

Measurement of Rheumatoid Arthritis Disease Activity and Damage Using Magnetic Resonance Imaging. Truth and Discrimination: Does MRI Make the Grade?

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ABSTRACT. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a tool with unprecedented capabilities. Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) abnormalities that can be measured with MRI include erosions, articular cartilage thickness, synovial membrane volume, and pannus. However, as access to MRI increases, there is a risk that its use will not be evaluated using rigorous scientific measurement principles. We reviewed published MRI measurement methods for RA and investigated whether the methods were systematically evaluated for reliability, validity, and responsiveness to change — components of the OMERACT filter. Medline and Embase databases were searched from 1966 to 1999. Titles and abstracts were scanned to identify publications on MRI methods used to assess either disease activity or damage in RA. A data extraction template was developed and 68 peer reviewed publications from 40 research groups were appraised; 40 addressed RA disease activity, 4 RA damage, and 24 both activity and damage. Joints most frequently assessed were knee (32 publications) and wrist (31 publications). Ninety-one percent of publications evaluated either reliability or validity or responsiveness to change. Thirteen percent evaluated all 3 and only 9% evaluated none of these measurement properties. Validity was evaluated in 85%, responsiveness to change in 37%, and reliability in 35% of publications. Only 12% of publications evaluated both intra and inter-reliability. Few publications of MRI measures of disease activity or damage in RA met the OMERACT filter for all measurement properties. It would be regrettable if MRI measures are developed ad hoc, with little regard to considerations of scaling, reliability, validity, and responsiveness to change, because this will severely limit their ability to confidently assess treatment efficacy and prognostic indicators. (*J Rheumatol* 2001;28:1151–7)

Key Indexing Terms:

MAGNETIC RESONANCE IMAGING RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS SYNOVITIS
MEASUREMENT RELIABILITY RESPONSIVENESS

Radiographs: the good, the bad, and the ugly

The good. Traditionally, the radiograph has measured damage in rheumatoid arthritis (RA), and most disease modifying therapies in RA are judged by their ability to prevent or retard radiological damage. Radiographs reflect several elements of structural damage of joints, including joint space narrowing (due to articular cartilage loss), bone cysts and erosions (due to discrete bone resorption), osteophytes, and malalignment. Serial radiographs can be used to evaluate the progression of damage over time. Radiographs and the scoring methods are relatively easy to perform, are relatively cheap, and provide a permanent record allowing repeat scoring.

The bad. Radiographs have clear limitations. Although they

offer spatial resolution for bony detail, they present technical problems that limit their role as a disease measure. The radiographic technique projects a 3 dimensional structure onto a 2 dimensional film, and in the process distorts the geometry. This is particularly problematic when comparison of serial films is important. Further, because of superimposition inherent in the projection, certain structures such as erosions may be minimized or obscured entirely. The fundamental limitation of the radiograph is that it cannot directly visualize those important structures such as cartilage, synovium, periarticular soft tissues, and bone marrow that reflect disease activity effects; and in early disease they are relatively insensitive for even osseous structures.

The ugly. The above limitations of the content validity of radiographs are reasonably well recognized. Most work in radiographic scoring methods in the last quarter century has focused on what features to include (i.e., erosions, joint space narrowing, osteoporosis, soft tissue swelling), which joints to include, and what measurement system to adopt (i.e., grading, scoring, counting, measuring area). However, there has been relatively little systematic evaluation of many of the disease activity and damage measures in RA

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including that of radiographs regarding the important measurement issues of reliability and responsiveness¹. This is partly due to the complexity of measurement methodology.

Therefore, despite decades of development and testing (and numerous peer reviewed publications), current radiographic scoring methods require further evaluation of the basic elements of scaling, discriminatory performance (reliability and responsiveness to change), and truth (validity). This evaluation must be grounded in data and systematic experiment and is fundamental to our understanding of what is a minimal clinically important difference (a recurrent theme of OMERACT 4 and OMERACT 5²).

