR) is caused by lack of O2 delivery as a result of shock. Therefore, knowledge detail in the model can be increased by modelling shock through these relations. However, estimating values about the perfusion in different body parts and oxygen delivery could be more difficult for the user than estimating a value for shock only. The nodes that are not modelled in different levels of details, such as bleeding or coagulopathy node in our example can be used as focal point to align the models and keep the overall causal relations consistent between different detail levels.

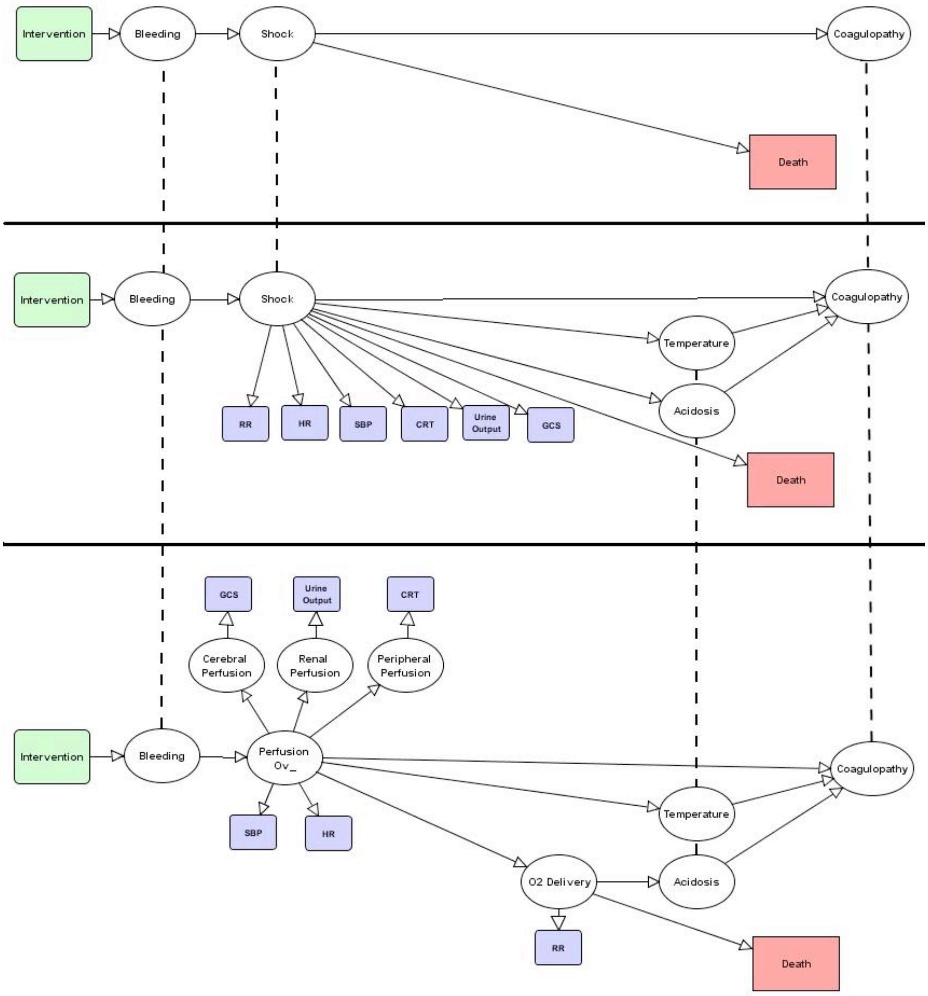


**Fig. 4.** Causal BN with multiple levels of detail about physiology related risk of death

## 5 Conclusion

In this study, we have proposed a method for building causal BNs, where causal relationships are elicited from clinical knowledge. The method involves three stages of knowledge modelling, using:

- activity diagrams to model the decision points and procedural relations
- class diagrams to model the multiplicity relations between the variables
- multi-level causal diagrams to represent a hierarchical of causal relationships.

This method aids the knowledge-elicitation with experts by providing understandable intermediate models and decreases the risk of having semantic mistakes in the final BN model. The study for developing the method is still in progress. This paper shows our first attempts for providing guideline for some common modelling problems seen in building causal BNs. More structured method for building complete causal BNs are being researched. For next steps, we plan to use formalise the models within a common framework, allowing more automated approaches for building the final causal BNs. We also plan to extend the work to show how the prediction of outcomes can be used to generate decision guidelines.

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