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Refining the Eikonal Model to Reproduce the Influence of Atrial Tissue Geometry on Conduction Velocity

https://doi.org/10.1515/cdbme-2022-1035

Abstract: Atrial fibrillation is responsible for a significant and steadily rising burden. Simultaneously, the treatment options for atrial fibrillation are far from optimal. Personalized simulations of cardiac electrophysiology could assist clinicians in the risk stratification and therapy planning for atrial fibrillation. However, the use of personalized simulations in clinics is currently not possible due to either too high computational costs or non-sufficient accuracy. Eikonal simulations come with low computational costs but cannot replicate the influence of cardiac tissue geometry on the conduction velocity of the wave propagation. Consequently, they currently lack the required accuracy to be applied in clinics. Biophysically detailed simulations on the other hand are accurate but associated with too high computational costs.

To tackle this issue, a regression model is created based on biophysically detailed bidomain simulation data. This regression formula calculates the conduction velocity dependent on the thickness and curvature of the heart wall. Afterwards the formula was implemented into the eikonal model with the goal to increase the accuracy of the eikonal model without losing its advantage of computational efficiency.

The results of the modified eikonal simulations demonstrate that (i) the local activation times become significantly closer to those of the biophysically detailed bidomain simulations, (ii) the advantage of the eikonal model of a low sensitivity to the resolution of the mesh was reduced further, and (iii) the unrealistic occurrence of endo-epicardial dissociation in simulations was remedied.

The results suggest that the accuracy of the eikonal model was significantly increased. At the same time, the additional computational costs caused by the implementation of the regression formula are neglectable. In conclusion, a successful step towards a more accurate and fast computational model of cardiac electrophysiology was achieved.

Keywords: cardiac modelling, eikonal model, conduction velocity, wall thickness, tissue curvature, atrial fibrillation

1 Introduction

Atrial fibrillation (AFib) is responsible for an increase of morbidity and mortality and its prevalence is expected to increase further, due to the rising life expectancy of humans and age being a major risk factor [1]. At the same time the treatment options available for AFib are far from optimal. Personalized simulations of cardiac electrophysiology could assist clinicians in the risk stratification and therapy planning for AFib [2].

Bidomain simulations are detailed but computationally too expensive to be used in clinical time frames. The eikonal equation can be used as an efficient way to calculate local activation times (LATs) of wavefronts in the myocardium. Due to the computational efficiency, eikonal simulations have the potential to be applied in clinical time frames. However, eikonal simulations lack accuracy, because of their inability to capture certain electrophysiological effects like source sink mismatches or reentry. A fast and accurate model is needed to make personalized simulations applicable in clinics. [3]

Whereas previous work addressed the wavefront curvature in eikonal simulations [4], this work is about the influence of tissue curvature and wall thickness on local conduction velocity (CV). Hereby, Information obtained with bidomain simulations is used to create a regression model for the CV. The formula is then implemented into the eikonal model to increase its accuracy in a computationally efficient way.

2 Methods

2.1 Software

The following software was used:
- Myokit’s [5] data extractor to obtain information from graphs
- openCARP [6] to run bidomain simulations
- MATLAB [7] to run eikonal simulations (anisotropic, homogeneous, fast iterative method), generate the mesh, find the best approach for the regression formula, and optimize the parameters of the regression formula.
2.2 Myocardial Tissue Model and Mesh Generation

The methods in this section were chosen to be as similar as possible to the methods used in Rossi et al. [8], where the influence of atrial tissue geometry such as wall thickness and curvature on CV was studied using a 2D mesh. A similar mesh was created based on the myocardial tissue model shown in Figure 1. The mesh was then bent to a certain curvature $\kappa_{\text{endo}}$ in the endocardium. This was achieved by editing the coordinates of the nodes in the straight mesh using the trigonometric formula presented in Rossi et al. [8]. The sign of the curvature indicates the direction the mesh was bent to. A positive curvature $\kappa_{\text{endo}}$ means the block is bent towards the left and vice versa.

2.2.1 Fiber Direction

The fiber direction has an influence on CV in all anisotropic cases [9]. Therefore the implementation of the information about the fiber direction into the mesh is crucial to correctly study the impact of geometrical factors on CV. A vector was assigned to each node of the mesh representing the fiber direction. These fiber vectors were calculated in a way that they stay aligned with the longer borders of the mesh for all curvatures.

2.3 Regression Model Creation

Based on the bidomain data about the influence of wall thickness and curvature on conduction velocity published in Rossi et al. [8], a regression model was created. This regression model describes the relative change in CV depending on the wall thickness $l_m$ in mm, the curvature $\kappa_{\text{endo}}$ in $\text{cm}^{-1}$ to a reference CV in straight tissue:

$$CV_{\text{rel}} = (p_1 \cdot l_m + p_2) \cdot e^{-p_3 \cdot e^{p_4 \cdot l_m \cdot \kappa_{\text{endo}}}} - (p_1 \cdot l_m + p_2) \tag{1}$$

The four parameters were optimized by minimizing the RMSE towards the locally calculated CV of the bidomain solution, which resulted in the following values: $p_1=-0.23$, $p_2=0.57$, $p_3=0.03$ and $p_4=1.73$. The resulting match of the regression model to the bidomain data can be seen in Figure 2.

