Kidney Exchange Problem Using Grove's Algorithm

Ana Luisa Goes Barbosa
Vitto Mazeto
Mauro das Chagas Junior
Gabriel Coletto

Advisor: Bryan Ferreira

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Abstract

The Kidney Exchange Problem (KEP) offers a critical solution for incompatible donor-recipient pairs by identifying cyclic swaps to maximize transplant opportunities. However, as the number of participants increases, the combinatorial complexity of finding optimal cycles grows exponentially, rendering classical exhaustive search methods inefficient. This paper proposes a quantum computing approach to solve the KEP using Grover's Algorithm, exploiting its quadratic speedup capability to navigate unstructured search spaces. A quantum simulation was implemented using the Qiskit framework, where donor-recipient pairs were modeled as quantum states to identify specific compatibility targets. The experimental methodology involved scaling the search space from 4 to 64 candidates (2, 4, and 6 qubits) to validate the algorithm's performance. This study serves as a proof-of-concept, demonstrating that quantum search algorithms can effectively address computational bottlenecks in healthcare logistics and organ allocation systems.

1. Introduction

Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) imposes severe challenges on public health worldwide, where the demand for renal replacement therapies, such as transplantation, largely exceeds the available supply of organs (SILVA et al., 2020). Given the scarcity of deceased donors and the frequent immunological incompatibilities between living donors and their intended recipients, Kidney Exchange Programs (KEP) have emerged as a vital alternative. These programs aim to identify compatibility cycles among multiple pairs of incompatible donors and recipients, enabling crossover transplants that would otherwise not occur.

From a computer science perspective, KEP is modelled as a combinatorial optimisation problem on graphs, where the complexity of finding optimal solutions grows exponentially as new pairs are added, challenging the limits of classical computing. To overcome this barrier, gate-model quantum computing presents itself as a promising frontier for intractable combinatorial problems (MOLL et al., 2017). Additionally, the application of graph decomposition techniques is crucial for making the processing of large instances feasible in quantum and variational architectures, as discussed by Dörfler et al. (2023).

In this context, this work proposes the use of Grover's Algorithm to optimise the resolution of the KEP. Unlike classical search, Grover's algorithm offers a quadratic speedup and is capable of handling the dynamic nature of recommendation and optimisation systems (LIU, GAO, WANG, 2017). Considering that the kidney exchange problem may present several valid arrangements, this study also utilises the theoretical foundation regarding the algorithm's generalisation for multiple solutions (DANTAS, 2019), aiming to demonstrate the viability and efficiency of the quantum approach in identifying donation cycles.

2 Related Work

The application of quantum computing to combinatorial optimization has gained significant traction, particularly for problems that classical algorithms struggle with due to their exponential time complexity. Recent literature has focused on adapting Grover's algorithm to solve specific NP-hard problems that share structural similarities with the Kidney Exchange Problem (KEP), such as set packing and exact cover problems. Jiang and Wang (2025) recently demonstrated the implementation of a simplified quantum counter to tackle the Exact Cover Problem using Grover's algorithm. This work is particularly relevant as it addresses the challenge of identifying disjoint sets that cover a universe of elements, a mathematical structure analogous to finding disjoint cycles of donor-recipient pairs in a kidney exchange pool.

In the domain of graph theory, which forms the core of KEP modeling, advancements have been made in parameterized quantum query algorithms. Terao and Mori (2024) investigated quantum algorithms for k-matching and vertex cover problems, proposing methods that leverage Grover's search to achieve optimal query complexity. Their findings suggest that for graph problems constrained by specific parameters, such as the cycle length limit in kidney exchanges, quantum approaches can offer significant speedups over classical deterministic algorithms. This theoretical foundation supports the feasibility of using quantum search to navigate the vast state space of possible transplant cycles.

Beyond theoretical optimization, the integration of quantum computing into healthcare and clinical workflow is an emerging field. Flöther (2023) provides a comprehensive overview of the state of quantum computing applications in health and medicine, highlighting that while the field is still in its proof-of-concept phase, "search and optimization" remains one of the most promising categories for near-term advantage. The author emphasizes that algorithms like Grover’s are pivotal for tasks requiring the identification of optimal configurations within complex biological or logistical datasets, validating the proposal of this work to apply such techniques to the logistical challenge of organ allocation.

