An Epistemological Approach to Risk Assessment in Pharmacovigilance and Mitigation Through Artificial Intelligence

A. D. Skali
Healthcare Innovation Consultant, CEO TheTowerBrand, ex-COO Luci Health, Head of Innovation Forum Barcelona Branch, Future Business Centre King's Hedges Road, Cambridge, U.K.

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Abstract: Pharmacovigilance, which focuses on risk assessment and management in drug safety, offers a robust foundation for addressing inherent risks in new drug discovery. This bibliographic research article explores innovative perspectives by drawing parallels between pharmacovigilance and investment practices, as inspiration to establish a new, in the field of pharmacovigilance, epistemological framework for the understanding of the main risk inducing elements in pharmacovigilance and the steps and technology we can adopt to assess and mitigate them.

1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Risk assessment and prevention is essential in the field of healthcare. The judicious application of risk assessment methodologies serves as a sentinel, discerning latent hazards embedded within clinical processes. This discernment facilitates the creation of a secure healthcare milieu, diminishing the incidence of adverse events and fortifying the sanctity of patient well-being.

As we transition to the specific domain of pharmacovigilance, the importance of risk management becomes even more pronounced. In the pharmaceutical landscape, where the stakes are inherently high, risk assessment plays a pivotal role in ensuring the safety and well-being of patients. The intricate web of risks in this context includes not only the potential side effects of medications but also regulatory compliance and the complexities of a globally interconnected pharmaceutical market.

Pharmacovigilance, as a subset of risk management in healthcare, involves the systematic monitoring and evaluation of the safety and efficacy of pharmaceutical products post-market approval. The application of rigorous risk assessment frameworks within pharmacovigilance becomes a linchpin for identifying potential risks associated with medication use. This includes adverse drug reactions, unexpected side effects, and any other safety concerns that may arise during the course of patient treatment.

In the field of pharmacovigilance, the challenges and limitations of current risk assessment methodologies are multifaceted and underscore the evolving nature of risks associated with pharmaceutical products.

One prominent challenge lies in the dynamic nature of risks. Traditional risk assessment methodologies often struggle to keep pace with the rapidly changing landscape of pharmaceuticals, where new drugs are continually introduced, and their effects may only become apparent after widespread use. The inherent complexity of biological systems and the variability in patient responses contribute to the dynamic nature of risks, necessitating a more adaptive and responsive approach to risk assessment.

Moreover, the inadequacy of traditional approaches becomes apparent when addressing emerging threats. Conventional risk assessment models may not adequately account for novel and unforeseen risks that can emerge as a result of evolving scientific knowledge, changes in patient demographics, or the introduction of innovative therapeutic modalities. These emerging threats may include previously unknown side effects, drug interactions, or unexpected patient populations susceptible to adverse reactions.

Additionally, the global interconnectedness of the

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pharmaceutical market poses challenges to traditional risk assessment methodologies. The widespread distribution of pharmaceutical products across diverse populations and regulatory environments requires a more comprehensive and globally aligned approach to risk assessment. Traditional models may struggle to capture the nuanced variations in risk profiles across different regions and demographic groups, potentially leading to incomplete risk assessments.

The reliance on spontaneous reporting systems for adverse drug reactions is another limitation. Such systems heavily depend on healthcare professionals and patients voluntarily reporting adverse events, leading to underreporting and a potential lag in identifying risks. This limitation hampers the real-time assessment of risks associated with pharmaceutical products.

In the context of pharmacovigilance, the existing literature on risk assessment and mitigation provides valuable insights into the challenges and advancements in ensuring drug safety. However, there are noticeable gaps and areas where epistemological perspectives are underexplored.

The current literature predominantly focuses on the technical and methodological aspects of risk assessment, such as signal detection, data mining, and statistical modeling. While these approaches are crucial, there is a paucity of literature delving into the underlying epistemological foundations that shape our understanding of risk in pharmacovigilance.

One evident gap lies in the exploration of the ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent in risk assessment methodologies. Understanding the nature of knowledge and reality as it pertains to drug safety is crucial for refining risk assessment models. For instance, the ontological status of adverse events, whether they are discrete entities or part of a complex network of interconnected factors, remains a topic that warrants deeper philosophical exploration.

Furthermore, there is limited literature on the epistemic uncertainties associated with pharmacovigilance data. Epistemological perspectives can shed light on the inherent uncertainties in observational data, the reliability of different sources, and the interpretative challenges in discerning causality. Addressing these epistemic uncertainties is pivotal for improving the accuracy and reliability of risk assessments.

