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# Care:Bricks - An LMIC-First Implementation for agile development of process-centric and guideline-driven point of care EMR systems

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**Background & Purpose:** The ability to reinforce clinical guidelines to optimize quality of care is a driving factor for electronic health records implementation. Digital systems that ensure completeness of data required for health programs, especially HIV, are now commonplace in most low- and middle-income countries. However, these systems are designed more toward supporting monitoring, evaluation, and reporting activities with clinical care support and guideline adherence often added as an afterthought. These systems also require dedicated developers and are difficult to upgrade as clinical guidelines change. This manuscript describes the rationale and prototypical implementation of a set of tools for rapid design and deployment of point of care, electronic medical record systems.

**Methods:** We outline a system of flexible components designed to support effective integration of clinical guidelines in LMICs. To minimize hardware costs and provide a system that users with low computer literacy can quickly learn to use, the system is also designed to run on small, low-power, touchscreen-enabled devices.

**Results:** We developed Care:Bricks, a set of modular tools divided into four components: a design environment based on a graphical workflow editor, a runtime environment to execute the design at a health facility at the point of care, a data representation and storage engine, and a core development environment.

**Conclusions:** Adapting electronic systems to changes in clinical guidelines is often slow and expensive. Agile, scalable, and low-cost implementations that a system like Care:Bricks can support offer a new model for sustaining EMR implementations in low-resource settings where employing dedicated developers is costly or impossible.

Keywords: EMR, EHR, Clinical Decision Support, Digital Guideline Implementation, Digital job aid, Digital health

## 1 Introduction

# 1.1 Clinical Guidelines

Clinical guidelines are a common mechanism for standardizing and improving the quality of care by synthesizing available biomedical knowledge into clear, reliable, reproducible, and applicable steps or instructions [1] [2]. The Institute of Medicine defines clinical guidelines as "systematically developed statements to assist practitioner and patient decisions about appropriate health care for specific clinical circumstances" [3]. Clinical guidelines have many potential benefits such as improved health outcomes for patients, increased quality and consistency of clinical decisions by healthcare practitioners, and reduction of healthcare system costs [4]. Despite the benefits offered by good clinical guidelines, uptake and adherence remains a challenge [5]. Patient preferences, lack of clarity, clinically inapplicable instructions, and a resistant organizational culture are some of the reasons that contribute to low utilization and uptake of clinical guidelines [1] [6].

#### 1.2 Job Aids

One common way to improve the clarity and utility of published guidelines is through job aids. Job aids are any external resources used to support the performance of a task by guiding, directing, and enlightening performance of an activity or decision [7]. Job aids can simplify complex guidelines, improve clarity of instructions and condense information into memorable snippets to support healthcare providers. Job aids have been particularly useful in low-resource settings where critical human resources shortages have necessitated task shifting from highly-trained staff to capable, untrained assistants [8].

A more enhanced version of a job aid is the use of computer systems to provide clinical decision support (CDS). Similar to how clinical guidelines inform decision making by healthcare providers, CDS systems provide targeted clinical and contextual knowledge such as patient and other health information to enhance the decision-making process [9] [10]. Unlike paper job aids, CDS systems can utilize and synthesize a wider range of knowledge to provide greater insight during a clinical consultation. However, CDS are just another form of a job aid i.e., digital job aid, and are not meant to replace people [11].

To increase their impact, job aids should be designed to seamlessly integrate and improve clinical workflows. Friedman [12] asserts that the development, implementation, and evaluation of such tools belongs to the field of informatics. In his seminal papers describing the field of informatics, Friedman [11] [12] argues that informatics is about placing information resources in the hands of users such that their performance or experience is better than when the information resource was not available. This assertion is a fundamental theorem of biomedical informatics and a guiding principle for this approach. To achieve this, Friedman [11] argues that information resources must be built for the benefit of people and offer something that the person doesn't already know or have. In other words, systems must make the work of healthcare providers easier, better, faster, or more satisfying. This can be attained if systems are designed from both a user- and process-centric perspective with the aim of improving workflows first rather than merely collecting data. Improving processes is an often-forgotten aspect of electronic systems especially in low-resource settings where data capture typically becomes the primary focus of digital systems rather than data as a by-product of clinical decision support.

