Fast Detection of Venous Air Embolism in Doppler Heart Sound Using the Wavelet Transform

Brent C. B. Chan, Student Member, IEEE, Francis H. Y. Chan,* Member, IEEE, F. K. Lam, Ping-Wing Lui, and Paul W. F. Poon

Abstract—The introduction of air bubbles into the systemic circulation can result in significant morbidity. Real-time monitoring of continuous heart sound in patients detected by precordial Doppler ultrasound is, thus, vital for early detection of venous air embolism (VAE) during surgery. In this study, the multiscale feature of wavelet transforms (WT's) is exploited to examine the embolic Doppler heart sound (DHS) during intravenous air injections in dogs. As both humans and dogs share similar physiological conditions, our methods and results for dogs are expected to be applicable to humans. The WT of DHS at scale \(2^j (j = 1, 2)\) selectively magnified the power of embolic, but not the normal, heart sound. Statistically, the enhanced embolic power was found to be sensitive \((P < 0.01 \text{ at } 0.01 \text{ ml of injected air})\) and correlated significantly \((P < 0.0005, r = 0.83)\) with the volume of injected air from 0.01 to 0.10 ml. A fast detection algorithm of \(O(N)\) complexity with unit complexity constant for VAE was developed (processing speed = 8 ms per heartbeat), which confirmed the feasibility of real-time processing for both humans and dogs.

Index Terms—Precordial doppler ultrasound, venous air embolism, wavelet transform.

I. INTRODUCTION

VENOUS AIR embolism (VAE) occurs intermittently during surgery when the incision wounds lie above the heart. The central venous pressure in the cut vessels being lower than the atmospheric pressure causes air to be sucked to the circulatory system. As VAE is life-threatening, real-time monitoring of the continuous heart sound is essential for early and prompt detection of VAE and for issuing instant warning to the anaesthetist to ensure proper clinical treatment.

Ultrasonic precordial Doppler monitoring is commonly used for the detection of VAE [1], [2]. This method is superior to other methods, especially in terms of sensitivity and non-invasive nature [3]. The audio Doppler heart sound (DHS) can be obtained simply by placing the Doppler ultrasonic flow transducer over the chest of the patient (as compared with a common invasive method known as transesophageal echocardiography (TEE) [4] which causes substantial discomfort by requiring the patient to swallow an ultrasonic probe of considerable size together with the attached cables). A disadvantage of the Doppler method is that it requires the constant attention of the anaesthetist to detect subtle changes in the DHS. In addition, quantitative information on the volume of air entering circulation cannot be provided simply by listening to the audio DHS. As anaesthetists usually act only when a clinically significant volume (above 1 ml) of air embolism is present [5], such quantitative information is crucial for them to prescribe suitable clinical treatment.

In order to study both the qualitative and quantitative properties of the DHS during VAE, we have to inject a known volume of air into the vessels and monitor the changes in the DHS. However, it is unethical to try this experiment in humans as VAE is a potentially fatal anaesthetic complication. Thus, we conducted our experiment on dogs as most of the physiological conditions of dogs are quite similar to those of humans. Since the heart rate of dogs (180/min) is much higher than that of humans (70/min), if we can achieve real-time monitoring of the DHS in dogs, we could be confident that the same technique may also be applied to humans.

We investigated the spectral characteristics of the embolic heart sound (EHS) in anaesthetized dogs using a time-frequency method [6]. We showed that while the normal heart sound occupies the frequency band below 400 Hz, EHS occupies an additional higher-frequency band from 400 to 1200 Hz. With a single cutoff frequency estimated by the percentile-and-threshold crossing method [7], we established a method for quantitative analysis of embolic air during VAE. Although the high-frequency components increased significantly \((P < 0.05\) by Student's \(t\)-test [8]) at volumes as low as 0.05 ml of embolic air, there was much scattering in the relationship \((r = 0.46\) on linear regression [8]). Moreover, the time-frequency method used was not efficient enough for real-time computation.