The potential contributions of integrating epistemology into risk management practices are substantial. Epistemological perspectives can inform the development of more robust risk models by providing a foundation for understanding what counts as evidence, how causality is established, and the nature of knowledge production in pharmacovigilance. This integration can enhance the transparency and accountability of risk assessment processes, as it encourages a critical examination of the assumptions and values that underpin decision-making.

Moreover, incorporating epistemological considerations can foster interdisciplinary collaboration between experts in pharmacovigilance, philosophy, and other relevant fields. This collaboration can lead to a more comprehensive and holistic approach to risk assessment, considering not only the technical aspects but also the epistemological underpinnings that shape our understanding of drug safety.

In the context of pharmacovigilance, the integration of effective risk management strategies aligns with the broader goal of fostering a culture of patient safety. By systematically identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks associated with pharmaceutical products, the healthcare industry can uphold the highest standards of patient care and well-being. This interconnected approach underscores the symbiotic relationship between robust risk management practices, patient safety, and the integrity of the pharmaceutical industry.

This paper embarks on the ambitious journey of unraveling the intricate relationship between epistemology and risk assessment in pharmacovigilance. Its overarching goal is to contribute a nuanced understanding that enriches the current discourse on drug safety by delving into the philosophical underpinnings and epistemic dimensions inherent in the field. The primary focus of this exploration is on meticulously examining the epistemological facets of risk assessment in pharmacovigilance.

This endeavor involves unraveling the intricacies of how information regarding drug safety is perceived, interpreted, and validated. Within this focus, particular emphasis will be placed on elucidating both the ontological essence of adverse events and the epistemic processes that govern knowledge production in the realm of pharmacovigilance.

The scope extends beyond the superficial layers, aiming for an in-depth examination of the philosophical foundations that shape current risk assessment methodologies. This includes a critical analysis of how philosophical perspectives influence our conceptualization of adverse events. Within this extended examination, the exploration encompasses a comprehensive analysis of the nature of knowledge production in pharmacovigilance. This sheds light on

how epistemological assumptions contribute to the construction of narratives surrounding drug safety. The paper actively advocates for interdisciplinary collaboration between experts in pharmacovigilance, philosophy, and related fields. While promoting such collaboration, it acknowledges inherent limitations in providing exhaustive analyses of the technical intricacies within the pharmacovigilance domain.

The proposed framework for integrating epistemology into risk management practices will be thoroughly discussed within the specific context of pharmacovigilance. This includes practical insights into how epistemological considerations can enhance transparency, accountability, and accuracy in the assessment of drug safety. By navigating through these interconnected realms, the paper aims not only to shed light on the philosophical dimensions of risk assessment in pharmacovigilance but also to advocate for a collaborative and informed approach towards ensuring drug safety.

2 A SIMPLIFIED FRAMEWORK FOR DECISION MAKING

In contemplating the seemingly disparate realms of investing and pharmacovigilance, one might readily dismiss any potential correlation based on their ostensible divergent objectives. However, upon closer examination of their core essence and methodological approaches, an unexpected similarity emerges.

Pharmacovigilance, in its essence, constitutes the scientific discipline and set of actions dedicated to the vigilant monitoring of medicine safety and the proactive management of any issues that may arise in this domain. The World Health Organization encapsulates this concept as encompassing activities directed at detecting, assessing, understanding, and preventing adverse reactions to medicines and other medicine-related problems. In essence, pharmacovigilance is a continuous process of monitoring medicine safety, with the overarching aim of reducing risks and optimizing benefits.

Conversely, the foundational objective of investing is rooted in the strategic utilization of available information and analytical tools to make judicious decisions. These decisions are not solely oriented towards maximizing profit; they necessitate a comprehensive evaluation of associated risks and the implementation of strategic measures to mitigate these risks effectively.

While the goals of investing and pharmacovigilance may appear divergent at first glance, a closer examination reveals a shared pursuit – the reduction of risks and the enhancement of positive outcomes. Both disciplines, albeit operating in distinct domains, converge on the fundamental principle of informed decision-making to achieve outcomes that are not only focused on obtaining benefits but also resilient in the face of inherent uncertainties.

