で境界を決定し、軟骨領域の抽出を行った。これらの手法が生体内における軟骨形態計測にどのように応用できるのか今後検討が必要であると考える。

E．結論

今回我々は、超音波 B-mode 画像を用いて豚膝関節軟骨を撮像し、得られた画像より三次元モデルを作成、軟骨厚および軟骨の体積を計測した。高解像度 CT を用いて同様に軟骨三次元モデルを作成し、軟骨厚・体積を算出し、超音波による定量値の精度評価のため、それらを比較検討した。双方の間には有意な相関・高い近似がみられ、超音波を用いた関節軟骨三次元評価は、関節軟骨の形態定量法として有用であると考えられた。

F．研究発表

9．論文発表

Matsuyama J, Ohnishi I, Sakai R, Bessho M, Matsumoto T, Miyasaka K, Harada A, Ohashi S, Nakamura K. A New Method for Evaluation of Fracture Healing by Echo Tracking. Ultrasound Medicine & Biol., In press

Y. Cheng, S. Wang, T. Yamazaki, J. Zhao, Y. Nakajima, S. Tamura, Hip cartilage thickness measurement accuracy improvement, Computerized Medical Imaging and Graphics, Vol.31,no.8, p.643-655, 2007

図１　カッティング後の豚骨軟骨片（膝蓋骨）

10．学会発表

Matsuyama, J.; Ohnishi, I.; Sakai, R.; Miyasaka, K.; Harada, A.; Bessho, M.; Ohashi, S.; Matsumoto, T.; Nakamura, K., A new method for evaluation of fracture healing by Echo tracking, 8th EFORT congress, Transactions, F779, 2007

大橋　暁、大西　五三男、酒井　亮一、廣田　浩二、宮坂　好一、中村　耕三
超音波を用いた Time of Flight 法による関節軟骨の音速測定、日本整形外科学会誌、81(8), S1012, 2007