#### 1.3 Clinical Guidelines in LMIC EMRs

Douglas et al. illustrate Friedman's theorem with their electronic medical record (EMR) system implementation, BART (Baobab Anti-Retroviral Therapy), where the healthcare provider is stepped through a series of questions drawn from Malawi's Antiretroviral Therapy guidelines using a wizard-style, single question per screen touchscreen user interface [13]. This approach allows the healthcare provider to recall and incorporate aspects of the clinical guideline into a natural discourse with the client while at the same time enforcing a standard workflow. As a result, this approach not only improves care, but also improves the process through which complete data are collected. The wizard design simplifies complex processes and enforces a clear sequence of steps with each step displayed as a single screen showing only pertinent information, focussing user attention and decreasing odds of user error [14].

Unlike other fields, scientific knowledge and healthcare practices change quickly. For example, in HIV care, clinical guidelines undergo frequent revisions due to changes in available interventions and changes in evidence on the benefits and harms of the interventions among others [15]. As such, systems built to support this work, like BART, must keep up with the changes or risk becoming obsolete. For example, when medication regimens change, the software needs to reflect those changes immediately, and any delay can result in the old regimens being perpetuated, with associated risk to patients. For systems like BART, adapting to such guideline changes required software developers to edit code and deploy changes, which may be extensive depending on the scale of the guideline update. The lead software developer for the BART system indicated a best-case scenario for incorporating revisions to the national ART guidelines requires three to four weeks of work for four professional software developers [16]. Reducing or eliminating the need for programmers to make adaptations with each change to the clinical guidelines could help better manage transitions between clinical guidelines and save significant time and resources.

In this manuscript, we describe a novel suite of tools designed to reduce dependence on software developers to both create as well as keep systems up to date with rapidly changing clinical guidelines and settings. This suite of tools has been designed and implemented to demonstrate the LMIC-first approach to developing EMR systems which is characterized by six themes namely; democratized EMR development, process- and guideline-centric, point-of-care, touchscreen-first, low cost, and low power.

### 2 Materials and Methods

We conceptualized Care:Bricks as a suite of four components for the effective use of clinical guidelines in LMICs: a design environment, a runtime environment, a data representation & storage engine and a core development environment. To minimize hardware costs and provide a system that users with low computer literacy can quickly learn to use, Care:Bricks is designed to run on small, low-power, touchscreen-enabled devices with minimal systems resources such as Raspberry Pis and other single

board computers. All external software components are based on open source projects and Care:Bricks itself is licensed under the MIT open source licence [17].

#### 2.1 Design environment

The design environment is a tool for LMIC Ministry of Health (MoH) staff to create and edit workflows that provide clinical decision support using clinical guidelines in a web-browser. We built the design environment on top of the NodeRed workflow editor [18], which is a visual environment for flow-based programming. This visual environment reduces the need for LMIC Ministry of Health staff to write code, enables reuse of common building blocks ("bricks") and makes a clinical guideline workflow inspectable by both the designer and other colleagues in MoH.

#### 2.2 Runtime environment

The runtime environment is software deployed at a facility that takes workflows created in the design environment and transforms them into an EMR with wizard-style, touchscreen user interfaces for frontline healthcare workers. On the server-side, we programmed the runtime environment with an event-driven, asynchronous JavaScript approach through a minimal Node.js layer with optional data persistence. Web browsers on the client-side utilize modern Web-APIs (like Client-Storage and Multimedia components) through a simple JavaScript foundation in combination with discrete HTML/JS pages.

# 2.3 Data Representation & Storage Engine

We use JSON structures as the internal data representation. The bricks operate on these structures as the flows are executed by the runtime environment and data inputs are recorded through user interaction. At specific points the data structures are transferred to and stored on the server. Care:Bricks provides a simplistic file storage engine ready to be used in many simpler use cases. If a more sophisticated persistence layer is needed, additional database support is possible.

