A Hybrid Transformer–Graph Neural Network Architecture for Personalized Clinical Risk Prediction Using Electronic Health Records

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Abstract

Electronic health records (EHRs) contain longitudinal measurements, diagnoses, procedures and medication events that jointly encode clinical deterioration. Sequence models can represent temporal progression but may overlook explicit relations among clinical concepts, whereas graph neural networks (GNNs) capture relational structure but often compress chronology. This manuscript proposes a hybrid Transformer–GNN architecture for personalized prediction of adverse clinical outcomes at a predefined horizon. A causal Transformer processes timestamped patient events; a patient-specific heterogeneous graph represents diagnoses, laboratory findings, medications and encounters; and a gated fusion mechanism combines temporal and relational representations. We specify cohort construction, leakage prevention, missingness modeling, training objectives, calibration, subgroup auditing and prospective evaluation. A reproducible evaluation protocol is described for a credentialed EHR resource such as MIMIC-IV. Because no patient-level experiment was performed for this manuscript, numerical results are explicitly labeled as synthetic demonstration values, not clinical validation or evidence of superiority. The contribution is a detailed and testable design intended for future external validation.

Keywords: Electronic health records; Transformer; graph neural network; personalized risk prediction; clinical decision support; calibration; temporal modeling.

DOI: 10.21590/ijtmh.10.04.47

1. Introduction

Electronic health records have transformed the information environment of modern healthcare. Routine care produces longitudinal collections of diagnoses, laboratory measurements, medication orders, vital signs, procedures and clinical encounters. These observations can inform anticipatory decisions, yet their usefulness depends on methods capable of distinguishing persistent clinical vulnerability from short-lived changes in condition. A risk prediction system should estimate the probability of a precisely defined event over a specified period rather than merely assign an opaque category. Such estimates can help prioritize review, but their deployment demands attention to uncertainty, clinical workflow and patient safety.

Classical clinical scores often depend on a restricted number of variables measured at a single time point. Their simplicity aids communication and implementation, but a fixed snapshot may

fail to represent evolving multimorbidity, therapeutic responses and irregular observation intervals. Machine learning has broadened the modeling toolkit by enabling nonlinear interactions and high-dimensional representations. Nonetheless, stronger discrimination in retrospective datasets does not automatically imply clinical utility. Label definitions, sampling design, the frequency of measurement and the cost of false alerts can change apparent performance considerably.

Temporal structure is a defining feature of EHR data. A sequence of elevated inflammatory markers followed by a new antibiotic order has a different meaning from the same items recorded months apart. Measurements also arise under informative observation processes: critically ill patients are tested more frequently, while missing values can indicate lower concern, limited access or workflow variation. Therefore, a model that simply imputes all gaps and treats encounters as equally spaced may distort the clinical signal. A temporal encoder should retain elapsed time, missingness indicators and a strict boundary between observed history and future outcomes.

Transformer architectures offer a flexible way to model distant dependencies using attention. In EHR applications, visit and code embeddings can represent combinations of events that occur across long patient histories. Li and colleagues introduced BEHRT as a Transformer-based approach to longitudinal EHR prediction, illustrating the value of contextual representations for future disease estimation. However, attention alone does not explicitly guarantee medically meaningful relations. The same diagnosis may interact differently with a laboratory trend, a drug exposure or a comorbid condition; such structure may be represented more naturally as a graph.

Graph neural networks propagate information over nodes and edges, making them appealing for modeling the relational organization of healthcare data. A patient-specific graph can connect encounters to diagnoses, medications and laboratory observations, and can connect successive encounters in chronological order. Relation types provide information that a flat list of tokens may obscure. At the same time, graph construction creates methodological hazards. Edges derived from future visits, population-level outcome correlations or full-dataset statistics can leak information into an otherwise causal prediction task.

A hybrid architecture aims to exploit complementary inductive biases. The Transformer learns time-dependent patterns and long-range trajectories; the GNN learns structured interactions among entities that co-occur or relate clinically; and fusion determines how much each representation contributes for a particular patient and prediction time. Rather than asserting that two complex modules must always outperform one, the proposal treats this claim as a hypothesis to be tested against strong baselines and simpler fusion methods.