G．知的財産権の出願・登録状況（予定を含む。）

5．特許取得

超音波骨癒合診断装置　特願 2007-177056 2007.7.5

超音波骨癒合診断装置　特願 2007-231114 2007.9.6

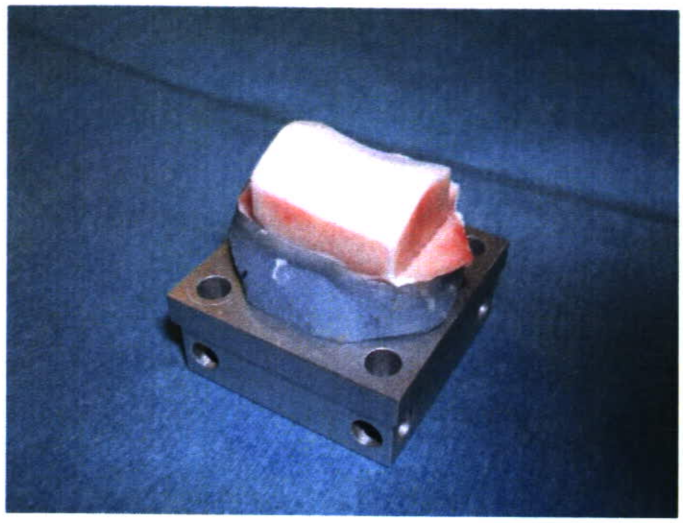


図２　骨軟骨片およびプローブのセッティング

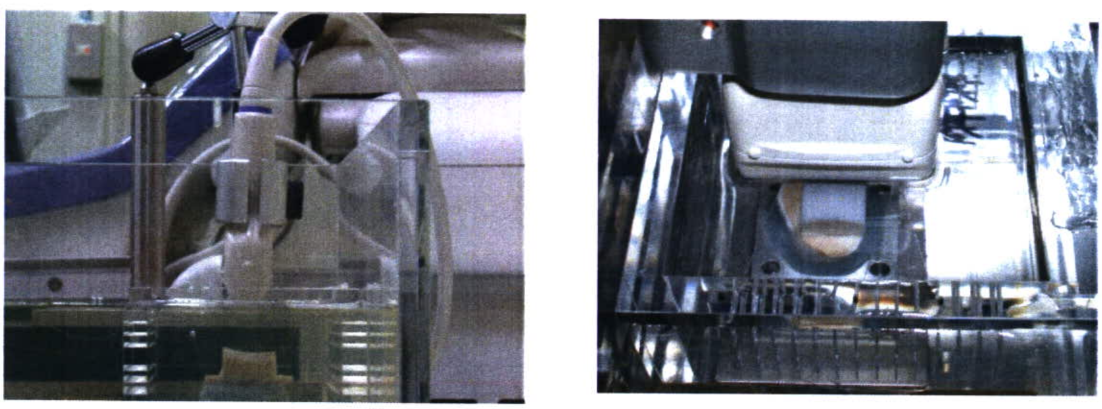


図３　超音波 B-mode 軟骨画像

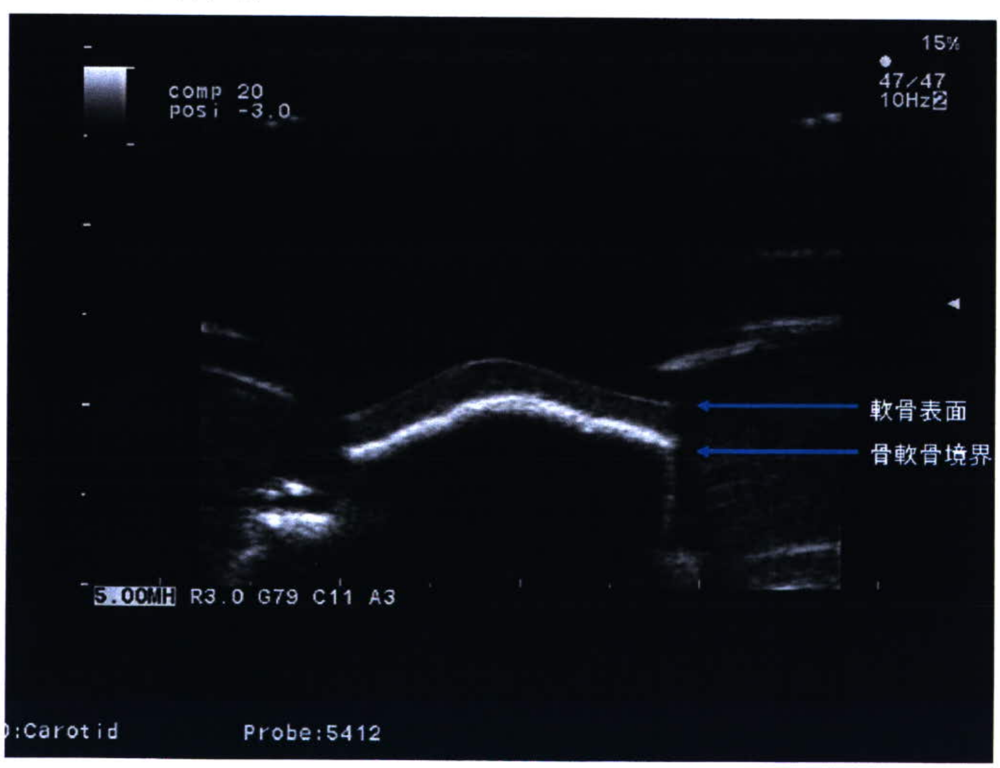


図４　高解像度 CT 像

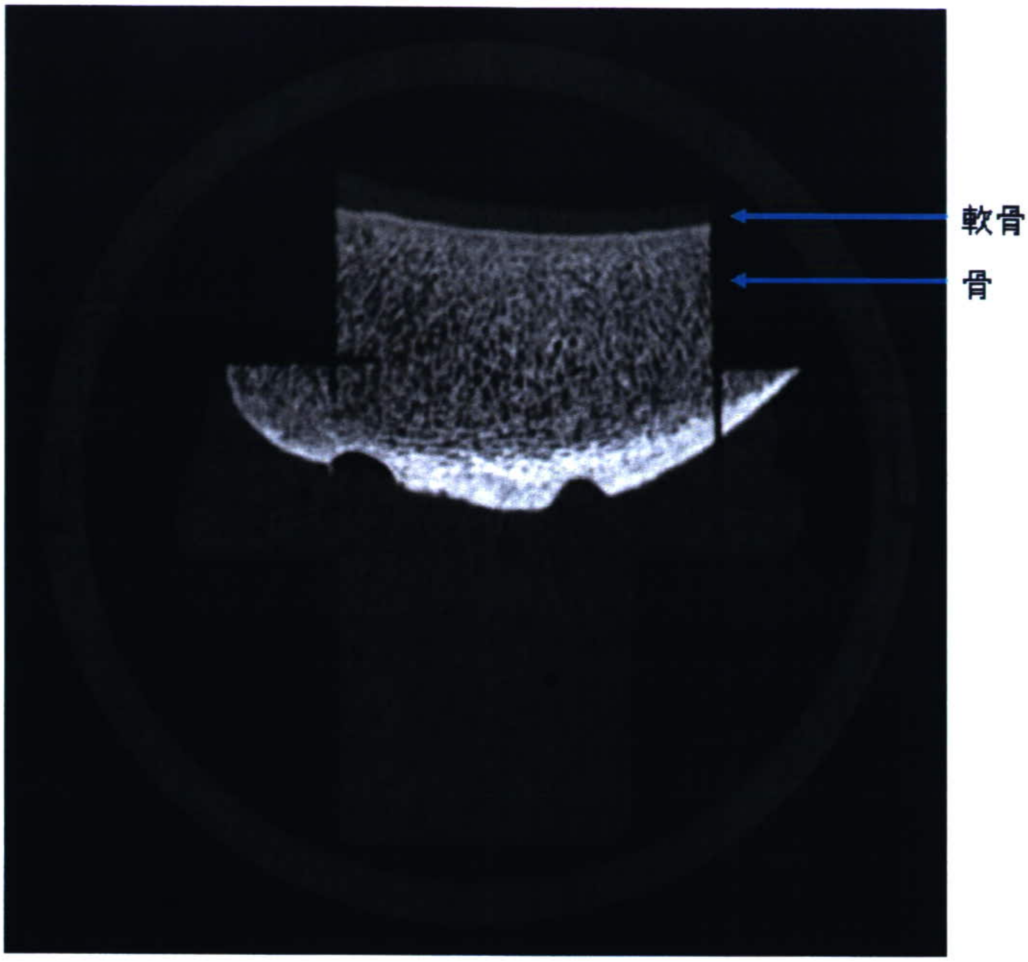
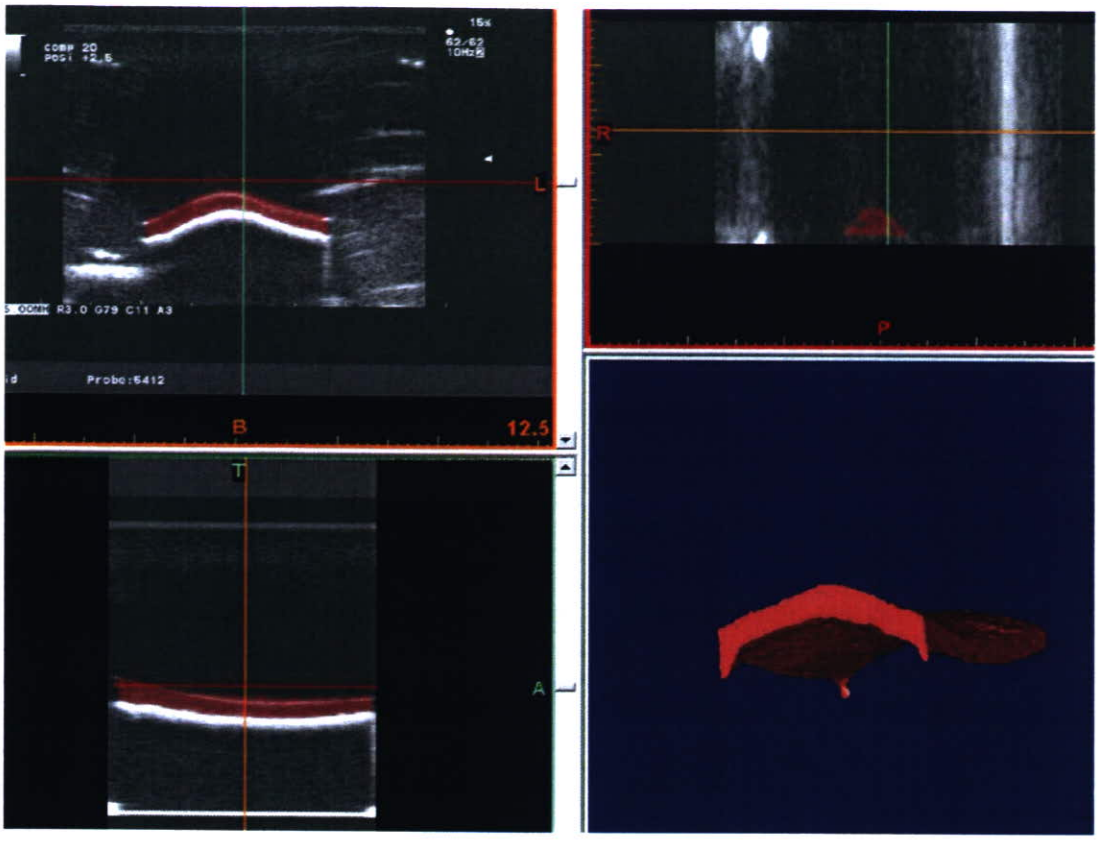


図５　軟骨超音波 3D モデル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62/62
10Hz
comp 20
Posi +2.5
R3.0 G79 C11 A3
Probe:6412
L
B
12.5
R
P
T
A