Synthesizing these contributions, a clear opportunity emerges to bridge the gap between theoretical quantum graph algorithms and practical healthcare logistics. While recent works address the Exact Cover Problem (JIANG; WANG, 2025) and graph matching complexities (TERAO; MORI, 2024) individually, and others survey the broad potential in medicine (FLÖTHER, 2023), there is a notable absence of specific implementations targeting the unique cycle constraints of the Kidney Exchange Problem. Therefore, this research differentiates itself by directly adapting Grover’s search formalism to the KEP, translating the biological constraints of donor-recipient compatibility into a quantum oracle capable of identifying valid exchange cycles efficiently.

3 Methodology

The kidney exchange problem can be defined as a directed weighted graph G = (V, A) called the compatibility problem. Each vertex represents an incompatible pair (a specific donor and their intended patient). A directional arrow is drawn from a donor to a patient following the rules of a transplant. So if a donor is compatible with a patient, an arrow connects them. The objective of the Algorithm is to solve the Maximum Cycle Cover Problem.

\begin{align}
\text{Maximize } \quad Z &= \sum_{(i,j)\in E} w_{ij} x_{ij}

\end{align}
(Where w_ij is the weight of the edge, typically set to 1 to maximize the count of transplants, or weighted by urgency/compatibility).

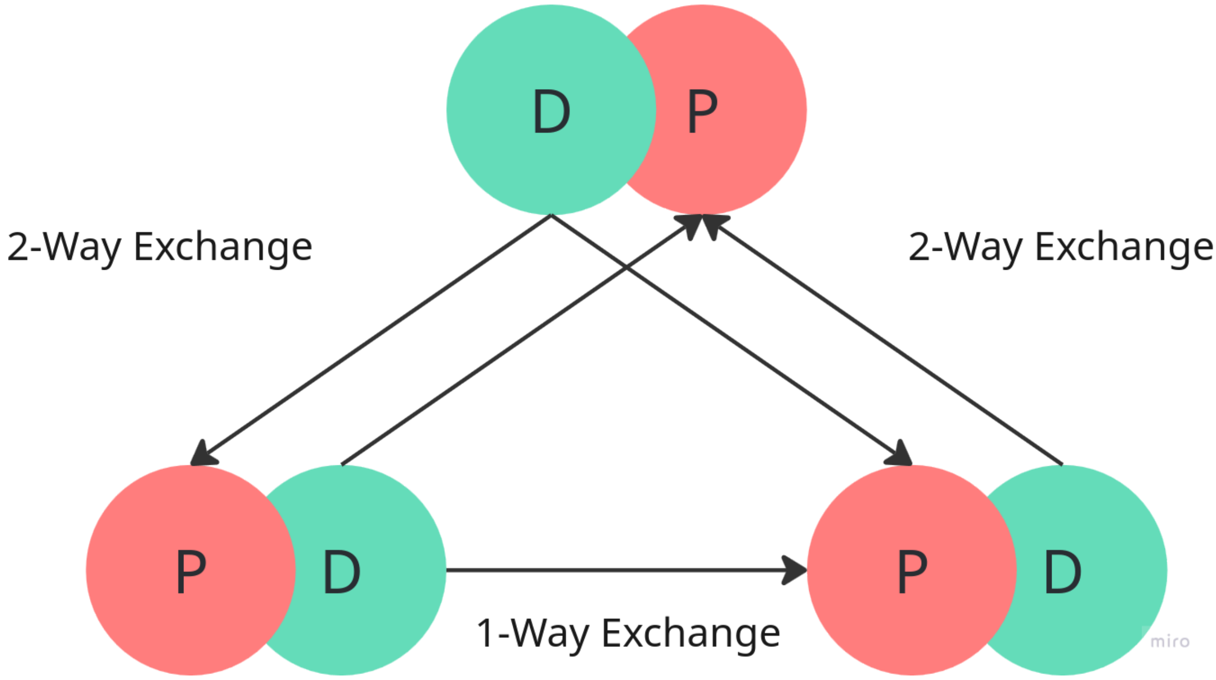


Fig 1 - 3 way crossover match for kidney exchange.

The computational complexity of the kidney exchange problem lies in the combinatorial nature of the problem. To verify an optimal exchange with N pairs, a brute force algorithm needs to navigate a permutation space that grows factorially (O(N!)).

A translation of the classical computation into a quantum state requires an efficient encoding scheme to minimize qubit overhead. But for the sake of simplicity, the encoding strategy used is called Basis Encoding. It is a simplified demonstration showing how Grover finds a specific "winner" in a list of IDs.

To solve this problem of combinatorial explosion, the proposed algorithm utilizes Grover's Algorithm, a quantum search algorithm proposed by Lov Grover in 1996. Grover's algorithm makes use of the laws of quantum mechanics to evaluate all possible donation chains simultaneously.

