

Syed Arif Kamal[¶], Fareeha Sultan and Samira Sahar Jamil

SF Growth-and-Imaging Laboratory, Anthromathematics Group, Dept. of Mathematics, University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan. profdrakamal@gmail.com

Sensitivity and Specificity of Screening Tests

Sensitivity is the true-positive rate. It measures the proportion of actual positives, which are, correctly, identified. If a person is suffering from a certain disease, and a test, conducted to discover this condition, turns out positive, probability of this right decision may be represented by $(1-\beta)$, which is a measure of sensitivity. β is the probability of wrong decision, when the disease was present, but the relevant test conducted was negative. This is called false negative (missed diagnosis), which may result in denial of essential medical care. Such a situation could have tragic consequences, when early intervention may cure the person or prolong life. A very small β makes the test very sensitive, which has high performance. However, such a test is less reliable. A β close to unity results in many missed diagnoses. Such a test has a high false-negative rate and it is less sensitive. Hence, it generates mistaken perception of acceptability (a safety issue). *Specificity* is the true-negative rate. It measures the proportion of actual negatives, which are, correctly, identified. If a person is not suffering from a certain disease, and a test, conducted to discover this condition, turns out negative, probability of this right decision may be represented by $(1-\alpha)$, which is a measure of specificity. α is the probability of wrong decision, when the disease was not present, but the relevant test conducted was positive. This is called false positive, which may result in over-treatment. Such a situation could cause economic burden and discomfort to patient life. A very small

DISEASE ABSENT TEST OUTCOME NEGATIVE <i>True Negative</i> Probability of Right Decision = $1-\alpha$ SPECIFICITY	DISEASE ABSENT TEST OUTCOME POSITIVE <i>False Positive</i> Probability of Wrong Decision = α OVER-TREATMENT
DISEASE PRESENT TEST OUTCOME NEGATIVE <i>False Negative</i> Probability of Wrong Decision = β MEDICAL CARE DENIAL	DISEASE PRESENT TEST OUTCOME POSITIVE <i>True Positive</i> Probability of Right Decision = $1-\beta$ SENSITIVITY

Fig. 1. Matrix representing sensitivity and specificity in the context of clinical setting

α makes the test highly specific, which is very reliable. However, it has lower performance. An α close to unity results in a high false-positive rate and it is less specific. Hence, it generates mistaken perception of unacceptability (a performance issue). This paper introduced 2 new concepts — *relative sensitivity* and *relative specificity*, in which probabilities of a freshly-introduced test are computed on the basis of agreed-upon standards. The definitions of sensitivity and specificity given in the chart shall become definitions of relative quantities, if disease present (absent) is replaced by positive (negative) result of a clinically-accepted test (agreed-upon standard). In fact, the verdict of a disease present or absent is too big a claim to be given by humans. Results of physical, biochemical and radiological examinations are combined through a suitable clinical model to declare presence of a certain disease. Combined with the definitions of *accuracy* and *precision*, presented earlier by the first author (<http://www.ngds-ku.org/Presentations/Physics2.pdf>), relative sensitivity and relative specificity should play a leading role in deciding about the suitability of a screening test.

Keywords: Screening tests, sensitivity, specificity, relative sensitivity, relative specificity, alpha error, beta error

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest is identified for this work

Grant Sponsor: Dean's (Science) Research Grant, University of Karachi, number DFSR/2009

Research Ethics: Project initiated after Institutional Review Process and conducted in compliance with ethical and human-right standards in our region.

Web address of this document: <http://www.ngds-ku.org/Presentations/Screening.pdf>

HTML version: <http://www.ngds-ku.org/pub/confabstA.htm#C104>:

[¶]PhD (Mathematical Neuroscience); MA, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, MD, United States; MS, Indiana, Bloomington, IN, United States; MSc, *summa cum laude*; BSc (Honors), *summa cum laude*, University of Karachi; Project Director, the NGDS Pilot Project; Director, SF Growth-and-Imaging Laboratory; Associated Professor, Malmö General Hospital, Sweden (1988); Visiting Faculty, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York, United States (1990); Sessional Faculty, the Aga Khan University Medical College, Karachi (1996-2006); Master Trainer for Anthropometry, Tawana Pakistan and Department of Special Education, University of Karachi (2006); Member, Subject Committee for Physical Education, Health and Sport Sciences, National Testing Service Pakistan (2012-2015); Head, Anthromathematics Group, University of Karachi • *paper mail:* Professor and Chairman, Department of Mathematics, University of Karachi, PO Box 8423, Karachi 75270, Pakistan • *telephone:* +92 21 9926 1300-15 ext. 2293 • *project URL:* <http://ngds-ku.org> • *homepage:* <http://www.ngds-ku.org/kamal>