#### 2.4 Core development environment

The development environment is a toolkit for developers that wish to modify and extend the Care:Bricks system. We provide application programming interfaces (APIs) and the source code of the existing system as a basis for custom extensions. We expect that LMIC MoH staff who master the design environment will desire enhanced functionality, the ability to create novel workflow modules that are not present in the base system and share their innovations with others.

# 3 Results

#### 3.1 Design environment

The user interface for the design environment consists of a brick library on the left and a construction area on the right. Bricks, representing discrete steps in a flow, are dragged from the brick library into the construction area. Care:Bricks includes a library of bricks for the most common EMR usage scenarios in the brick library. Flows are a series of interconnected bricks (see Figure 1).

Each flow has one or more starting, intermediate and ending bricks. Once bricks are placed in the construction area, they can be connected in the desired sequence by dragging a connection from the right side of a brick to the left side of another brick. Once the workflow is completed, the deploy button in the top right corner stores the workflow definition, from where it can be read by the runtime environment and rendered as a series of user interface screens.

Starting bricks allow a user to select a patient i.e., using a search screen or via a queue of patients in the waiting area or registering a new patient. A designer uses intermediate bricks to display summary information (e.g., as a graph or table), collect new data (e.g. height and weight), make a clinical decision or calculate a value (e.g. body mass index or prescription dosing). Ending bricks take the data obtained in a workflow and send it elsewhere (e.g., to the storage engine, another workflow or to another service).

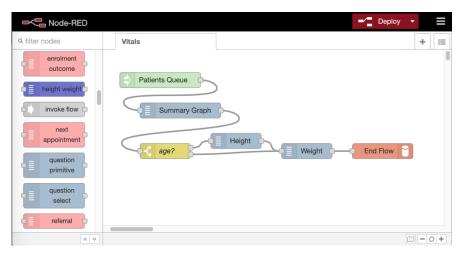


Figure 1: Design environment with simple vitals flow

We show an example workflow in Figure 1. In this workflow, the user first selects a patient from patients in the waiting area. Then the system displays a summary graph of the patient's weight over time. In the next step, a decision brick queries the age of the patient (as defined in the demographics record) and decides whether or not to collect height in addition to weight information.

More sophisticated flows can be incrementally built by adding bricks to the construction area and sequencing them. Figure 2 shows an extended version of the flow in Figure 1 where an additional branch from the age decision brick (yellow brick) can lead to recording of mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC) instead of height or weight depending on the patient's age. The flow ends with scheduling the patient's next appointment before sending the data to the storage engine.

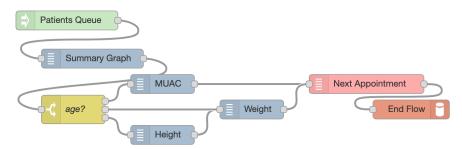


Figure 2: Closeup of the vitals flow showing additional branch to record mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC)

# 3.1.1 Subflows

As workflows become more complex, they can become harder to understand. To remedy this, workflows can be broken into subflows. A subflow represents a flow, but is visually 'collapsed' into a single brick. Subflows act as placeholders and decrease the information density in the construction area.

Typically, subflows are used to logically group independent sections of larger flows to reduce visual complexity and to introduce reusable components. Most of the time a subflow brick has one input and one output. The runtime environment expands subflows as it steps through the larger flow. Figure 3 shows our ongoing example of a vitals flow with a subflow for collecting height, weight and MUAC measurements.



Figure 3: Vitals flow with Height, Weight, MUAC subflow

#### 3.1.2 Calculated/derived values

It is common in medical practice to calculate a value from existing clinical data e.g., calculating body mass index (BMI) using height and weight to diagnose obesity. Automatically calculating such values decreases assessment time and can increase both quality of care and adherence to clinical guidelines.