図６　軟骨高解像度 CT　3D モデル

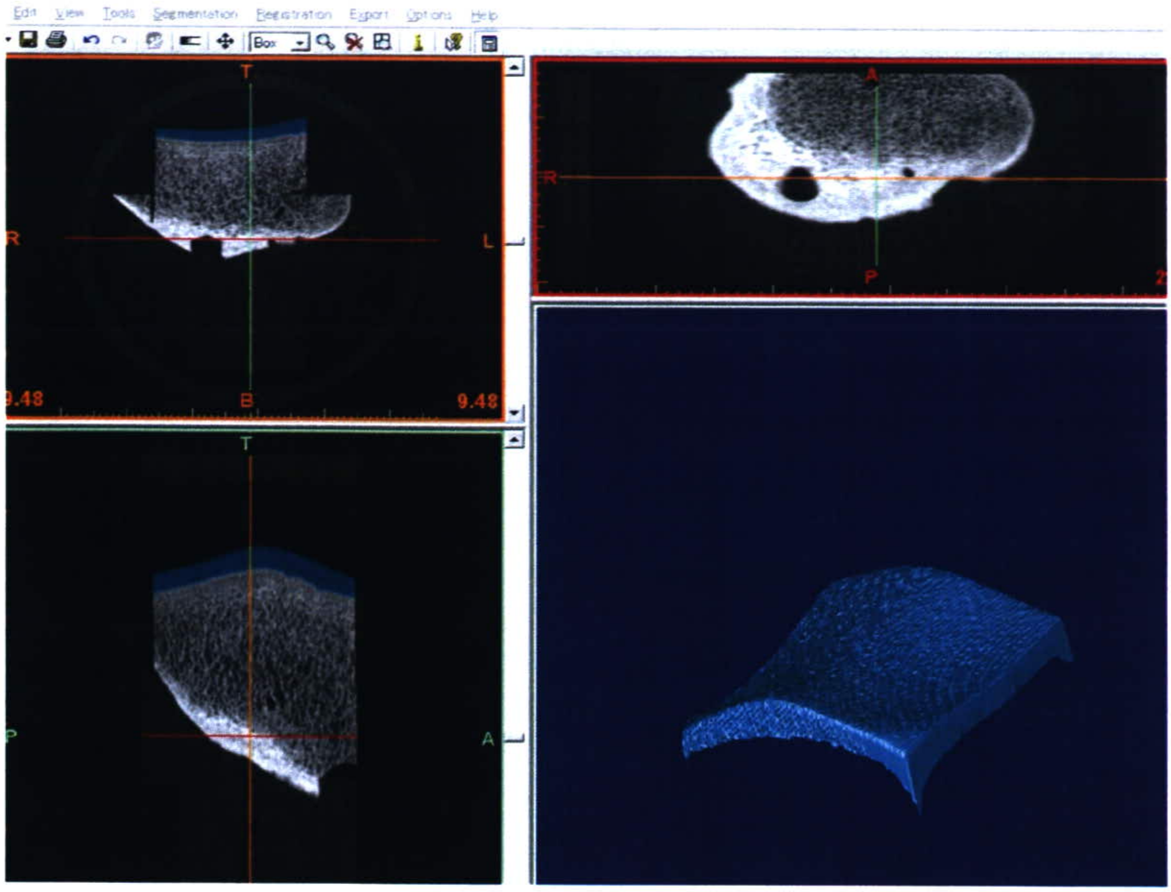


図７　3D モデル　レジストレーション後

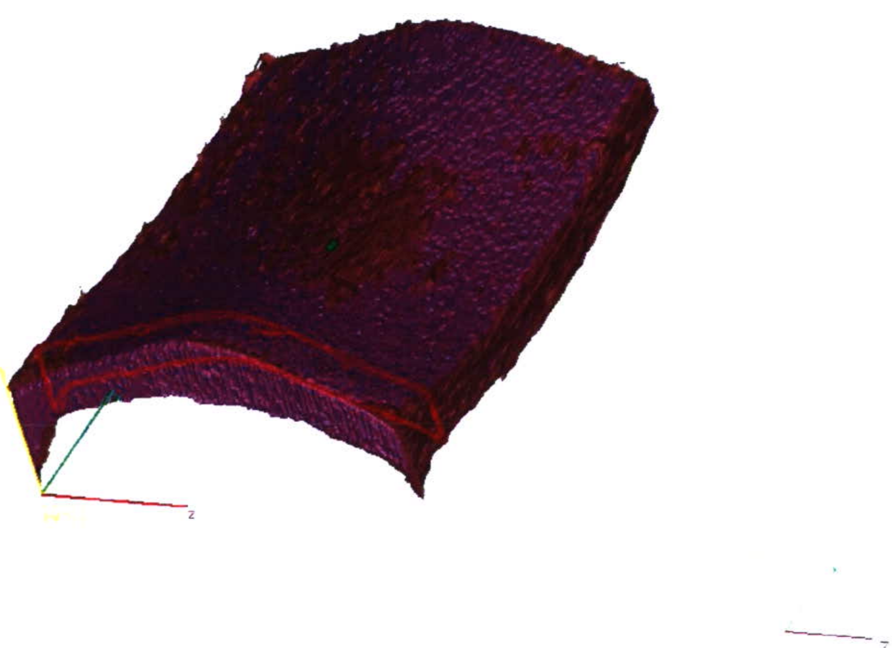
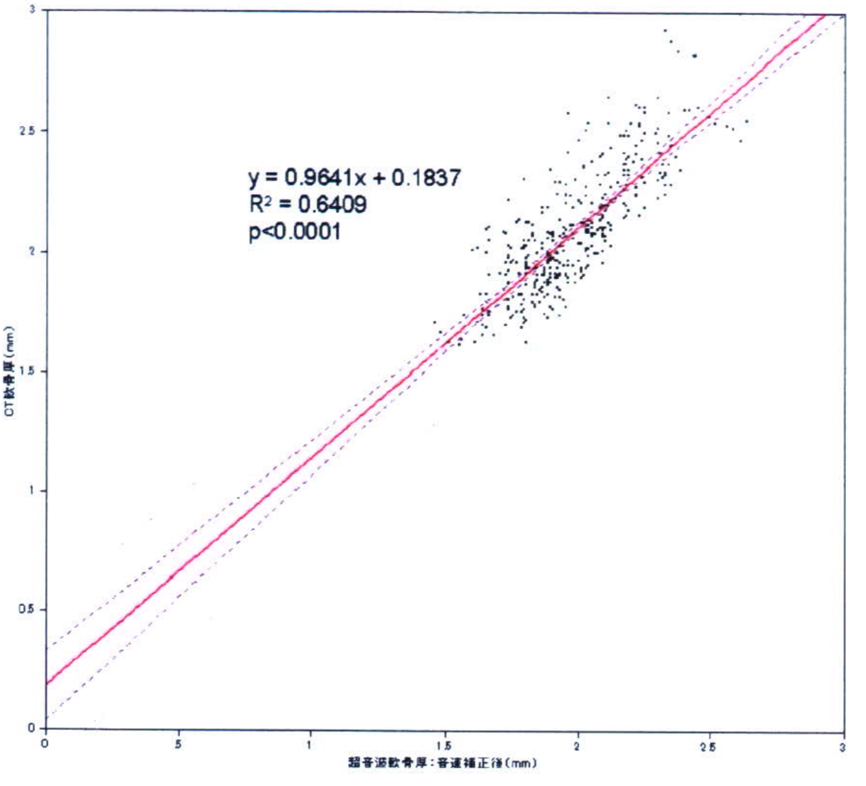


図8


y = 0.9641x + 0.1837
R2 = 0.6409
p<0.0001
CT軟骨厚(mm)
超音波軟骨厚：音速補正後(mm)
0
0.5
1
1.5
2
2.5
3
0
5
1
1.5
2
2.5
3

Ⅲ　　研究成果の刊行に冠する一覧表

研究成果の刊行に関する一覧表

【H19. 4. 1～H20. 3. 31】

雑誌

発表者氏名	論文タイトル名	発表誌名	巻号	ページ	出版年
Matsuyama J, Ohnishi I, Sakai R, Bessho M, Matsumoto T, Miyasaka K, Harada A, Ohashi S, Nakamura K.	A New Method for Evaluation of Fracture Healing by Echo Tracking.	Ultrasound Medicine & Biol	In press		
Y. Cheng, S. Wang, T. Yamazaki, J. Zhao, Y. Nakajima, S. Tamura	Hip cartilage thickness measurement accuracy improvement	Computerized Medical Imaging and Graphics	Vol. 31, no. 8	643-655	2007
Matsuyama, J.; Ohnishi, I.; Sakai, R.; Miyasaka, K.; Harada, A.; Bessho, M.; Ohashi, S.; Matsumoto, T.; Nakamura, K.	A new method for evaluation of fracture healing by Echo tracking	8th EFORT congress	Transactions	F779	2007
大橋　暁、大西五三男、酒井　亮一、廣田　浩二、宮坂　好一、中村　耕三	超音波を用いた Time of Flight 法による関節軟骨の音速測定	日本整形外科学会誌	81(8)	S1012	2007

Ⅳ　研究成果の刊行物・印刷

May 15	Auditorium nr.	4 - Cimabue	Time	11.00 - 12.30
Category	Free Papers	Bone research 1	Moderators	
	General Orthopaedic 10		Kienapfel, H. (Germany); Tranquilli Leali, P. (Italy)	
Time	Number of Abstract	Title	Presenting Author	Authors

11.10	**F779**	**A new method for evaluation of fracture healing by Echo tracking**	**Matsuyama, J.**	**Matsuyama, J.; Ohnishi, I.; Sakai, R.; Miyasaka, K.; Harada, A.; Bessho, M.; Ohashi, S.; Matsumoto, T.; Nakamura, K.**

The most important issue in the assessment of fracture healing is to acquire information on the restoration of mechanical integrity of the bone. To measure bending stiffness at the healing fracture site, we focused on the use of echo tracking (ET) that was a technique measuring minute displacement of bone surface by detecting a wave pattern in a radiofrequency echo signal with an accuracy of 2.6 μ. The purpose of this study was to assure that the ET system could quantitatively assess the progress, retardation or arrest of healing by detecting bending stiffness at the fracture site.