As part of a continuing effort to develop a real-time monitoring system for VAE [6], [9], we used an improved technique in this study that involves the wavelet transform (WT) [10]–[12]. WT is a promising technique for time-scale (or time-frequency) analysis which decomposes a signal into components that appear at different scales. It is closely related to multiscale edge detection methods [13] which can reveal points of sharp variations in transient signals such as the EHS.
This feature can thus be used to analyze the high-frequency components of the EHS. We also utilized some features of a particular class of dyadic wavelets and its fast algorithm [13] so as to further improve the data-processing speed for real-time application. Consequently, fast detection of VA,E and accurate estimation of the volume of embolic air could be attained. To confirm the superiority of the WT method, we compare the present results with those obtained by our previous method on the same set of experimental data.

II. WAVELET TRANSFORM

A. General Properties

$\mathbb{Z}$ and $\mathbb{R}$ denote the set of integers and real numbers, respectively. $L^2(\mathbb{R})$ denotes the Hilbert space of measurable, square-integrable 1-D functions. The WT is a linear operation which decomposes a signal into components that appear at different scales. A wavelet is a function $\psi(x) \in L^2(\mathbb{R})$ whose average is zero. The WT of a signal is computed by convolving the signal with a dilated wavelet. For thorough descriptions of the WT, the reader is referred to the work of Meyer [11] and Daubechies [12]. The WT of a signal $f(x)$ at scale $s$ and position $x$ is given by the convolution product

$$W_s f(x) = f^* \psi_s(x) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f(t) \psi_s(x-t) \, dt \quad (1)$$

where

$$\psi_s(x) = \frac{1}{s} \psi \left( \frac{x}{s} \right). \quad (2)$$

The support of $\psi_s(x)$ decreases as the scale $s$ decreases such that the WT of $f(x)$ (i.e., $W_s f(x)$) is sensitive to finer details. Hence, the scale $s$ characterizes the size and regularity of the signal features extracted by the WT.

B. Dyadic Wavelet Transform

The WT depends on two parameters, $s$ and $x$, that vary continuously over $\mathbb{R}$. These parameters must be discretized for practical applications. For a particular class of wavelets which allows fast numerical implementation (to be discussed in the following sections), the scale parameter can be sampled along the dyadic sequence $(2^j)_{j \in \mathbb{Z}}$ without modifying the overall properties of the transform. The WT at scale $2^j$ is given by

$$W_{2^j} f(x) = f^* \psi_{2^j}(x). \quad (3)$$

The Fourier transform ($\mathcal{F}\{\cdot\}$) of $W_{2^j} f(x)$ is

$$\mathcal{F}\{W_{2^j} f(x)\} = \mathcal{F}(\omega) \Psi(2^j \omega) \quad (4)$$

where $\mathcal{F}(\omega)$ and $\Psi(\omega)$ represent the Fourier transform of $f(x)$ and $\psi(x)$, respectively. By imposing that

$$\sum_{j=-\infty}^{\infty} |\Psi(2^j \omega)|^2 = 1 \quad (5)$$

we ensure that the whole frequency axis is covered by the dilation of $\Psi(\omega)$ by $(2^j)_{j \in \mathbb{Z}}$. Any wavelet satisfying (5) is called a dyadic wavelet. We also call as dyadic WT the sequence of functions

$$W f = \{ W_{2^j} f(x) \}_{j \in \mathbb{Z}}. \quad (6)$$

$W$ is then called the dyadic WT operator.

C. A Particular Class of Wavelets

We define a class of wavelets which can be used for fast implementation of a discrete algorithm [13]. We first define a smoothing function $\phi(x)$ whose Fourier transform, $\Phi(\omega)$, can be written as an infinite product

$$\Phi(\omega) = e^{-i\omega \omega} \prod_{\ell=1}^{\infty} H(2^{-2\ell}) \quad (7)$$

where $H(\omega)$ is a $2\pi$ periodic differentiable function such that

$$|H(\omega)|^2 + |H(\omega + \pi)|^2 \leq 1 \quad \text{and} \quad |H(0)| = 1. \quad (8)$$

The parameter $\omega$ is the sampling shift which arises from the discretization of the dyadic WT. It is adjusted so that $\phi(x)$ is symmetrical with respect to zero. Equation (7) implies that

$$\Phi(2\omega) = e^{-i\omega \omega} H(\omega) \Phi(\omega). \quad (9)$$

We next define a wavelet $\psi(x)$ whose Fourier transform, $\Psi(\omega)$, is given by

$$\Psi(2\omega) = e^{-i\omega \omega} G(\omega) \Phi(\omega) \quad (10)$$

where $G(\omega)$ is a $2\pi$ periodic function.

