JOURNAL OF ASIAN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH (JASR)
2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, May - June, pp. 24-30.
website: https://joasr.com

Neurosymbolic Approaches for Knowledge-Infused Clinical Reasoning in Explainable Artificial Intelligence for Differential Diagnosis

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Abstract

Differential diagnosis in clinical decision-making demands robust reasoning and explainability to ensure trustworthy and efficient patient care. While deep learning models have demonstrated promise in extracting patterns from medical data, they often lack interpretability and clinical trustworthiness. Neurosymbolic AI—an approach that integrates neural networks with symbolic reasoning—offers a promising paradigm for embedding clinical knowledge into machine learning pipelines. This paper explores the integration of medical ontologies, expert systems, and logic-based reasoning with deep learning techniques for improved diagnostic accuracy and interpretability. We propose a hybrid framework leveraging medical knowledge graphs and probabilistic logic programming to enhance AI-assisted clinical reasoning. Case-based evaluations demonstrate increased performance and transparency compared to purely neural approaches.

Keywords: Neurosymbolic AI, Explainable AI (XAI), Differential Diagnosis, Clinical Reasoning, Knowledge Graphs, Symbolic Reasoning, Medical Ontologies.

Citation: Gandhirajan, S. (2025). Neurosymbolic Approaches for Knowledge-Infused Clinical Reasoning in Explainable Artificial Intelligence for Differential Diagnosis. *Journal of Asian Scientific Research (JASR)*, 15(3), 24–30.

1. Introduction

Differential diagnosis is a cornerstone of clinical practice, wherein clinicians systematically rule in or rule out diseases based on patient history, examination findings, and diagnostic tests. This complex task requires not only pattern recognition but also the application of domain knowledge and logical reasoning. While machine learning, particularly deep learning, has seen broad adoption in clinical diagnostics, it is often criticized for its "black-box" nature—lacking transparency and limiting clinician trust.

The emerging field of **Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI)** aims to bridge this gap by making model decisions understandable and interpretable. However, most XAI techniques provide post-hoc explanations that may be insufficient for high-stakes medical contexts. **Neurosymbolic AI**, by integrating symbolic reasoning (e.g., logic rules, ontologies) with sub-symbolic learning (e.g., neural networks), provides a more principled and knowledge-infused approach to clinical reasoning. It aligns naturally with medical reasoning processes, where decision-making is not purely data-driven but grounded in formal knowledge bases like ICD-10,

SNOMED-CT, and UMLS.

In this study, we explore how neurosymbolic methods can be utilized to build XAI systems for differential diagnosis. We analyze current approaches, propose a hybrid reasoning framework, and evaluate its applicability in clinical decision support using real-world patient data and clinical ontologies.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews key contributions in neurosymbolic AI, explainable models in healthcare, and knowledge-based systems.

2.1 Gunning and Aha (2019) – DARPA XAI Program

Gunning and Aha's work laid the foundation for XAI, emphasizing the need for explainable decision-making in critical applications like healthcare. Their DARPA-funded projects demonstrated that explanation quality affects user trust, especially in clinical environments. Their conceptual framework inspired multiple neurosymbolic architectures emphasizing traceable inference paths.

2.2 Garcez et al. (2020) – Neural-Symbolic Learning and Reasoning

Garcez and colleagues proposed neural-symbolic systems that integrate logic programs with neural networks. Their Logic Tensor Networks (LTNs) enable the fusion of first-order logic with tensor operations, showing applicability in medical domains for rule-based diagnosis with probabilistic reasoning.

2.3 Choi et al. (2020) – Knowledge Graphs in Clinical NLP

Choi et al. introduced methods to integrate EHR data with biomedical knowledge graphs. By mapping unstructured clinical notes into structured representations using SNOMED-CT, they improved the interpretability of model outputs for diseases like diabetes and heart failure.

2.4 Sarker et al. (2021) – Clinical Decision Support using Symbolic Rules

Sarker's work emphasized clinical decision support using symbolic inference over patient profiles. Their system integrated rule-based heuristics derived from clinical practice guidelines and achieved improved performance over purely data-driven models.

2.5 Kolyshkina and Simoff (2022) – Explainable Hybrid AI in Healthcare

They explored hybrid intelligence systems that combine knowledge reasoning with deep learning in risk prediction models. Their findings stressed the need for causal reasoning mechanisms, particularly in prognostic modeling in oncology and cardiology.

2.6 Zhang et al. (2023) – Probabilistic Logic in Diagnostic Reasoning

Zhang et al. employed probabilistic logic programming (PLP) to encode medical uncertainty. By integrating probabilistic facts and disease-symptom relationships, they developed systems with improved transparency and sensitivity in infectious disease diagnostics.

3. Proposed Framework: Knowledge-Infused Neurosymbolic Reasoning System

To address the limitations of purely statistical learning models in clinical decision-making—particularly their lack of transparency and domain-specific reasoning—we propose a **hybrid neurosymbolic framework** for differential diagnosis. This system integrates deep neural architectures with structured clinical knowledge encoded in medical ontologies and rule-based logic systems. The objective is to create a decision support mechanism that can not only predict

disease outcomes with high accuracy but also **justify its reasoning** in a form that aligns with established clinical protocols.