2.4 Implementation of the Regression Model into the Eikonal Model

In the eikonal simulation, every node is assigned a so called local speed function (LSF) that corresponds to the local CV along the longitudinal fiber direction. At first, the employed eikonal model neglects the influence of geometrical factors on CV, because a constant CV in the longitudinal direction is assumed in case homogeneous tissue is modeled. This means that the LSF has the same value in every node of the mesh in non-fibrotic tissue. To implement the influence of atrial tissue geometry on CV into the eikonal model, the LSF has to be calculated in every node according to the regression formula. The difficulty hereby is to define the curvature for each node. In our case the curvature in endocardium $\kappa_{\text{endo}}$ is known and the curvature in the epicardium $\kappa_{\text{epi}}$ can be calculated using equation 2:

$$\kappa_{\text{epi}} = -\frac{1}{\frac{1}{\kappa_{\text{endo}}} + l_m} \tag{2}$$
Alternatively, it is possible to determine the curvature in an anatomically realistic mesh. The LSF of the remaining nodes, which are in between the endo- and epicardium, was estimated by a linear interpolation of the calculated CV between the endo- and epicardium.

3 Results

The LATs and wavefront shapes of eikonal simulations in curved tissue can be seen in Figure 3. In Figure 3a it can be observed that during the propagation through curved tissue the wavefront becomes increasingly curved and endo-epicardial dissociation (EED) builds up. The inside arc of the curved geometry is always shorter than than the outside arc, but the LSF is constant in all nodes of the mesh. As a consequence, the electrical activity in the longer arc lags behind the activity in the shorter arc. The changes caused by the implementation of the regression model can be seen in Figure 3b. It can be noted that negative curvatures (shorter arc) now slow down the CV. Consequently, no more significant EED occurs.

To quantify the changes made by the regression model, eikonal simulations were compared to accurate bidomain simulations. Once before the implementation of the regression model and again afterwards. Overall 24 geometries with varying wall thicknesses and curvatures were analysed. The deviation of the eikonal simulations to the bidomain simulations was quantified by the root mean square error (RMSE) of the LATs.

To show the improvements obtained with the regression model the geometry with a curvature of $-\pi/4$ cm$^{-1}$ and a wall thickness of 1.5 mm is shown in Figure 4. A positive value (red) means that the eikonal simulation has a higher LAT at the same node compared to the bidomain simulation. The stimulus in eikonal simulations propagates slower than in the bidomain simulations in red areas. On the other hand, a negative value (blue) means that the eikonal simulation has a lower LAT than the bidomain simulation indicating a higher CV in the blue areas. In green areas the differences in LATs between eikonal and bidomain simulations are small and show that the eikonal model matches the bidomain simulations well in these areas. The histogram in the bottom of Figure 4 shows that after the implementation of the regression model the error distribution is significantly smaller. To test the influence of the mesh resolution two eikonal simulations are compared for the same muscle tissue geometry but with different mesh resolutions.

Tab. 1: RMSE of LAT eikonal - LAT bidomain before and after the implementation of the regression model for 24 different geometries in terms of wall thickness $l_m$ in mm and curvature $\kappa$ in cm$^{-1}$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$\kappa$</th>
<th>$l_m$</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\pi/2$</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.32 → 0.06</td>
<td>0.54 → 0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.20 → 0.05</td>
<td>0.33 → 0.06</td>
<td>0.40 → 0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\pi/4$</td>
<td>0.16 → 0.05</td>
<td>0.27 → 0.06</td>
<td>0.32 → 0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$-\pi/4$</td>
<td>0.18 → 0.05</td>
<td>0.31 → 0.07</td>
<td>0.39 → 0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-1</td>
<td>0.22 → 0.06</td>
<td>0.37 → 0.07</td>
<td>0.46 → 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$-\pi/2$</td>
<td>0.35 → 0.08</td>
<td>0.58 → 0.11</td>
<td>0.70 → 0.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The RMSE of the LATs between the eikonal simulations with different mesh resolution is calculated to quantify the mesh sensitivity before and after the implementation of the regression model. This procedure was done twice, once before and once after the implementation of the regression model. Table 2 shows that the RMSE decreased in all geometries after the implementation of the regression model.

### 4 Discussion

Figure 3 shows that the implementation of the regression model removes the unrealistic occurrence of EED in eikonal simulations with no epicardial fibrosis present. Additionally, the increasingly curved wavefront shapes in Figure 3b indicate that transmural propagation from the shorter to the longer arc took place due to the increasing EED. Removing these unrealistic conduction patterns from the simulation is important due to the role of EED in the maintenance of AFib [10].

The quantitative comparison of the LATs to accurate bimain simulations in Figure 4 and Table 1 leads to the conclusion that the accuracy of the eikonal model was significantly increased by the regression model. Even the smaller improvements that the accuracy of the eikonal model was significantly more challenging with each additional parameter considered. To tackle this issue, future research could use other methods of regression like machine learning techniques.

In conclusion a successful step towards a more accurate and fast computational model of cardiac electrophysiology was achieved. The creation of a regression formula turned out to enable significant improvements in the accuracy of eikonal simulations.

#### Author Statement

Research funding: This Project has received funding from the European Union’s horizon research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 860974. Conflict of interest: Authors state no conflict of interest.

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