With the ET system, eight tibial fractures in 7 patients with an average age of 37 years (range: 24-69) were measured. Two tibiae in 2 patients were treated conservatively with a cast, and 6 tibiae in 5 patients were treated with internal fixation (intramedullary nailing: 4, plating: 1, screw 1). Patients assumed supine position, and the affected lower leg was held horizontally with the antero-medial aspect faced upwards. The fibula head and the lateral malleolus were supported and held tight by a Vacufix ®. A 7.5 Hz ultrasound probe was placed on each antero-medial aspect of the proximal and distal fragments along its long axis.

Each probe was equipped with a multi-ET system with 5 tracking points with each span of 10 mm. A load of 25 N was applied at a rate of 5 N / second using a force gauge parallel to the direction of the probe and these probes detected the bending angle between the proximal and distal fragments. An ET angle was defined as the sum of the inclinations of both fragments. In the patients treated with a cast, the contra-lateral side was also measured and served as a control. Fracture healing was assessed time sequentially with an interval of 2 or 3 weeks during the treatment.

None of the patients complained of pain, or no other complication related to this measurement occurred. In the patient (patient:M) treated with a cast, the ET angle exponentially decreased as time elapsed (y = 1.4035e-0.1053x, R = 0.9754) and the radiographic appearance showed normal healing. Including this case, in all patients with radiographic normal healing, the ET angle exponentially decreased. However, in patients with retarded healing (patient:N), the decrease of the angle was extremely slow(y = 0.2769e-0.0096x, R = 0.815). In patients with non union (patient:T), the angle stayed at the same level.

With this method, noninvasive assessment of bending stiffness at the healing site was achieved. Bending angle measured by ET diminished over time exponentially in patients with normal healing. On the contrary, in patients with healing arrest, no significant decrease of the bending angle was recognized. It

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was demonstrated that the echo tracking method could be applicable clinically to evaluate fracture healing as a versatile, quantitative and noninvasive technique.

Ultrasound in Med. & Biol., Vol. 34, No. x, pp. xxx, 2008

0301-5629/08/$–see front matter

ELSEVIER

doi:10.1016/j.ultrasmedbio.2007.11.005

● *Original Contribution*

A NEW METHOD FOR EVALUATION OF FRACTURE HEALING BY ECHO TRACKING

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TAKUYA MATSUMOTO,* KOICHI MIYASAKA,† AKIMITSU HARADA,† SATORU OHASHI,*
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Abstract—Assessment of bone healing on radiographs depends on the volume and radio-opacity of callus at the healing site, but is not necessarily objective, and there are differences of judgment among observers. To overcome this disadvantage, a clinical system was developed to quantify the stiffness of healing fractures of the tibia in patients by the echo tracking (ET) method in a manner similar to a three-point bending test. The purpose of this study was to ensure that the ET system could clinically assess the progress, delay or arrest of healing. The fibular head and the lateral malleolus were supported. A 7.5-MHz ultrasound probe was placed on the proximal and distal fragments and a load of 25 N was applied. Five tracking points were set along the long axis of the ultrasound probe at intervals of 10 mm. With a multiple ET system, two probes measured the displacement of five tracking points on each of the proximal and distal fragments of the tibia, thereby detecting the bending of the two fragments generated by the load. ET angle was defined as the sum of the inclinations of the proximal and distal fragments. Eight tibial fractures in seven patients treated by a cast or internal fixation were measured over time. In patients with radiographically normal healing, the bending angle decreased exponentially over time. However, in patients with nonunion, the angle remained the same over time. It was demonstrated that the ET method could be clinically applicable to evaluate fracture healing as a versatile, quantitative and noninvasive technique. (E-mail: ohnishii-dis@h.u-tokyo.ac.jp)

Key Words: **Ultrasound, Echo tracking, Fracture site stiffness, Fracture healing.**

INTRODUCTION

The most important issue in assessment of fracture healing is to obtain information about restoration of the mechanical integrity of the bone. In clinical practice, fracture healing is usually judged from serial radiographs. Assessment of bone healing on radiographs depends on the volume and radio-opacity of callus at the healing site, but is not necessarily objective, and there are differences of judgment among observers. In addition, radiographs cannot evaluate fracture site strength. In these respects, assessment of fracture healing by using radiographs is far from ideal.

The stated disadvantages of radiography for assessment of fracture healing have been pointed out in recent years, and various other methods of assessment have been developed. Jernberger (1970) devised an invasive method for measuring the bending stiffness of healing fractures of the tibia. With his method, the proximal and distal bone fragments were fixed by screws that were connected to a specially designed beam, and a load was applied through a screw at the center of the fixing screws. The method was based on the principle governing the bending of two beams connected at the ends and subjected to a bending force applied at the midpoint. Burny et al. (1984) developed a method that used a strain gauge attached to a fixator shaft. With their method, the strain gauge readings were monitored over time during weight bearing, and the pattern of fracture healing was classified into seven categories (such as normal, delayed, arrested, *etc.*). Assessment using acoustic emission (AE) was developed by Nicholls and Berg (1981), who detected acoustic pulses generated by microscopic failure of the bone under loading. The investigation by Watanabe et al. (2001) revealed that AE signals occurred with the yielding of callus. However, the strain gauge method and the AE method have the disadvantage that both are limited to patients with external fixation, and both require the in-

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E-mail: ohnishii-dis@h.u-tokyo.ac.jp

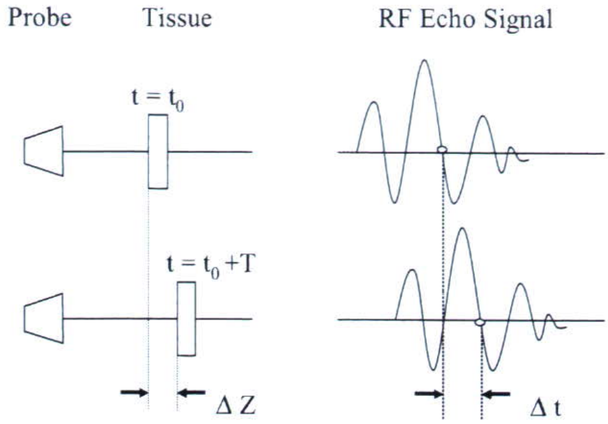

Fig. 1. The target tissue may move closer to or away from an ultrasonic probe over the distance ΔZ during a pulse repetition time of ultrasonic waves (T), causing phase delay of the RF echo signal (Δt). The ET method measures the extent of this displacement by tracking the initialized phase pattern of the echo signal.

sertion of screw pins or wires. For these reasons, such methods have not been widely used and a new method is needed that is both noninvasive and widely applicable.

To overcome such limitations, we developed a new method for the noninvasive and quantitative assessment of fracture healing. Bone always undergoes deformation in response to an applied load. By quantitatively measuring this deformation, it is possible to assess the mechanical properties of bone and thereby estimate the strength of a fracture site. In this study, we attempted to noninvasively assess the bending stiffness of the healing fracture sites after applying a load. To measure bending stiffness, we focused on ultrasound because it is noninvasive. Precise measurement of the displacement of a specific point can be done by the echo tracking (ET) method. This method is a technique for measuring minute displacement of a certain point on a tissue by detecting a wave pattern in the radiofrequency (RF) echo signal reflected from the target tissue (Fig. 1) (Hokanson et al. 1972). To apply this technique for detection of bone deformation, we improved it so that displacement could be measured with an accuracy of 2.6 μm (Matsuyama et al. 2006). We also developed a multi-ET system that was able to simultaneously track dynamic movement at multiple points on the bone surface. In our previous study of the three-point bending test using a porcine tibia, the strain gauge readings and the data from the multi-ET system showed an almost perfect linear correlation with the load (r = 0.998). These results indicated the possibility of using the echo tracking method to detect bone surface deformation.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether our newly developed ET system could clinically assess the progress, delay or arrest of healing by detecting the bending stiffness at the fracture healing site. Fracture healing was evaluated in patients with tibia fracture treated by a cast or internal fixation.