Personalization requires more than adding demographic variables. The estimated probability must be conditioned on a patient's observed history, care context and the target horizon. It should be calibrated so that a predicted risk near twenty percent corresponds, approximately, to an observed event rate of twenty percent in an appropriate population. Moreover, calibration may differ across hospitals, age strata, demographic groups and temporal periods. Performance summaries must

therefore include discrimination, calibration, sensitivity at operational thresholds and decision-relevant utility.

Interpretability is also essential but difficult. Attention weights and graph importance scores can describe computational influence, yet they are not automatically causal explanations. A clinically useful system should identify contributing observations with timestamps, expose missing information, and allow a clinician to review the underlying record. Explanations should be stress-tested for stability under plausible perturbations and should never imply that removing an associated feature would change an outcome.

The proposed study is organized around a concrete prediction scenario: estimating the risk of an adverse clinical event within a fixed future horizon using only data available at an index time. Candidate endpoints include in-hospital mortality or unplanned readmission, but each endpoint requires a separate operational definition and suitable cohort. The framework is deliberately modular to accommodate different settings without suggesting that a model trained in intensive care is automatically transferable to outpatient populations.

The manuscript makes four methodological contributions. First, it defines a leakage-aware event and graph construction pipeline. Second, it integrates causal temporal attention and relation-aware graph message passing with a patient-conditioned gate. Third, it specifies calibration, uncertainty, subgroup and external-shift evaluation alongside discrimination. Fourth, it distinguishes a proposed experimental design from empirical findings: the numerical tables later in the manuscript are synthetic teaching examples, not measurements obtained from MIMIC-IV or any hospital. This distinction preserves scientific integrity while providing a complete blueprint for a future reproducible study.

2. Literature Review

Risk modeling from structured EHR data has evolved from logistic regression and manually selected scores toward models that learn representations from longitudinal records. Logistic regression remains an important comparator because its coefficients, regularization and calibration are relatively straightforward to inspect. Tree ensembles can model nonlinear interactions in tabular features but commonly require explicit aggregation of the historical timeline. Comparing a proposed deep model only with a weak statistical baseline would not establish the value of its added complexity.

Recurrent neural networks introduced a principled way to summarize successive clinical encounters. Long short-term memory and gated recurrent unit models can maintain hidden states over time, although very long histories and irregular intervals complicate learning. RETAIN, introduced by Choi and colleagues, used reverse-time attention to produce interpretable visit-level and variable-level contributions. Its importance is methodological: it shows that attention can be used for longitudinal clinical prediction while still requiring careful interpretation and validation.

Transformer models replace sequential recurrence with self-attention over event representations. The original attention architecture of Vaswani and colleagues permits each token to incorporate

context from other positions. Clinical implementations must adapt the architecture to EHR-specific irregularities, including multiple codes per encounter, variable time gaps and incomplete observations. Bidirectional pretraining can be useful for learning representations, but outcome prediction must avoid incorporating future patient events into the index-time representation.

BEHRT demonstrated a disease-oriented Transformer approach in large-scale primary care data. Its representation combined clinical codes with contextual information such as age and position. The study is influential because it established that longitudinal EHR histories can be treated as structured sequences for multitask prediction. Nevertheless, its dataset, label definitions and outcomes should not be equated with an intensive-care deterioration task. The generalizable insight is the value of temporal representation learning, not a transferable numerical performance guarantee.

Other clinical Transformer studies have incorporated laboratory trajectories, textual notes and multimodal records. Their central challenge is alignment: different sources are recorded at different frequencies, and the presence of a measurement may be influenced by clinical suspicion. Masking and timestamp encoding reduce some representation problems but do not remove confounding from the observation process. Researchers must separate the modeling of values from the modeling of when and why values were collected.

Graph representation learning supplies a different perspective. Graph convolutional and attention-based networks aggregate information across neighboring nodes, while relational GNNs distinguish edge types. In clinical data, nodes may denote patients, encounters, diagnoses, medications or laboratory events. Population graphs can capture shared characteristics, but a patient-to-patient edge constructed using outcomes or post-index records risks leakage. Patient-specific graphs built from observed history are often easier to align with prospective prediction constraints.

