Evaluating Expert-Curated Data for LLM-Based Adverse Drug Event Classification

March 2026

Abstract

We evaluate whether providing a large language model (LLM) with a small set of expert-labeled examples (few-shot prompting) improves its classification of FDA adverse event reports compared to giving it only task instructions and no examples (zero-shot prompting). Using 200 reports from the FDA Adverse Event Reporting System (FAERS), we classify each report by clinical severity and primary organ system under both strategies. Including just 8 expert-annotated examples in the prompt yields a 12.8% increase in mean confidence and corrects clinically significant misclassifications in 11.5% of cases, precisely the ambiguous reports where automated drug safety systems are most likely to miss safety signals. These findings suggest that even small, carefully curated example sets can produce disproportionate gains in LLM performance on domain-specific classification tasks.

1. Introduction

Post-market drug safety surveillance depends on the timely identification of adverse event signals from spontaneous reporting databases. The FDA's Adverse Event Reporting System (FAERS) is the largest such database in the United States, receiving over two million reports annually [1]. Each report contains drug exposure information and coded reaction terms using the Medical Dictionary for Regulatory Activities (MedDRA) terminology [2], along with binary seriousness flags indicating whether the event resulted in death, hospitalization, or other significant outcomes.

Despite this structure, FAERS data lacks granular severity classification and organ-system categorization at the resolution needed for automated signal detection. Reports indicating "drug ineffective" are coded alongside reports of hepatic failure, and peripheral edema in a pulmonary arterial hypertension patient may be misattributed to cardiac dysfunction without clinical context. Human safety analysts address these ambiguities through expert judgment, but this approach does not scale.

Recent work has demonstrated that large language models can perform medical text classification with performance approaching clinical experts on structured tasks [3, 4]. However, the sensitivity of these models to prompt design, and specifically to the quality of in-context examples, remains underexplored in drug safety applications. Prior studies in clinical NLP have shown that few-shot prompting with domain-expert examples can outperform zero-shot approaches on medical entity extraction [5], but the magnitude of this improvement on adverse event classification has not been quantified.

This study addresses that gap. We compare zero-shot and expert-curated few-shot LLM classification of FAERS reports across two dimensions, clinical severity and organ system, and analyze the specific disagreement patterns to understand where and why data curation produces its largest effects.

2. Methods

2.1 Data Collection

We retrieved 200 adverse event reports from the openFDA Drug Adverse Events API (api.fda.gov/drug/event.json). For each report, we extracted medicinal product names, MedDRA-coded reaction terms, and FDA seriousness indicators including seriousnessdeath, seriousnesshospitalization, and seriousnesslifethreatening. We constructed a natural language narrative for each report by concatenating drug names and reaction terms into a standardized format.

2.2 Classification Schema

We defined a two-axis classification schema. **Severity** was graded on a four-tier scale: mild, moderate, severe, and life-threatening. **Organ system** classification used 14 categories aligned with MedDRA System Organ Classes: cardiac, hepatic, neurological, gastrointestinal, respiratory, dermatologic, musculoskeletal, renal, hematologic, immunologic, metabolic, reproductive, psychiatric, and general/systemic. Each report received a primary and optional secondary organ-system assignment.

2.3 Prompting Strategies

Zero-shot. The model received the classification schema, including the complete list of severity tiers and organ-system categories, with instructions to return structured JSON containing severity, primary organ system, secondary organ system, and a confidence score. No examples were provided.

Few-shot with expert curation. The same schema was augmented with 8 expert-annotated examples spanning the full severity and organ-system range. Each example included the adverse event narrative, the correct classification, and a brief clinical reasoning statement explaining the rationale. Examples were selected to cover known edge cases: drug inefficacy reports, hepatic enzyme elevations, pregnancy-related events, and drug-class-specific side effects.

Both classification passes were executed using the Claude API (Anthropic) with structured JSON output. The model used was Claude Sonnet, selected for its balance of

reasoning capability and throughput on structured extraction tasks [6].

3. Results

3.1 Overall Agreement

Across 200 reports, zero-shot and few-shot classifications agreed on severity in 88.5% of cases and on primary organ system in 90.0% of cases. Joint agreement on both fields was 82.0%. Mean confidence increased from 0.74 (zero-shot) to 0.84 (few-shot), a gain of 12.8 percentage points.

Table 1. Classification metrics. Delta = zero-shot to few-shot.

Metric	Zero-Shot	Few-Shot	Delta
Mean confidence	0.74	0.84	+0.10
Severe/life-threatening (FDA serious)	73.1%	76.9%	+3.8%
Cardiac assignments	12	3	-9
Hepatic assignments	3	6	+3
Reproductive assignments	4	8	+4

3.2 Severity Disagreements

The 23 severity disagreements (11.5%) concentrated in three patterns. The dominant shift was **moderate to mild** (15 cases), occurring almost exclusively on reports where the reaction term was "drug ineffective" or "unevaluable event." Zero-shot treated these as moderate adverse events; the expert examples demonstrated that lack of efficacy is a product quality issue, not a clinical safety event, and should be classified as mild/general-systemic.