METHODS

A clinical system was developed to quantify the stiffness of healing fractures of the tibia in patients by the ET method in a similar manner to a three-point bending test. Five tracking points were set along the long axis of the ultrasound probe at intervals of 10 mm. With a multiple ET system, two probes measured the displacement of five tracking points on each of the proximal and distal fragments of the tibia, thereby detecting the bending of the two fragments generated by the load. ET angle was defined as the sum of the inclinations of the proximal and distal fragments (Fig. 2). When callus was weak in the initial stage of healing, the tracked points were almost in a straight line and the inclination of the two fragments was calculated directly. However, when the callus was more rigid in the late stage of healing, the line connecting the points was curved and the inclination was obtained from the slope of the linear regression equation for the displacement of the points.

Before clinical application of this method, its accuracy was evaluated by measuring the inclination of the metal flat panel.

Measurement of the accuracy of ET angle using an inclined flat metal panel

A flat stainless steel (SUS 420J) panel (length 270 mm, width 60 mm, thickness 5 mm) was used, which had a parallel accuracy and flatness variation of <2 μm. One end of the panel was attached to a magnet stand (DG, Noga Japan Ltd, Saitama, Japan), and the other side was attached to a goniometer (X13–001, Tsukumo Co. Ltd, Saitama, Japan) fixed to another magnet stand. Then, the

Fig. 2. Probes are set on each of the proximal and distal fragments of the tibia to detect the bending of the two fragments generated by a load. The ET angle is defined as the sum of the inclination of both fragments.

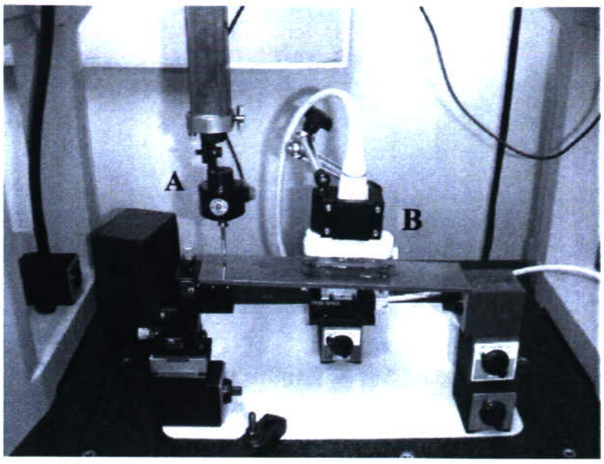

Fig. 3. The accuracy of the ET measurement was evaluated by measuring the inclination of the flat metal panel simultaneously using a 3-D measuring device. (A) 3-D measuring device; (B) 7.5-M Hz linear ultrasound probe.

metal panel was inclined by increasing the height of the goniometer stand. A 7.5-M Hz linear ultrasound probe (UST-5710-7.5, Aloka Co. Ltd., Tokyo) was set at a distance of 20 mm from the panel to measure the changes of displacement of each of five points on the panel (Fig. 3). Using these data, the ET angle of the panel was calculated. At the same time, the inclination of the panel was accurately measured using a 3-D measuring device (AE112, Mitsutoyo, Kanagawa, Japan) with an accuracy of 1 μm. The panel was inclined by elevating the sliding mechanism of the stand by 0.4 mm and the inclination of the panel was measured 5 times, after which the mean and standard deviation were calculated. Accuracy was evaluated by calculating the standard deviation of the difference between the ET angle and the inclination measured by the 3-D measuring device in each of the measurement trials.

Clinical measurement of fracture site bending stiffness

Eight tibial fractures in seven patients with an average age of 37 y (range 24–69 y) were measured (Table 1). Two fractures of two patients were treated conservatively with a cast, and six fractures of five patients were treated by internal fixation (locked intramedullary nailing in 4, plating in 1 and screws in 1). The average measurement period was 40.8 wk (21–60 wk), and the average number of measurements was 7.5 (5–11).

Patients assumed the supine position with both knees extended, and the affected leg was held horizontal with the antero-medial aspect of the tibia upwards. The fibular head and the lateral malleolus were supported and held tight by a Vacufix (Muranaka Medical Instrument Co., Ltd., Osaka, Japan) to avoid rotation of the leg during loading trials. Before measurement, B-mode images of the short axis of the proximal and distal fragments of the tibia were obtained to identify the center in both directions. By connecting both of the centers, the anatomical axis of the tibia was identified. A 7.5-MHz ultrasound probe was placed on the antero-medial aspect of each of the proximal and distal fragments in the long axis. Each probe was equipped with a multi-ET system with five tracking points at 10-mm intervals. The probes were set vertically on the skin of the leg and held tight with an articulated holder (DG61003, Noga Japan Ltd., Saitama, Japan). A load of 25 N was applied at a rate of 5 N/s and then reduced to 0 N at the same rate using a force gauge (DNP, Imada, Osaka, Japan) parallel to the direction of the probe at the most distal part of the proximal fragment adjacent to the fracture site (Fig. 4). For the initial measurement obtained in each patient, the loading point was set right on the long axis near the fracture site using a B-mode image as a guide. With this setup, the tibia was bent in the same way as for a three-point bending test in the direction of the ultrasound beam. In patients with oblique or spiral fractures, the loading point and the tracking points were set so that they did not cover the fracture site. In patients with a bone graft at the fracture site, the loading point was set on the graft, but the probes were placed so as not to cover it. In the patient with a plate, both the proximal and distal probes were set on the plate surface to measure bending of the plate. Using the multi-ET system, the probes

Table 1. Clinical cases of the tibial fracture

Case	Gender	Age	Limb	Treatment fracture healing	Measurement period (Initial-final)	Radiographic finding
1	F	24	L	Casting	4–47 wk	Normal
2	M	29	R	Casting	7–28 wk	Normal
3	M	23	R	Bone grafting	8–27 mo	Normal
4	M	31	R	Nailing	4–39 wk	Normal
5	F	57	R	Nailing	5–10 mo	Normal
6	F	57	L	Nailing	6–10 mo	Normal
7	F	26	R	Nailing	5 y 2 mo–5 y 7 mo	Nonunion
8	M	69	R	Plating	9–45 wk	Delayed

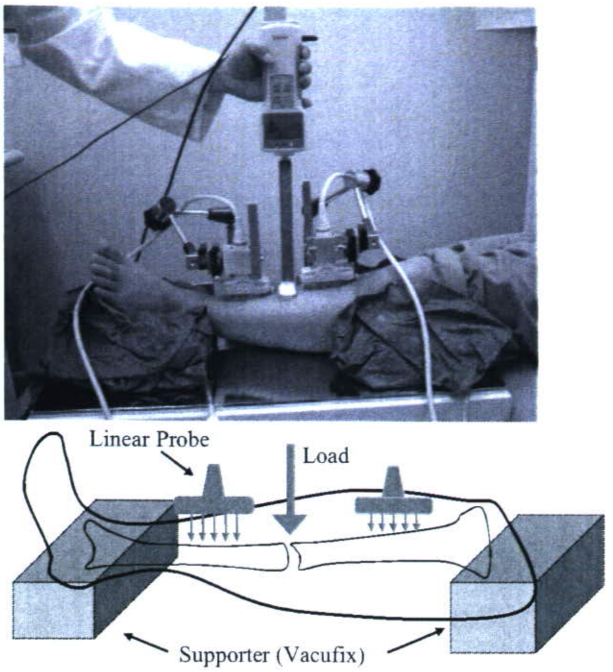

Fig. 4. The affected leg of a patient was held horizontal with the antero-medial aspect of the tibia upwards. The fibular head and the lateral malleolus were supported and held tight by a Vacufix. The probes were set vertically on the skin of the leg and held tight with an articulated arm. A load was applied using a force gauge parallel to the direction of the probe.

detected the angle between the proximal and distal fragments generated by the load. Measurement was repeated five times, and the mean and the standard deviation of the ET angle were calculated.

