Detecting kidney fibrosis using H-scan

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Abstract—Kidney fibrosis plays a significant role in determining the outcome of kidney transplantation. Accurate measurement of kidney fibrosis is thus important not only in the diagnosis of chronic kidney disease but also in the assessment of donor grafts. Currently, biopsy is only procedure used to assess kidney fibrosis. Thus, the development of non-invasive and accurate imaging tools would be advantageous. This study aims to demonstrate the ability of H-scan to quantify kidney fibrosis.

We performed an ex vivo murine study using the unilateral ureteral obstruction (UUO) model to induce renal fibrosis. 15 mice in total were used in this study. 10 mice underwent UUO surgery on the left ureter, with the right kidneys serving as controls. The kidneys were extracted on day 7 (n = 5) and day 14 (n = 5). The other 5 healthy mice served as sham controls, and their kidneys were also extracted. Ultrasound imaging of the extracted kidneys was performed using a 15 MHz center frequency transducer. After imaging, the kidneys were stained with picrosirius red to quantify fibrosis levels. H-scan was applied to the whole kidneys. The percentage of lower frequency scattering encoded as red (% red) was used as the H-scan quantification, and these results were compared to the histology fibrosis score.

We demonstrated that H-scan imaging provided differentiated color images for normal and fibrotic kidneys. Fibrotic kidneys tended to contain more red, indicating increased collagen fiber arising during the buildup of kidney fibrosis. Furthermore, quantification of fibrosis using the H-scan and histology was compared, showing a strong correlation of R = 0.99. Overall, we demonstrated that the H-scan can accurately detect the buildup of kidney fibrosis, suggesting its potential use for renal fibrosis assessment as an alternative to biopsy.

Keywords—H-scan, Ultrasound, Tissue characterization, Kidney fibrosis, Fibrosis assessment, Kidney transplantation

I. INTRODUCTION

Fibrosis of the kidneys is a hallmark of end-stage renal disease in chronic kidney disease (CKD) patients. It also plays a significant role in kidney transplants. Typically, donations that contain fibrosis have poorer outcomes and shorter longevity. The ability to quantify the degree of kidney fibrosis can have a significant clinical impact as it allows nephrologists to predict the outcome of a graft and better allocate the scarcely available donations. Currently, biopsy remains the only means of measuring renal fibrosis, although it has drawbacks related to the sampling volume, extraction site, and bleeding risk.

The development of a non-invasive, accurate, and safe tool to measure renal fibrosis is needed, but, there is currently no standard imaging modality for this [1]. Recent studies for non-invasive assessment of fibrosis have been performed, using imaging modalities such as ultrasound (US) and magnetic resonance (MR) elastography [2], MR imaging utilizing agents [3], and photoacoustic (PA) imaging [4]. US and MR elastography are not accurate enough to evaluate renal fibrosis [2]. Utilizing contrast agents targeted to fibrosis has limitations, including nephrotoxicity. Further, PA imaging requires the use of a laser, limiting the penetration depth to only cortical regions and ex vivo examinations.

In this study, to assess renal fibrosis, we used the conventional B-mode US procedure and then analyzed backscattered signals utilizing acquired radiofrequency (RF) data. H-scan analysis was performed by extracting frequency-dependent information from the RF data. This enabled the quantification of fibrosis buildup in kidney. To evaluate the accuracy, the H-scan output and histology fibrosis scores were compared.

II. METHODS

A. Kidney fibrosis mouse model

A total of 15 C57BL/6 mice (Charles River Laboratories, Wilmington, MA, USA) were investigated. Fibrosis was induced only on the left kidneys in 10 mice using the unilateral ureteral obstruction (UUO) model [5], whereas the right kidneys were not injured, serving as control (healthy and non-fibrotic). The fibrotic kidneys were extracted on day 7 (n = 5) and day 14 (n = 5) following the UUO surgeries. In addition, n = 5 healthy mice served as sham controls, as their ureters were not obstructed. The sham surgery kidneys on the left and right sides were also extracted on day 0. In total, 15 mice with 30 kidneys were investigated to assess fibrosis buildup.

