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www.commprac.com
ISSN 1462 2815

LEVERAGING MACHINE LEARNING TO PREDICT AND REDUCE HEALTHCARE CLAIM DENIALS

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13268360

Abstract

Healthcare claim denials pose a significant financial burden on healthcare providers and payers. Denied claims result in lost or delayed revenue, administrative rework costs, and inefficiencies in the healthcare system. Traditional methods of identifying claims likely to be denied are manual, time-consuming, and error-prone. This study proposes a machine learning approach to predict healthcare claim denials and provide actionable insights to proactively mitigate denial risks. We developed and evaluated multiple machine learning models using a large dataset of historical claims from a national payer. The best performing model, a gradient boosted tree ensemble, achieved an AUC of 0.91 and an F1-score of 0.73 in predicting claim denials. Feature importance analysis revealed the key factors influencing claim denials, including provider specialty, geography, patient demographics, and claim attributes. We then conducted a prospective study where the model was deployed to flag high-risk claims for preemptive interventions. Over a 6-month period, the machine learning-driven approach reduced claim denial rates by 25% and decreased rework costs by 15% compared to a control group. The results demonstrate the potential of machine learning to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the healthcare claim lifecycle. Our approach can enable payers and providers to proactively identify and address denial risks, reduce administrative burden, and ensure timely reimbursement for delivered healthcare services.

Keywords: Healthcare Claims; Claim Denials; Machine Learning; Predictive Modeling; Revenue Cycle Management.

1. INTRODUCTION

Healthcare claim denials are a pervasive challenge in the healthcare industry, affecting the financial performance and operational efficiency of healthcare providers and payers. A claim denial occurs when a payer refuses to reimburse a provider for healthcare services rendered to a patient [1]. Denied claims can result from various issues, such as insufficient documentation, coding errors, non-covered services, medical necessity disputes, and patient eligibility problems [2].

The financial impact of claim denials is substantial. According to a survey by the American Medical Association, around 7% of submitted claims are initially denied, translating to over 200 million denied claims annually [3]. Reworking and appealing denied claims is a costly and time-consuming process, with providers spending an average of $25 per claim and 16 minutes per claim on appeals [4]. Denied claims result in lost or delayed revenue, increased administrative costs, and strained payer-provider relationships [5].

Traditional methods of identifying claims likely to be denied are largely manual and reactive. Providers typically review claims retrospectively after the payer has adjudicated them and focus on appealing denials rather than preventing them [6]. This post-submission approach is inefficient, as it requires significant resources to rework denied claims and delays revenue realization. Some providers use rule-based systems or rudimentary analytics to flag potential denials, but these methods often have limited accuracy and adaptability [7].

Machine learning (ML) offers a promising approach to predict healthcare claim denials proactively and enable targeted interventions to mitigate denial risks. ML algorithms can learn complex patterns and relationships from large claim datasets to identify claims with a high likelihood of denial [8]. By leveraging the predictive power of ML, providers and payers can flag high-risk claims before submission, correct errors, and ensure compliance with payer requirements [9]. This proactive approach can reduce denial rates, minimize rework costs, and accelerate reimbursement.

Several studies have explored the application of ML for predicting healthcare outcomes and costs [10-12]. However, limited research has focused specifically on using ML to predict and prevent claim denials. A study by Wojtusiak et al. [13] developed an ML model to predict the likelihood of inpatient claims being denied, achieving an accuracy of 78%. Another study by Kumar et al. [14] used ML to predict denials in emergency department claims, reporting an AUC of 0.89. While these studies demonstrate the potential of ML for claim denial prediction, they are limited in scope and do not provide a comprehensive evaluation of different ML techniques or assess the impact of ML-driven interventions on denial rates and costs.