A 2024 survey by Boll and colleagues reviewed GNN approaches for clinical risk prediction using EHR data and identified diagnosis prediction as a major application area. The survey emphasized heterogeneity, multimodality and interpretability as continuing challenges. These findings support investigation of relational representations but do not establish that any particular hybrid design is superior. Comparisons must control for data preprocessing, information access, model size and tuning budget.

Hybrid temporal and graph approaches attempt to learn both sequence-level and relation-level dependencies. Several fusion strategies are possible: concatenation of pooled embeddings, cross-attention, additive combination and learned gating. A learned gate is attractive because it can adapt to the amount of available structured evidence. However, it also introduces parameters and possible instability. A rigorous ablation should compare fusion with temporal-only, graph-only and simple concatenation variants under identical data splits.

Clinical evaluation has increasingly recognized that the area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUROC) is not enough. Rare-event tasks can show deceptively strong AUROC while producing low precision among alerts. Area under the precision–recall curve (AUPRC), sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, Brier score and calibration slope

provide complementary information. Decision curve analysis can examine whether an alert threshold offers potential net benefit, although actual workflow impact requires prospective study.

Finally, EHR datasets such as MIMIC-IV make methodological work possible under controlled access conditions. Johnson and colleagues described its clinical tables and research applications, while PhysioNet provides versioned releases and access procedures. Dataset availability does not imply unrestricted access or approval for a specific analysis. A future study must document cohort extraction code, database version, institutional governance, temporal split, exclusions, missingness handling and patient-level separation. The literature therefore motivates a hybrid model, but the unresolved research question is whether its relational component improves generalization and calibration after rigorous, leakage-free comparison.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Study design, endpoint and population

This is a proposed retrospective development and validation study, not a completed clinical experiment. A suitable first task is in-hospital mortality within 48 hours after an eligible index time among adult ICU admissions. The precise eligibility criteria, observation window and outcome ascertainment must be registered before model fitting. The unit of analysis is a patient encounter; repeated encounters belonging to the same person must be kept within the same partition.

At each index time, the model may access only events with timestamps at or before that time. A suggested observation window is the preceding 24 hours, supplemented by known earlier history. Outcomes occurring in the subsequent 48 hours define the label. Admissions with insufficient observation or ambiguous labels should be handled through prespecified exclusions and sensitivity analyses rather than post hoc removal.

The dataset can be extracted from an approved MIMIC-IV release after satisfying PhysioNet credentialing requirements. Patient-level development, validation and held-out test partitions are recommended; a temporally later test cohort should additionally probe drift. A separate hospital would provide stronger external validation. No dataset was downloaded or processed for this manuscript.

3.2 Preprocessing and temporal representation

Clinical variables are mapped to stable vocabularies with units harmonized and implausible measurements flagged. Continuous measurements are transformed using training-set statistics only; categorical diagnoses and medications are encoded as tokens. The preprocessing pipeline retains explicit missingness masks, elapsed time since last observation and event provenance. All imputation parameters are learned inside training folds to prevent distribution leakage.

Let each event have a clinical concept, measured value, event time, modality and encounter identifier. Embeddings of these attributes are added to form an event vector. A causal attention mask ensures that an event representation cannot attend to later events. If a single prediction is made at the end of an observation window, a pooled summary of permitted event embeddings is used.

$$e_i = E(c_i) + V(x_i) + T(t_i) + M(m_i)$$

Here e_i is the embedding of event i; E is a concept lookup, V encodes a normalized value, T encodes elapsed time, and M identifies the clinical modality. All terms are vectors with equal dimension.

$$A = softmax(QK^T / \sqrt{d} + C)$$

Q, K and V denote learned query, key and value matrices; d is the key dimension; C is a causal masking matrix whose forbidden positions have effectively negative infinite scores. The Transformer output is H = A V followed by residual, normalization and feedforward operations.

3.3 Patient-specific heterogeneous graph

A graph is built independently for each patient at the index time. Node types include encounters, diagnosis codes, medications, laboratory observations and optionally procedures. Typed edges express observed-in-encounter, medication-ordered-at, diagnosis-recorded-at and chronological-successor relations. Edges are generated only from the available observation window. No outcome node, future diagnosis or post-index treatment may enter the graph.