Fracture healing was assessed at intervals of two or three weeks until radiographic union or arrest of healing occurred. In each patient, the decrease of the ET angle was statistically examined to determine whether it decreased exponentially and whether the decrease was significant. To evaluate the changes of the ET angle over time, exponential regression analysis was performed, and the curve of the ET angle *vs.* time relation was drawn. Differences were considered significant when the p value was less than 0.05.

To investigate the influence of the position of the probes and the patient on the results, the precision of the method was evaluated by repeated measurement of the ET angle in a patient with a diaphyseal fracture of the tibia treated by a cast (case 2). In addition, the linearity of the relation between the load and the ET angle was assessed by incrementally increasing the load from 10 to 30 N. The ultrasound device (SSD 1000, Aloka Co. Ltd.) used in this investigation is used clinically and its safety has been established. The protocol of this investigation was approved by the ethics committee of Tokyo University Hospital, and the patients were enrolled after informed consent was obtained.

RESULTS

Accuracy of ET angle measurement for a flat metal panel

Measurement of the inclination of the flat metal panel showed that the average inclination was 0.117° and the standard deviation was 0.002°. The average inclination obtained with the 3-D measuring device was 0.116°, with a standard deviation of 0.003°. The standard deviation of the differences between the data obtained by the ET method and by the 3-D measuring device was 0.002°.

Clinical measurement of fracture site bending stiffness

The average time required for measurement was 17 min (range 15–20 min). At each loading trial, none of the patients complained of pain and there were no complications related to measurement.

The precision of this method was evaluated by repeating measurement of case 2 (treated with a cast), with repositioning of the leg and the ultrasound probes. The mean and standard deviation of the ET angle were 0.316 ± 0.015, and the coefficient of variation was calculated to be 4.6%. The linearity of the relation between the load and the bending angle was very high, with a correlation coefficient of 0.997.

Cases presentation

Case 1: A 24-year-old-woman treated with a cast. The patient sustained a spiral fracture of the proximal diaphysis of the tibia in a traffic accident, and a Patella tendon bearing brace cast was applied. Healing was assessed by the ET method, as well as radiographs a total of 11 times from 4 weeks to 47 weeks after fracture. The fracture line became opaque and the callus volume increased from 4 weeks to 19 weeks, but after 26 weeks there was almost no change of the thickness of the callus. On the other hand, measurement showed that the ET angle was about 1° at 4 weeks, and that it decreased exponentially ($y = 1.40e^{-}$ $_{0} \cdot 105\times$, $r = -0.975$, $p < 0.0001$). The ET angles of both cases 1 and 2 treated with a cast decreased exponentially over time and they reached the level of the intact side by 22 weeks (Fig. 5a, b).

Case 7: A 26-year-old-woman with a fracture of the diaphysis of the tibia treated by a locked intramedullary nailing. ET measurement was performed five times from 5 y 2 mo to 6 y 7 mo after fracture. Her X-ray films showed hypertrophic nonunion, but judgment of whether healing was proceeding was extremely difficult. ET measurement showed that there was no significant decrease of the angle over a period of 1 y and 5 mo ($y = 0.264e^{0} \cdot 002\times$, $r = 0.238$, $p = 0.700$) (Fig. 6a, b).

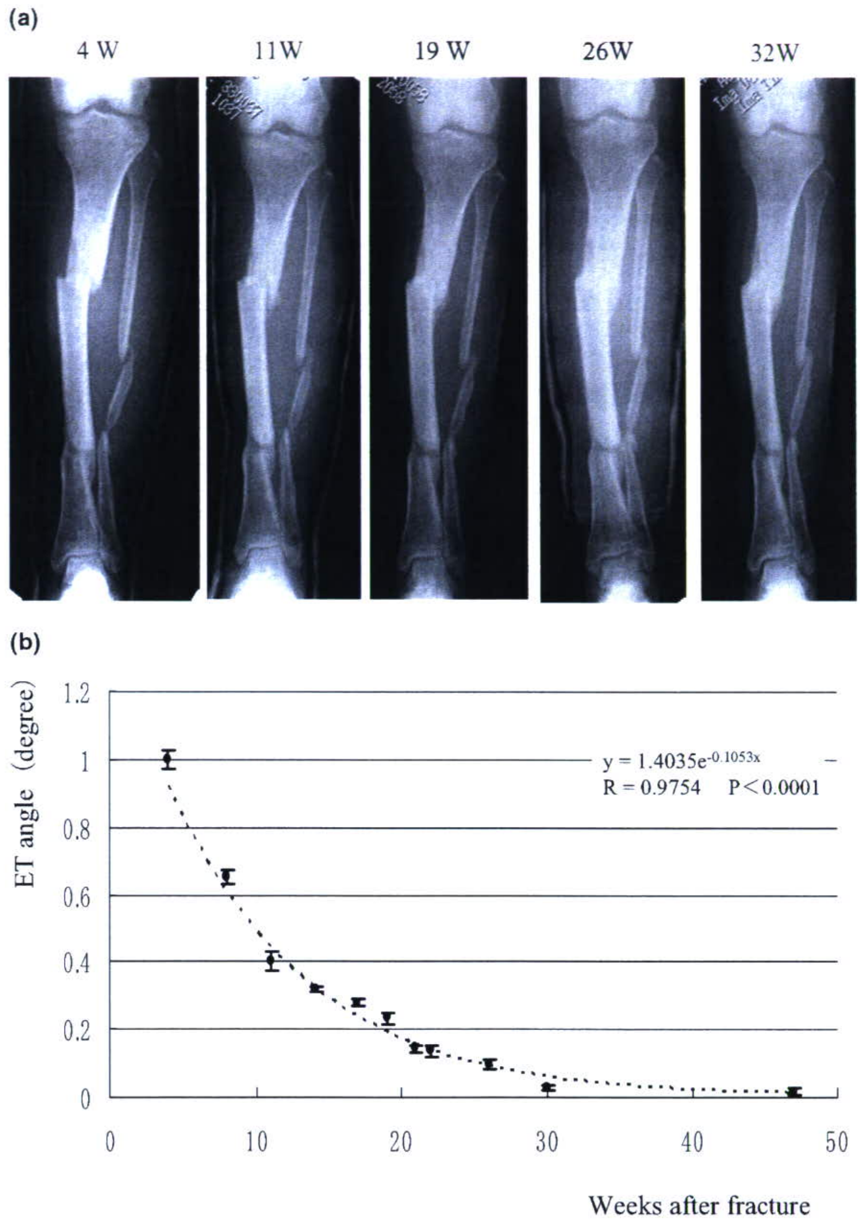

Fig. 5. (a) Time sequential change of the fracture site X-ray from 4 weeks to 32 weeks after fracture in case 1 treated with casting. The fracture site healed normally. (b) In the same patient, the ET angle was plotted. The ET angles decreased exponentially over time.

Case 8: A 69-year-old-man with a long oblique fracture treated with a plate. His X-ray films showed a long oblique fracture line extending for almost 80 mm. Measurement was performed 10 times from 9 weeks to 45 weeks after fracture, during which period almost no change of the fracture site or callus was recognized on X-ray films. The ET method measured the bending angle of the plate. The change was very slow, but the angle decreased significantly from 0.28 to 0.2 degrees, and then finally declined to 0.1 degree. The overall change showed an exponential curve ($y = 0.40e^{-0.030x}$, $r = -0.895$, $p = 0.0005$) (Fig. 7a, b). In patients with radiographically normal healing, the bending angle decreased exponentially over time (Fig. 8). However, in patients with nonunion, the angle remained the same over time.

