Evaluation of the Facial Recess and Cochlea on the Temporal Bone of Stillbirths regarding the Percutaneous Cochlear Implant

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Abstract

Introduction The literature shows that there are anatomical changes on the temporal bone anatomy during the first four years of life in children. Therefore, we decided to evaluate the temporal bone anatomy regarding the cochlear implant surgery in stillbirths between 32 and 40 weeks of gestational age using computed tomography to simulate the trajectory of the drill to the scala tympani avoiding vital structures.

Objectives To measure the distances of the simulated trajectory to the facial recess, cochlea, ossicular chain and tympanic membrane, while performing the minimally invasive cochlear implant technique, using the Improvise imaging software (Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, US).

Methods An experimental study with 9 stillbirth specimens, with gestational ages ranging between 32 and 40 weeks, undergoing tomographic evaluation with individualization and reconstruction of the labyrinth, facial nerve, ossicular chain, tympanic membrane and cochlea followed by drill path definition to the scala tympani. Improvise was used for the computed tomography (CT) evaluation and for the reconstruction of the structures and trajectory of the drill.

Keywords
► cochlear implantation
► middle ear
► hearing loss, sensorineural
► temporal bone / anatomy
► cochlea
► experimental studies

Results Range of the distance of the trajectory to the facial nerve: 0.58 to 1.71 mm. to the ossicular chain: 0.38 to 1.49 mm; to the tympanic membrane: 0.85 to 1.96 mm; total range of the distance of the trajectory: 5.92 to 12.65 mm.

Conclusion The measurements of the relationship between the drill and the anatomical structures of the middle ear and the simulation of the trajectory showed that the middle ear cavity at 32 weeks was big enough for surgical procedures such as cochlear implants. Although cochlear implantation at birth is not an indication yet, this study shows that the technique may be an option in the future.
Introduction

In recent decades, technological advances such as cochlear implants enabled patients with hearing loss to regain the ability to hear. According to recent incidence studies, 14.5% of the population has some form of disability, and out of this number, 5.2% declare inability to hear, with 3.9% of moderate hearing loss, 0.9% of severe hearing loss, and 0.4% of profound hearing loss. The ear derives from the ectoderm of the cephalic part of the embryo, originating from one round vesicle. The otocyst cavity contains the endolymph and the organ of Corti. The membranous labyrinth reaches its maturity during puberty, which can have a significant impact on the anatomy of the temporal bone. It has been suggested that these changes take place in the tympanic and mastoid processes and in the squamous portion of the temporal bone.

Regarding the relevant anatomy to the cochlear implant, there are significant differences between children and adults. Lloyd, in 2010, presented evidence that the basal turn of the cochlea can change its orientation relative to the facial recess during growth, which can influence the angle of insertion of the electrode.

As Moberly et al described in 2015, early stimulation of the cerebral cortex yields better results on hearing rehabilitation. Replacing the function of the organ of Corti and electrically stimulating the ganglion cells and nerve endings of the auditory nerve, cochlear implants are used in the hearing rehabilitation of patients with severe to profound hearing loss.

Despite the safety of the procedure having increased due to technological advances, there are still complications, especially in younger patients, in whom the noble anatomical structures (the facial nerve, the chorda tympani nerve and the cochlea) have different angles and are in different positions compared with adults. The current techniques to access the cochlea use visual feedback (with the aid of a microscope) and facial nerve monitoring to avoid these structures. The facial nerve has the most risk of injury because of the nerve recess approach. In order to increase the safety of the procedure, reduce the surgical and healing times, and accelerate the activation of the cochlear implants, minimally invasive approaches using robotic techniques have been proposed. This surgical technique has been approved by the FDA to be used on adults and children.

The procedure is based on the fact that it is possible to pass a drill through the temporal bone after a previous tomographic planning, with the anatomical study of the noble structures of the mastoid through the trajectory using image-guided techniques, while critical structures of the temporal bone are avoided.

Objectives

The objective of the present study was to evaluate the simulated trajectory of the drill on the computed tomography (CT) scan used in the percutaneous cochlear implant technique and its viability in neonates through:

1. A measurement of the simulated trajectory of the drill between the cortical temporal bone and the cochleostomy, calculating the mean, median and standard deviation.
2. An assessment of the mean, median and standard deviation of the distances between the simulated trajectory to the ossicular chain, tympanic membrane and facial nerve.

Methods

Study Design

This was an experimental study. This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of one of our institutions (under CAAE number 51243215.2.0000.065).

Inclusion Criteria

The corpses that did not show anatomical malformations in the middle and inner ear structures or in bone density during the tomographic evaluation were included in the study.

Methodology

A tomographic study was performed using the machine Discovery CT 750 HD (General Electric Healthcare, Little Chalfont, UK) (CT Protocol- volumetric acquisition helical Hi-res rotation 0.8 seconds with collimation of 0.625 mm and 0.312 mm range KV 140 mA: 400 FOV- determined by measuring the laterolateral diameter of the temporal region in digital radiography and reconstruction Ultra High Definition). Held in the Radiology Laboratory of one of our institutions.