Node attributes include concept embeddings, numeric measurements, time intervals and presence indicators. Relation-specific transformations distinguish clinically different links. A graph attention layer computes normalized weights for each allowed neighboring node and aggregates messages. The patient graph representation is obtained by attention pooling over encounter and concept nodes.

$$a_{ij} = softmax_j(LeakyReLU(u^T[Wh_i \parallel Wh_j \parallel r_{ij}]))$$

h_i and h_j are source and neighboring node features; W is a trainable transformation; r_{ij} is a relation embedding; u is an attention vector; ‖ denotes concatenation. The softmax normalizes weights over permitted neighbors of node i.

$$h_i^{(l+1)} = \sigma(\sum_j a_{ij} W_r h_j^{(l)})$$

The superscript l identifies the graph layer, W_r is a relation-specific weight matrix and σ is a nonlinear activation. The summation covers only nodes connected by edges observed before the index time.

3.4 Architecture flowchart

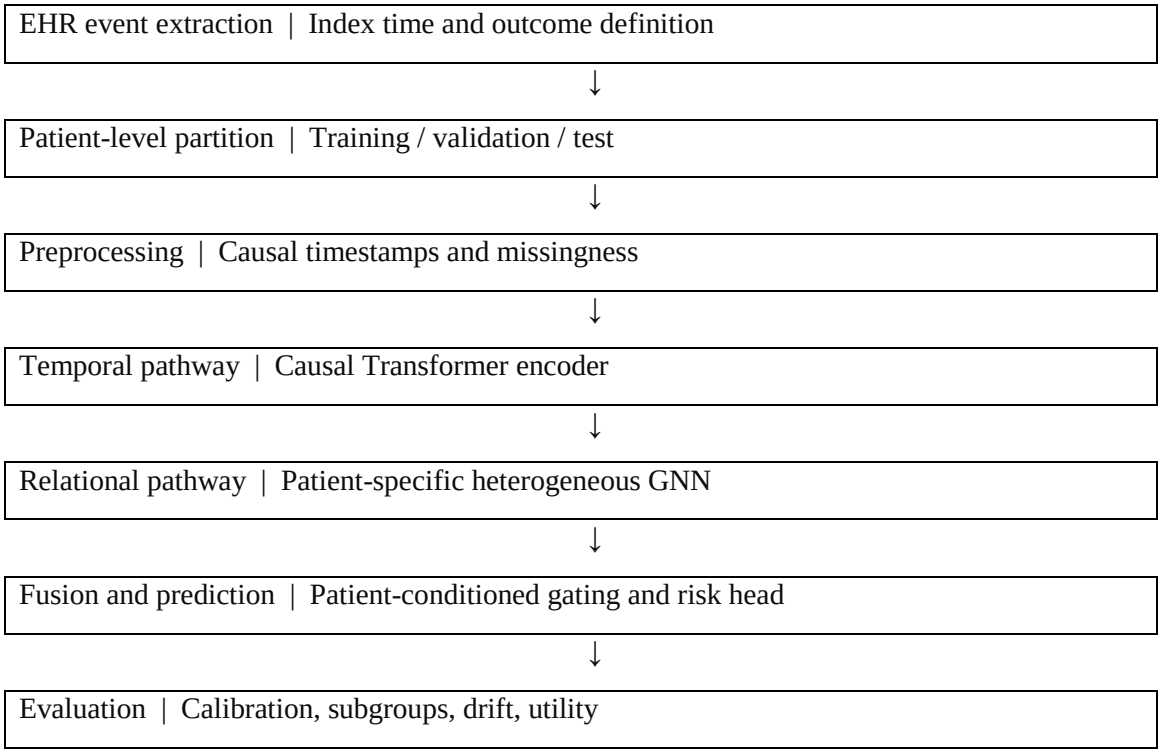

Figure 1. End-to-end methodological flowchart. The temporal and relational pathways run in parallel after preprocessing and join at the fusion stage; no post-index information enters either pathway.