In the realm of pharmacovigilance, a succinct framework guiding the evaluation of whether a drug should remain on the market involves several key steps:

Data Collection and Reporting Signal Detection
Risk Assessment Benefit-Risk Evaluation
Risk Minimization Strategies

What unites these procedural steps is a fundamental principle shared with diverse domains such as investing, marketing, and management. Despite apparent differences in decisions, they collectively adhere to a basic yet robust structure—the problem-solving structure—which forms the bedrock of the scientific method.

At the core of these decision-making processes lies a simple and universal structure, akin to the scientific method. When embarking on drug usage, individuals are essentially testing a basic hypothesis:

"Is this drug sufficiently beneficial to justify potential associated risks?"
"Do we possess comprehensive information to ensure the accuracy of our decisions?"

Figure 1: Basic framework for the scientific method.

In its essence, this structured decision-making process maintains a constant framework, its iterations adapting to our evolving comprehension of the situation or the issues at hand. This universal approach extends beyond specific domains, encompassing diverse fields such as marketing, investing, management, sports, and, as asserted in this context, pharmacovigilance. At the core of effective problem-solving lies the validation or affirmation of a hypothesis grounded in experimental data (Figure 1). This involves exploring correlations or causations among various elements to make informed predictions and actively working to minimize the

likelihood of recurring errors.

The debate surrounding the applicability of this streamlined decision-making model to pharmacovigilance may require further discusiont. However, the valuable perspective gained by examining the field through this lens provides clarity, fostering a nuanced understanding of its intricacies.

3 THE FRAMEWORK AND PHARMACOVIGILANCE

In the context of pharmacovigilance and the delineated steps, applying this straightforward model could be represented as follows:

DAE, AE, or SAE → Information Gathering → Judgment

Where Adverse Drug Effects (ADEs) constitute a comprehensive category encompassing any harmful or unintended effect resulting from drug usage, Adverse Drug Reactions (ADRs) constitute a subset of ADEs, specifically referring to unwanted and harmful effects caused by a medication when taken at normal doses during the regular course of treatment, and Spontaneous Adverse Effects (SAE) denote unintended, harmful reactions to a drug occurring without any apparent cause or known pattern.

And the element that we always have to take into account when approaching risk assessment is the distinction arises between the "real risk" and the "assumed risk." During the process of risk assessment, there's a common inclination to believe that the available information is comprehensive enough to ensure accurate decision-making.

A compelling analogy that encapsulates this idea is the iceberg metaphor. What's visible above the waterline represents only a fraction of the entire structure, with a substantial portion hidden beneath the surface. This concept is reminiscent of the challenges faced by ships navigating near glaciers. Initially, ships assumed that wooden hulls were sufficient to navigate these icy terrains, leading to numerous sinkings. The realization that the actual risk, the unknown factors, outweighed the assumed risk prompted strategic measures. Ships began reinforcing their hulls with metal, establishing specific routes and timings to navigate through glaciers. While they couldn't precisely determine the size of each glacier, they made educated guesses about potential risks, enabling them to accomplish their goals despite incomplete knowledge.

Three essential elements emerge for informed decision-making across various domains: understanding the known, which involves delving into the philosophy of knowledge (epistemology); identifying main risks by discerning primary risks based on existing knowledge and formulating initial technological solutions; and establishing a feedback loop, creating a continuous learning mechanism for iterative improvements over time, fostering adaptability and enhanced decision-making capabilities.

3.1 Reducing the Gap Between Real and Perceived Risk

All risk reduction strategies are rooted in two fundamental principles: augmenting our understanding of causal/correlation relationships and mitigating errors associated with human judgment. The empirical evidence from the notable investor Ray Dalio and his hedge fund, Bridgewater Associates, underscores the transformative impact of enhancing these two principles on decision-making. The initial imperative is to amass more pertinent information while ensuring its accuracy and relevance. In the realm of pharmacovigilance, diverse avenues exist to gather information on potential adverse effects, adverse drug effects, and spontaneous adverse effects.

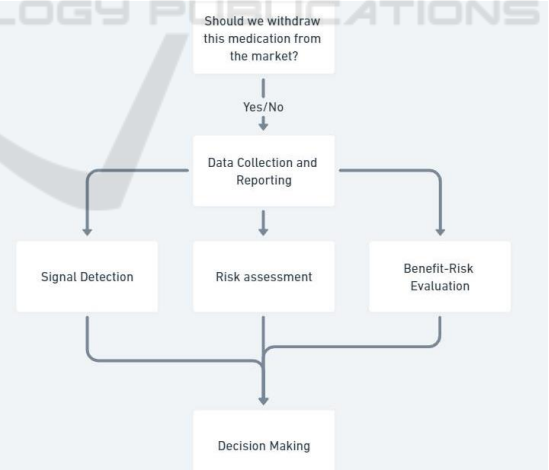

Figure 2: Application of the epistemological framework to pharmacovigilance.