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

MRI may be able to overcome many of the limitations of radiographs noted above. First, from the point of view of the patient, it does not employ ionizing radiation. Being a cross sectional technique, it does not suffer from projectional distortion or superimposition, as does the radiograph. It has the ability to image in any plane, which can help to visualize curved surfaces, and the imaging variables can be manipulated to accentuate a particular process of interest. MRI can also acquire 3 dimensional data allowing volumetric calculations of joint components. Gadolinium, a paramagnetic medium, enhances synovium and can be used to measure synovial volume. Its rate of enhancement can be used to measure inflammatory activity. Therefore, MRI noninvasively provides simultaneous assessment of osseous (including bone marrow) and soft tissue structures (both intra- and extraarticular), and can differentiate between synovium and cartilage. Abnormalities that could be measured include erosions, articular cartilage thickness, and synovial membrane volume and pannus activity.

Foreseeable problems. However, we run the risk of being seduced and bamboozled by this technique — by the anatomic detail, the panorama of tissues, sliced sagittally, coronally and transversely; by the hardware — superconducting magnets, volume coils; and particularly by the impressive and endless jargon — T1 weighted, T2 weighted, spin-echo, fast spin-echo, gradient-echo, GRASS, STIR, FLASH, FISP, gadolinium-DTPA, voxels, pixels, flip angles, magnetization transfer, proton precession, and radiofrequency pulse. Indeed, are we being lured, wooed, and beguiled by the marvels of quantum physics?

Furthermore, as noted above, measurement — and its jargon — are also difficult. Scale construction requires consideration of levels of measurement (nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio), weighting (implicit, explicit), and aggregation. It requires thought whether to use a discrete or a continuous measure, and whether to grade, score, count, or calculate areas or volume. Once a scale has been constructed, all sources of variability and concomitant reliability (including the smallest detectable difference), validity

(face, content, construct, criterion), and responsiveness to change (also with multiple facets) have to be determined.

Given these problems there is a risk that as access to MRI increases its use will not be evaluated using rigorous scientific measurement principles. Therefore the goal of this paper was to systematically survey published MRI methods in RA for evaluation of the OMERACT filter components: truth (validity) and discrimination (reliability and responsiveness to change)³.

METHODS

Medline and Embase databases were searched using the medical subject headings: “MRI (or magnetic resonance imaging) AND [rheumatoid arthritis OR synovitis OR synovial membrane]” from 1966 to 1999 (121 publications). Titles and abstracts were scanned and the following were excluded: letters, non-English publications, review articles, non-human magnetic resonance, and publications not related to measurement systems of RA disease activity or damage of the knee, wrist, metacarpophalangeal (MCP) joint, proximal interphalangeal (PIP) joint or foot, thus leaving 68 publications. Although 49 published conference proceedings were identified in *Arthritis and Rheumatism* and *British Journal of Rheumatology* (1991-1999), they are not included in this review.

A data extraction template was developed. Studies were evaluated (yes, no, unclear) for the following: description of MRI sequences and variables (e.g., machine, magnet, sequences, views, slice thickness, gaps, field of view, scan times); description of clinical or laboratory or radiographic or histopathological assessment; description of MRI rheumatoid disease activity or damage measurement system; source (and number) of patients and normal controls; assessment of machine reliability; intraobserver/method reliability; interobserver/method reliability; construct validity; criterion validity⁴; and responsiveness of the MRI measure to change.

RESULTS

Sixty-eight peer reviewed publications were identified from 40 research groups (Table 1). Forty publications (59%) assessed RA disease activity alone, 4 assessed damage alone, 20 assessed both activity and damage (29%), and the remaining 4 assessed activity and damage in combination. Seventy-four percent of the reports were published since 1994. Joints most frequently assessed were the knee (32 publications) and wrist (31 publications), then the MCP, PIP, metatarsophalangeal, and tarsal joints, respectively (17, 8, 3, and one publications). All but one publication clearly described the MRI sequences and variables. Fewer publications clearly described any clinical assessment or the MRI measurement system they were evaluating (Table 2).

The MRI measurement system used was qualitative (either purely descriptive or grading of individual MRI features) in 27 publications, semiquantitative (gradings aggregated into an interval-like score) in 19 publications, and quantitative (a true interval or ratio scale, e.g., synovial membrane volume in milliliters, rate of synovial enhancement) in 32 publications. Eight publications developed more than one MRI measurement system. Ninety-one percent of publications evaluated either reliability or validity or responsiveness to change. Thirteen percent evaluated all 3 and only 9% evaluated none of these measurement proper-

Table 1. Study design and MRI measurement system evaluation of reviewed publications.

