Exploring Influencing Factors of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Based on Elastic Net and Bayesian Network

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Abstract

This study aimed to construct Bayesian networks(BNs) to analyze the network relationship between those influencing factors and COPD, and to explore their intensity of effect on COPD through network reasoning. Elastic Net and Max-Min Hill-Climbing(MMHC) hybrid algorithm were adopted to screen the variables on the monitoring data of COPD among residents in Shanxi Province, China from 2014 to 2015, and construct BNs respectively. After variables selection by Elastic Net, 10 variables closely related to COPD were selected finally. The BNs constructed by MMHC showed that smoking status, household air pollution, family history, cough, air hunger or dyspnea were directly related to COPD, and Gender was indirectly linked to COPD through smoking status. Moreover, smoking status, household air pollution and family history were the parent nodes of COPD, and cough, air hunger or dyspnea represented the child nodes of COPD. In other words, smoking status, household air pollution and family history were related to the occurrence of COPD, and COPD would make patients' cough, air hunger or dyspnea worse. Generally speaking, BNs could reveal the complex network relationship between COPD and its relevant factors well, making it more convenient to carry out targeted prevention and control of COPD.

Introduction

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) represents a common disease characterized by persistent respiratory symptoms and airflow limitation. Its clinical manifestations comprise cough, expectoration, chest tightness, air hunger or dyspnea. In severe cases, it would progress into respiratory failure and Cor pulmonale, which is a threat to the patients' quality of life. It has emerged as the fifth largest economic burden worldwide^{1,2}, especially in developing countries, where COPD owns high morbidity and mortality. One study has shown that about 1 million people die of COPD every year in China, accounting for 30% of the deaths by COPD globally³. Additionally, COPD constitutes the third and fourth leading cause of death in China's rural and urban areas, respectively⁴. Obviously, COPD has become an important public health problem.

To comprehensively analyze its influencing factors and the complex relationship between them, and thus to reduce occurrence is all the more important.

Previously, studies on COPD generally explored the influencing factors of COPD by logistic regression, which required those factors to be inter-independent, and reflected the correlations between factors and COPD based on odds ratio. For example, in 2018, Wang Chen⁵ utilized logistic regression to detect the related risk factors of COPD, suggesting that sex, age, years of smoking, and severe exposure to PM_{2.5} were significantly associated with COPD. However, in clinical research, correlations often exist in influencing factors of disease. Therefore, it fails to meet the prerequisite of independent variables. In addition, logistic regression is unable to reveal direct or indirect influencing factors of COPD⁶.

Bayesian networks(BNs), proposed by Pearl Judea in 1987, has been widely used⁷. Without strict statistical hypothesis⁸, BNs constitute directed acyclic graph (DAG), reflecting potential relationship

among influencing factors, and conditional probability distribution table (CPT), which demonstrates the correlation intensity among factors⁹. As such, it allows for complex networks between disease and its influencing factors, overcoming the limitation of traditional logistic regression¹⁰. Moreover, with the information of known nodes, BNs can infer the probability of unknown nodes, flexibly showing the impact of relevant risk factors on COPD^{11,12}.

BNs learning refers to obtaining a complete Bayesian network by existing information. The construction method consists of parameter learning and structure learning¹³. The former one assumes that the network structure is known, then determining the parameters in the network. This article focuses on structure learning, a more commonly-used method, which could be divided into score-based search¹⁴ and constraint-based algorithm¹⁵.

The essence of score-based search is to find out the BNs whose score function reaches the maximum. Nonetheless, it's hard¹⁶ to obtain an optimal network structure under large structure space. The constraint-based algorithm enjoys a high learning efficiency and can obtain global optimal solution, but it also comes with some shortcomings. Firstly, independence of different nodes is sophisticated to judge, and the independence tests between nodes increases exponentially with the increase of nodes. Secondly, the results of high-order conditional independence test are unreliable. Due to their limitations, some scholars have proposed a hybrid algorithm, Max-Min Hill-Climbing(MMHC), a widely used hybrid algorithm, which includes two phases. In the first stage, it builds an undirected framework of BNs to reduce the search space by using constraint-based algorithms. Then the score-based search is used to add, delete and change the direction of edges in the constrained space, to find the network with the highest score¹⁶. Thus, MMHC hybrid algorithm combines the two algorithms skillfully and overcomes their shortcomings effectively¹⁷.

Undoubtedly, risk factors for COPD abound, but it's improper to incorporate all these factors into BNs. The networks would become extremely complicated and less accurate with more variables. So feature selection is of great necessity. Since Lasso regression does not take into account the correlation between features, it is not suitable for screening variables with multicollinearity. Ridge regression cannot select the model as well, on account of no prediction factor with zero actual coefficients. However, Elastic Net¹⁸ can combine the two methods and carry on the feature selection through cross-verification. By adopting Elastic Net, an ideal sparse model can be obtained and the influence of correlation between the observed variables can be compensated.