3.5 Gated multimodal fusion

The Transformer produces a temporal patient representation s and the graph encoder produces a relational representation g. Both are projected to a common dimension. A patient-conditioned sigmoid gate determines their relative contributions. The gate is a learned allocation mechanism rather than a clinical explanation by itself.

$$z = sigmoid(W_x[s \parallel g] + b)$$

$$f = z \odot s + (1 - z) \odot g$$

$$p = sigmoid(w^T f + b_o)$$

Here z is a vector of fusion weights between zero and one; $\odot$ denotes elementwise multiplication; f is the fused patient representation; p is the estimated event probability. The weights and biases are optimized using training data. A simpler concatenation model should be included as a fusion baseline.

3.6 Objective function and optimization

For a binary endpoint, a class-weighted cross-entropy objective can account for event imbalance. Calibration should be assessed on untouched validation data; any post-hoc temperature or logistic recalibration must be fitted exclusively on validation predictions. Early stopping uses a prespecified validation metric and is not tuned on the held-out test set.

$$L = -\sum_i [w_1 y_i log(p_i) + w_0(1 - y_i)log(1 - p_i)] / N$$

N is the number of training encounters; y_i is the observed binary outcome; p_i is the predicted probability; w_1 and w_0 are prespecified class weights. A regularization term may be added to penalize large model weights. AdamW, gradient clipping, fixed random seeds and patient-grouped minibatches are recommended.

3.7 Evaluation protocol and statistical analysis

Compare logistic regression, gradient-boosted trees, recurrent sequence models, Transformer-only, GNN-only, concatenation fusion and the proposed gated hybrid. Ensure that all baselines use the same eligible records and available features. Tune hyperparameters using nested or carefully separated validation data and report model size, runtime and missing-data sensitivity.

Primary metrics should be AUROC and AUPRC; secondary metrics include sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, F1 score and Brier score. Confidence intervals should be estimated by patient-level bootstrap resampling. Calibration intercept and slope should be reported along with a reliability diagram. Decision curve analysis should use clinically plausible threshold probabilities and be interpreted as exploratory.

Assess subgroup performance by age category, sex where recorded, care unit and missingness burden. Report subgroup sample sizes and event counts to avoid unstable comparisons. Robustness experiments should test truncated histories, missing measurements, coding changes and temporal shift. External validation and prospective silent deployment are prerequisites for claims about operational usefulness.

4. Results and Discussion

IMPORTANT: All numerical values in this section are SYNTHETIC ILLUSTRATIONS created to demonstrate the intended reporting format. They are not computed from patients, do not constitute experimental findings, and must not be cited as measured performance. Replace every illustrative number with audited held-out results before submission as an empirical research article.

Illustrative model	AUROC	AUPRC	Brier score
Logistic regression	0.741	0.312	0.182
Gradient boosting	0.783	0.364	0.166
Recurrent model	0.801	0.391	0.157

Transformer only	0.824	0.425	0.146
GNN only	0.811	0.408	0.152
Concatenation fusion	0.832	0.442	0.141
Hybrid gated model	0.846	0.463	0.134

Table 1. Hypothetical model comparison. Higher AUROC and AUPRC indicate better ranking; lower Brier score indicates smaller mean squared probability error. The example suggests a modest incremental gain for gated fusion, but no such gain has been established empirically.

