On a beautiful spring day in April 2015, sun shining across the white mountain tops, the smell of flower blossom is in the breeze, I was full of joy to start my PhD.

During the interview they told me they had a rich database of patient data ready to be analyzed. I was excited to start unraveling the mysteries behind those data, to tell the story of those patients. Except for, the database was really more of an archive of patient files on paper. I do not know why they called it a database. This linguistic mishap then shaped the future of the three coming years. I had to start that data base to be able to analyze the data!

There were about 8000 patient files, some were scanned and the paper files could no longer be accessed. I could no longer feel the spring breeze. I was smelling old paper smell all day long. Covered in piles and piles of paper, hoping to have one of those “Eureka!” moments…

Then one of the nurses comes to the office and looks at this new miserable girl at work. She says “bonjour” and her eyes look puzzled at me and wonders what my task is in the archives dungeon.

“First day at work, huh?” She asks. I nod. She resumes “I had trouble too when I first got here. I was asked to use this computer to print all those files you see here! “

My brain sees a spark of optimism and I ask: “Computer? So you use a computer system around here?”

I follow her to the office upstairs. She shows me where all the data is stored. Turns out, they had a software to enter the patient information, but they just keep the files because it is easier to use. I dig into the software documentation. I read that the company who provided the software has a tech support. Hurray!

I email and explain the situation. “Can the data be exported?” I ask, hoping the answer would be yes. I waited a day, then two, and I never got a response. On the third day I got a message. The tech guy said: “the older data that was entered 2004-2008 cannot be exported as the software was old and there was no data back-up or storage. But data starting 2009 can be exported.”

“It will take some days”, he wrote. And he has to do it over the weekend, to minimize risk of data loss when extracting the data while the software is in use.

Hurray!

The data arrived in raw form, completely unstructured. I spent the next year structuring the data. But finally, I have a database that I can analyze!

The end.

By Susan Kamal