However, the underlying questions remain consistent. Pertinent inquiries include assessing the severity, frequency, reversibility, and likelihood of potential adverse drug reactions (ADRs). These questions bear substantial weight, influencing critical

decisions such as whether to proceed with drug commercialization or delay it. The pivotal factor lies in the reliability and trustworthiness of the amassed information. Consequently, a refined framework for pharmacovigilance can be articulated (Figure 2).

In addressing these inquiries, additional considerations come to the forefront:

Determining the specific information essential for making informed decisions is a foundational step. Evaluating the reliability of the information received is paramount, questioning its accuracy and relevance.

Scrutinizing the trustworthiness of the information source, whether it be a program or an individual, becomes crucial. Assessing the believability of the person or the reliability of the tool involves questioning when it was last validated and calibrated in a similar context. Assessing the credibility of the person providing information and the trustworthiness of the tools used to obtain information is imperative. Interrogating the methods employed and the tools utilized in information acquisition is essential for ensuring their reliability.

Gauging the truthfulness of the information and its compatibility with a usable format forms a critical component of the evaluation.

The significance and prioritization of these questions vary depending on the context. The applicability of these inquiries differs substantially, whether in the domain of pharmacovigilance during the clinical trial phase or the post-marketing phase. Due to constraints of brevity, this discussion primarily aims to provide an overarching perspective on these concepts and elucidate how digital tools can contribute to enhancing the safety of our endeavors.

4 MAIN CAUSES FOR ERRORS IN THE DATA COLLECTION AND REPORTING STAGE

During the data collection phase, various challenges can significantly impact the reliability and comprehensiveness of gathered information:

Underreporting is a prominent issue involving the failure of healthcare professionals, patients, and pharmaceutical companies to report adverse events related to medications. This leads to incomplete safety profiles and hinders the identification of risks. Conversely, overreporting can occur, attributing unrelated events to medication use, requiring meticulous sorting to discern genuine concerns. Factors such as ignorance, lethargy, complacency, diffidence, insecurity, and the absence of feedback contribute to underreporting.

Delays in reporting adverse events pose a serious challenge, hindering the ability to take timely corrective actions and assess the overall impact on patient safety. Inconsistent and non-standardized reporting practices across healthcare institutions, regions, or countries complicate data collection and analysis, impeding the identification of trends and patterns in adverse events.

Patient selection bias arises when participants in pharmacovigilance studies are not representative of the general population taking the drug, potentially skewing results. For instance, studies may include only patients with specific medical conditions or those taking the drug at high doses.

Poor data quality, including inaccuracies, duplications, or missing data, undermines the reliability of pharmacovigilance databases, leading to erroneous conclusions. Incomplete information and confounding factors, such as multiple medications or underlying health conditions, complicate data interpretation.

Effective communication between regulatory agencies, pharmaceutical companies, pharmacovigilance teams, healthcare providers, and patients is crucial. Gaps in communication hinder the timely exchange of safety information and collaborative efforts to mitigate risks. Addressing these challenges is essential for enhancing the accuracy and utility of pharmacovigilance data.

4.1 Main Causes for Error in the Case of Signal Detection in Pharmacovigilance

Pharmacovigilance systems encounter various challenges that can impede their effectiveness. One crucial aspect is sensitivity, representing the proportion of actual adverse drug reactions (ADRs) reported to the system. A low sensitivity raises concerns, indicating that a considerable number of ADRs may go unreported. This limitation compromises the system's ability to comprehensively capture and address potential risks associated with medications.

Another significant challenge is the Low Positive Predictive Value (PPV), which denotes the proportion of reported ADRs truly caused by the drug. A low PPV introduces noise and potential confusion into the pharmacovigilance system, as a significant portion of reported ADRs may not be directly attributable to the drug in question.

The difficulty in detecting rare ADRs is also a noteworthy challenge. Due to their infrequent occurrence in a limited population, rare ADRs are

often underreported, making it challenging for the pharmacovigilance system to identify and address these less common but potentially severe adverse events.