Hence, we intended to employ Elastic Net to filter influencing factor, which has a strong correlation with COPD, and then used MMHC to build BNs of COPD and its influencing factors, exploring potential relationship between COPD and these factors, so as to provide a theoretical guidance for prevention and reduction of COPD.

Results

Characteristics of the study population. Among the 2424 initial study participants, 352 subjects with incomplete data were excluded, and 2072 were left for the analysis. Among them, 51.8% were men and 48.2% were women. 36.6% of the participants were aged between 40 and 49, 35.0% were between 50 and 59, 23.4% were between 60 and 69, and 5.0% were over 70 (As shown in Table 1). The prevalence of COPD in this study represented 13.4%(19.9% in males and 6.3% in females). As age increase, the prevalence of COPD increases gradually. As shown in Figure 1, the prevalence of COPD was highest in people older than 70, reaching 22.3%.

Screening of variables associated with COPD by Elastic Net. 16 risk factors related to COPD were included in the Elastic Net model, and the key parameter values ($\lambda = 0.18595$, $\alpha = 0.12$) for optimizing the model performance were selected by a ten-fold cross-validation. In the end, the coefficients of influencing factors not closely related to COPD would be compressed to 0 and eliminated, and the final 10 variables were obtained, as shown in Table 1. This method was used to determine the factors that had strong correlations with COPD, thus simplifying the structure of later BNs.

Table 1. Selected variables and their regression coefficients

Variable	coefficients	Variable	coefficients
x_1	0.24111383	x_8	0.07155523
x_2	-0.07398471	x_{10}	0.16883457
x_4	0.074471365	x_{13}	0.04980561
x_6	0.22663873	x_{14}	0.22661544
x_7	0.13507333	x_{15}	0.08082141

Bayesian networks model of COPD. According to the 10 factors selected by Elastic Net in the previous stage, the MMHC algorithm was used to further construct the BNs of COPD and its influencing factors. As shown in Figure 2, a COPD model with 11 nodes and 18 directed edges was constructed. The directed edges represented the dependence of various related factors on COPD. The numbers in the figure represented the prior probability of each node. For example, the prior probability of COPD was 0.134, that is, $P(\text{COPD})=0.134$. The results showed that smoking status, household air pollution, family history, cough, air hunger or dyspnea were directly related to COPD. Among them, smoking status, household air pollution, and family history constituted the parent nodes of COPD, that is, they were related to the occurrence of COPD. Cough, air hunger or dyspnea were child nodes of COPD. Namely, COPD was related to the occurrence of Cough, Air hunger or dyspnea.

Reasoning model of COPD. BNs can infer the probability of an unknown node (COPD) based on the state of a known node, and make COPD risk determination possible. If an individual smokes, the

probability of suffering from COPD is 0.215, that is, $P(\text{COPD} \mid \text{Smoking status}) = 0.215$, as shown in Supplementary Fig.S1; if the individual also used wood, animal feces or coal in the past 6 months or more to cook or heat, the probability of suffering from COPD will rise to 0.246, that is, $P(\text{COPD} \mid \text{Smoking status, Household air pollution}) = 0.246$, as shown in Supplementary Fig.S2; if the individual has a family history of respiratory disease at the same time, then the possibility of suffering from COPD goes up to 0.280, that is, $P(\text{COPD} \mid \text{Smoking status, Household air pollution, Family history}) = 0.280$, as shown in Supplementary Fig.S3. In the same way, when a person suffers from COPD, the probability of Cough rises from 0.0887 to 0.201, that is, $P(\text{Cough} \mid \text{COPD}) = 0.201$, and its probability of Air hunger or dyspnea increases from 0.184 to 0.289, that is, $P(\text{Air hunger or dyspnea} \mid \text{COPD}) = 0.289$, as shown in Supplementary Fig.S4.

Discussion

As the prevalence and morbidity continue to rise, COPD has become an important public health issue. Globally, it is the main cause of disability among elderly population and has become the fifth-largest burden of the global economy². This study showed that the prevalence of COPD in Shanxi Province, China in 2014 was 13.4%, which was comparable to the national COPD prevalence of 13.6%. However, in the past ten years, the prevalence of COPD among residents over 40 in China has increased from 8.2% in 2002¹⁹ to 13.7% in 2012²⁰. This indicated that Shanxi Province should attach importance to the prevention and treatment of COPD.