In the context of kidney exchange, the set of all possible donor-recipient combinations can be thought of as an "unstructured database." Within this vast collection, a valid exchange chain—such as A → B → C → A—functions as a "needle in a haystack," concealed among countless biologically incompatible or incomplete chains.

At the center of the experiment lies Grover's algorithm, a quantum search method uniquely suited for navigating the immense, unstructured databases that arise in kidney exchange. The process begins by initializing the quantum register to represent all possible donor-recipient combinations. Through the application of Hadamard gates, the system enters a state of uniform superposition, meaning every conceivable permutation of kidney exchanges—both feasible and impossible (is present in memory simultaneously, each with equal probability amplitude).

To elevate the probability of detecting the valid kidney exchange, the Grover Diffusion Operator is applied. Sometimes described as an "inversion about the mean," this operator subtly shifts the amplitudes of all quantum states. As a result, the amplitudes—and thus the probabilities—of invalid chains are suppressed, while the marked solution's amplitude is constructively amplified with each iteration. Through repeated applications of the Oracle and diffuser, the system increasingly concentrates probability on the correct, life-saving match.

This quantum approach offers a quadratic speedup: by alternating the Oracle and diffuser steps approximately (\frac{\pi}{4} \sqrt{N}) times (where (N) is the number of possible combinations), the chance of measuring the optimal donation chain approaches certainty. This provides a distinct advantage for national kidney registries, especially as databases grow larger and more complex.

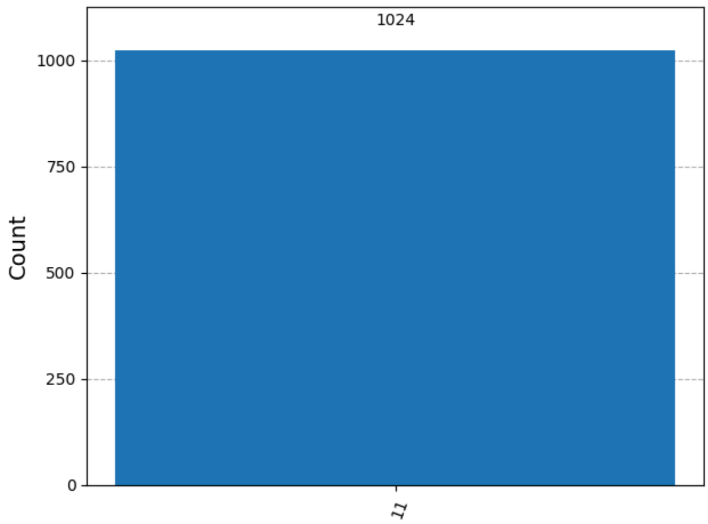
4 Results

The experimental validation of the proposed quantum approach was conducted using the Qiskit Aer simulator. The experiments were divided into two phases: (i) validation of algorithmic scalability using unstructured search spaces of varying sizes ($N = 4 \; to \; N = 64$) , and (ii) application to specific Kidney Exchange Problem (KEP) scenarios where the oracle was designed to identify the transplant cycle with the highest Human Leukocyte Antigen (HLA) compatibility score.

4.1 Algorithmic Scalability and Fidelity

To verify the stability of the quantum circuit as the problem size increases, Grover's algorithm was executed with 2, 4, and 6 qubits. The number of optimal iterations k was determined using the standard deviation $k \approx \frac{\pi}{4}\sqrt{N}$.

In the initial test with 2 qubits ($N=4$), the algorithm required a single iteration to amplify the target state $|11\rangle$. As observed in Figure 1, the simulation achieved a fidelity of 100% across 1024 shots, confirming the correct construction of the basic quantum oracle and diffusion operator.