Long-term ADRs pose a distinct challenge, as their manifestations may be delayed for months or even years. This delayed onset makes it difficult to associate these ADRs with the medication, leading to underreporting and hindering the timely identification of such adverse events.

Cultural influences play a significant role in ADR reporting practices. In Japan, a cultural norm discourages complaining, extending to the reporting of ADRs. This cultural inclination results in reluctance among both patients and doctors to report ADRs, contributing to underreporting in the country.

Similarly, traditional Chinese medicine reflects a belief that side effects are inherent and necessary for the medicine to be effective. This belief may discourage patients from reporting ADRs, viewing them as integral to the healing process. Cultural variations also impact the types of ADRs reported, with a preference for reporting skin-related ADRs in Asian countries compared to liver-related ADRs in Western countries.

These challenges underscore the intricate nature of pharmacovigilance and emphasize the need for nuanced strategies to effectively address them. A comprehensive approach that considers cultural factors, enhances sensitivity and PPV, and tackles the difficulties in detecting rare and long-term ADRs is essential for ensuring the robustness of pharmacovigilance systems.

5 NEW TECHNOLOGY AND AI TO HELP GET REDUCE THE BIASES AND ERRORS

In addressing the challenges of measuring real risk in decision-making, strategies include specific training and hiring experts in risk assessment and epistemology. This discussion focuses on using digital solutions, emphasizing AI/ML's role in data ingestion, including duplicate detection and anomaly identification. Machine learning aids in detecting ADRs, performing safety surveillance, and managing signal detection, such as automating the classification of first-person reports of ADRs in social media. It offers advantages in detecting ADRs not captured by medical professionals, processing data quickly, and utilizing personal information in social media posts related to ADRs.

Machine learning is also employed to classify ADRs, determining the seriousness of patient cases through different algorithms based on precision, recall, and accuracy. Clinical trials, crucial for drug approval, face structural limitations, and post-marketing monitoring through AE reports in pharmacovigilance is not error-proof due to biases like underreporting, especially for rare events and drug-drug interactions. Machine learning aids in streamlining adverse event reports, comparing rule-based queries and semi-supervised machine learning against a reference standard.

In pharmacoepidemiology, ML predicts adverse events, facilitating early quality assurance measures. Its use in signal detection and analysis automates processes, adapting to patients presenting with multiple disease states, medications, and ADRs. Institutions like Connecticut Children's Medical Center leverage machine learning to streamline adverse event reports. Additionally, ML in pharmacoepidemiology studies drug interactions in real-life conditions, predicting adverse events promptly for patient safety.

The utility of machine learning is underscored in its application to screen and analyze voluminous datasets of adverse event reports through sophisticated algorithms and text mining. Specific implementations include the development of algorithms like "AwareDX," exhibiting the capacity to predict sex-specific risks of adverse drug effects with a remarkable degree of precision, and the identification of targeted patient populations vulnerable to specific toxicities. Machine learning further aids in predicting drug side effects during post-marketing surveillance, leveraging knowledge extracted from literature to enhance the efficacy of spontaneous reporting system methods.

Artificial intelligence makes significant strides in integrating prediction uncertainties into patient safety through the deployment of deep learning-based computer-aided diagnosis, yielding more dependable results in cases fraught with ambiguity. However, the seamless integration of AI into existing pharmacovigilance systems raises potential challenges, potentially amplifying workload and complexity. The judicious implementation of AI/ML in PV is recommended, specifically when it streamlines workload, simplifies complexity, or optimizes budget allocation, enabling more effective resource deployment for critical aspects ensuring patient safety.

The integration of AI/ML into pharmacovigilance encounters legal challenges in both Europe and the United States, particularly concerning the liability for

errors arising from artificial intelligence technology. Despite these legal impediments, the promising potential of AI/ML in pharmacovigilance remains evident, prompting a critical examination of how to harness these technologies effectively to construct a future fit for purpose. Establishing a seamlessly connected system for the flow of inputs and outputs across diverse data systems emerges as a critical imperative. Such a system would not only foster an interactive continual learning solution but also enhance the understanding of the benefit–risk profiles of medicines and vaccines. Additionally, it would empower prescribers, patients, and other stakeholders to obtain pertinent information and pose inquiries as needed, thereby contributing to a more informed and responsive healthcare ecosystem.

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