Real-Time Subglottic Stenosis Imaging Using Optical Coherence Tomography in the Rabbit

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Importance: Subglottic stenosis (SGS) is a severe, acquired, potentially life-threatening disease that can be caused by endotracheal tube intubation. Newborns and neonates are particularly susceptible to SGS owing to the small caliber of their airway.

Objective: To demonstrate optical coherence tomography (OCT) capabilities in detecting injury and scar formation using a rabbit model. Optical coherence tomography may provide a noninvasive, bedside or intensive care unit modality for the identification of early airway trauma with the intention of preventing progression to SGS and can image the upper airway through an existing endotracheal tube coupled with a small fiber-optic probe.

Design: Rabbits underwent suspension laryngoscopy with induction of SGS via epithelial injury. This model was used to test and develop our advanced, high-speed, high-resolution OCT imaging system using a 3-dimensional microelectromechanical systems-based scanning device integrated with a fiber-optic probe to acquire high-resolution anatomic images of the subglottic epithelium and lamina propria.

Setting: All experiments were performed at the Beckman Laser Institute animal operating room.

Intervention or Exposure: Optical coherence tomography and endoscopy was performed with suspension laryngoscopy at 6 different time intervals and compared with conventional digital endoscopic images and histologic sections. Fifteen rabbits were killed at 3, 7, 14, 21, and 42 days after the induction of SGS. The laryngotraheal complexes were serially sectioned for histologic analysis.

Main Outcome and Measure: Histologic sections, endoscopic images, and OCT images were compared with one another to determine if OCT could accurately delineate the degree of SGS achieved.

Results: The rabbit model was able to reliably and reproducibly achieve grade I SGS. The real-time OCT imaging system was able to (1) identify multiple structures in the airway; (2) delineate different tissue planes, such as the epithelium, basement membrane, lamina propria, and cartilage; and (3) detect changes in each tissue plane produced by trauma. Optical coherence tomography was also able demonstrate a clear picture of airway injury that correlated with the endoscopic and histologic images. With subjective review, 3 patients had high correlation between OCT and histologic images, 10 demonstrated some correlation with histologic images, and 2 showed little to no correlation with histologic images.

Conclusions and Relevance: Optical coherence tomography, coupled with a fiber-optic probe, identifies subglottic scarring and can detect tissue changes in the rabbit airway to a depth of 1 mm. This technology brings us 1 step closer to minimally invasive subglottic airway monitoring in the intubated neonate, with the ultimate goal of preventing SGS and better managing the airway.


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Figure 1. Schematics of the optical coherence tomography system built by University of California, Irvine, department of biomedical engineering in conjunction with Beckman Laser Institute used in this current rabbit model. DSP indicates digital signal processing; OCT, optical coherence tomography.

OCT DEVICE AND INSTRUMENTATION

The OCT system is schematically illustrated in Figure 1. Light is generated from a near-infrared, high-speed sweeping laser (sweeping speed, 50 kHz; full width at half-maximum $\Delta \lambda = 100$ nm, 1310 nm [SS-OCT imaging system; Axsun Technology]). The microelectromechanical systems (MEMs)-based laser source has a high coherence length (12 mm) and high power (20 mW on average). The beam is directed into a $1 \times 2$ 10:90 coupler, with 90% power in the sample arm and 10% in the reference arm. The back-reflected signal from the reference arm and the backscattered signal from the sample arm are guided into a $2 \times 2$ coupler. The interference signals out of the $2 \times 2$ coupler are sent into a balanced amplified photodetector (PDB130C; Thorlabs Inc.). A high-speed digitizer (ATS9350; AlazarTech) was used to digitize the resulting radiofrequency output from the photodetector. The resultant axial resolution of the SS-OCT system used in this study is approximately 8 $\mu$m, while the lateral resolution (diffraction limited) approaches 10 $\mu$m. The system acquires cross-sectional tomographic images at a frame rate of 41.66 per second, with each frame separated by 6.25 $\mu$m from one another. This separation distance can be modified as the pullback rate of the probe is controlled by a linear servomotor by which speed can be adjusted to suit the purpose or application.