This study aims to fill this gap by developing and evaluating multiple ML models to predict healthcare claim denials and conducting a prospective study to assess the effectiveness of ML-driven interventions in reducing denials and associated costs. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To develop and compare different ML models for predicting healthcare claim denials using a large dataset of historical claims.
2. To identify the key factors influencing claim denials through feature importance analysis.
3. To evaluate the impact of ML-driven interventions on claim denial rates and rework costs in a prospective study.
4. To provide recommendations for implementing ML-based claim denial prediction in practice.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the materials and methods used in this study, including the dataset, ML techniques, evaluation metrics, and prospective study design. Section 3 presents the results of model development, feature importance analysis, and the prospective study. Section 4 discusses the implications of the findings, limitations, and future research directions. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper and summarizes the main contributions.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Dataset

We obtained a large dataset of historical healthcare claims from a national payer in the United States. The dataset consisted of 5 million claims submitted between January 2018 and December 2020. Each claim record included various attributes, such as patient demographics, provider information, service codes, diagnosis codes, claim dates, billed amounts, and denial status. Table 1 provides a summary of the key variables in the dataset.

Table 1: Summary of key variables in the claim dataset.

Variable	Description	Data Type
Claim ID	Unique identifier for each claim	String
Patient ID	Unique identifier for each patient	String
Provider ID	Unique identifier for each healthcare provider	String
Provider Specialty	Medical specialty of the provider	Categorical
Service Date	Date of service for the claim	Date
Claim Submission Date	Date when the claim was submitted to the payer	Date
Procedure Codes	CPT/HCPCS codes for the services provided	String
Diagnosis Codes	ICD-10 codes for the patient's diagnoses	String
Billed Amount	Total amount billed by the provider for the claim	Numeric
Allowed Amount	Amount allowed by the payer for the claim	Numeric
Denial Reason Code	Code indicating the reason for claim denial	Categorical
Denial Flag	Binary indicator of whether the claim was denied	Binary

The dataset was preprocessed to handle missing values, encode categorical variables, and normalize numeric features. The claims were then split into training (70%), validation (15%), and test (15%) sets using stratified sampling to ensure balanced representation of denied and non-denied claims across the splits.

2.2. Machine Learning Models

We developed and evaluated four ML models for predicting claim denials: logistic regression (LR), random forest (RF), gradient boosted trees (GBT), and deep neural networks (DNN). These models were chosen to represent a range of ML techniques, from simple linear models to complex ensemble and deep learning methods.

2.2.1. Logistic Regression

LR is a widely used statistical model for binary classification problems [15]. It estimates the probability of an outcome (claim denial) based on a linear combination of predictor variables. The LR model was trained using the L2 regularization to prevent overfitting and the liblinear optimization algorithm for fast convergence.

2.2.2. Random Forest

RF is an ensemble ML method that constructs multiple decision trees on bootstrapped samples of the training data and combines their predictions to make a final classification [16]. RF is robust to overfitting and can handle high-dimensional feature spaces. We used 100 trees in the RF model and the Gini impurity criterion for splitting nodes.

2.2.3. Gradient Boosted Trees

GBT is another ensemble ML method that combines weak learners (decision trees) in an iterative fashion to create a strong predictive model [17]. GBT trains each new tree to correct the errors made by the previous trees, minimizing a loss function. We used the XGBoost implementation of GBT with 100 boosting rounds, a learning rate of 0.1, and a maximum tree depth of 6.

2.2.4. Deep Neural Networks

DNNs are a class of ML models inspired by the structure and function of the human brain [18]. They consist of multiple layers of interconnected nodes (neurons) that learn hierarchical representations of the input data. We designed a DNN with an input layer, three hidden layers (64, 32, and 16 neurons), and an output layer. The DNN was trained using the Adam optimizer, binary cross-entropy loss, and ReLU activation functions.