Three cases shifted from **severe to life-threatening**, all involving opioid overdose. The expert example for fentanyl patch overdose (DURAGESIC-100) anchored the model to recognize that opioid overdose implies respiratory depression and CNS compromise, warranting the highest severity tier regardless of whether death was explicitly reported.

Two cases shifted from **mild to severe**, both involving hepatic enzyme elevations that zero-shot classified as routine lab findings. The expert example for Letairis-associated hepatotoxicity taught the model that elevated liver enzymes in the context of a drug with a boxed hepatotoxicity warning [7] represent a clinically significant safety signal.

3.3 Organ-System Disagreements

Twenty reports (10.0%) received different primary organ-system assignments. The largest shift was **cardiac to metabolic** (4 cases), where zero-shot classified peripheral edema and fluid retention under cardiac pathology. The few-shot model correctly recognized that edema in patients receiving ambrisentan (Letairis) for pulmonary arterial hypertension is a known endothelin receptor antagonist class effect mediated through fluid retention, not cardiac dysfunction [8]. Four additional cases shifted from **general/systemic to reproductive**, involving maternal exposure and fetal outcome reports that zero-shot failed to route to the appropriate organ system.

3.4 Confidence Calibration

Beyond the shift in mean confidence, the distributional change is noteworthy. Zero-shot confidence was bimodal: unambiguous reactions clustered at 0.80, while edge cases dropped to 0.50 to 0.60. Few-shot confidence concentrated above 0.80 for the majority of reports, including many that zero-shot flagged as uncertain. This suggests that the expert examples resolve genuine ambiguity rather than merely inflating scores. The model reports higher confidence because it has better decision criteria, not because it is less calibrated.

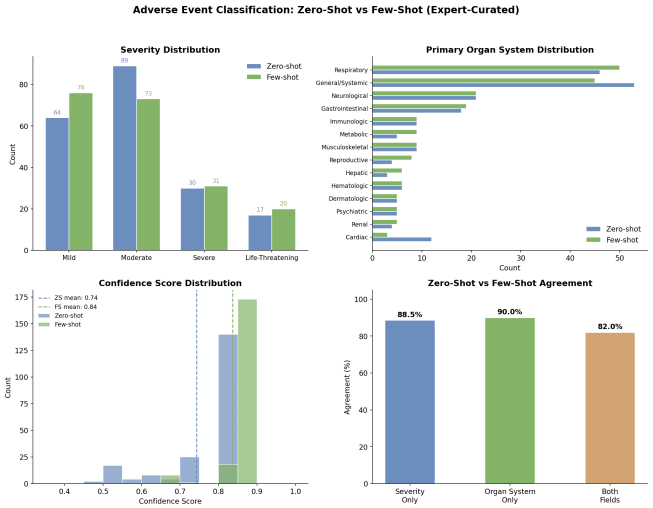

Figure 1. Classification comparison: severity distribution (top left), organ-system distribution (top right), confidence histograms (bottom left), and inter-method agreement (bottom right).

4. Discussion

The 11.5% severity disagreement rate concentrates on the cases that matter most in drug safety monitoring: ambiguous reports where a naive classifier either inflates non-events to moderate severity or fails to escalate genuine safety signals. This has direct implications for automated triage, where both false positives (overwhelming reviewers) and false negatives (missing signals) carry operational and patient safety costs.

The organ-system misattribution findings are particularly noteworthy. Without drug-class context, the model defaults to surface-level pattern matching, for example edema triggers cardiac, enzyme elevation triggers general, that a clinician would immediately recognize as incorrect. Eight expert examples were sufficient to shift this behavior, suggesting that the model has latent pharmacological knowledge that appropriate in-context examples can activate. This aligns with work on knowledge elicitation in LLMs [9], which shows that performance on domain-specific tasks is often bounded not by knowledge but by prompt specificity.

Several limitations should be noted. The sample of 200 reports may over-represent certain drug classes (notably Letairis/ambrisentan). Classification was validated against FDA seriousness flags rather than independent pharmacist review, limiting our ability to report precision and recall against a clinical gold standard. The 8-example few-shot set

was curated by a single analyst; inter-rater variability in example selection could affect reproducibility.

5. Conclusion and Future Work

Expert-curated few-shot examples produce disproportionate improvements in LLM classification of adverse event reports, concentrated in clinically significant edge cases where automated drug safety systems are most vulnerable to error. A set of 8 examples was sufficient to correct severity miscalibration, activate drug-class-specific knowledge, and resolve organ-system ambiguity.

Future work will expand the curated set to 25+ cases targeting reproductive toxicity and multi-drug interactions. We plan to introduce a pharmacist review loop for precision/recall against expert ground truth, scale to 5,000+ reports across broader therapeutic areas, and evaluate whether reinforcement learning from human feedback can further close the gap on edge cases that static few-shot examples do not cover.

References

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