Calculations in the Care:Bricks design environment are implemented using a specific intermediate brick called a function brick. A function brick allows the designer to incorporate mathematical and/or logical statements in their flow. For example, BMI is defined as weight (kgs) divided by height (m) squared. As we have previously captured the height in cm in our example flow we multiply everything by 10,000. To implement this function, we write this piece of logic in a small JavaScript code block.

```
encounter.bmi =
10000 * Number(encounter.Weight) /
(Number(encounter.Height) * Number(encounter.Height));
```

# 3.1.3 Clinical Decision support

In clinical practice, patient symptoms, signs and data are used to interpret the patient's state. For example, BMI derived from adult weight and height determine if a patient is obese or underweight. Most clinicians know that normal BMI is between 18.5 and 24.9 but don't necessarily memorize what constitutes a BMI for severe malnutrition or Class 3 obesity. As a digital job aid, we incorporate clinical thresholds in our flow and provide clinical decision support.

For example based on results of a calculated BMI, Care:Bricks branches into different care paths. We guide the clinical user to refer to the malnutrition unit if the normal BMI threshold is not reached and to the chronic care if the overweight BMI threshold is exceeded. This of course can be extended further. For example, for patients with mild cases of over- or under-weight providers could be given specific educational guidance on screen. This workflow can be seen in Figure 4.

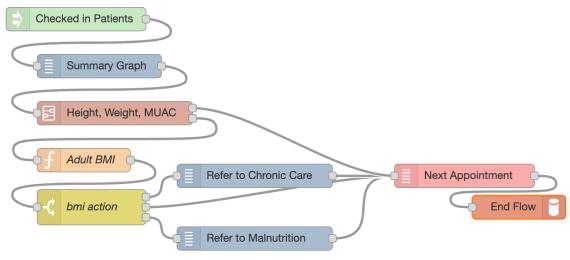


Figure 4: Clinical decision support

#### 3.2 Runtime environment

The runtime environment takes the flows from the design environment and renders workflow screens in a web browser using the brick type to render one or more predefined screens. Care:Bricks includes a set of bricks and associated screens for most frequently used elements of EMRs. These bricks and associated screens can be used to develop workflows with no additional programming.

After a workflow is deployed to the runtime environment, it becomes immediately active (at least in simple deployment setups where the design and runtime environment are on the same system) and can be selected by the clinical user. As bricks have their own pre-defined user interfaces and for above vitals flow pre-defined bricks were used from the brick library, no additional programming is required. Once the user (or in some cases the runtime environment) selects and starts a certain workflow, the steps are executed from left to right. Not all steps require user interaction; some like the yellow age condition are

implicitly evaluated by the runtime environment and not visible to the user. Figure 5 below represents the four steps of the simple vitals flow that require user interaction (Find Patient, Display Summary Graph, Enter Height, Enter Weight).

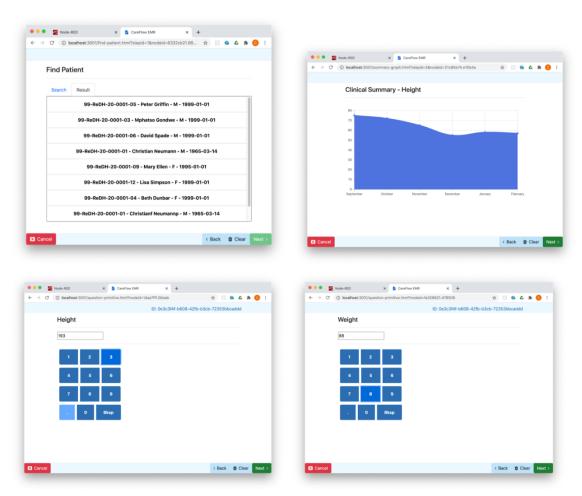


Figure 5: Sequence of screen for simple vitals flow in the runtime environment

## 3.3 Data Representation & Storage Engine

Following our LMIC-approach themes of process-centricity and low-cost, we implemented a simple storage engine for Care:Bricks using a RESTful interface to access patient data as datafiles, eschewing a formal relational or object database. Our conceptual model is a straight-forward mapping from the paper record; for the data storage engine (database), we have used a minimally invasive technology which directly supports the process-centric approach. Our logical implementation is a file in JSON format with a single directory for each patient and we utilize a standard filename convention that incorporates patient id and the type of record for each data unit of patients.