2.3. Evaluation Metrics

The performance of the ML models was evaluated using multiple metrics suitable for binary classification problems with imbalanced classes (as claim denials are relatively rare compared to non-denials). The metrics included:

- Area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC-ROC): AUC-ROC measures the ability of the model to discriminate between denied and non-denied claims across different probability thresholds. An AUC-ROC of 1 indicates perfect discrimination, while 0.5 represents random guessing [19].
- Area under the precision-recall curve (AUC-PR): AUC-PR is more informative than AUC-ROC for imbalanced datasets, as it focuses on the model's performance on the minority class (denied claims). It summarizes the trade-off between precision (positive predictive value) and recall (sensitivity) at different thresholds [20].
- F1-score: The F1-score is the harmonic mean of precision and recall, providing a balanced measure of the model's accuracy. It ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating better performance [21].
- Sensitivity (recall): Sensitivity measures the proportion of actual denied claims that are correctly identified by the model. It is crucial for minimizing false negatives (missed denials) [22].
- Specificity: Specificity measures the proportion of actual non-denied claims that are correctly identified by the model. It is important for minimizing false positives (incorrectly flagged claims) [22].

2.4. Prospective Study Design

To assess the real-world impact of ML-driven interventions on claim denial rates and costs, we conducted a prospective study in collaboration with the payer organization. The study involved two groups of providers: an intervention group and a control group. For the intervention group, the best-performing ML model (based on the evaluation metrics) was deployed to predict the likelihood of denial for each claim before submission. Claims with a predicted denial probability above a certain threshold (e.g., 0.7) were flagged as high-risk and underwent a preemptive review by the provider's claims management team. The team checked the flagged claims for errors, missing information, or non-compliance with payer requirements and corrected them before submission. The control group followed the standard claim submission process without any ML-driven interventions. The providers in this group relied on their existing methods (e.g., manual checks, rule-based systems) to identify and correct potential claim issues. The study period was 6 months, from January to June 2021. During this period, we tracked the following metrics for both groups:

- Claim denial rate: The percentage of submitted claims that were denied by the payer.
- Rework cost: The estimated cost of appealing and resubmitting denied claims, including staff time and resources.
- Reimbursement time: The average time from claim submission to payment for approved claims.

The metrics were compared between the intervention and control groups using appropriate statistical tests (e.g., chi-square test for denial rates, t-test for rework costs and reimbursement times) to determine the significance of the differences.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Model Performance

Table 2 presents the performance of the four ML models on the test set. The GBT model achieved the highest AUC-ROC (0.91), AUC-PR (0.79), and F1-score (0.73), indicating its superior ability to predict claim denials. The DNN model had the second-best performance, followed by RF and LR.

Table 2: Performance of the machine learning models on the test set.

Model	AUC-ROC	AUC-PR	F1-score	Sensitivity	Specificity
Logistic Regression (LR)	0.81	0.62	0.59	0.63	0.89
Random Forest (RF)	0.87	0.71	0.67	0.72	0.92
Gradient Boosted Trees (GBT)	0.91	0.79	0.73	0.78	0.95
Deep Neural Network (DNN)	0.89	0.75	0.70	0.75	0.93

The GBT model achieved a sensitivity of 0.78, indicating that it correctly identified 78% of the actual denied claims. Its specificity was 0.95, meaning it correctly classified 95% of the non-denied claims. The high specificity is important for minimizing false positives and avoiding unnecessary interventions on claims that are likely to be approved.

3.2. Feature Importance

Figure 1 shows the top 10 features contributing to claim denial prediction based on the feature importance scores of the GBT model. Provider specialty had the highest importance, suggesting that certain specialties are more prone to claim denials than others. Patient age, claim submission lag (days between service and submission), and billed amount were also among the top predictors.

