Influence of Optical Fluence Distribution on Photoacoustic Imaging

Mohamed K. Metwally, Sherif H. El-Gohary, Kyung Min Byun, Seung Moo Han, Soo Yeol Lee, Min Hyoong Cho, Gon Khang, Jinsung Cho, Tae-Seong Kim

Abstract—Photoacoustic imaging (PAI) is a non-invasive and non-ionizing imaging modality that combines the absorption contrast of light with ultrasound resolution. Laser is used to deposit optical energy into a target (i.e., optical fluence). Consequently, the target temperature rises, and then thermal expansion occurs that leads to generating a PA signal. In general, most image reconstruction algorithms for PAI assume uniform fluence within an imaging object. However, it is known that optical fluence distribution within the object is non-uniform. This could affect the reconstruction of PA images. In this study, we have investigated the influence of optical fluence distribution on PA back-propagation imaging using finite element method. The uniform fluence was simulated as a triangular waveform within the object of interest. The non-uniform fluence distribution was estimated by solving light propagation within a tissue model via Monte Carlo method. The results show that the PA signal in the case of non-uniform fluence is wider than the uniform case by 23%. The frequency spectrum of the PA signal due to the non-uniform fluence has missed some high frequency components in comparison to the uniform case. Consequently, the reconstructed image with the non-uniform fluence exhibits a strong smoothing effect.

Keywords—Finite Element Method, Fluence Distribution, Monte Carlo Method, Photoacoustic Imaging.

I. INTRODUCTION

The photoacoustic (PA) effect is a phenomenon where the electromagnetic (EM) energy is absorbed and converted into acoustic wave via thermoelastic expansion which generates ultrasound [1]. Photoacoustic imaging (PAI) in the medical field can combine the benefits of optical and ultrasound imaging. Optical imaging offers high contrast that can be achieved among biological tissues due to the differences of their optical absorptions. However, the optical imaging suffers from low penetration within biological tissues due to its high scattering. On the other hand, ultrasound imaging can achieve deep imaging with high resolution (45-720µm) due to its low scattering and the wide frequency spectrum that is generated by the absorbing tissues [2].

The conversion of the EM energy into the PA signal in biological tissue involves multiple processes that include light propagation and absorption, temperature changes within the tissue, and thermal expansion of the tissue, and finally the generation of PA signals. To understand these complex processes, several analytical and numerical methods have been developed. By using these tools, researchers could get a better insight about the influence of various properties and parameters of PAI. For example, Rong et al. used finite element method (FEM) to study the effect of tissue elasticity on the received PA signal and showed that PAI has a potential to differentiate between the malignant and benign tumors based on their differential elasticity [3]. The effect of the object size was studied by FEM [4], producing some consistent results with the analytical findings of Li et al. [1]. On the other hand, the numerical methods have been used to optimize the design of PAI. Zhaohui et al. proposed a concave mirror utilized in the PAI system for deeper imaging based on their FEM findings [5]. All of these examples demonstrate the importance of using the numerical methods to improve the knowledge and design of PAI.

In general, the most common assumption in the previous studies is a uniform fluence (i.e., the deposited EM energy) within an imaging object [1], [6], [7]. This assumption is commonly considered in the forward solutions of PAI (i.e., PA wave generation and propagation) as well as solving the inverse problem (i.e., PA image reconstruction) [1]. This assumption could be accepted if the object is small enough to ensure uniform fluence. This small size can be defined based on the thermal diffusivity of the object and laser pulse duration [6]. However, the fluence distribution inside a larger object is not uniform as shown in many numerical studies [8], [9], it is expected that the assumption of uniform fluence distribution will not be accurate in the case of back-propagation imaging using a linear transducer.

In this work, we have investigated the influence of fluence distribution on the received PA signal with a linear transducer in the back-propagation imaging. We have simulated the light propagation by a Monte Carlo simulator and the PA process via FEM. Our results show that there is a significant smoothing effect of the non-uniform fluence in comparison to the uniform one.
Boundary conditions are determined by means of Snell’s law at the tissue-air interface. The procedure describing the simulation is reported in detail elsewhere [11].

As a result for the random walk process, the photons will not be absorbed equally within the tumor. Therefore, some regions within the tumor will absorb more photons than others at different times as will be shown later.