While the file storage is an atypical approach, it worked rather well. Even for a large facility (45,000 patients, 5.5 million encounters, 27 million observations) we simulated adequate performance for data entry and retrieval (excluding reporting): With 400 visits per day, spread across 10 different point-of-care locations within this facility, a new encounter will occur on average every ~7 seconds (8 clinic hours \* 60 minutes per hour \* 60 seconds per minute) / (400 visits \* 10 stations). A Single board Computer like a Raspberry Pi 4 with a flash-based storage was able to process around three requests per second (simulating a mix of query and write operations).

Operating costs for storage are kept low. In our prototype implementation (with a rather verbose JSON structure), the size of a demographic patient record was typically less than 2 KB and for a complete visit averaged around 5 KB (spread across multiple encounters and excluding photos/scans/biometric

information). The demographic records for 45000 patients resulted in 30 MB of raw data, while ~20 GB were needed for 5.5. million encounters.

Again, considering operational costs and associated skill acquisition overhead, standard operating system tools can be used for data backups (like regularly creating compressed archives of the patient data via cron, tar and gzip; and scp, rsync for remote backups).

#### 3.4 Development environment

While we aim to provide a comprehensive solution for developing basic workflows, we also want the system to be extendable. Intentionally there is a gradual transition from an advanced EMR designer into someone extending the core environment. Similar to EMR Designers we assume as little product-specific skills as possible for the development. We favor a tool- and framework-agnostic solution over assuming a certain approach, even if additional tools or frameworks would provide some short-term benefits. The environment is kept as simple as possible with its modular approach of having minimal assumptions and providing maximum flexibility.

## 4 Discussion

Optimizing clinical care using digital systems requires that workflows are at the core of a system. Information collected is most beneficial to clinical decision-making at the point of care, and, when enhanced with clinical decision support, these digital systems can have far greater impact. Also, all systems change over time. Sometimes changes are minor and infrequent, sometimes extensive and occurring often. It is crucial that EMR changes can be done quickly, with minimal expense and by those who are closest to the work, ideally without needing to involve developers.

By transforming programming code into graphical flows, the EMR design becomes transparent. This approach enables EMR Designers with less IT/programming skills. Instead, the required skills set pivots towards non-technical clinical managers and monitoring & evaluation (M&E) staff, who potentially are already definding textual guidelines and data use in the clinical context. This removes the often-prevalent communication gap between clinical experts and ICT experts while shortening the development cycles. NodeRED [18] was initially chosen for the design environment, but any generic flow editor could be adapted to work.

The field of software engineering has seen multiple attempts to raise the level of abstraction by providing higher-level programming environments. From Rapid Application Development environments (like Microsoft Visual Basic), Database-driven systems (such as Microsoft Access), fourth-generation programming languages and graphical notations for business process models like BPMN, up to the recent cloud-based Low-Code/No-Code development platforms (Airtable, Microsoft Power Automate). Some of these approaches found their niches but are not widely adopted.

In all these environments, good engineering practises such as versioning, collaboration in bigger teams and testing can be problematic. Additionally, advanced developers often find these environments (too) limiting as things need to be done within the pre-defined boundaries of the platform ('my way or no way'). Beyond the psychological component for "real programmers" this has the real danger that investments in a specific platform might be lost once the platform vanishes or technology advances. In the world of open-source EMR systems, there is a strong emphasis on 'traditional' software development. While this makes these tools very flexible and adjustable to many different usage scenarios, it also puts a significant burden on the required skill sets for the developers. It is difficult to find and maintain qualified programmers across LMIC countries. Such a focus on development also increases the risk of talking more about code and technical problems instead of focusing on the business requirements.