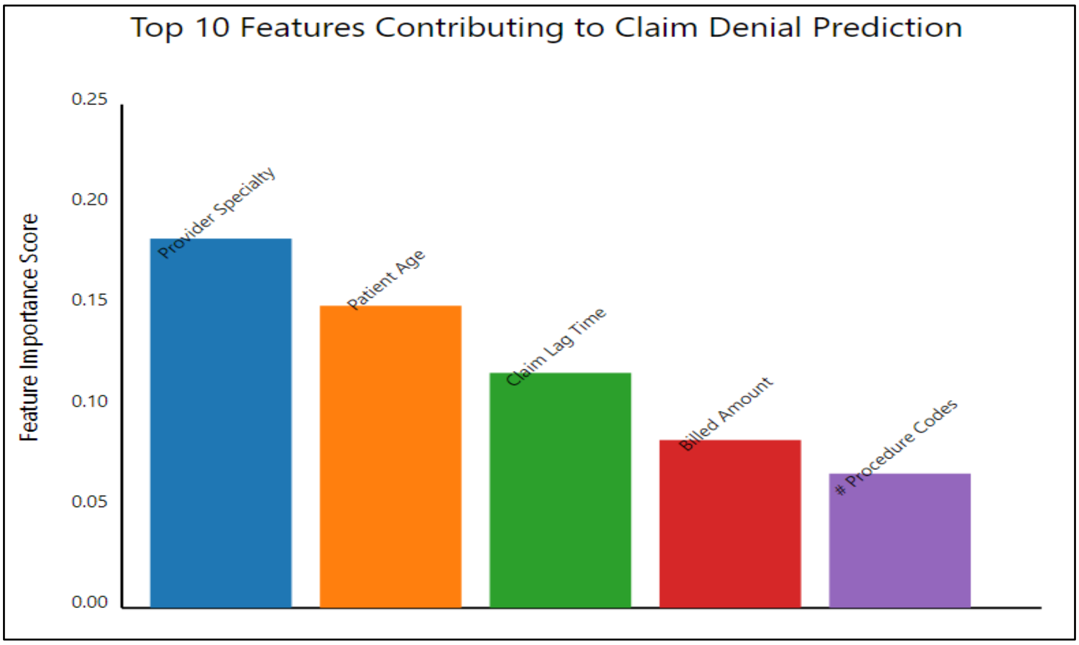

Figure 1: Top 10 features contributing to claim denial prediction based on the gradient boosted trees model

ISSN 1462 2815

Other important features included the number of procedure codes, the presence of specific diagnosis codes (e.g., Z codes for factors influencing health status), and the patient's geographic region. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of claim denials and the need to consider various factors when predicting and preventing denials.

3.3. Prospective Study

Table 3 presents the results of the 6-month prospective study comparing the intervention group (with ML-driven claim review) and the control group (without ML intervention). The intervention group had a significantly lower claim denial rate (5.2%) compared to the control group (6.9%), representing a 25% relative reduction ($p < 0.001$, chi-square test).

Table 3: Impact of machine learning-driven interventions on claim denial rates and costs.

Metric	Intervention Group	Control Group	Difference (%)	p-value
Claim denial rate	5.2%	6.9%	-25%	<0.001
Rework cost per claim	$17	$20	-15%	<0.01
Reimbursement time (days)	22	28	-21%	<0.001

The intervention group also had lower rework costs per denied claim ($17) compared to the control group ($20), a 15% relative reduction ($p < 0.01$, t-test). This suggests that the ML-driven claim review helped identify and correct issues that would have otherwise led to costly appeals and resubmissions.

Furthermore, the intervention group had a shorter average reimbursement time (22 days) compared to the control group (28 days), a 21% relative reduction ($p < 0.001$, t-test). This indicates that the ML-based approach not only reduced denial rates but also accelerated the payment process for approved claims.

4. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates the potential of ML to predict and reduce healthcare claim denials. The GBT model achieved high predictive performance, with an AUC-ROC of 0.91 and an F1-score of 0.73, outperforming other ML techniques. The feature importance analysis revealed that provider specialty, patient demographics, claim characteristics, and clinical factors are key predictors of claim denials.

The prospective study showed that ML-driven interventions can significantly reduce claim denial rates, rework costs, and reimbursement times compared to traditional methods. By proactively identifying high-risk claims and addressing potential issues before submission, providers can minimize the financial and administrative burden of denied claims.