Year	Author	Joint Region	No. of RA Patients	Activity or Damage	Normal Subjects Included	Machine Reliability	Intrareliability	Interreliability	Construct Validity	Criterion Validity	Responsiveness to Change	Scaling* of MRI Measure
1988	Gilkeson ⁵	Wrist	10	A & D	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1989	Heuck ⁶	Knee	12	A	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	3
1990	Bjorkengren ⁷	Knee	9	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1990	Konig ⁸	Knee	20	A	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	1
1990	Kursunoglu-Brahme ⁹	Knee	14	A	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
1990	Meske ¹⁰	Wrist		A, D	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
1991	Adam ¹¹	Knee	23	A	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	1
1991	Foley-Nolan ¹²	Wrist	11	D	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1992	Corvetta ¹³	Wrist MCP PIP	31	A, D	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	2
1992	Singson ¹⁴	Knee	10 of 1051	A	uncl	No	No	No	uncl	No	No	1
1993	Gubler ¹⁵	Wrist MCP tarsal MTP	9	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1993	Jevtic ¹⁶	Wrist MCP PIP	45	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	2
1993	Jevtic ¹⁷	Wrist MCP	65	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	2
1993	Jorgensen ¹⁸	Wrist	15	A, D	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	1
1993	Rominger ¹⁹	Wrist MCP	30	A, D	Yes	No	No	No	uncl	No	uncl	1
1993	Schweitzer ²⁰	Knee	6	A	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	3
1993	Yamato ²¹	Knee	13	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	3
1993	Yanagawa ²²	Wrist	49	A	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1994	Ostergaard ²³	Knee	12	A	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	3
1994	Ostergaard ²⁴	Knee	15	A	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	3
1994	Poleksic ²⁵	Knee	33	A, D	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
1994	Tamai ²⁶	Knee	9	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	3
1995	Gaffney ²⁷	Knee	21	A	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	3
1995	Giovagnoni ²⁸	Wrist MCP PIP	18	A & D	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	1
1995	Jetvic ²⁹	Wrist MCP	1	A & D	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
1995	Jetvic ³⁰	MCP PIP	16	A & D	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	1
1995	Ostergaard ³¹	Knee	17	A, D	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	2, 3
1995	Ostergaard ³²	Knee	10	A	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	3
1995	Ostergaard ³³	Wrist	16	A	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	2
1995	Ostergaard ³⁴	Knee	10	A, D	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	3
1995	Palmer ³⁵	Wrist	12	A	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	3
1995	Peterfy ³⁶	MCP	1	D	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	3
1995	Polisson ³⁷	Wrist	2	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	2
1996	Jetvic ³⁸	Wrist	15	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	2
1996	Leitch ³⁹	Knee	6	A	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	1, 3
1998	Nakahara ⁴⁰	Wrist	27	A	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	3
1996	Oliver ⁴¹	Knee	21	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	3
1996	Ostergaard ⁴²	Knee	15	A, D	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	2, 3
1996	Ostergaard ⁴³	Wrist	26	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	2, 3
1996	Ostergaard ⁴⁴	Knee	22	A	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	3
1996	Poleksic ⁴⁵	Knee	43	A, D	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	1

Table 1. Continued.