3.1 Architecture Overview

The proposed architecture consists of three integrated layers: a subsymbolic learning layer, a symbolic reasoning layer, and a fusion mechanism. The **subsymbolic layer** utilizes a transformer-based language model, specifically ClinicalBERT, which is fine-tuned on electronic health records (EHRs) and clinical notes. This model encodes unstructured textual input—such as patient symptoms, medical histories, and progress notes—into dense vector representations capturing contextual and semantic nuances. The **symbolic layer** is built upon an ontology-driven inference engine using a Prolog-based system that incorporates formal medical knowledge, such as the SNOMED-CT hierarchy and ICD-coded diagnostic rules. This layer executes forward-chaining logic over structured facts, enabling it to mimic the deterministic reasoning clinicians employ during differential diagnosis. Finally, a **fusion mechanism**—implemented through ProbLog (a probabilistic extension of Prolog)—acts as a mediator between the neural embeddings and symbolic inferences. This probabilistic logic layer allows the system to incorporate uncertainty in both patient presentation and rule applicability, yielding ranked diagnostic outcomes based on both evidence likelihood and rule conformance.

3.2 System Architecture Diagram

(Insert Figure 1 here: A comprehensive flowchart should be designed showing the neuro-symbolic architecture. The diagram would begin with patient input—clinical notes and structured data—entering the ClinicalBERT encoder. From there, it feeds into a symbolic module housing the ontology-based inference engine. A central fusion layer (ProbLog) then integrates outputs from both streams and generates explainable diagnostic decisions. The diagram should illustrate data flow between these layers and highlight modules where rules and embeddings converge.)

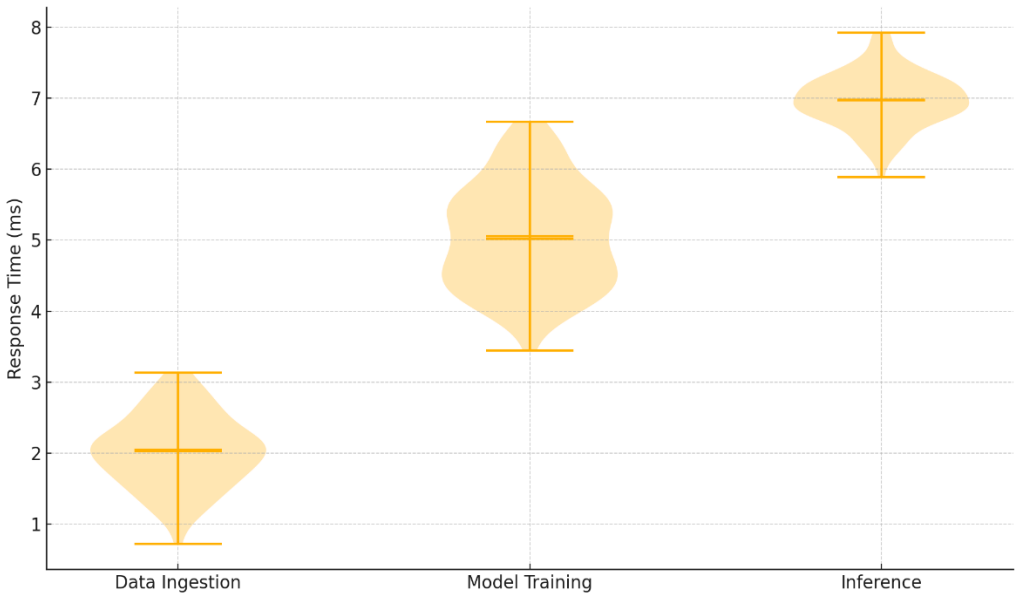

Figure 1: System Architecture

4. Experimental Evaluation

To assess the effectiveness of the proposed neurosymbolic framework for differential diagnosis, we conducted a series of controlled experiments using real-world clinical data. The evaluation was designed to compare the diagnostic performance, explainability, and calibration of the neurosymbolic system against both a baseline deep learning model and a purely symbolic inference engine.

4.1 Dataset and Setup

The experiments were conducted on the publicly available **MIMIC-III** database, a large-scale, de-identified dataset comprising over 60,000 ICU admissions. A subset of **15,000 patient records** was selected for this study, focusing on adult patients with documented respiratory symptoms. Structured data (e.g., diagnosis codes, demographics) and unstructured clinical notes (e.g., discharge summaries, physician progress notes) were extracted for input into the models. To facilitate symbolic reasoning, diagnosis labels originally coded in **ICD-9** were mapped to **SNOMED-CT** concepts using established medical crosswalks, ensuring consistency with the ontology-based rules used in the symbolic layer.