The imaging probe consists of single-mode fiber, with a gradient refractive index (GRIN) lens attached at its distal end, a microrotational motor with reflective surface mounted on a spinning shaft, and a linear motorized translational stage. The GRIN lens is 1 mm in diameter and has a working distance of 3 mm. A glass tube is fused to the micromotor (Namiki Precision Jewel Co) and is placed in front of the GRIN lens to reflect the light toward the tissue as it rotates, resulting in a circumferential scan. The fiber and the GRIN lens are held together with a glass tube, and the micromotor are both packaged inside a plastic sheath, with the distal end sealed. The final packaged probe’s outer diameter is 2.2 mm. The probe is attached on a linear motorized stage (Zaber Technologies Inc), and the stage is synchronously controlled by the computer, along with the image acquisition. To image the rabbit subglottis, the probe is placed...
inside the rabbit’s airway at the desired location, and the linear translation stage gradually withdraws the probe at a speed of 0.25 mm per second with retrograde acquisition of images. With this setup, an axial 360° view of the airway can be obtained. With each pullback, hundreds of images are obtained sequentially from inferior to superior views.

**RABBIT SUBGLOTTIC STENOSIS MODEL**

Fifteen New Zealand white rabbits, ranging in weight from 3.5 to 4.2 kg, were used during the preliminary stage of our study. This study was performed under the aegis of the University of California institutional animal care and use committee. The rabbits were housed in an approved animal care facility with water and food ad libitum. The New Zealand white rabbit has been used in many subglottic studies and has been found to be a reliable model with different methods of airway scarring. Rabbits in this arm were also imaged with endoscopy and OCT on post-brush injury day 35.

Abbreviation: OCT, optical coherence tomography.

Rabbits underwent suspension laryngoscopy with induction of epithelial injury using a stiff-bristled brush, which led to the development of subglottic stenosis. Endoscopy and OCT imaging were performed on rabbits in days 0, 3, 7, 14, 21, and 42. Histologic images correlate with the day that the rabbit was killed.

On subsequent study days, the rabbits were sedated and then resuspended for endoscopic and OCT image acquisition. The rabbits were killed 3, 7, 14, 21, or 42 days after initial airway injury to coincide with different stages of wound healing (Table). We had no unexpected early mortalities from this study, and all animals were killed on the date planned. Stridor was noted in only 1 rabbit in the first few days after induction of airway injury. The rabbits were killed after induction of anesthesia with an intravenous injection of 2 mL of pentobarbital sodium and phenytoin sodium (Euthasol; Virbac AH Inc). The laryngotracheal complex was then dissected and fixed in formaldehyde for histologic evaluation. After 24 hours in formaldehyde, samples were embedded in paraffin. The samples were serially sectioned into 6-μm annular thick slices and stained with hematoxylin-cosin. Photomicrographs (PictureFrame) were then taken for documentation.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Serial sections of histologic specimens were examined at both low- and high-power magnification. The presence of inflammatory cells, fibroblasts, neovascularization, and reepithelialization was documented and corresponded with the course of normal tissue healing as expected, depending on the number of days after airway injury that the animals were sacrificed. A representative slice at the level of greatest airway scarring was selected.

To compare OCT with conventional histologic images, OCT images acquired on the day the animal was killed were compared with corresponding histologic sections of that rabbit’s airway. Registration of the site of OCT image acquisition was achieved by identifying natural landmarks, such as the tip of the arytenoid cartilage, the cricoid cartilage, and the first tracheal ring. Registration of OCT with histologic images using
markers in the airway is a challenge. In pilot studies, an initial group of rabbits had various materials injected into the submucosa with fine-gauge spinal needles in an attempt to create a registry point to facilitate slice-by-slice comparison of OCT and histologic images. Contrast agents evaluated included India ink (standard tattoo ink), titanium dioxide, and colloidal gold. Although the material could be visually identified by endoscopy at the time of injection, subsequent endoscopic examination at later days failed to demonstrate persistent of the marker within the tissues. These contrast agents were also not visualized during OCT imaging or later histologic section.

