SCIENTIFIC CORRESPONDENCE

Variability across the optic nerve head in scanning laser tomography

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Aim: To characterise measurement variability in scanning laser tomography of the optic nerve head.

Methods: 21 normal and 21 glaucoma subjects underwent same and separate day test-retest Heidelberg retina tomograph imaging by the same and different operators.

Results: Rim area was most reproducible among parameters. Its variability tended to be highest temporally and increased (p<0.05) with testing involving different operators and visits. Nature of regional variability differed between glaucoma and normal eyes and between standard and 320 \( \mu \)m reference planes.

Conclusions: Rim area is reproducible and potentially useful as a marker of progression. Pattern of variability and the influence of different reference planes, disease, operators, and visits should be considered when evaluating progression.

Scanning laser tomography of the optic nerve head (ONH) is reproducible, but in what way it should be used to evaluate glaucoma progression remains to be determined. To judge progression, measurement variability needs to be distinguished from true change, for which a detailed understanding of reproducibility is needed. Variability in Heidelberg retina tomograph (HRT) image analysis may be influenced by blood vessels, cardiac pulsation, and the ONH’s variably sloped, excavated surface. Progression is not uniform over the ONH and its detection is likely to be influenced by test conditions and variability in different ONH regions. We studied the reproducibility of different topographic parameters, from which one was selected to assess variability regionally. Whether testing involving different operators and visits affects variability was studied in normal and glaucoma eyes. Then the possibility that different reference planes vary and the ONH’s variability proportioned to its point estimates. In normal eyes, median rim area CV for intraoperator-intravisit and interoperator-intravisit, and (4) interoperator-intervisit.

Analysis

Mean topography images from one randomly selected eye of each subject were analysed. All images had pixel mean SD <50 \( \mu \)m. Contour lines, all drawn by the same observer (JT), were exported to test-retest images. For global analysis, topographic parameters (see Fig 1) were analysed by two reference planes: (1) standard reference plane set 50 \( \mu \)m posterior to contour line height between 350° and 356° (HRT software v1.09 to 1.10), and (2) 320 \( \mu \)m reference plane offset by 320 \( \mu \)m posterior to the mean height of the reference ring (HRT software v1.09 to 1.10). For regional analysis, a single reliable parameter was assessed in 30° sectors round the ONH.

Parameter variability was compared using the coefficient of variation (CV). Regional variability was analysed as described by Bland and Altman. Significance testing was by the Wilcoxon signed rank test (Mann-Whitney test) to determine if sector variability (differences) changed with different operators and visits.

RESULTS

In Figure 1, CV for both reference planes tended to increase with different test operators and visits. Apart from disc area, the rim area of the CV was lowest and reasonably proportioned to its point estimates. In normal eyes, median rim area CV for intraoperator-intravisit and interoperator-intervisit testing was 1.1% and 1.6% respectively for the 320 \( \mu \)m reference plane; and 1.5% and 2.3% respectively for the standard reference plane. A comparable pattern was seen in
DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that different test operators and visits affect reproducibility independently, and that this varies by reference plane and ONH region. Previous studies of parameter variability have not addressed the influence of different operators, visits, or reference planes in mean images. One study that measured global pixel variability reported that different visits did not significantly affect variability, though a trend was seen. We studied discrete regions of rim area and our results agree with Jonescu-Cuyppers et al, who found that variability was generally less (median 30%) in same day repeat imaging than in day to day imaging.

Some points should be noted. Firstly, cup area CV was higher than for rim area because its point estimates were small relative to variability (SD/mean) rather than cup area being more variable per se. In fact, SD for cup area and rim area were similar (p>0.05). Secondly, cup shape had high variability, suggesting its limited usefulness in longitudinal evaluation (although it has been suggested for diagnosis). It could be that tilting and image decentring between images changes cup shape to cause variability. Thirdly, the possibility that progression occurred between visits in glaucoma cannot be excluded. However, such change manifesting as bias was not seen in global rim area agreement analysis (separate analysis; not shown).

Possible reasons for the observed patterns of variability are, firstly, the ONH is often tilted temporally and inferiorly so that the reference plane is more superficial in the ONH temporally than nasally. Slight shifts may lift the reference plane above the temporal but not nasal rim surface to artefactually reduce rim area temporally. In glaucoma, the ONH could become depressed relative to the surrounding retina, causing the reference plane to lie more superficially in the nerve and measurements to be more variable. Secondly, reference plane shifts should affect the temporal rim-cup more than in steeper nasal regions. Thirdly, the standard reference plane is fixed to a small 6° section of the inferotemporal contour line, where it

Figure 1 Variability of topographic parameters measured by coefficient of variation (CV). Graphs: top row = normal eyes, standard reference plane (ref plane); middle row = normal eyes, 320 µm reference plane; bottom row = glaucoma eyes, standard reference plane. Left column = intraoperator-intravisit testing, right column = interoperator-intervisit testing. Only standard reference plane analysis for glaucoma eyes shown (pattern in 320 µm reference plane data similar). Box plots = median, first, and third quartiles, error bars = 95% percentiles. Bar graphs = corresponding point estimates. X-axis: A = disc area, B = cup area, C = cup-disc area ratio, D = rim area, E = cup volume, F = rim volume, G = mean cup depth, H = maximum cup depth, I = cup shape measure, *data were not analysed in glaucoma as cup shape values ranged from negative to positive, making it difficult to analyse CV meaningfully. Negative and positive values represent a skew towards low or high values in the height distributions of the cup respectively. Nevertheless, normal eyes gave a reasonable estimation of cup shape variability, J = retinal thickness, K = retinal cross sectional area.
“pivots.” Image tilting or reference plane shifts may cause more variation nasally opposite the pivot.

Rim area is reproducible and potentially useful as a marker of progression. Its variability differs between regions of the ONH, is influenced by testing involving different visits and operators, and varies with reference planes. These features can be expected in standard reference plane analysis of HRT II images and should be considered when evaluating progression. It seems that a reference plane that is stable relative to the ONH is vital to optimising reproducibility and should be explored further.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This study was supported in part by grants from the International Glaucoma Association and the Frances and Renee Hock Trust. The authors thank Wendy Franks, Ed White, and Ian Thrasher for technical support.

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Accepted for publication 3 September 2002

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