Care:Bricks does not aim to be a fully-integrated and encapsulated/closed platform. We wanted our solution to be as modular as possible so that aspects of the system are not bound to a singular solution or framework. With this in mind, we created a clean separation between the workflow design environment and the runtime environment. In between sits the intentionally simple and open workflow model. By carefully separating different layers, any layer could be individually replaced with other technical solutions. For example, while we favor a particular kind of data storage, other mechanisms could also be implemented without impacting the other layers.

We have applied the same principles of lean design to the data storage layer. Commonly used generic persistence solutions can introduce significant overhead. Storing data points as observations in a typical relational database with a flexible Entity-Attribute-Value model can result in a scenario where the data for

internal management and indexes is higher than the actual medical records. This not only has an impact on the required physical storage and memory consumption, but can also introduce additional performance bottlenecks for data access and reporting. Surprisingly there are only very few situations where data gets updated concurrently (in a point-of-care setting a patient can only be at one location at a time). And even in cases of concurrent edits, there are often no true conflicts as data typically gets voided and re-added. So the data storage predominately follows a write-once, rarely-update strategy; allowing to question the need for a full ACID-compliant database. Instead of imposing a traditional database just because it is the default choice, Care:Bricks keeps all data for patients in separate subdirectories and all visits plus the demographic record is kept in separate files in that directory. While there is some variation in the size of the data, a demographic record can often be stored with less than 1 KB, and the data per visit usually does not exceed 5 KB even for complex visits (excluding photos/scans/biometric information).

But regardless of this storage simplicity, depending on the number of patients, visits and file system performance, access to multiple patients at once, might be challenging. For these cases a 'custom index' for searchable data points (either in-memory or persisted on the filesystem) can be programmed to speed up retrieval time. This mechanism is also utilised for the 'queue management' of patients. However, if additional needs to the storage engine arise, Care:Bricks is open for more conventional persistence layers like CouchDB. The implementation of the 'custom index' is also the foundation for the 'derived data representation'. It is a re-programmable, event-driven, on-the-fly transformation of data from the internal data representation into an external format like FHIR, 'flat tables' or transaction logs for synchronization.

Our solution directly addresses barriers to implementing EMRs in LMIC settings and has features that would maximize sustainability when donor funding is no longer available. Acquisition costs are reduced largely by eliminating the need for implementers with specialised software development skills, and through the use of low-cost hardware, possible due to the use of light-weight technologies. Disruptive effects on clinical care practices are addressed through our process-centric approach rather than data centric approach. Operating costs are reduced in several ways. Emphasis on lower cost hardware means that periodic replacement of equipment will be less expensive. Reliance on low-power hardware means lower operating costs in terms of consumption of electricity. The cost of electricity may seem inconsequential. However, in off-the-grid sites where systems rely on power to be generated, and potentially stored in battery backup systems, the cost of the power system can often exceed that of the computers themselves. Updates to the system to reflect changes in guidelines can be done quickly by existing staff, thereby eliminating the requirement for paid consultants. The simplification of rendering the workflows creates a sufficiently intuitive user interface for "computer-illiterates" with no mouse/keyboard skills.

### 5 Future work

While Care:Bricks currently focusses on the rapid definition and execution of workflows, we plan to include a data representation layer for HL7-FHIR as well as linkages to standard terminologies such as SNOMED-CT and ICD10. We also envision dedicated Datatype- and Concept-Editors to establish and enforce a 'common language' and an explicit data dictionary. Together with a Roles-based permission model for the Design environment these aspects could provide support for hierarchical national scale-ups.

# 6 Conclusion

Large strides have been made in the past two decades to get EMRs working in LMIC settings. However, there are still significant gaps that need to be addressed before these systems reach their full potential. Our aim with Care:Bricks is to help democratize EMR development to the point where they can be locally developed and maintained, getting us one step closer to a truly LMIC-First approach.

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