**CAROTID PLAQUE CHARACTERIZATION WITH MEDICAL ULTRASOUND**by  
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
(Biomedical Engineering)  
at the  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON  
2011

**Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank Dr. Tomy Varghese, my advisor. I would also like to thank other faculty members in the Ultrasound Group, Dr. James Zagzebski, Dr. Ernest Madsen, and Dr. Timothy Hall. I was a TA for the ultrasound course lab working with Jim Zagzebski, and I am always amazed by the time he takes to get into the lab even as the chair of Medical Physics, and I admire his humble, inquisitive attitude. I had the pleasure of working closely with Ernie Madsen, and I can only aspire to perform at his caliber as an experimentalist. Without his earnest involvement, we would not have solved the Mystery of the Planar Reflector Scum. The Siemens scanning system would not be in a sufficient functioning state to get the data that was obtained without Tim Hall’s efforts.

Thanks to Dr. Tim Hacker who allowed me to modify (and occasionally break) his VisualSonics system.

I greatly appreciated the assistance I have received and relationships I have built with the graduate students in the ultrasound research group. The names are too numerous to mention here, but special recognition should be given to Dr. Hairong Shi, who mentored me when I started, and Dr. Maritza Hobson, who guarded against unwanted visitors and cockroaches in our basement cave at the Medical Sciences Center.

Gratitude is owed to the Biomedical Engineering Department, which I am a member, but also the Medical Physics Department, which I am an adopted member. The Medical Physics students, faculty, and staff made the journey enjoyable.

The research I performed would not be possible without the valuable contributions of the team of which I was a part. Dr. Robert Dempsey not only performed the surgeries, but lead the team with an attitudes that promoted success: eagerness to try to understand the problems at hand, place resources where needed, and deliver patience when required. Dr. Mark Kliewer generously offered his skills as a radiologist, and his taste for good music. Dr. Carol Mitchell was undoubtedly the most valuable member of the team, and I doubt her passion for research, knowledge, and work ethic are matched in the field of ultrasonography. Thanks are also due to Pam Peterson and Cindy Colombo who put forth their best efforts in coordinating the research study.

Finally, I am grateful to my parents, Dr. Michael and Bernadette McCormick and siblings for their support. Also, the support of my uncle and aunt Patrick and Sara McCormick and their family in Verona, WI was cherished.

**Abstract**

The most common cause of episodic stroke and cerebral ischemia is thought to be microemboli from carotid plaque. The bifurcation at the carotid bulb is a location prone to atherosclerosis. Some carotid plaques may be prone to rupture, which generates thrombi or plaque particulate that produce neural infarction. There is a significant clinical need for a method to determine which plaques are vulnerable to disruption so that surgical intervention or other prophylactic actions can be taken. In this dissertation, advances in diagnostic ultrasound imaging tools to address this need are proposed.

Focus is placed primarily on non-invasive, *in vivo* strain imaging techniques to quantify plaque vulnerability. It is hypothesized that strain, the mechanical distortion of tissue, is a direct measure of the tissue’s proximity to fatigue failure. A hierarchical block-matching motion tracking algorithm is developed. Displacements are estimated with improved robustness and precision by utilizing a Bayesian regularization algorithm and an unbiased subsample interpolation technique. A modified least-squares strain estimator is proposed to estimate strain images from a noisy displacement input while addressing the motion discontinuity at the wall-lumen boundary. Methods to track deformation over the cardiac cycle incorporate a dynamic frame skip criterion to process data frames with sufficient deformation to produce high signal-to-noise displacement and strain images. Algorithms to accumulate displacement and/or strain on particles in a region of interest over the cardiac cycle are described. New methods to visualize and characterize the deformation measured with the full 2D strain tensor are presented.

Other diagnostic ultrasound techniques, high-frequency 3D ultrasound and transcranial Doppler ultrasound, which have the potential to support the strain findings, are also studied. Experimental methods to characterize the high-frequency acoustic properties of a tissue-mimicking reference phantom are shown to be effective. The reference phantom is used to create 3D integrated backscatter coefficient images of excised carotid plaques. Transcranial Doppler is studied as method to detect intracranial microemboli and blood flow-dynamics.

Initial results from patients imaged prior to endarterectomy suggest that strain imaging detects conditions that are traditionally considered high risk including soft plaque composition, unstable morphology, abnormal hemodynamics, and shear of plaque against tethering tissue that can be exacerbated by neoangiogenesis. Non-invasive carotid strain imaging is a potentially useful tool for detecting unstable carotid plaque.

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