Risk Analysis of Skin Cancer using Deep Learning

Thanh Dang, Stefano Fenu, Matthew May, Apurv Verma

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Abstract

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer, accounting for 40% of cases globally. More than 8,500 people in the US are diagnosed with skin cancer every day. The survival rate of individuals is dependent on when they start treatment, and is very high with early treatment. The initial step in the diagnosis of skin cancer is visual inspection by a trained health care provider. Building on recent breakthroughs in deep convolutional neural networks, which have proven to be effective at image classification, we aim to develop a system that assists dermatology health care providers in following up with their patients. By providing classification of suspected skin cancer lesions, patient risk scoring, and patient image management, our system will allow dermatologists to more effectively manage their patients. This could lead to improved patient outcomes, enhanced patient satisfication, and streamlined medical practice management.

1 What Are You Trying To Do?

Our goal is to build a website that allows dermatologists to more effectively follow up with patients with skin cancer, or patients at risk for skin cancer. Our website will do this by providing classification of suspected skin cancer lesions, patient risk scoring, and patient image analysis over time. Ultimately, we hope to improve outcomes, promote happier patients, and improve medical practice.

2 How Is It Done Today?

The current state-of-the-art for automated skin cancer analysis generally involves feature detection [10]. In dermatology, there is a widely used ABCDE (Asymmetry, Border, Color, Diameter, Evolving) [14] algorithm that is used by doctors to assess potential skin cancer lesions. Existing approaches often attempt to imitate this algorithm by "teaching" models how to detect the same features [15]. However, the limitation of many of these models has been verification on a relatively small, highly curated test set of images, leading to low-quality results on broader image sets and limited adoption in clinical practice.

Relatively recently, neural networks have been applied to skin cancer classification. In [8], the authors use a combination of neural networks, image processing, and feature extraction techniques to classify skin lesions. Sheha et al. [13] use a multilayer perceptron to classify melanoma, attaining 92% accuracy on their test set. Esteva et al. [4] use an ensemble of convolutional neural networks to attain 90% binary classification (malignant/benign).

3 What's New In Your Approach? Why Will It Succeed?

The primary limitation of current automated approaches has been limited applicability to actual clinical practice. Low patient engagement, limited integration into clinical workflows, poor algorithm performance on actual patient images, and expensive hardware requirements have plagued existing approaches.

To increase patient engagement, our system will present an interface in which patients receive rewards for uploading images of their skin lesions over time, providing an incentive for patient compliance with their treatment plan.

Due to the recent adoption of electronic medical records (EMR), our Web-based system will easily integrate with existing clinical workflows, which are increasingly electronic. Our system will perform analysis on uploaded patient images and then present the results to the physician in a meaningful, uncluttered way, allowing immediate follow-up with the patient if necessary.

To improve algorithm performance, we will use state-of-the-art convolutional neural networks, which have been shown to be highly effective [9] at difficult image classification problems. Furthermore, by allowing patients to upload images of their skin lesions from their smartphone or computer, there will be no additional hardware purchase required of the patient or physician.

4 Who Cares?

In the literature, it has been shown that the implementation of health care IT can lead to significant increases in patient satisfaction [12]. It has also been shown that the experience of the patient in receiving care is related to overall patient satisfaction [2]. Patient satisfaction is one of the primary metrics now considered an indicator of overall health care quality by physicians and hospital administrators [5].

By allowing patients to receive a higher standard of care through the use of unobtrusive technology, we believe patient satisfaction will grow. Furthermore, it has been shown that telemedicine technology, which this could be considered a form of, is effective and increases patient access to care [6]. It also allows for more efficient use of resources, as physicians can interact with their patients in an asynchronous fashion.

In our research, we have often heard that physicians are frustrated by non-compliant patients. By creating a communication tool that connects the physician with his patients, and provides meaningful data that supports patient follow-up, we believe patient outcomes, as well as patient satisfaction will be improved.

5 What Difference Will It Make?

To determine whether our proposed approach would have utility in practice, we spoke with dermatologists at Stanford Medical Center and Emory University. One common thread that we heard was that patient follow-up is a process that has significant gaps. Patients see their dermatologist at six-month, or in some cases, multi-year intervals, and have little to no contact with their physician in between. This creates large time periods where skin lesions continue to change, but there is little or no supervision of their progress.

Our system will enable follow-up on a consistent basis when the patient is not physically in the office, potentially allowing cancerous lesions to be caught at a much earlier time. Furthermore, by analyzing skin lesions over time, we will be able to generate risk profiles for each patient, increasing the quality of clinical decisionmaking. And by allowing the physician to instantly “ping” the patient to schedule an appointment after a questionable lesion is uploaded, our system will promote more frequent patient follow-up when necessary.

6 What Are the Risks and Payoffs?

6.1 Risks

As with any technology, there are certain risks that should be considered. First, dermatologists may be hesistant to adopt our technology because in certain reimbursement schemes, physicians are compensated primarily when patients come for in-person office visits. If our system leads to a decrease in patient visits because of more effective patient management, this could slow adoption. To mitigate this, we should focus on health care systems with positive incentives for managing patients more effectively.

Secondly, the recent widespread adoption of electronic medical records is a relatively costly and complex procedure that can be frustrating for physicians [3]. Thus, some medical practices may be saturated with technology and unwilling to adopt additional technologies. Lastly, on a more technical note, the relatively small size of our image datasets used for training and testing could promote overfitting, leading to suboptimal results when applied to patient imaging in practice.

6.2 Payoffs

The scalability of our system, and the relatively low cost that it could be offered to medical practices at, means that it could feasibly be deployed to a wide range of clinical settings, having a large impact on the quality of medical care. Ultimately, better patient follow-up could mean that patient outcomes are improved (i.e., lives saved), practices are managed more effectively, and patients are more satisfied with the care they’ve received, making them more likely to return.

7 How Much Will It Cost? How Long Will It Take?

Our approach leverages open-source technology and also a novel technique known as *transfer learning* [11], in which a pre-trained network is used at the initial basis for feature learning. Thus, we are able to produce a minimally viable product at relatively low cost. More specifically, our primary costs are in training neural networks, which are done at a cost of ∼\$0.65/hour on Amazon EC2 dedicated GPU instances. For our initial model development and training, we estimate approximately 150 hours of instance utilization (∼\$100 total). Our website will run on a t2.micro instance on Amazon EC2, which is free under a promotion.

We rely on freely available technologies such as Python, NumPy, TensorFlow [1], Caffe [7], and Ruby on Rails for the development of our system. From a human resource perspective, we intend to collectively spend 400 total hours on the project, which can be estimated at ∼$40,000 in opportunity cost with each of our time valued at an average of $100/hour.

8 Evaluation and Checkpoints

1. We aim to achieve an accuracy of 90% for the binary classification case.
2. Build an end to end web application with user and clinician interfaces.
3. Build a service which can compute score for each uploaded image

The tasks are split as follows among the team members. Stefano is mainly focussing on training the deep network. Thanh will be focussing on building the UI and visualization component. Matthew will be focussing on the web application and Apurv would be focussing on data pre-processing and integrating the components.

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