Year	Author	Joint Region	No. of RA Patients	Activity or Damage	Normal Subjects Included	Machine Reliability	Intrareliability	Interreliability	Construct Validity	Criterion Validity	Responsiveness to Change	Scaling* of MRI Measure
1996	Sugimoto ⁴⁶	Wrist MCP PIP	20	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1996	Tonolli-Serabian ⁴⁷	Wrist	22	A, D	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1997	Clunie ⁴⁸	Knee	18	A	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	3
1997	Creamer ⁴⁹	Knee	16	A	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
1997	Forslind ⁵⁰	Knee MTP	30	A, D	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	2
1997	Jetvic ⁵¹	MCP PIP Wrist	31	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	3
1997	Kalden-Nemeth ⁵²	Wrist	18	A	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	3
1997	Ostergaard ⁵³	Knee Wrist	26 knee 17 wrist	A	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	3
1997	Ostergaard ⁵⁴	Knee	37	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	3
1997	Pierre-Jerome ⁵⁵	Wrist	33	D	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1998	Gaffney ⁵⁶	Knee	31	A	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	3
1998	McQueen ⁵⁷	Wrist	42	A, D	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	2
1998	Ostergaard ⁵⁸	Knee	17	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	3
1998	Sugimoto ⁵⁹	Wrist MCP PIP	11	A	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	3
1998	Takeuchi ⁶⁰	Knee	86	A, D	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1, 2
1998	Uhl ⁶¹	MCP MTP	20 jts	D	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
1999	Backhaus ⁶²	MCP PIP DIP	60	A, D	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	2
1999	Huh ⁶³	Wrist	16	A, D	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	2
1999	Klarlund ⁶⁴	MCP	37	A	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	2, 3
1999	Klarlund ⁶⁵	Wrist MCP	33	A, D	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	2
1999	Lee ⁶⁶	Wrist	10	A, D	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	1, 2, 3
1999	McGonagle ⁶⁷	MCP		A	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	1
1999	McQueen ⁶⁸	Wrist	42	A, D	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	2
1999	Ostergaard ⁶⁹	Wrist	26	A, D	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	3
1999	Pirich ⁷⁰	Knee	13	A, D	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	1, 2, 3
1999	Rand ⁷¹	Knee	20	A	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	1
1999	Veale ⁷²	Knee	12	A	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	3

*1: qualitative; 2: semi-quantitative; 3: quantitative. MCP: metacarpophalangeal; PIP: proximal interphalangeal; DIP: distal interphalangeal; MTP: metatarsophalangeal.

Table 2. Reporting of study methods and MRI measurement system evaluation.

Study Methods and MRI Measurement System	No. of Publications		
	Yes	No	Unclear
Description MRI sequences and variables?	67	0	1
Description patient clinical assessment?	50	12	6
Description MRI measurement system?	51	13	4
Evaluation of MRI machine reliability?	6	62	0
Evaluation of MRI intraobserver/method reliability?	15	53	0
Evaluation of MRI interobserver/method reliability?	15	53	0
Evaluation of MRI measurement system construct validity?	51	15	2
Evaluation of MRI measurement system criterion validity?	13	55	0
Evaluation of MRI measurement system responsiveness to change?	18	49	1

ties. Validity was evaluated in 85%, responsiveness to change in 37%, and reliability in 35% of publications. Only 12% of publications evaluated both intra and inter-reliability. Construct validity (reported in 75% of publications) was ascertained using clinical constructs (joint swelling or tenderness) in 39 publications, radiographs in 27 publications, other imaging in 2 publications (PET and ultrasound), and histology in 7 publications. Criterion validity (reported in 19% of publications) was ascertained using several innovative methods including direct estimation of synovial effusion volume by arthrocentesis, and histopathological examination of joints following joint replacement surgery. Responsiveness to change (reported in 37% of publications) was generally ascertained in a longitudinal before–after treatment study design.

DISCUSSION

An important endpoint of therapeutic assessment in RA is damage prevention, as reflected in structure. Currently, this is done via the radiograph and appears to take a minimum of 12–18 months. To accelerate testing of the ability of new therapies to control damage, it is critical that we develop new techniques that are both superior in sensitivity and have more stringent metrological properties than the standard radiograph. MRI has the potential to serve this purpose.

A foreseeable problem is that increased access to new technology will lead to neglect of rigorous evaluation of measurement fundamentals. In this review of published MRI methods of RA activity and damage evaluation, few met all OMERACT filter components of truth (validity) and discrimination (reliability and responsiveness to change).

All new clinical tools should be developed and tested in a systematic and meticulous manner, and MRI, in particular, would benefit from a confluence of clinicians, radiologists, technicians, and measurement experts. The OMERACT 5 Working Party on MRI Evaluation of RA⁷³ is one example of how the interaction of experts can facilitate the development and testing of new clinical tools that efficiently and accurately demonstrate prognostic indicators and therapeutic effects.

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