Effect of Emitted Power on Waveform Intensity in Transcranial Doppler

James H. Halsey, MD

This study assesses the problem of transcranial Doppler recording failure and seeks to determine the extent to which this can be ameliorated by increased emitted power. We hypothesized that waveform intensity is directly related to the rate and quality of successful recording and may be compared quantitatively among groups of patients. Among a large group of patients recorded at 800 mW/cm² emitted power, intensity was strongest in white men, weakest in black women, and intermediate in black men and white women. It declined with age in women of either race, but not in men of either race. Analysis of the effect of emitted power on intensity predicted that significant numbers of waveforms recorded at 800 mW/cm² could not be recorded at the current clinical standards of 100 mW/cm², the difference being most pronounced in elderly black women. Temporal bone window thickness measured in a series of adult cadaver skulls was least in white men, greatest in black women, and intermediate in black men and white women. The findings of this study support the hypothesis that temporal bone window thickness is an important determinant of recording difficulty and suggest that increased emitted power can significantly increase successful recording, particularly in black and elderly patients. Increased power alone, however, cannot completely solve the recording problem within safe limits. (Stroke 1990;21:1573-1578)

A major limitation of the use of transcranial Doppler (TCD) in elderly stroke patients is the frequency of failure to obtain a recording. Several centers, using the standard transducer power of 100 mW/cm², have reported greater difficulty in elderly than young patients, in women than men, and in black people than white.1-7 However, these reports provide little quantitative information that might serve to set goals for improved instrument design. This study was undertaken to assess the problem of TCD recording failure in different age, sex, and racial groups and to determine to what degree this failure can be ameliorated by increased emitted power. We measured the intensity of the recorded waveform in a large group of patients to compare age, sex, and racial subgroups among them. We hypothesized that the ease and accuracy of an examination was related to waveform intensity, which would serve as a quantitative criterion for comparison.

Doubling of emitted power results in a waveform intensity increase of 3 dB,8 but it was not known by how much this would improve the rate of successful recording. We addressed this question in a separate, smaller group of patients in whom only low-intensity waveforms could be recorded. In these difficult patients, we made recordings over a range of emitted power to determine the power and intensity levels below which recording was not possible. We therefore could determine the effect of emitted power on the rate and quality of success.

In transcranial recording, most of the applied ultrasound energy is lost by absorption and scatter in the temporal bone. Measurements of bone window thickness comprise the basis for understanding clinical recording problems. We therefore made such measurements in cadavers to serve as background for the measurements in patients and to permit a limited test of the hypothesis that bone window thickness is related to waveform intensity.1-7

Subjects and Methods

We studied two groups of patients seen in our TCD laboratory between May 1, 1988 and September 1, 1989. We also made temporal bone window measurements in a group of cadavers.

The clinical studies were made with a Medasonics Transpect (Medsonics, Freemont, Calif.) with a hand-held transducer in the range-gated pulsed-wave mode at 2 MHz. The instrument was modified to yield 800 mW/cm² emitted power, meaning an in situ intensity of 800 mW/cm² spatial peak temporal average. This is compared with 95 mW/cm² in the stan-
dard Transpect, based on calibration by hydrophone in a deaerated water bath. Pulse duration was 12 μsec, and pulse repetition frequency was 10.4 kHz for the depth range of 25–62 mm. The sample volume was 12 mm in length and approximately 5 mm in diameter; these dimensions did not vary significantly between depths of 40 and 60 mm.

The recording consisted of the velocity waveform at a specific depth between 55 and 45 mm from the temporal scalp surface. Systolic velocity (SV) and diastolic velocity (DV) in centimeters per second, averaged over 5–10 cardiac cycles comprising about 5 seconds of recording time, were measured directly on the cathode ray tube display with a cursor controlled on the instrument panel. The mean velocity (MV) was computed by the instrument using a fast Fourier transform analysis, and this was compared with the arithmetic calculation MV = DV + (SV - DV)/3.9

The Transpect instrument had two gain controls that could be adjusted independently to optimize contrast between background noise and velocity waveform. These were called “noise level” and “dynamic range.” The noise level was a threshold below which weaker signals would not be displayed. Lowering the noise level made more low-intensity signal visible, but also included more background noise. Dynamic range specified the highest intensity above noise level to be displayed on the cathode ray tube screen, that is, the loudest component of the waveform, represented by the brightest contrast. Lesser intensities were displayed automatically with less bright contrast. The instrument contained a tuning program that automatically selected the noise level and dynamic range settings, which gave the optimal waveform display. With this program in effect, the sum of noise level and dynamic range was the intensity in decibels of the loudest component of the waveform spectrum. Spurious results were unimportant which random noise was displayed on the cathode ray tube, usually due to mechanical disturbance of the transducer, was louder than the loudest component of the waveform. Displays containing such disturbances were excluded.