DISCUSSION

Our method allows noninvasive assessment of bending stiffness at the healing site, so it can be appli-

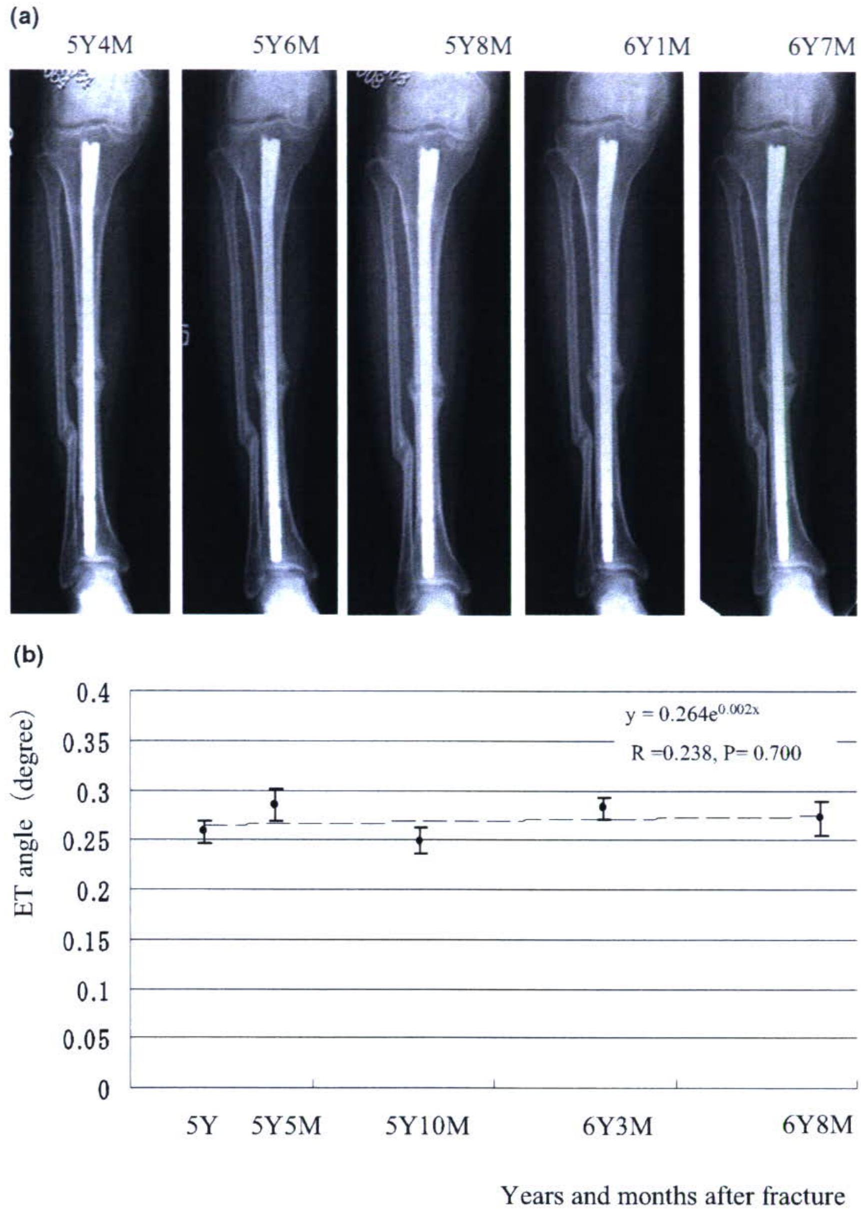

Fig. 6. (a) Time sequential change of the fracture site X-ray from 5 y 4 mo to 6 y 7 mo after fracture in case 7, treated with intramedullary nailing. The X-ray films showed hypertrophic nonunion, but judgment of whether healing was proceeding was extremely difficult. (b) In case 7, the ET angle showed no change over time and the regression lines showed no significant decrease.

cable to patients treated conservatively as well as those managed by surgical intervention with plating or intramedullary nailing.

In this study, the precision and reproducibility of the method were evaluated. The precision of measuring displacement by using the echo tracking system specially designed for bone surface measurement has already been assessed, and a precision of 2.6 μ was demonstrated in our previous study. However, the precision of measuring the bending angle has not been investigated before. We obtained a precision of 0.002°, which was thought to be adequate based on the results of the study by Moorcroft et al. (2001) that evaluated fracture healing. They used the three-point bending test to generate angles of 0.4 to 1.0° in an *in-vivo* measurement trial and connected a goniometer to the bone fragment *via* screw pins fixed to a side bar of the external fixator to detect bending at the fracture site.

When estimation of the linearity of measurement was done in relation to the load, there was excellent

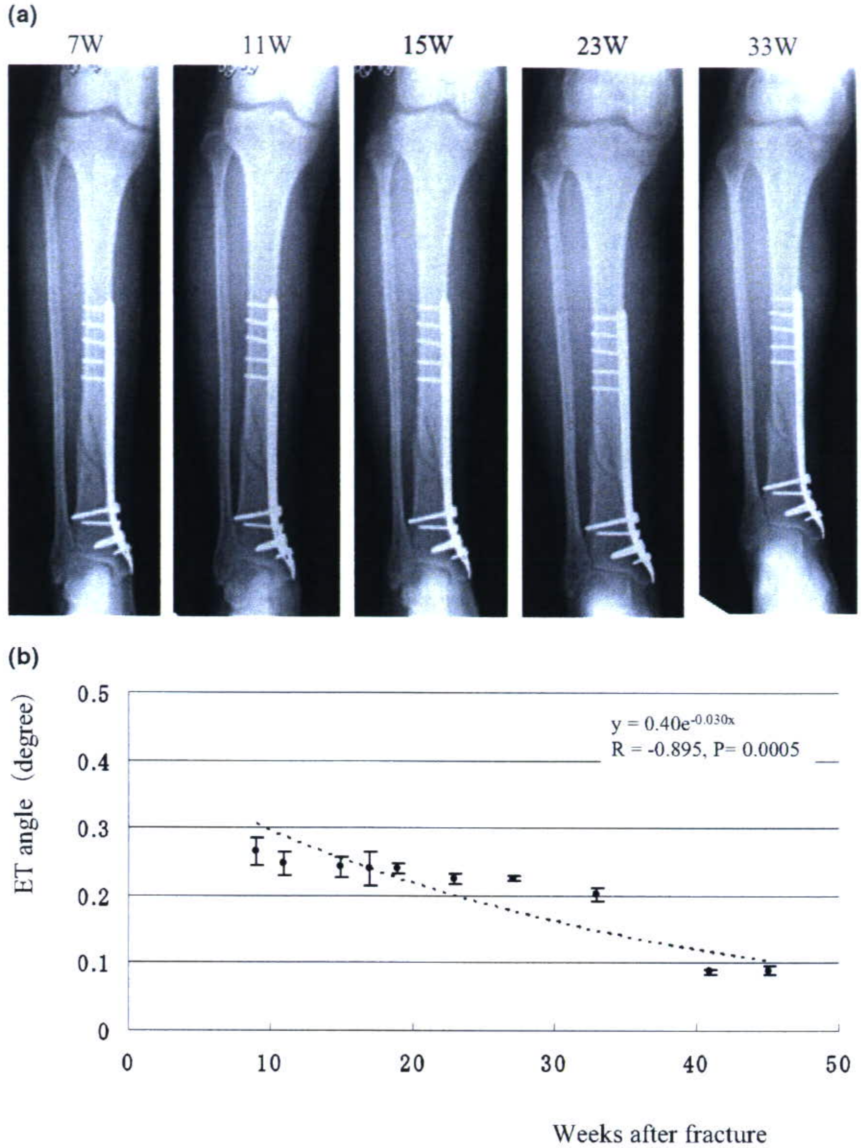

Fig. 7. (a) The X-ray films of case 8, treated with plating. No change of the fracture site or callus was recognized on X-ray films. (b) The ET method measured the bending angle of the plate. The change was very slow, but the angle decreased significantly from 0.28 to 0.2°, and then finally declined to 0.1°.

linearity between load magnitude of the load and the ET angle ($r = 0.997$), indicating that elastic deformation of the fracture site had occurred under a load range of 10 to 30 N. Therefore, measurement was shown to be noninvasive as well as safe, without causing any residual deformity.