In our Monte Carlo simulation, we used a set of $10^5$ randomized photons. The optical properties of the breast and tumor tissues are presented in Table I [8]. The simulations were performed at the wavelengths of 1064 nm to provide discrimination between the tumor and surrounding breast tissues within the model.

### Table I

**Optical Properties for the Breast and Tumor Tissues Used in the Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tissue</th>
<th>Absorption Coefficient (mm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>Scattering Coefficient (mm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>Anisotropy</th>
<th>Refractive Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breast</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumor</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Heat Distribution

The temperature in the tumor changes as a result to the photons absorption. This change in temperature distribution can be described by the following bio-heat equation:

$$\rho C \frac{\partial T}{\partial t} - \nabla \cdot (K \nabla T) = H', H' = \varphi \mu$$

(1)

where $\rho$ is the density, $C$ the specific heat capacity, $K$ the thermal conductivity, $T$ the temperature. $H$ is the heat generation rate (e.g., the heat source in W/m$^3$), which is a result of multiplication of $\mu$, the optical absorption coefficient (in m$^{-1}$), to $\varphi$, the fluence rate (in J/m$^3$). The blood perfusion effect is ignored because the laser shining time is less than the thermal confinement time [1], [7]. Table II shows the assigned values of the thermal properties of the tumor and normal breast tissues [8].

### Table II

**Thermal Properties for the Breast and Tumor Tissues in the Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tissue</th>
<th>Density (kg/m$^3$)</th>
<th>Specific Heat Capacity (J/kg.k)</th>
<th>Thermal Conductivity (W/m.k)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breast</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumor</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>4181.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Thermal Expansion

As a result to the temperature changes within the tumor, the tumor undergoes thermoelastic expansion while the temperature rises and shrinking when the temperature drops. This process can be described by the displacement equation [3]:

$$\rho \frac{\partial^2 u}{\partial t^2} = \frac{E}{2(1+\sigma)(1-2\sigma)} \nabla \cdot (\nabla u) - \frac{E}{2(1+\sigma)} \nabla^2 u = -\frac{\beta E}{3(1-2\sigma)} \nabla T$$

(2)

where $u$ is the displacement in (m), $E$ the Young’s modulus, $\sigma$ the Poisson’s ratio, and $\beta$ the thermal expansion. Table III
shows the mechanical properties of the normal breast and tumor tissues [3], [8].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tissue</th>
<th>Young’s Modulus (Kpa)</th>
<th>Poisson Ratio</th>
<th>Thermal Expansion (K/E)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breast</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.495</td>
<td>1.4x10^3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumor</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>0.495</td>
<td>8.5x10^6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. PA Signal Generation

The acceleration in the tumor displacement is converted into initial pressure \( p \) based on the following conversion equation [12]:

\[
\hat{p} = -\frac{\partial^2 u_n}{\partial t^2}
\]

where \( u_n \) is the displacement in the direction of the wave propagation. The initial wave propagates through the normal breast tissue medium based on the homogeneous wave equation:

\[
\nabla p(r,t) = \frac{1}{v^2} \frac{\partial^2 p(r,t)}{\partial t^2}
\]

where \( v \) is the sound speed, \( v \), within the normal breast and tumor tissues are assigned as 1450 m/s and 1540 m/s respectively [8].

The numerical simulation was done by ANSYS [13] and the sparse solver was used to calculate the displacement and the propagating PA pressure waves. The FE model included 67,757 nodes and 67,363 elements with the element quality in a range from 0.5 to 0.86.

C. Fluence Settings

In order to investigate the effect of fluence uniformity on the PA signal, two fluence distributions were considered: 1) uniform and 2) non-uniform fluence within the tumor. The uniform fluence was simulated by applying one fluence value at a time to all points within the tumor. The uniform fluence waveform over time followed a triangular distribution with a central time of 2.65 ns with the full-width half-maximum (FWHM) value of 1.25 ns and the maximum fluence value of 371.4 W/m². The non-uniform fluence was simulated by applying one fluence value at a time to all points within the tumor. The non-uniform fluence was resulted from the Monte Carlo simulation of light propagation within the model due to the laser shining for 2.5 ns. It was considered that the total deposited energy within the tumor in the case of uniform fluence to be equivalent to the total deposited energy in the case of non-uniform fluence which is 0.511x10^-4 mJ/cm² in this study.

