A Smarter Lens on DNA:

popEVE and the Future of Genetic Diagnosis

Paper written by:
Alba **D'Agosta**
Elisabetta **Milani**

HEPHAESTUS APPLIED ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ASSOCIATION

Genetic sequencing has become ever more common in both research and clinics, but a key problem remains: when a patient's genome reveals a variant (especially those called missense mutation, meaning a single-amino-acid swap) whose impact is unknown, doctors often don't know whether it's harmless, harmful or somewhere in between.
The new AI-model popEVE offers a fresh approach: by combining evolutionary information across species with human population variation data, it can place any such variant on a unified scale of likely harm across all genes.
This could potentially be a big step towards a faster diagnosis of rare diseases, especially in situations where the causal gene is entirely novel or the variant has never been seen before.

How popEVE works

The key insight behind popEVE rests on two core principles.
First, some amino-acid positions in proteins are evolutionarily conserved: if a species is not able to tolerate a change in a specific position, it is a hint that the same change would be deleterious
in humans too. The earlier model EVE (Evolutionary model of Variant Effect) used deep generative modelling of thousands of species' protein sequences to estimate how harmful each amino-acid substitution is.
However, just because a change disrupts protein function doesn't always mean it causes a severe disease in an individual, and also different genes will tolerate different degrees of change. PopEVE addresses this by calibrating those evolutionary-based scores with human-population data, such as the UK Biobank, to reflect how strongly a given variant is constrained in healthy humans.
The outcome that follows is pretty intuitive: for any missense mutation across the human proteome (entire set of proteins produced by a cell, tissue, or organism at a certain time), popEVE gives a score on a continuous spectrum of pathogenicity, which means that it is possible to compare a variant in gene A to a variant in gene B on the same scale. Traditional tools often provide only relative scores or gene-specific scales.

How it compares and why it matters

In testing, popEVE delivered a striking performance. Among 31,000 families with children who suffered severe developmental disorders, the model examined 513 cases in which the children showed a completely new genetic mutation. PopEVE correctly identified the mutation as the most damaging variant 98% of the time.
It also out-performed competitors including models developed by DeepMind ("AlphaMissense") in predicting severity and in handling populations of non-European ancestry.
Because of this latter strength, and since it does not require enormous computing power (its evolutionary data can be reused and the calibrated model runs efficiently), popEVE may be especially well suited for deployment in low and middle income countries. Research suggests it could help genetic diagnosis in settings where parents' samples or large cohorts are unavailable.

Real-world implications

• **Faster diagnoses of rare diseases:** for patients whose variant is in a gene never previously implicated in diseases, popEVE offers a way to prioritise and interpret that variant rather than waiting for more cases to accumulate

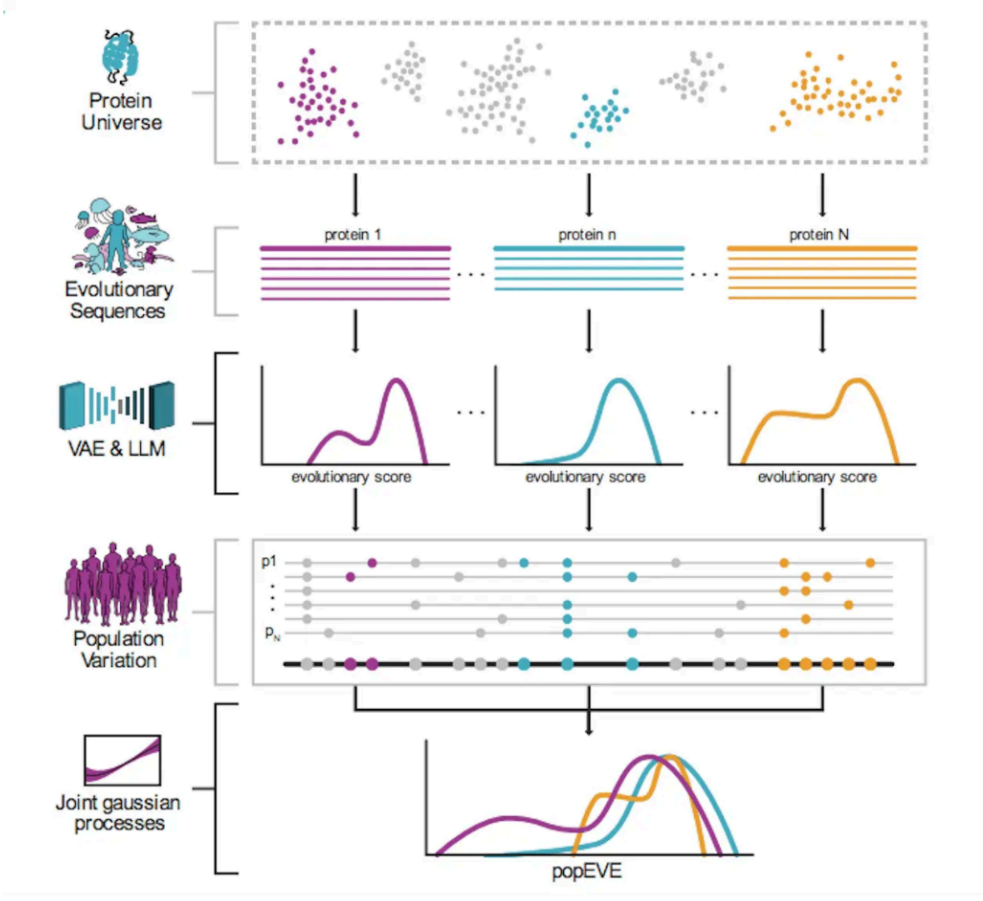
• **Global reach:** By working well across ancestry backgrounds and requiring less computing muscle, popEVE helps reduce the Euro-centric bias in genetic diagnostics

• **Broad applications:** While the current focus is on missense variants, the framework suggests a path toward interpreting many sorts of genetic changes, helping clinicians and researchers focus on which ones matter most

• **Ethical & practical benefit:** For patients and families with undiagnosed conditions, narrowing down the causal variant more quickly means earlier potential intervention, targeted therapy, and more informative genetic counselling

Conclusion

PopEVE represents a significant advance in our ability to assess the potential impact of genetic
variants, especially when mutation has never been seen before.
By integrating evolution and human population data, it offers a unified, cross-gene scale of
pathogenicity, making variant interpretation more consistent and reliable.
This means fewer variants of unknown significance and more actionable insights for rare-disease diagnostics.



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