Reproducibility of the measurement method was estimated to be 0.015°, which was adequate to evaluate fracture healing quantitatively, because the angle ranged from around 1° in the initial stage to about 0.1° in the final stage when it was almost equivalent to that of the intact tibia. However, we have to improve the reproducibility of measurement *in vivo*. The factors affecting reproducibility *in vivo* include the position of the leg, loading direction and positions of the probes. Among these, the positioning or fixation of the leg seems to have the most influence on the reproducibility of measurement.

For clinical evaluation of fracture healing, data obtained by the ET method were compared with X-ray findings over time. In patients with delayed healing or nonunion, judgment of the healing process using X-ray films was difficult because the direction and conditions of obtaining images were not exactly the same every time, so the findings were not reproducible. In contrast,

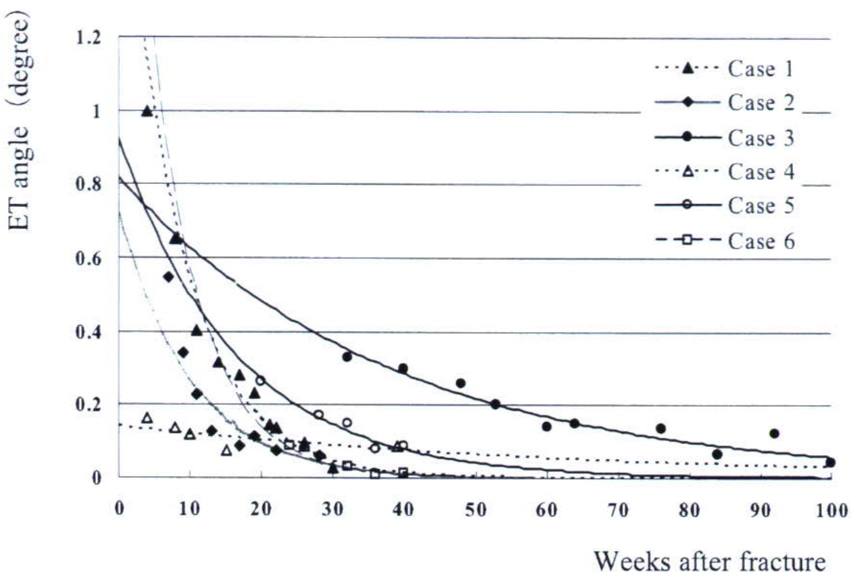

Fig. 8. In cases 1 through 6, the changes of the ET angle showed an exponential pattern. The correlation coefficients obtained by the regression equation for the ET angle and time were very high in these cases.

the echo tracking method evaluated fracture stiffness with considerable accuracy, sensitivity and reproducibility.

In patients with radiographically normal healing, the bending angle decreased exponentially over time. However, in patients with nonunion, the angle remained the same over time. According to the results obtained with previous methods such as the strain gauge method and the invasive method of Jernberger (1970), strain or deformation caused by loading at the healing site has been reported to diminish exponentially over time in patients with normal healing. Among these previous studies, Bourgois and Burny (1972) evaluated fracture healing in hundreds of patients treated with an external fixator that was instrumented with a strain gauge. They not only accumulated considerable clinical data on the strain readings over time, but also theoretically proved by mathematical simulation that the change of the strain over time during normal healing could be expressed as a typical hyperbolic curve. In addition to this, they proved that the time course of the change in strain could also be a hyperbolic curve by developing fracture simulation models with stabilization by intramedullary nailing, plating and external fixation. As a result, their clinical data were compatible with those for the theoretical model of external fixation. They classified the pattern of fracture healing into seven categories depending on the difference in the healing process. Among them, normal healing was defined as healing in which the strain reading *vs.* time curve reaches a plateau at 60 to 90 d after fracture. Slow healing was defined as healing in which the decline of strain was very slow compared with the normal pattern but the healing process was progressive over time. Nonunion was defined as cessation of the progress of healing. In two patients treated with a cast in our study, the ET angle decreased rapidly until 10 weeks after fracture to a level twice that on the intact side, and then it decreased slowly. The exponential regression curve for the echo tracking angle *vs.* time showed a very strong correlation (case 1, $r = -0.975$). Therefore, it can be concluded that the echo tracking method could be used to evaluate normal healing as proposed by Burny et al. (1984).As shown in Fig. 5, the progress of healing in patients treated with intramedullary nailing and bone grafting could be assessed by using the ET method. The ET angle *vs.* time relation in these cases was also expressed by exponential curves. However, the ET angle curve of patient 7 (Fig. 6b) did not show any significant decrease of the angle and there was no correlation between the ET angle and time. From this, the healing process was diagnosed as nonunion. The ET angle of patient 8, treated with plating, showed an extremely slow decrease over time from 9 weeks to 33 weeks, but reduction of the angle was statistically significant until 45 weeks, so the healing process was concluded to be being delayed.

Fracture site stiffness was adopted as a parameter for evaluation that was thought to be correlated with strength of bone healing. In various earlier studies of fracture site mechanical properties, stiffness was measured to estimate the strength of the fracture site. However, stiffness is not necessarily correlated with strength.

Chehade et al. (1997) investigated this relationship in 24 sheep. The tibia was stabilized with an external fixator and then osteotomy was done. Next, the tibiae were excised at 6, 8 and 10 wk after osteotomy and a 4-point bending test was done. As a result, in the initial stage of healing, stiffness showed a strong correlation with strength ($r = 0.89$), but there was no correlation between them in the remodeling stage. However, as Chehade et al. (1997) stated, because the stiffness of the fracture site is strongly correlated with the strength until remodeling is initiated, it is clinically significant to monitor fracture site stiffness as a substitute for strength to determine the appropriate level of weight bearing so that patients can avoid refracture because of overloading the fracture site during postoperative management. In the remodeling stage, we need to pay special attention to the relationship between stiffness and strength, even if stiffness reached the same value as the intact side.

Fracture healing was evaluated quantitatively by the echo tracking method in patients treated conservatively as well as by internal fixation. All previous methods of assessment could only be applied to patients treated with an external fixator that required the insertion of wires or screw pins, and none of the methods could achieve evaluation in a totally noninvasive manner. The potential problem with evaluating patients treated with internal osteosynthetic devices such as intramedullary nails or plates is that the stiffness at the fracture site is the sum of stiffness for both the healing fracture and the implant. The stiffness of the implant is very high compared with that of the healing fracture because it is made of a metal such as stainless steel or titanium-aluminum-vanadium alloy. Therefore, the combined stiffness at the fracture site is usually very high compared with that in patients receiving conservative treatment by casting. In such patients with internal osteosynthetic devices, comparison of stiffness with the intact side does not have any meaning for evaluation of fracture healing. Therefore, we have to be careful with interpretation of the changes of stiffness over time in such cases. How the implanted material and the configuration of stabilization affect fracture site stiffness should be investigated in the future so that we can assess fracture healing more precisely in patients with internal fixation.

In conclusion, it was demonstrated that the echo tracking method could be clinically applicable to evaluate fracture healing as a versatile, quantitative and noninvasive technique. Further development of this method should be performed so that it can be applied to other anatomical sites by improving accuracy and precision.

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