The specimens were placed in the scanner in the supine position with the head in hyperextension with the aid of a cushion, forming a straight angle to the base of the scanner. The images were made in the coronal and axial planes with a thickness of 0.6 mm. The images were transferred to the Improvise (Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, US) software, followed by segmentation of the structures involved in the cochlear implant (facial nerve, ossicular chain, tympanic membrane, labyrinth and cochlea). After the segmentation, the software then simulates the trajectory of the drill between the cortex of the temporal bone and the scala tympani through a cochleostomy (Fig. 1).

In order to define the path between the cortex of the temporal bone and the cochleostomy, we used features of the software that allow us to make points on different locations of the image, keeping the symmetry between sides. Thus, the first point was positioned in the scala tympani, and the second one on the cortex of the temporal bone, having
as limits the facial nerve, the ossicular chain and the tympanic membrane. To simulate the thickness of the drill, a cylinder (yellow) with a radius of 0.5 mm was created. The axial plane was chosen to perform the demarcation of the defining points of the trajectory, because it presents a more accurate identification of the scala tympani than other planes.

We then measured the shortest distances between: the facial nerve and the trajectory (Fig. 2); the ossicular chain and the trajectory (Fig. 3); the tympanic membrane and the trajectory (Fig. 4); and the cortex of the temporal bone and the scala tympani.

Results

Tomographic images of the mastoid of nine specimens of stillbirths that met the inclusion criteria were evaluated. The data were transferred to an Excel (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, US) spreadsheet, in which we calculated the mean, median and standard deviation and applied the paired samples Student t test (Tables 1 and 2).

The measurements of the trajectory of the drill to the facial nerve ranged from 0.58 mm to 1.71 mm; for the trajectory to the ossicular chain, they ranged from 0.38 mm to 1.49 mm. The tympanic membrane was between 0.85 mm and 1.96 mm away from the simulated drill path; and the trajectory from the cortex of the temporal bone to the scala tympani ranged from 5.92 mm to 12.65 mm. The paired samples correlations between the right and left sides were evaluated. The first one was the facial nerve; then, the ossicular chain, followed by the tympanic membrane and the trajectory. The related correlation results and significance are respectively described as: facial nerve - 0.598 mm and 0.089 mm; ossicular chain - 0.252 mm and 0.514 mm; tympanic membrane - 0.396 mm and 0.291 mm; and trajectory - 0.958 mm and 0.0 mm. The paired samples t test
showed a statistical difference between the relative position of the tympanic membrane and the trajectory from the right to the left sides.

**Discussion**

By analyzing the images, we noticed that the middle ear cavity at 32 weeks is well-pneumatized, and it could enable surgical procedures such as cochlear implants. In order to confirm that, we propose a simulated study using an image-guided, minimally invasive technique to access the cochlea in pediatric patients undergoing cochlear implant. This approach involves drilling a narrow path from the cortex of the temporal bone to the cochlea without hitting vital anatomical structures such as the facial nerve, ossicular chain and chorda tympani nerve.

The Improvise software was developed at Vanderbilt University, and it is used to analyze, segment, and measure tomographic images of patients undergoing cochlear implant surgery. After the segmentation of the facial nerve,

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**Table 1** Distance of the drill’s trajectory (mm) to the middle ear structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N = 18</th>
<th>Facial nerve</th>
<th>Ossicular chain</th>
<th>Tympanic membrane</th>
<th>Trajectory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.35</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.95</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.64</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.47</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>1.49</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 2** Paired samples statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Standard error of the mean</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>0.35107</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LFN</td>
<td>1.1389</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td>ROC</td>
<td>0.9278</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.35192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOC</td>
<td>0.9856</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.26698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td>RTM</td>
<td>1.4100</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.34673</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LTM</td>
<td>1.1100</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.33849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 4</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
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</table>

Abbreviations: LFN, left facial nerve; LOC, left ossicular chain; LTM, left tympanic membrane; LTRAJ, left trajectory; RFN, right facial nerve; ROC, right ossicular chain; RTML, right tympanic membrane; RTraj, right trajectory.
access to the scala tympani through the facial recess. By as early as 32 weeks, the middle ear cavity enables safe surgery. This procedure is not yet indicated because there is no sure diagnose of deafness this early in life, or on infants before 5 months of life (once the difficulties of precisely diagnosing severe or profound hearing loss, at this age are overcome), it is of extreme importance to use a technique that is fast and minimally invasive, due to the limitations of the anesthetics and the possible blood loss during surgery.

**Conclusion**

The measurements of the relationship between the drill and the anatomical structures of the middle ear (the facial nerve, ossicular chain and tympanic membrane), and the simulation of the trajectory between the cortical temporal bone and the scala tympani, showed that none of the structures studied were damaged by the drill, which implies that, at 32 weeks, the middle ear cavity already has sufficient size to support a surgical procedure. Although cochlear implantation is not indicated at this age, this surgical technique may be a possibility in the future.

**Conflicts of Interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

**References**

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