In the first patient group, measurements were made over a range of ages. Forty-two black females, 28 black males, 126 white females, and 150 white males were studied. About half of these examinations were conducted by the author and the remainder by technologists whose window finding skills were comparable to the author's. These were consecutive patients in whom at least one middle cerebral artery (MCA) could be recorded from a depth between 55 and 45 mm from the temporal scalp surface. Each segment was treated as an independent observation. Twenty-seven separate segments were studied between a depth of 55 and 45 mm from the temporal scalp surface. Each segment was treated as an independent observation. Because of the differences in angle of insonation, it was presumed that different amounts of bone were traversed by the recorded signals at each segment.

A satisfactory velocity waveform was obtained initially for each segment at 800 mW/cm² emitted power. Then, without moving the transducer, power was successively reduced. Additional waveforms of the same segment were recorded at 600, 400, 200, 80, and 40 mW/cm² or until no waveform could be distinguished from background noise. The reflected intensity of each waveform was noted. When the waveform could no longer be distinguished from background noise, its intensity was assumed to be zero.

Cadaver temporal bone window measurements were made on 31 cadavers, all those that were available in the University of Alabama Gross Anatomy Laboratory in July 1987. These included 13 white men, 11 white women, two black men, and five black women. All were adult, but their ages at death were unknown. The minimum thickness of the squamous portion of the temporal bone in the region of the usual clinical temporal windows, above the zygomatic arch anterior to the external ear canal, was measured with calipers having a measurement error of ±0.1 mm. Several measurements were made in each temporal bone, the thinnest measurement for each side being recorded. Thus, each cadaver provided two window measurements.

Results

The average waveform intensity at 800 mW/cm² emitted power in white males of patient group 1 was approximately 29 dB at all ages above 30 and was slightly higher below 30. In black males, the average was approximately 27 dB at all ages above 30. Too few patients younger than 30 were studied to establish a reliable mean. In white women, the average waveform intensity declined from 33 dB below age 30 to 28 dB above age 50. In black women there was a stronger age...
effect, as the average declined from 32 dB below age 30 to 24 dB above age 50 (Figure 1). In a small subsample comprising 95 segments among 19 black women older than 70, the mean was only 18.7 dB.

A two-factor analysis of variance was used to investigate effects of race and sex on intensity among groups. Fisher's protected least significance difference test was used to compare pairs of means. Pearson's coefficient was calculated for the correlation between age and intensity for each race and sex group. All the means were significantly different from each other among the 51–99-year-old groups, with white male > white female > black male > black female (Table 1). The differences were less strong among the 31–50-year-old groups, those between white and black males not being significant.

In patients aged 51–99, failure to record any MCA waveforms occurred among two of 76 white males (3%), six of 53 white females (11%), one of 24 black males (4%), and eight of 19 black females (42%) (Figure 2). Sample sizes were too small for the low failure rates among younger patients to reveal meaningful differences. According to Fisher's exact test,
Discussion

The experimentally determined power and intensity relationship so closely corresponding to that predicted from basic physical principle validates the measuring system used and justifies the concept of quantitative comparison of intensity among groups as an index predictive of rate and quality of successful examination. Thus, at 800 mW/cm² the waveform intensity was approximately 10.5 dB greater than would be obtained at the current clinical standard of 100 mW/cm². For waveform intensities greater than about 35 dB, this difference would not be clinically significant because the waveform of approximately 25
dB to be obtained at 100 mW/cm² still would be
detectable and not degraded at 100 mW/cm².

A waveform with intensity as low as 23 dB at 800
mW/cm² would be barely detectable at 100 mW/cm²,
having an intensity of only 12.5 dB, virtually at the
threshold of detection. Such a waveform likely
would be degraded with underestimation of velocity, a
frequent problem below approximately 22 dB. Win-
dow-finding was easy in patients with intensity
greater than 30 dB but became increasingly difficult
below approximately 25 dB.

The practical significance of increased power can
be estimated by subtracting 10.5 dB from the intensity
of each waveform recorded at 800 mW/cm².
Assuming all those waveforms with resulting intensity
less than 12 dB at 100 mW/cm² to be undetectable, in
the 51–99 age groups this would exclude 13% of the
waveforms in white men, 18% in white women, 23% in
black men, and 50% in black women. The effects
would be minor in young patients. This is illustrated
in Figure 2, in which the estimated effect of the
hypothetical power reduction is added to the failure
rate actually noted at 800 mW/cm², and in Figure 1,
in which the effect on the actually recorded wave-
forms of the reduction of emitted power would be as
if the detection threshold at 800 mW/cm² were raised
to 22.5 dB. An additional effect of the lowered power
would be a greater difficulty in window-finding near
the detection threshold; thus, the failure rate in
practice would be higher than that predicted simply
by subtracting intensity or raising detection threshold
at a known window.

Because ultrasound absorption and scatter by bone
are much greater than by any other tissue, measure-
ments of temporal bone window thickness form the
anatomical basis for understanding practical clinical
recording problems. The relationship shown in Fig-
ure 4 is of course artificial because it compares
measurements in living patients and cadavers and
assumes that the cadaver sex and race subgroups
represent the same subgroups as among the clinical
patients. Nevertheless, acknowledging these limita-
tions, the relationship lends support to the hypothe-
sis that temporal bone window thickness is a major
determinant of waveform intensity and hence of
recording difficulty. Naturally, it would be desirable
for patients with poorer windows, but 6,400 mW/cm².