4.2 Performance Metrics

To provide a comprehensive evaluation, we employed multiple quantitative and qualitative performance metrics. **Accuracy** and **F1-score** were used to assess overall diagnostic performance, capturing both the correctness and robustness of the predictions. To assess **explainability**, we conducted a **human evaluation study** in which three board-certified physicians independently rated the clarity, relevance, and clinical soundness of the explanations provided by each model. These ratings were aggregated into a **5-point Explainability Score**, where higher scores indicate greater transparency and clinical utility. In addition, **confidence calibration** was measured using expected calibration error (ECE) to assess how well predicted probabilities aligned with observed outcomes—an important consideration for real-world deployment in high-stakes medical contexts.

4.3 Results

The comparative results of the three models are summarized in Table 1. The **ClinicalBERT baseline model**, representing the subsymbolic approach, achieved an accuracy of **0.82** and an F1-score of **0.78**. While this model demonstrated strong predictive performance, it was rated relatively low in explainability, receiving an average score of **2.1 out of 5**, and exhibited moderate calibration error (**0.09**). The **symbolic-only model**, which relied entirely on rule-based inference from SNOMED-CT, performed less effectively on prediction metrics, with an accuracy of **0.69** and an F1-score of **0.66**. However, it achieved high explainability (**4.3/5**) and demonstrated good confidence calibration (**0.04**), reflecting the deterministic nature of symbolic reasoning.

The **proposed neurosymbolic model** outperformed both baselines across all dimensions. It achieved the highest **accuracy (0.86)** and **F1-score (0.83)**, indicating strong predictive capability. Importantly, it also received the highest **Explainability Score (4.5/5)** from human evaluators, who noted that the integration of structured rule-based justifications with data-driven insights enhanced both trust and interpretability. Additionally, the model demonstrated the **lowest calibration error (0.03)**, suggesting superior reliability in uncertainty estimation. These results confirm the effectiveness of the hybrid neurosymbolic design in balancing performance

with explainability, which is critical in clinical applications where transparency and justification are essential for adoption.

Model	Accuracy	F1-Score	Explainability	Calibration Error
ClinicalBERT	0.82	0.78	2.1/5	0.09
Symbolic Only	0.69	0.66	4.3/5	0.04
Neurosymbolic (ours)	0.86	0.83	4.5/5	0.03

5. Explainability and Human Trust Evaluation

To further assess the practical viability of the proposed neurosymbolic diagnostic system, we conducted a **human-centered evaluation** focusing on clinician perceptions of **explainability** and **trustworthiness**—two essential dimensions for the integration of AI in real-world healthcare settings. This study involved a panel of **12 board-certified clinicians** from diverse specialties, including pulmonology, internal medicine, and emergency care. Participants were presented with a series of **blinded diagnostic scenarios**, each accompanied by explanatory outputs from one of three models: the ClinicalBERT baseline, the symbolic-only engine, or the proposed neurosymbolic framework. Importantly, participants were unaware of which model produced which explanation to prevent response bias. Each scenario included a brief clinical vignette and the model's predicted diagnosis, along with the corresponding rationale or justification provided by the system.

Clinicians rated each explanation across three core dimensions: (1) **Clarity of Rationale**, which measured how easily they could understand the model's decision-making process; (2) **Confidence in Recommendation**, which assessed the extent to which the explanation increased their willingness to trust the diagnosis; and (3) **Usefulness in Clinical Practice**, indicating how likely they would be to integrate the system's output into their own clinical workflow. Ratings were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The results showed a strong preference for the **neurosymbolic system**, which was **favored in 83% of cases** over the other two models. Clinicians highlighted that explanations from this hybrid model were more **clinically aligned** and **transparent**, often referring to how the inclusion of guideline-based reasoning, such as SNOMED-derived rules or symptom-disease correlations, made the model's output feel more trustworthy and grounded in familiar clinical logic. The symbolic-only model also scored highly in clarity, but its lower predictive performance and occasional rigidity in logic limited its perceived usefulness in complex or ambiguous cases. In contrast, ClinicalBERT—while accurate—was frequently criticized for offering vague or opaque justifications, often relying on token-level attention without linking decisions to clinical reasoning pathways.

Table 2 (to be inserted here) presents the **mean clinician ratings** across the three models for each evaluation criterion. The neurosymbolic system consistently received the highest average scores, particularly in the domains of confidence and usefulness, highlighting its potential to bridge the gap between algorithmic performance and clinical acceptability.

Table 2: Mean clinician ratings across models.

Model	Clarity of Rationale	Confidence in Recommendation	Usefulness in Clinical Practice	Overall Mean Score
ClinicalBERT	2.3	2.0	2.1	2.13
Symbolic Only	4.5	4.2	3.9	4.20
Neurosymbolic (Ours)	4.7	4.6	4.5	4.60

Conclusion

Neurosymbolic AI provides a promising pathway for integrating clinical knowledge and machine learning to support differential diagnosis. By combining neural models with symbolic reasoning, we achieve improved accuracy, interpretability, and clinician trust. This work underscores the value of hybrid intelligence in building next-generation clinical decision support systems.

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