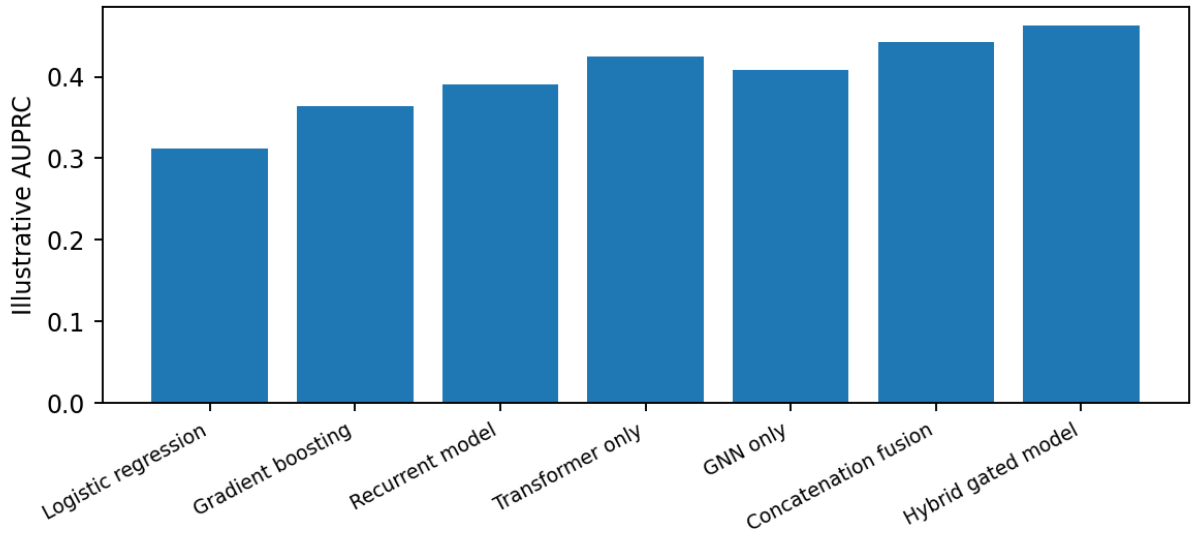

Figure 2. Synthetic example of precision–recall performance across candidate architectures. These values are for document illustration only.

4.1 Hypothetical ablation study

Illustrative variant	AUROC	AUPRC
Without time gaps	0.821	0.417
Without graph relations	0.824	0.425
Without missingness masks	0.829	0.431
Simple concatenation	0.832	0.442
Full hybrid design	0.846	0.463

Table 2. Synthetic ablation example. A genuine ablation must retrain each variant with identical partitions and report confidence intervals across repeated seeds. The purpose is to isolate whether the claimed gains arise from explicit graph structure, time encoding or the fusion gate.

4.2 Hypothetical operating-point analysis

Risk threshold	Sensitivity	Specificity	Precision
0.10	0.89	0.52	0.27
0.20	0.77	0.71	0.36
0.30	0.64	0.82	0.43
0.40	0.49	0.90	0.51

Table 3. Synthetic threshold trade-offs. Lower thresholds identify more events but generate more false alerts. Threshold selection should reflect local event prevalence, staff capacity and the clinical consequences of delayed intervention, not just the maximum F1 score.

4.3 Interpretation and limitations

A higher hypothetical AUPRC for the hybrid model would be consistent with complementary temporal and relational information, but alternative explanations include parameter count, tuning effort or feature leakage. A real analysis must compare capacity-matched baselines and include statistical uncertainty. The synthetic table deliberately does not support significance testing.

The model may inherit selection bias, recording bias, measurement frequency effects and coding differences. A patient-specific graph can also amplify historical inequities if edges reflect differential access to care. Clinicians should not interpret learned attention weights as causal mechanisms. A deployed system requires monitoring for calibration drift, subgroup performance and alert burden.

Before any clinical application, governance must address data permissions, security, model versioning, documentation, local ethics review, and human oversight. Prediction is not diagnosis and should not replace clinical judgment. The proposed model is not clinically validated.

5. Conclusion

This paper develops a comprehensive research design for personalized clinical risk prediction using a hybrid Transformer and graph neural network architecture. The temporal encoder is intended to represent longitudinal dependencies and irregular observation times, while a patient-specific heterogeneous graph captures explicit relations among diagnoses, medications, laboratory observations and encounters. A learned fusion gate integrates both views to generate calibrated risk estimates at a clearly specified prediction horizon. The methodology emphasizes index-time causality, patient-level data separation, preprocessing restricted to training data, careful outcome definitions, strong baselines, ablation studies, uncertainty intervals and subgroup audits.

The numerical results provided are synthetic demonstrations and must not be interpreted as evidence that the hybrid model improves clinical outcomes or predictive accuracy. The next research step is an authorized implementation on a versioned EHR dataset, followed by temporal

and external validation, calibration assessment and prospective workflow testing. Only after these stages could the approach be considered for carefully governed clinical decision support.

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