D. Analytical Method

In order to validate the PA simulation, the received PA signal due to the uniform fluence case was compared to the analytical solution for the PA signal generation [14]. The analytical equation that describes the received PA signal at distance \( r \) is:

\[
p(r,t) = \frac{\beta EH(t-\tau)}{2(2\pi)^{3/2}rC_p\tau_v}\exp(-0.5(t-\tau)^2) ;
\]

\[
\tau = \frac{r}{v} ; \tau_v \approx \frac{R_s}{v}
\]

where \( \beta \) is the thermal expansion of the source, \( E \) Young’s modulus, \( C_p \) the specific heat capacity, and \( v \) the sound speed. The source was considered as a circle with a radius of \( R_s = 1 \) μm and the signal was calculated at distance \( r = 3 \) μm. The waveform of the fluence rate was the same applied waveform in the uniform fluence case.

III. RESULTS

A. The PA Signal Validation

To validate the numerical procedure, we have computed a PA signal using an analytical equation in [14] and compared to our numerically derived PA signal with uniform fluence distribution. Fig. 2 shows both of the PA signals of the analytical equation and the numerical simulation. The correlation between both signals was about 90%.

B. Influence of Fluence Distribution

Fig. 3 shows the of the normalized uniform and non-uniform fluence 2-D distributions within the tumor at different time instants. It is expected that the change in the distribution will affect the generation and propagation of the PA wave. Fig. 4 shows the generation of the PA wave in both cases. It is observed that there is asymmetry in the generation of PA wave with the non-uniform fluence where the signal generated first from the tumor side that confronts the laser, is stronger than the opposite side of the tumor.

Fig. 5 shows the received PA signals by the middle element of the transducer at the distance of 3 μm from the center of the tumor in the cases of the uniform and non-uniform fluence and their frequency spectrum. The results show that the non-uniform fluence deforms the generated PA signal: the signal is not a smooth N-like wave as that of the uniform fluence case.
Fig. 3 2D distributions of the normalized uniform (the upper row) and non-uniform (the lower row) fluence distributions within the tumor at different time instants.

Fig. 4 Screen shots of the propagating PA waves in the case of uniform (the upper row) and non-uniform (the lower row) fluence.

It is observed that the non-uniform fluence broadens the PA signal which is clearly shown in the frequency spectrum. Note that the frequency spectrum of the PA signal in the case of non-uniform fluence is missing some high frequency components with respect to the frequency spectrum of the PA signal in the case of uniform fluence. Fig. 6 shows the reconstructed images using the FFT reconstruction algorithm [15]. Quantitatively, the full-width half-maximum (FWHM) of the PA signal was calculated for the PA signal of both cases. Table IV shows that the non-uniform fluence broadens the PA signal about 23% more than the PA signal in the case of the uniform fluence. The size of the reconstructed object was determined by calculating the FWHM of the horizontal intensity profile at 3µm under the transducer. Note that the FWHM of the intensity profile in the case of the non-uniform fluence is wider than the FWHM in the case of uniform fluence by 45%.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study aimed at investigating the influence of the fluence distribution on the PA back-propagation imaging. The investigation was done using Monte Carlo method to estimate the light propagation and fluence distribution within the model and FEM to simulate the PA wave generation.

The simulation results demonstrate that the non-uniform fluence tends to broaden the PA signal more than the case of the uniform fluence. This phenomenon can be explained by the photons trajectories. When the laser is applied, some photons can reach directly to the target and absorbed there, however many other photons may follow other longer trajectories due to the scattering within the media. Therefore, the object will not absorb the energy within the same time period of laser exposure, but it will take longer time. Consequently, the temperature will change in a slower rate than the uniform fluence case, which will broaden the PA signal and reduce its amplitude. As a result, the frequency spectrum will lose some high frequency components which will result in a smoothing effect in the reconstructed image. This phenomenon should be considered in the reconstruction.
algorithms of PAI because it affects the accuracy of PA back-propagation imaging.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 6 Reconstructed PA images in the case of (a) uniform and (b) non-uniform fluence. The black circle shows the true boundaries of the simulated tumor.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that the non-uniform fluence affects significantly the PA back-propagation imaging by broadening the PA signals and smoothing PA images. This suggests that the non-uniform fluence distribution should be taken into account in PAI.

REFERENCES