An improved gravity model for Emergency Departments: from patients' preferences to healthcare operations' efficiency

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Abstract

This study investigates patients' decision-making process, focusing on Emergency Departments (EDs) selection, also considering the creation of information supporting the healthcare planning. An extension of the gravity model, integrating factors such as the distance between patients' home and EDs, the hospital's size and the clinical conditions' severity is proposed. The model is applied to a specific geographical context related to a University Hospital composed of six territorial facilities and located in the Northern Italy, highlighting a model accuracy equal to 98.7%.
The study provides both theoretical and practical contributions, for the mathematical modelling and for supporting the healthcare operations' efficiency.

Keywords: gravity model, emergency departments, facility location

Purpose

Facility location problems are relevant for a variety of sectors to minimize operational costs, while ensuring an effective resources' utilization. In healthcare context, they are typically related to the need of guaranteeing an adequate level of accessibility for patients while minimizing locations' cost. In this sector, characterized by a growing demand of services, scarce resources, healthcare professionals' shortage, patients' pathway fragmentation among several hospitals but also territorial healthcare facilities, the ability of predicting patients' flows and hospitals' admissions is becoming a crucial and pivotal challenge (Zhou et al., 2023). For these reasons, the mathematical modelling is very useful and widely applied in healthcare facility location problems (Earnshaw and Dennett, 2003), to support the operations' planning and definition.

Focusing on the Emergency Departments, in particular, some common problems hamper EDs' operations such as overcrowding, patients' long length of stay, staff shortages, arrival volume increases, and budget constraints (Collins, 2021). These problems could lead to a higher workload, a decrease in the patient's satisfaction in combination with longer waiting times and delayed inpatient admissions (Gross et al., 2023; Collins, 2021; Skowron et al., 2019), considering the high number of patients accessing the EDs and the difficulty of the system to take in charge all the patients and to ensure an appropriate capacity to deliver healthcare services and procedures.

Extended waiting and service times concur to the quality-of-care reduction, also increasing the risk of adverse events and negative outcomes for the patients. Thus, being characterized by high uncertainties and the need for quick decisions under the above-detailed constraints and criticisms, EDs presents several challenges for operations management. Minimizing resource consumption is at the basis for the implementation of efficient healthcare services and, for this reason, several studies provide significant evidence of alternative methods, procedures, or tools to improve performance, ranging from prediction tools (Chen et al., 2022), to the development of new instruments and predictive tools (Webb and Mills, 2019; Saghafian et al., 2014).
In this field, gravity models, traditionally developed and implemented for retail and marketing issues (Reilly, 1953), or transportation problems (Hallefjord and Joernsten, 1986), are applied to offer important and significant insights for the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the existing literature evidence indicates a low accuracy rate and overlooks certain significant aspects, that may impact on the selection of an ED, such as the hospital size, the patients' perceived severity, and the distance between the patient's residence and the healthcare facilities location (Rogelj and Bogataj, 2018).

Focusing on the healthcare emergency management, this study investigates the patients' decision-making processes proposing an extension and a different implementation of the traditional gravity model (Cu˜nat and Zymek, 2022; Yuk et al., 2020), adding the above-mentioned factors to the traditional mathematical modelling, increasing the knowledge of patients' decision-making processes, and contributing to the gravity models' theoretical field.

Theoretical background: gravity models in healthcare

In the literature, focusing on the healthcare setting, the gravity models are applied as a well-established tool to capture the interplay of several variables that could influence patients' flow, and consequently hospitals' admissions (Congdon, 2010; Mayhew, 1984). Many authors considered the interactions between the geographic factors (Flowerdew &

Aitkin, 1982) with the information related to the outpatient and inpatient accesses (Xiong et al., 2016).

In addition, these mathematical models, also integrating the Bayesian approaches to define more precise predictions (Congdon, 2000), specifically of the patients' flows with reference to the resources' allocation and planning among the different hospital' departments and units (Teow et al., 2017; de Mello-Sampayo, 2014).
Some studies demonstrated the efficacy of the gravity models not only predicting the general hospitalizations but focusing also on specific types of admissions such as the nursery or the intensive care unit (Latruwe et al., 2022; Lowe & Sen, 2006) and different territorial settings such as the rural areas (Wende et al., 2020).

Methodology
From a methodological perspective, a function able to accurately model the patient likelihood of choosing a particular hospital ($p^*(H_i)$), considering distance and other determinants, is defined as follows:

$$p^*(H_i) = f\,(d_i, t, q_i) \tag{1}$$

where n represents the available hospitals, d_i, the distance between the patient and the hospital H_i, t_k, the triage code (which stands for the pathology's seriousness) assigned to a patient at the arrival in an ED, and q_i, the average perceived quality of hospital i, assuming the hospital's size as a proxy and considering that a hospital with a higher number of beds may be considered as to have a "higher" quality than a hospital with fewer beds.

Defining α and β as two parameters that could regulate the effect of the distance and of the perceived hospital's quality, the following preference function is proposed to describe individual preferences regarding the hospital H_i:

$$p^*(H_i)= \frac{q_i^{\alpha t}}{d_i^{\beta}} \tag{2}$$

The proposed model is tested in a specific context, using real-world data collected between 2019, 2021 and 2022 from the six EDs related to the territorial facilities of the Sette Laghi Hospital, a teaching University organisation in the Northern Italy and applying a simulation approach to calibrate the model and determine the optimal values for the parameters α and β in order to minimize the difference between the observed and the simulated values.

Findings
Consistent results were achieved implementing the model, considering both the efficiency of the model in allocating the patients to the appropriate EDs and the approach of the model to compute the allocation process and an average error of $E[e_i]=0.0123$, implying a precision of the model equal to 98.7%, is defined in assigning each patient to the appropriate ED, considering the priority code and the city of residence.