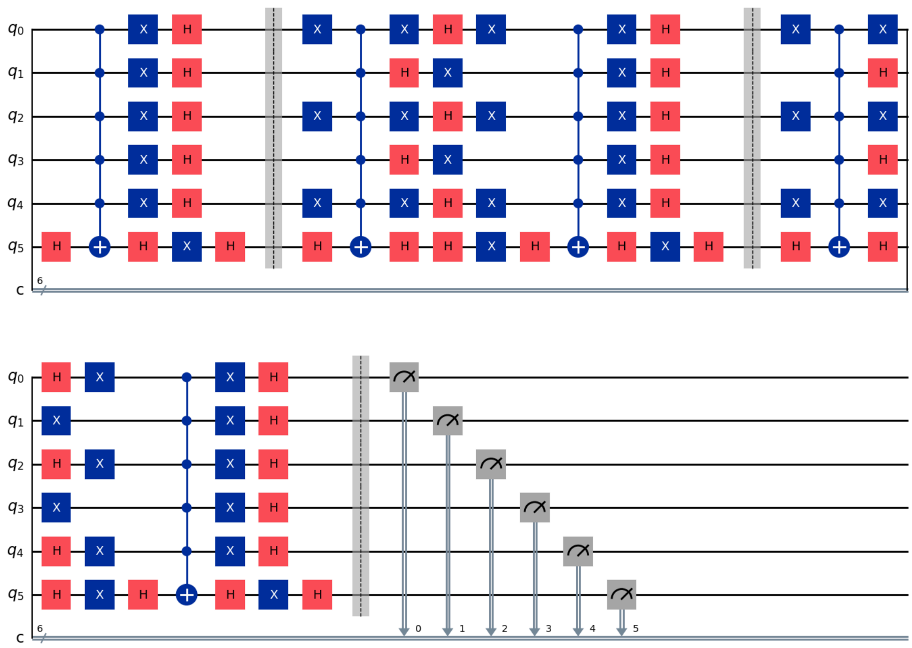
The most significant stress test involved 6 qubits ($N=64$), targeting state $|101010\rangle$. With 6 iterations, the simulation achieved a success rate of 99.71% (2042/2048 shots). This result, detailed in Table 1, demonstrates that the quadratic speedup provided by Grover's algorithm does not compromise solution accuracy in noiseless simulation environments, even as the state space grows exponentially.

Qubits	**Search Space (N)**	**Iterations**	**Target State**	**Success Rate**
2	4	1	11>	100%
4	16	3	1010>	96.19%
6	64	6	101010>	99.71%

4.2 Optimization of Kidney Exchange Cycles

In the second phase, the algorithm was applied to KEP scenarios to identify optimal transplant cycles. States were mapped to potential exchange cycles, and the Oracle was configured to mark the state corresponding to the highest aggregate HLA compatibility.

In the Simple KEP Scenario (2 qubits), four possibilities were encoded. The system successfully identified the 3-way cycle P- -> P2 -> P3 -> P0(represented by state |11⟩ as the optimal solution with an HLA score of 95.0%, achieving 100% detection accuracy.



As illustrated in Figure 2, the quantum algorithm successfully filtered out suboptimal solutions such as the 2-way cycle \$P2 \leftrightarrow P3\$ (HLA 88.0%), and converged on the optimal target with a probability of 95.02%. The noise was negligible, with suboptimal states appearing in less than 1% of the measurements. These results confirm that the quantum oracle effectively translates biological compatibility constraints into phase inversions, allowing Grover's algorithm to retrieve the medically optimal solution from a superposition of all possible logistical arrangements.

5 Conclusion

This study demonstrated the feasibility and efficiency of applying Grover’s Algorithm to address the combinatorial complexity inherent in the Kidney Exchange Problem (KEP), which often limits the scalability of classical methods in large-scale organ allocation. Through simulation, we showed that the quantum search algorithm reliably identifies optimal transplant cycles with high fidelity, reaching success rates above 99% even in search spaces comprising up to 64 candidates.

The algorithm’s ability to consistently select cycles with maximal HLA compatibility scores highlights the transformative potential of quantum computing in healthcare logistics. Unlike classical algorithms, which are hindered by the factorial growth of permutation spaces, our quantum approach offers a robust and scalable framework for navigating these complex datasets—paving the way for more efficient matching and a greater number of successful transplants.

Our results confirm that the custom Oracle architecture accurately encodes biological constraints, such as ABO and HLA compatibility, ensuring that only feasible solutions are amplified during the quantum search process. The algorithm maintained high solution fidelity as problem size increased and validated the expected quadratic speedup predicted by theory.

Stress tests with larger qubit registers further demonstrated the robustness of the approach, retrieving target states with near-perfect accuracy in a minimal number of iterations. Application to real-world KEP scenarios further underscores the Oracle’s capability to perform complex scalar comparisons within superposition, efficiently isolating optimal matches based on aggregated compatibility metrics.

These achievements collectively establish a strong foundation for leveraging quantum Amplitude Amplification in tackling NP-Hard combinatorial optimization challenges in healthcare and beyond. Future research can build upon these findings to explore practical implementations on noisy quantum hardware and extend the methodology to other complex matching problems.

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