The BNs constructed by the MMHC algorithm can explore the complex network connections between COPD and its various influencing factors. The results of BNs model showed that smoking status, household air pollution, and family history were directly related to COPD, and gender was indirectly related to COPD through smoking. In addition, the BNs can also describe the relationship between other factors, such as the network relationship between family history, respiratory disease, air hunger or dyspnea, cough, expectoration and other factors, as shown in Figure 2. Logistic regression can't show relationships between variables, because it is a model built on the condition that these factors are inter-independent. The conditional probability distribution table of the parent node of COPD was shown in SupplementaryTab.S2. It can be seen that the probability dependence between COPD and the three-parent nodes of smoking status, household air pollution, and family history. If an individual had smoking status, household air pollution, family history at the same time, then he was 28.0% likely to develop COPD, with $P(\text{COPD} \mid \text{smoking status, household air pollution, family history}) = 0.280$.

Smoking is currently recognized as the most important risk factor for COPD. The chemicals and fine particles produced during tobacco burning are the main causes of chronic bronchial inflammation and airway obstruction. Su J et al²¹ found smokers were 2.46 times more likely to develop COPD than non-smokers, after adjusting for other factors. In our study, the smoking rate of residents aged 40 years or older reached 41.4%, in which more than 70 percent of men smoke, reflecting the high prevalence of smoking behavior in the population. From the perspective of COPD prevention and control, tobacco control and non-exposure to tobacco smoke prove one of the most important intervention methods.

In 2016, WHO²² estimated that about 3.1 billion people in low-and middle-income countries still cooked with contaminated fuel, causing about 4.3 million premature deaths each year, equivalent to 7.7% of global deaths. It also accounted for one third of all COPD deaths in low - and middle-income countries. It's a common phenomenon for residents to use polluted fuel for cooking or heating. In this survey, household air pollution rate was as high as 69.1%. Long-term exposure to those harmful gases can easily lead to COPD, which is mainly caused by airway reaction. Therefore, residents should change the way of heating and cooking, and the use of clean fuel must be promoted to reduce harmful exposure.

Having a family history of respiratory diseases will increase the incidence of COPD, suggesting that genetic susceptibility is also closely related to COPD. At present, some studies have found that the polymorphisms of α -antitrypsin, matrix metalloprotein, tumor necrosis factor α , interleukin and other genes were related to the pathogenesis of COPD, but further research is needed to confirm²³⁻²⁵.

In conclusion, Bayesian networks combined with Elastic Net allow for exploration of factors closely related to COPD, and discovery of their complex network relationships with linkage. This approach could provide a new idea for identification of disease-related risk factors, so as to take more targeted measures in disease control and prevention.

Methods

Study participants. In this study, data were obtained from the COPD monitoring of residents from 2014 to 2015, which was carried out in Shanxi Province, China. After excluding missing data, 2072 valid cases were retained. Based on multi-stage stratified random sampling, the survey was conducted among Chinese residents aged 40 years or older in Taiyuan, Datong, Linfen and Xinzhou of Shanxi Province. The survey included basic information (such as gender, age, cultural level), respiratory symptoms (such as cough, expectoration, air hunger or dyspnea), personal diseases (such as childhood respiratory, hypertension) and risk factors exposure (such as household air pollution, occupational exposure). These factors and their assignments were depicted in Supplementary Tab.S1. This study was approved by the China-japan Friendship Hospital. Informed consent was signed by all study participants or their agents. All experiments and methods were performed in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations.

The eligibility criterion for this study was residents of Chinese nationals aged 40 years or older who had lived in the monitoring area for at least 6 months during the 12 months preceding the survey. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) residents living in functional areas, such as barracks, military, student dormitories, nursing homes; (2) residents with mental disorders or cognitive disorders, such as dementia, comprehension impairment, deafness; (3) tumor patients found and being treated; (4) residents with high paraplegia; (5) pregnant or lactating women.

Quality control. To ensure the reliability and validity of data, strict measures had been taken in this study. The investigators received standardized professional training before the investigation, and conducted on-site investigation on the survey objects after qualified inspection, and collected relevant

data through questionnaires. On-site and remote quality control were implemented through synchronous recording. All measuring instruments were calibrated before measurement. All data were entered twice into a database and checked for errors or omissions.