Considering the system's network visualization, in which each node represents a city and each link a movement from city j to an ED situated in another city k, the following comparative analysis is defined (Figure 1), underlying the capacity of the model to consider the geographical proximity, allocating accurately patients to EDs and maintaining the connections between residence cities and EDs' locations.

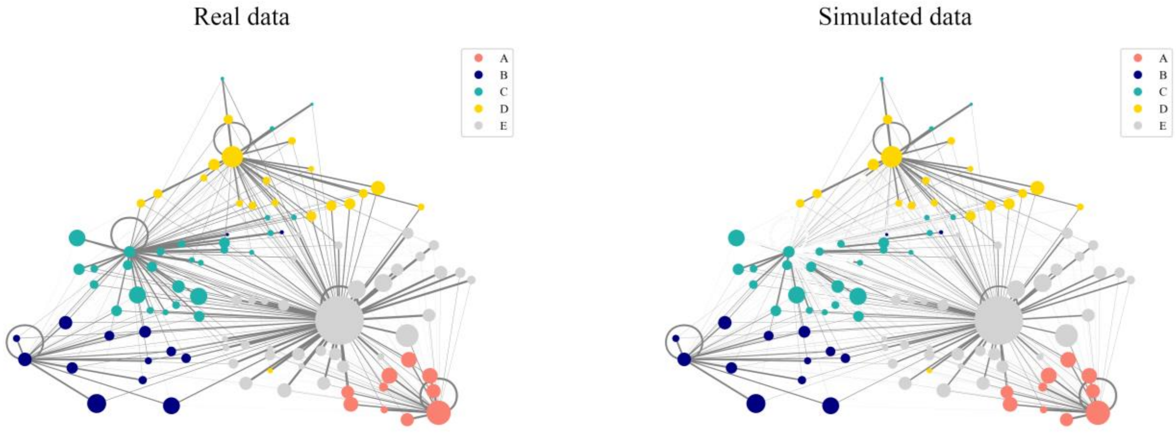

Figure 1 – Comparison of the network considering the real data and the results of the simulation (the colour of each node indicates the ED's city picked by the majority of a city's population travels and the node size corresponds to population)

Discussion and conclusions

The results are consistent with previous evidence, where a gravity model is employed to facilitate healthcare capacity planning (Wende et al., 2020; Tao et al., 2018), assuming that the volume of population and the presence of other healthcare facilities and emergency points in a specific geographical area could affect and influence the patients' choice and, as a consequence, also the workload and the operations of an ED (Teow et al., 2017).

The present study has several implications, both from a theoretical and a practical/managerial perspective. Firstly, the study could more generally enlarge the research field of mathematical modelling, answering to previous critical issues related to other tools and models already implemented for the EDs' organisational settings. An example could be the advanced multi-objective optimization models such as the one provided by El-Sawy and colleagues (2022), that incorporates patient's length of stay and waiting time within machine learning techniques, explored to assist the EDs operations planning by predicting waiting and treatment times, allowing for better management of workload and resources' allocation (van Delft, 2022).
In addition to these approaches, gravity models present a promising avenue for enhancing EDs operations by predicting patient inflows and thus, anticipating patient arrivals more accurately due to a more complete understanding of patient flow patterns, which is crucial for strategic planning and resources' distribution, positively impacting on the accessibility of delivery services. The incorporation of gravity models into EDs operational planning frameworks and models could further optimize patient care pathways, both from the hospitals and the patients' perspectives. Human and structural resources could be optimized and allocated efficiently, with a precise hospital planning. Patients could receive timely medical services and assistance, with a higher level of appropriateness, and at the same time, creating more accessibility to the EDs procedures.

From a practical point of view, the main contribution is related to the possibility of understanding the causal relationships between a patient's characteristics, the peculiarities of a healthcare facility (in this case an Emergency Department, but the model could be extended in general to all the healthcare services or facilities) and the patient's decision on which facility visits. The adoption of this conceptual model aims to explore and quantify the influence of various factors on patient choice, thus offering valuable insights into the optimisation of the healthcare services' distribution, within a specific context and the related accessibility. Moreover, the study could potentially support the healthcare operations within the Emergency Departments, but also the services' sizing, in terms of scheduling, involved medical specialisation and workforce planning, improving the overall quality and efficiency, both for the healthcare professionals and the patients (Garg et al., 2010). In addition, these findings are becoming pivotal considering the need to integrate territorial facilities within the current healthcare ecosystem, primarily focused in most of the cases on the hospital facilities, as suggested by the Italian National Decree n.77 and the National Recovering and Resilience Plan, supporting the definition of possible patients' cases that could be taken in charge and treated also in other healthcare facilities, more capillary distributed in a specific geographical area.

Furthermore, some limitations could be defined: i) the proposed model is tested only in one geographic context in the Northern Italy and future geographical areas could be analysed and considered to ensure the reliability and accuracy, ii) different territorial context such as the metropolitan area could be further investigated, considering that the patients should have more choices for the same distance covered, iii) a distinction between patients' residence and the actual departure point (that could be different from the residence location, included into the database) could affect the model's accuracy.

Future research should be devoted to apply the model also to the territorial facilities' accesses, supporting the development of an innovative healthcare network with a patient-centred approach or to define a simulation approach, with the aim of confirming the results or observing emerging behaviours in terms of patients' choice and network configuration. Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective, the model should be applied to other real data to validate the reliability and the accuracy aspects.

In conclusion, the present study would enable ED managers and healthcare professionals to monitor ED processes with a dynamic mathematical tool, supporting the resources management in an efficient way, and implementing optimal strategies for handling overcrowding and critical issues.

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