The extracted kidney specimens were scanned with ultrasound and immediately following the scanning, the specimens underwent histological examinations. The kidneys were stained with picrosirius red (PSR, Millipore Sigma, Burlington, MA, USA) to quantify fibrosis levels by visualizing collagen content.

B. Ultrasound data acquisition

The VevoLAZR-X imaging system (FUJIFILM, VisualSonics, Inc., Toronto, CA) utilized to image the kidneys was equipped with a 15 MHz center frequency linear array transducer with 256 elements. During the scanning, kidney...
specimens were placed in 4°C phosphate buffered saline, and the largest cross section of each kidney was scanned while acquiring the delay-and-sum beamformed RF data. The H-scan methodology was applied to the RF data of the whole kidneys to estimate fibrosis levels. The whole kidney area was manually contoured.

C. H-scan analysis

The H-scan approach [6] makes use of matched Gaussian filters to estimate frequency components present in each image. The H-scan process is shown in Fig. 1. Since attenuation causes frequency downshifts over depths, attenuation correction [6] with an attenuation coefficient of 0.5 dB/MHz/cm was performed on the acquired RF data. Utilizing the attenuation-corrected RF data, we estimated frequency components for all samples in the axial direction and all scanlines in the lateral direction within the manually contoured kidney boundary. For each estimation, 256 Gaussian bandpass filters with peak frequencies from 3.5 MHz to 11.5 MHz were applied in the frequency domain. Each filter was programmed to output a convolved image in the time domain, which highlights a peak frequency component of the corresponding Gaussian filter. Among the 256 convolved images, a Gaussian filter index having the maximum intensity for each pixel was selected. The selected indices become H-scan color levels ranging from 1 to 256. The lower and higher frequency components correspond to the lower and higher color levels, respectively. The H-scan color levels from 1 to 256 are color coded from red to blue, respectively, as shown in the color bar in Fig. 1. The red (lower frequency components) and blue (higher frequency components) colors can visualize larger and smaller US scatterers, respectively. To quantify the H-scan imaging, the percentage of red pixels (% red) was calculated:

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\% \text{ red} = \frac{\text{Number of pixels encoded in red}}{\text{Total number of pixels}} \times 100\% \quad (1)
\]

where the pixels encoded in red only include pixels having H-scan color levels < 128. Therefore, % red was used as the H-scan metric to assess the level of renal fibrosis.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fig. 2 shows representative B-mode and H-scan images from normal and fibrotic kidneys 14 days following UUO surgery. The fibrotic kidney contains more red pixels as fibrosis was induced for 14 days. The H-scan visualization provides a robust tool for identifying the low and high-frequency scattering components arising during the buildup of kidney fibrosis. Thus, it is hypothesized that the collagen fibers deposited during fibrosis increase effective scatterer diameter, increasing % red, i.e. low-frequency components.

The H-scan % red and histology fibrosis score are compared in Fig. 3, demonstrating a very strong correlation of \( R = 0.99 \) where \( R \) is Pearson’s linear correlation coefficient. The % red increased as collagen content increased due to fibrosis buildup.

This study demonstrated the potential use of the H-scan format for kidney fibrosis assessment. The study was
performed solely on *ex vivo* animal kidneys, therefore further evaluation in animals and humans *in vivo* is required. However, the H-scan analysis has been applied to *in vivo* animal and human studies for tissue characterization [7-14]. No challenges or limitations were observed when H-scan was extended to *in vivo* studies. The H-scan is capable of identifying tissue characteristics if (1) RF data for targets are acquirable during conventional B-mode scans and (2) adequate attenuation correction can be performed before applying the H-scan. Therefore, we anticipate that further *in vivo* studies would confirm our findings on the ability of the H-scan to accurately quantify renal fibrosis.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

These findings suggest that the H-scan format can accurately detect the buildup of kidney fibrosis, providing potential avenues for detecting this detrimental condition in patients with CKD.

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