In the thickest cadaver temporal bones, the inner
table was often roughened or scalloped. The thinnest
point was a narrow cylindrical depression with
narrow window diameter, there would be a "collimating" effect on the ultrasound
beam passing through thick bone. This might severely
restrict the angles that could be used, so that some
tissues could not be insonated. Inner table scalloping
demands persistence in the search for a window in
difficult patients.

In our experience with 800 mW/cm², patients being
examined have never complained of discomfort and
the author has not noted discomfort when examining
himself. There was no warming of the transducer
during either hand-held examination or up to 3 hours
of monitoring during surgery. In some cases, it has
been possible to avoid arteriography because of
normal TCD findings that would not have been
possible at 100 mW/cm². Similarly, in several cases of
carotid endarterectomy, the decision to place a shunt
was facilitated by availability of the TCD because of
increased power.

Extrapolation of the observed yield and power
relation of approximately 10% per doubling suggests
that substantially solving the recording problem in
elderly black women by simply increasing applied
power would require at least three further doublings
×8 from the presently used 800 mW/cm², to about
6,400 mW/cm². The constraint on applied power is
the possibility of tissue damage. The threshold to
production of histological lesions is more than 100 W
for 1 second, about 10 W for 10 seconds, and more
than 1.5 W for 1,000 seconds.10–12 Guidelines for the
avoidance of any biological effect are more stringent.
There is a consensus that 100 mW/cm² is safe up to 24
hours. Within the range of 1–500 seconds, the prod-
uct (time × intensity) less than 50 Joules is thought to
be safe, even in the fetus.13,14

It is symptomatic of the early state of TCD devel-
oment that the Food and Drug Administration
lumps the procedure with fetal applications without
acknowledging that in transcranial examination, ap-
proximately 90% of applied power is lost in 1–2 mm
of skull, whereas hair and skin account for relatively
little power loss.15–18 This should set the safety limit
in adults to 1,000 mW/cm², although this would not
be safe in children or patients who had undergone
ear, nose, and throat examinations. Considerably more power might be safe
for patients with poorer windows, but 6,400 mW/cm²
might not be safe for routine practice unless there
were a reliable way to determine temporal bone
thickness before examination. Even so, scalp burns
might result from such power.

A possible approach to determination of bone
thickness in vivo would be to incorporate A-mode
instrumentation to enable detection of standing ech-

des not seen in the outer table. This difference, with the velocity of sound in bone, would
yield a quantitative index of thickness.

The Transpect used in this study had a "window
finder" that displayed qualitatively the intensity of
signal strength (independently of waveform) return-
ing from the depth of 70 mm. Although this intensity
should give an indication of signal loss by the bone,
from which thickness might be inferred, it was not
helpful in the present study nor have we found it
useful in clinical examinations. The reason for this may be the "collimating" effect of narrow windows. Thus, even when there was sufficient energy penetration, the narrow window may have excluded the needed angle for successful insonation.

A practical approach to improved recording might be the application of signal averaging, as used in clinical neurophysiology for detecting cerebral cortical evoked potentials. The principle is that repetition of events that occur at a consistent time with a consistent amplitude sums the events, whereas the summation of random noise above and below baseline approaches zero. This enhances the signal-to-noise ratio as the square root of the number of repetitions. Thus, in a patient with a regular cardiac rhythm, the sweep could be triggered by the R wave of the electrocardiogram. As few as four or eight cardiac cycles might be required to make a waveform distinct that, without averaging, might be audible, but not visible. With the presently used instrument, the threshold for distinguishing a waveform from background noise was approximately 12 dB. If that threshold could be lowered to 3 dB with averaging, this would have the effect of three doublings of power, the estimated need for the most difficult patients in current clinical practice.

Acknowledgments

I thank Mr. Barry Zakar and Dr. Bob Stone, Medasonics, for discussion of the instrument calibration.

References


Key Words • temporal bone • ultrasonics • transcranial Doppler
Effect of emitted power on waveform intensity in transcranial Doppler.

J H Halsey

*Stroke.* 1990;21:1573-1578
doi: 10.1161/01.STR.21.11.1573

*Stroke* is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
Copyright © 1990 American Heart Association, Inc. All rights reserved.
Print ISSN: 0039-2499. Online ISSN: 1524-4628

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
http://stroke.ahajournals.org/content/21/11/1573

Permissions: Requests for permissions to reproduce figures, tables, or portions of articles originally published in *Stroke* can be obtained via RightsLink, a service of the Copyright Clearance Center, not the Editorial Office. Once the online version of the published article for which permission is being requested is located, click Request Permissions in the middle column of the Web page under Services. Further information about this process is available in the Permissions and Rights Question and Answer document.

Reprints: Information about reprints can be found online at:
http://www.lww.com/reprints

Subscriptions: Information about subscribing to *Stroke* is online at:
http://stroke.ahajournals.org/subscriptions/