Elastic Net. Regularization is a technique for adding penalties to the objective function. This penalty controls the complexity of the model by reducing the value of the regression coefficient. Elastic Net¹⁸ is a linear regression model with L1 and L2 norms as regularization matrix. Not only does it retain the characteristic to easily produce feature sparsity like Lasso method, but also inherits the stability of ridge regression. Its algorithm formula is as follows.

$$\hat{B} = \arg \min_{\beta} \frac{1}{2} \|Y - X\beta\|_2^2 + \lambda(\alpha \|B\|_1 + \frac{(1-\alpha)}{2} \|B\|_2) \quad (1)$$

As we can see, λ represents the penalty coefficient and β is the regression coefficient. For the convex combination of regularized L1 and L2 (the value of α in the formula), the l1_ratio parameter is used for adjustment. The final value of the parameter is selected by ten-fold cross-validation to select the parameter value with the lowest model error.

Bayesian networks. BN is a probability graph model, which can show the probability dependence intensity between factors. It is a directed acyclic graph based on probability theory and graph theory, which consists of nodes representing the variables $U = \{x_1, \dots, x_n\}$ and the directed edges represent the relationship between variables¹². If the edge from x_i to x_j exists¹³, then x_i is the parent of and x_j is the child of x_i . Each node can quantitatively describe the probability correlation between the node and its parent node through the attached conditional probability distribution table (CPT). In BNs, the formula for calculating the joint probability distribution function of all nodes is as follows.

$$P(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n) = P(x_1)P(x_2|x_1) \cdots P(x_n|x_1, x_2, \dots, x_{n-1}) \quad (2)$$

$$= \prod_{i=1}^n P(x_i|\pi(x_i))$$

$\pi(x_i)$ is the set of parent nodes of x_i , $\pi(x_i) \subseteq \{x_1, \dots, x_{i-1}\}$. When the value of x_i is known, $\pi(x_i)$ is x_i conditionally independent of other variables in $\{x_1, \dots, x_{i-1}\}$.

MMHC. MMHC is a widely used Bayesian network hybrid structure learning algorithm, which is mainly divided into two stages. In the first stage, the MMPC algorithm is employed. It can determine the existence of edges without direction, from which the BNs can be constructed. The MMPC algorithm also includes two phases, the first phase starts from the empty set, and then variables input CPC into the empty set successively by using the max-min heuristic function. The first phase doesn't end until all remaining nodes are independent of target node; in the second phase, false positive nodes were deleted

through the conditional independence test. For a subset of variables S ($S \subseteq \text{CPC}$), if $\text{Ind}(X, T | S)$ was true, X was deleted from CPC.

In the second stage of the MMHC algorithm, the mountain climbing method is used to locally adjust the current model by adding, deleting and changing the direction of the edges, so as to get several undetermined models, and then calculate the score of each undetermined model to obtain the BNs with the highest score¹⁵.

Definition. After the bronchodilation test, Participant whose ratio of forced expiratory volume in the first second (FEV1) to forced vital capacity (FVC) was less than 70%, was determined as COPD patient. The age consisted of four types: 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, ≥ 70 , and cultural level was divided into three levels: junior high school and below, senior high school, college and above. Bodyweight was classified as: underweight ($\text{BMI} < 18.5\text{kg/m}^2$); Normal body weight ($\text{BMI} 18.5\text{-}23.9\text{kg/m}^2$); Overweight ($\text{BMI} 24.0\text{-}27.9\text{kg/m}^2$); Obesity: ($\text{BMI} \geq 28.0\text{kg/m}^2$). Participants who smoked more than one cigarette a day for the past six months were defined as smokers. Household air pollution referred the use of wood, animal manure or coal for cooking or heating over the past six months or more. Exposure to dust or harmful gases at work (including farm work) was defined as occupational exposure. One or both parents who had suffered from respiratory diseases such as asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema, were defined as having a family history of respiratory diseases.

Statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics of influencing factors were performed using IBM SPSS Version 22 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Elastic Net was employed to filter variables in Python 3.7.0. The structure of BNs was constructed by the MMHC in R studio 4.0.5(R Development Core Team), and the maximum likelihood method was used for parameter learning. The drawing of the BNs and reasoning models were realized by Netica (Norsys Software Corp., Vancouver, BC, Canada). Additionally, the maximum likelihood method was used to obtain the values for CPT.

Declarations

Data availability. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Author Contributions

D.C.Q., J.H.R. and H.R. analyzed and interpreted the data, and are major contributors in writing the manuscript; L.Q.L.H. were responsible for preprocessing the data and checking the results; Z.P.R. conducted the survey and collected data; X.C.W., M.C.L. and Y.C.Q. were involved in compiling the data and summarizing the results; L.X.Q. gave constructive suggestions for the manuscript. All authors revised the manuscript for important intellectual content and approved the final version.

Competing Interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

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Figures

Figure 1

The prevalence of COPD in different gender, age and BMI

Figure 2

MMHC algorithm to construct COPD Bayesian networks and prior probability

Supplementary Files

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