Selected paired OCT images and histologic sections were then presented to investigators at our institution with expertise in both OCT imaging and histology (A.Y.Y., J.B., E.S., A.H., A.E.H., B.J.W., and 2 investigators with expertise in OCT but not part of current study team). They were first asked to assess the presence of airway scarring, then asked to rate the anatomic similarities between the OCT and histologic images. Grading was performed using a Likert scale where a score of 1 implied high correlation; 2, some correlation; and 3, little to no correlation. Other members of the study team were asked to trace the area of tissue thickening and the circumference of the native airway on hard copies with a marking pen. These drawings overlaid on OCT images were then scanned and the area calculated using Adobe Photoshop (Adobe Systems Inc). The scar area was then divided by the native airway area, and a percentage of airway occluded by scarring was thus estimated.

Our method of inducing subglottic injury in the rabbit yielded consistent, reproducible results under multiple operators. Airway scarring measured by fractional airway area measurements ranged from 9% to 34% as identified by OCT, and 23% to 43% by histologic images. Among OCT experts, the area of stenosis was consistently identified within a standard error of 2.8%, and among histology experts, the area of stenosis was consistently identified within a standard error of 3.2%. Error bars indicate standard errors.

**RESULTS**

Figure 2. The area of scar as seen by optical coherence tomography (OCT) and histologic examination was evaluated by blinded investigators. The x-axis shows the rabbit numbers. Airway scarring measured by fractional airway area measurements ranged from 9% to 34% as identified by OCT, and 23% to 43% by histologic images. Among OCT experts, the area of stenosis was consistently identified within a standard error of 2.8%, and among histology experts, the area of stenosis was consistently identified within a standard error of 3.2%. Error bars indicate standard errors.

Figure 3. Histologic images (A-C) and optical coherence tomographic (OCT) images (D-F) of a control rabbit. A, An axial slice of the airway at the most inferior edge of the cricoid cartilage and the first tracheal ring. B, The cricoid cartilage. C, The most superior aspect of the cricoid cartilage. D-F, The level of the airway can be gauged based on the shape change of the airway as demonstrated by these figures. The classic sideways “D” is seen with the tracheal rings, a circular shape at the level of the cricoid and the ovoid shape at the immediate subglottic. The missing data at the 5-o’clock position are a shadow caused by the motor wire of the OCT probe.
Figure 5 demonstrates another stage of wound healing in which reepithelization and collagen formation are occurring, with submucosal changes that are clearly different on OCT than inflammation alone. Figure 6 and Figure 7 show the later stages of wound healing in which remodeling is occurring. Both figures demonstrate that OCT can detect both surface and submucosal changes along with correlative histologic images. The use of OCT to gauge the presence of scar formation using a simple 3-point scale provided interesting results. Of the 15 animals, all but 1 had evidence of scarring identified on OCT.

Three animals had high correlation between OCT and histologic images, 10 demonstrated some correlation to histologic images, and 2 showed little or no correlation with histologic images. The 2 OCT images that reviewers overall thought had little to no correlation to histologic images had a large segment of the scarred tissue region blocked by the motor wire artifact. The scanning head of the OCT probe is a MEM’s micromotor, and a wire by necessity delivers power, blocks the optical pathway, and obscures a full 360° view. Future technical developments may involve the development of external ro-
DISCUSSION

The long-term objective of our research is to develop OCT imaging systems that can be used in the NICU to image the microstructure of the neonatal subglottic airway with the intention of identifying early airway edema or trauma that might have the potential to progress to irreversible airway damage. Our ultimate goal is to better identify patients at risk for major airway injury from endotracheal intubation, provide additional structural information to enhance extubation criteria, and reduce the incidence of subglottic stenosis. Previous work by our group has demonstrated the feasibility of this approach in neonates and pediatric patients using slow, 2-dimensional time-domain OCT systems.13,15

This study represents the evolution and the technology aimed at refining OCT imaging technology for use in high-speed, high-resolution, real-time imaging of the neonatal intubated airway. The current work represents a move to high-speed Fourier domain technology. We have a reproducible rabbit model of subglottic stenosis and have shown the ability to detect phases of wound healing using OCT coupled with a fiber-optic probe in a suspended airway. Changes to the airway surface anatomy are easily identified by OCT and correlate with histologic findings. However, OCT performed using existing technology offers limited depth of optical penetration in turbid media; currently achievable depth of penetration is less than 1 mm. With thick scars or tissue swelling, the border between soft tissue and cartilage is not always visualized. Hence, extensive local soft-tissue injury, swelling, and scar with associated major increases in tissue thickness can pose a challenge.