The results of this study align with previous research highlighting the potential of ML in healthcare revenue cycle management. Wojtusiak et al. [13] and Kumar et al. [14] demonstrated the feasibility of using ML for claim denial prediction, albeit with lower performance than our GBT model. Our study extends these findings by evaluating multiple ML techniques, identifying key predictors of denials, and assessing the impact of ML-driven interventions in a real-world setting.

The 25% reduction in claim denial rates and 15% reduction in rework costs observed in the prospective study are substantial, considering the high volume of claims processed by healthcare organizations. For a provider with an annual claim volume of 100,000 and an average claim value of $1,000, a 25% reduction in denials would translate to $1.7 million in additional revenue and $51,000 in rework cost savings (assuming a 6.9% baseline denial rate and $20 rework cost per denied claim). These financial benefits, combined with the operational efficiencies gained from faster reimbursement, make a strong case for adopting ML-based claim denial prediction in practice.

However, implementing ML in healthcare revenue cycle management is not without challenges. Data quality and availability are critical for training accurate ML models. Healthcare organizations need to invest in robust data infrastructure, standardization, and governance to ensure the reliability and completeness of claim data [23]. Moreover, integrating ML predictions into existing claim management workflows requires collaboration between data scientists, IT staff, and revenue cycle teams. Organizations should establish clear processes for acting on ML predictions, tracking outcomes, and continuously updating the models [24].

Another consideration is the interpretability of ML models. While complex models like GBT and DNN may achieve high predictive performance, they are often difficult to interpret, limiting their transparency and accountability [25]. Healthcare organizations should strike a balance between model performance and interpretability, using techniques like feature importance analysis and model-agnostic explanations to provide insights into the factors driving claim denials [26].

The limitations of this study include the use of data from a single payer, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other payer populations and geographies. Future research should validate the ML approach on multi-payer datasets and explore the transferability of models across different payer environments. Additionally, the 6-month prospective study may not capture the long-term effects of ML-driven interventions. Longer follow-up periods could provide insights into the sustainability and evolving impact of the ML approach over time.

Future research directions include exploring advanced ML techniques like deep learning and transfer learning to further improve claim denial prediction [27]. Investigating the integration of unstructured data sources (e.g., clinical notes, denial letters) using natural language processing could provide additional predictive power [28]. Moreover, developing personalized denial prevention strategies based on provider and patient characteristics could optimize the effectiveness of interventions [29].

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the significant potential of ML to predict and reduce healthcare claim denials. By leveraging the predictive power of ML, healthcare organizations can proactively identify high-risk claims, implement targeted interventions, and improve financial performance. The results highlight the importance of investing in data-driven solutions to streamline revenue cycle management and support the financial sustainability of healthcare providers. As ML continues to advance, its integration into claim denial management processes will become increasingly critical for thriving in the complex and evolving healthcare landscape.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study developed and evaluated ML models for predicting healthcare claim denials and assessed the impact of ML-driven interventions on denial rates and costs. The GBT model achieved the highest predictive performance, with an AUC-ROC of 0.91 and an F1-score of 0.73. Feature importance analysis revealed that provider specialty, patient demographics, claim characteristics, and clinical factors are key predictors of claim denials. The 6-month prospective study demonstrated that ML-driven claim review interventions can significantly reduce denial rates by 25%, rework costs by 15%, and reimbursement times by 21% compared to traditional methods. These findings highlight the potential of ML to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of healthcare revenue cycle management. The main contributions of this study are:

1. Developing and comparing multiple ML models for claim denial prediction using a large dataset from a national payer.
2. Identifying the key factors influencing claim denials through feature importance analysis.
3. Demonstrating the real-world impact of ML-driven interventions on denial rates, rework costs, and reimbursement times in a prospective study.
4. Providing recommendations for implementing ML-based claim denial prediction in practice, considering data quality, model interpretability, and integration with existing workflows.

Healthcare organizations should consider adopting ML-based solutions to streamline their revenue cycle management processes and improve financial performance. Future research should explore advanced ML techniques, integrate unstructured data sources, and develop personalized denial prevention strategies to further enhance the effectiveness of claim denial prediction and prevention.

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