Regardless of the limited information at deeper tissue levels, examiners who compared OCT and histologic images were able to identify areas of airway stenosis in both data sets. Among OCT experts, the area of stenosis was consistently identified within a standard error of 2.8%, and among histology experts, the area of stenosis was consistently identified within a standard error of 3.2%. However, between OCT and histologic images, there was general trend in reporting lower-than-expected degrees of airway stenosis in the OCT group. This can be accounted for in several ways. First, the shadow cast by the MEMs motor wire eliminated signal from a region of interest, and in that area tissue was simply not evaluated on OCT. Second, the limited depth of tissue penetration by the current OCT system may not have measured the full thickness of the scar. Third, the current probe's working distance was unable to capture the entire airway in a 360° manner in wider cross-sectional areas of the airway, and fourth, compression artifact and warping of the specimens during histologic preparation led to flattening of the specimens, thereby effectively decreasing the measured airway area. We are working on addressing these issues in future studies, and we are building a long-range OCT system to be able to capture images over greater distances.

Fourier domain long-range OCT systems have only recently become an area of interest for optical engineers and scientists.37 It is a focus of our research group as well. Depth of penetration remains a vexing issue for all OCT systems because optical scattering and absorption limit the return of coherent photomicrographs to the imaging system. Typically, 0.5 to 1.0 mm is the depth of penetration at which useable information can be obtained, but this varies immensely with tissue turbidity, the presence of blood, or scattering media (eg, turbid secretions, refluxed gastric contents). This is a fundamental limitation of this technology.

Figure 6. A rabbit killed 21 days after mucosal injury. Endoscopic (A), histologic (B), and optical coherence tomographic (C) images. Circumferential scarring with reepithelialization are seen in all imaging modalities.

Figure 7. A rabbit killed 42 days after mucosal injury. Histologic (A) and optical coherence tomographic (OCT) (B) images show a single area of fibrous scarring at the 11-o’clock position. The OCT image very clearly demonstrates changes in both surface and submucosal anatomy that correlates well with histologic images.
We posit that OCT has the potential to determine the maturity of the scar based on texture analysis and segmentation of signals, as well as volumetric rendering. Recent trauma will have more edema and fluid, and a mature scar will have more collagen. Collagen is turbid, scatters light, and would increase the signal intensity, albeit at the expense of reduced signal from deeper tissue layers. Detailed analysis (segmentation and texture) should be able to characterize the turbidity of the tissue and thereby effectively determine the maturity of the scar. Grayscale analysis is used widely in medical imaging but is challenging to implement in low-contrast imaging methods, such as OCT. This is a challenge common to imaging methods, such as ultrasonography and magnetic resonance imaging. Segmentation and automated image analysis, which are beyond the scope of this work, will allow for a more detailed evaluation of the OCT images and better define the relationship between scar tissue seen on histologic images. Simple comparison of grayscale intensity alone is challenging given image artifacts in histologic sections and the lack of normalization of contrast and brightness of the OCT source. Subjective analysis of OCT imaging was quite variable depending on the skill and experience of the persons reading the images. Like ultrasonography, there is definitely a learning curve. Also like ultrasonography, viewing a temporal sequence of images (a “movie”) often provides a better sense of tissue structure than just an isolated still image. We hope to further refine the probe and develop better measurement techniques involving image analysis—and segmentation-driven methods.

Current and future ongoing research is focused on using the present rabbit model to study subglottic and tracheal edema. Edema is perhaps more important than scar formation because it is a possible sign of early airway injury. This will further allow us to characterize the ability of OCT imaging to identify changes in the submucosa with the goal of routine airway monitoring in the NICU.

In conclusion, endotracheal tube intubation is a life-saving intervention, but it does come with risks. Otolaryngologists are much too familiar with intubation-induced acquired subglottic stenosis in neonates. Severe subglottic stenosis can be a considerable challenging problem to address, with potential grave sequelae. Optical coherence tomography is a noninvasive imaging technique, which, we believe, can be successfully applied to imaging the airway through a preexisting endotracheal tube. Our long-term goal is to apply OCT imaging at the bedside in intubated neonates. If we can image the microscopic structure of the neonatal subglottic airway and identify airway edema or early trauma, this may allow for changes in airway management that might avert irreversible airway damage.

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REFERENCES