We want a wavelet, $\psi(x)$, equal to the first-order derivative of a smoothing function. This implies that $\Psi(\omega)$ must have a
Fig. 2. Temporal partition of the DHS: the original DHS signal (lower tracing) is displayed together with the signal envelope obtained by lowpass filtering the DHS (upper tracing). The local minima of the envelope (indicated by vertical lines) represent the boundaries of individual cardiac cycles or heartbeats.

zero of order one at $\omega = 0$. Since $|\Phi(0)| = 1$, (10) yields that $G(\omega)$ must have a zero of order one at $\omega = 0$. We choose $H(\omega)$ in order to obtain a wavelet, $\psi(x)$, which is antisymmetrical, as regular as possible, and has compact support. A family of $2\pi$ periodic functions $H(\omega)$ and $G(\omega)$ which satisfy these constraints is given by

$$H(\omega) = e^{i\omega}/2\left(\sin\left(\frac{\omega}{2}\right)\right)^{2n+1}$$

$$G(\omega) = 4ie^{i\omega}/2\left(\sin\left(\frac{\omega}{2}\right)\right)^{2n+2}.$$  

From (7) and (10), we derive

$$\Phi(\omega) = \frac{\sin(\omega/2)}{\omega/2}$$

$$\Psi(\omega) = i\omega/4.$$  

In the present study, we chose $2n+1 = 3$ and the corresponding wavelet, $\psi(x)$, is shown in Fig 1. In order to have a wavelet antisymmetrical with respect to zero and $\phi(x)$ symmetrical with respect to zero, the shifting constant $\psi$ of (9) is equal to 1/2. The $2\pi$ periodic functions $H(\omega)$ and $G(\omega)$ can be viewed as the transfer functions of discrete filters with finite impulse responses. The corresponding impulse responses $h_k$ and $g_k$ are given in Table I.

D. Fast Wavelet Algorithm

Let $S_{2j}$ be a smoothing operator at scale $2^j$, which is the counterpart of $W_{2j}$, defined by

$$S_{2j}f(x) = f^*p_{2j}(x).$$  

For normalization purposes, our original DHS signal is represented by $S_{2j}f(x)$. Based on the properties of the wavelet $\psi(x)$ described in the previous section, we can compute the WT of the DHS signal using the following algorithm:

$$S_{2j}f(x) = \sum_{k \in \mathbb{Z}} h_kS_{2j-1}f(x - 2^{j-1}k)$$

$$W_{2j}f(x) = \sum_{k \in \mathbb{Z}} g_kS_{2j-1}f(x - 2^{j-1}k).$$  

From (16) and (17), the WT can be viewed as successive filtering of the DHS signal, as the Fourier transform of the WT (17) is

$$G(\omega)F(\omega)\Phi(\omega),$$

$$G(2^j\omega)H(\omega)F(\omega)\Phi(\omega),$$

$$G(2^{j-1}\omega)H(2^{j-2}\omega)\cdots H(\omega)F(\omega)\Phi(\omega),$$  

where $F(\omega)\Phi(\omega)$ is the Fourier transform of the original DHS signal. The WT of DHS at successive scales ($2^j$, $j > 0$) is, thus, equivalent to bandpass filtering at successively narrower bandwidths so that finer details of the DHS can be explored.

III. EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

**A. Data Collection**

Our VAE experiment on dogs was approved by the Animal Research Committee of the Veterans General Hospital, Taipei, Taiwan. Four anaesthetized dogs weighing 10–12 kg were placed in the supine position for intravenous air injections via the right external jugular vein. The Doppler ultrasonic flow transducer (Model P81 (2.4 MHz), Versatone Doppler Model D8, MedaSonics, Fremont, CA) was placed over the shaved skin at the right lateral border of the sternum using a generous quantity of coupling gel (Aquasonic 100, Parker Laboratories, Inc., Orange, NJ) and secured around the chest by Micropore tapes. We followed ascending volume steps (0.01, 0.02, 0.05, and 0.10 ml) with a 5-min interval between injections. At such low volume of air injection, premature ventricular contractions (PVC) or other forms of arrhythmia were not detected as judged by an experienced anaesthetist. The audio output of the transducer was recorded first on a tape recorder (WM-D6C, Sony Corp., Tokyo, Japan) and later digitized at 4 kHz, 12-b resolution through an analog and digital interface board (DT-2801A, Data Translation, Marlboro, MA) in an IBM PC (80486 DX2-66). The overall frequency response of the recording system was flat ($\pm 3$ dB) from 20 Hz to 18 kHz. We digitized an 8-s period of the DHS signal for each air injection with the embolic air appearing roughly at the middle of the time segment. The period of DHS with no previous injection of air was taken as the control. A total of 12 datasets were collected from three identical series of air injections on each of the four animals.

**B. Data Analysis**

For systematic analysis, the DHS signal was logically partitioned into a sequence of individual heartbeats. We adopted a lowpass filtering approach since the overall shape of the DHS is very similar to that of an amplitude modulated signal. Besides, the process of lowpass filtering is simple in nature and can be efficiently implemented either by software [fast
Fourier transform (FFT) algorithm] or hardware (digital filter) approaches. The cutoff frequency was chosen to be 3 Hz, which is the average heart rate of dogs. The full-wave rectified DC-clipped DHS was lowpass filtered. The resultant signal envelope and its local minima, together with the original DHS, are shown in Fig. 2. Each pair of consecutive local minima indicates a logical partition of the DHS. In addition, the time length of each partition provides the period of the corresponding heartbeat. The lowpass filter actually attenuates a great deal of noise, and we can successfully partition the DHS into single beats. We also indicate in Fig. 3 the waveforms and spectra of a single cardiac cycle with and without embolic air. It is obvious that the embolic heartbeat contains additional high-frequency components as compared with the normal heartbeat.

The WT was then applied to the DHS signal. A representative example of the WT of the DHS of a dog is shown in Fig. 4. From visual inspection, the WT of the DHS at $j = 1$ shows differences which would aid in distinguishing the embolic heartbeat from the normal. The embolic heartbeat was confirmed by an experienced anaesthetist by listening to the original acoustic signal. We next calculated the power of single heartbeats of the WT of the DHS at different scales. The resultant power data, which were normalized with respect to the control mean, are plotted in Fig. 5. The plot of the power data of the original DHS (i.e., $j = 0$) is also included for comparison.

The embolic heartbeats can now be readily identified by means of thresholding as the contrast of the embolic to normal signal power is greatly enhanced. A threshold value of two times the mean control power level was experimentally found to be suitable for effective and reliable detection of embolic heartbeats (Fig. 5). The twice-baseline threshold was chosen on empirical grounds. Choosing other threshold values, e.g., three times or four times gave similar results. Using threshold values lower than two times gave a noisier signal. For each air
Fig. 4. A typical DHS signal containing seven heartbeats and its WT at different scales (j = 1 to 3). With a 0.02 ml of air injected, the embolic heartbeat (marked by an arrow) was confirmed by an experienced anaesthetist by listening to the DHS signal.

Fig. 5. Normalized power of individual heartbeats obtained after WT of a DHS containing the time segment in Fig. 4. The embolic heartbeat is identified by an increase of power (for j = 1 and 2) above a threshold level (two times the mean power level of the control signal before air injection).

Injection, we summed the normalized power of the heartbeats above the threshold and called it the “cumulative embolic power (CEP).” The correlation between the CEP and volume of injected air was examined by linear regression. The increase of the CEP above the control level was also determined. Student’s t-test was used whenever appropriate. $P < 0.005$ was considered to be significant.

IV. RESULTS

At all scales (i.e., $j = 0$ to 3) we tested, the correlation between the CEP and the volume of injected air was highly significant ($P < 0.0005$). In particular, the correlation coefficient reached values as high as 0.83 and 0.81 for $j = 1$ and 2, respectively. Besides, the increase of the CEP above the control was significant ($P < 0.01$ and $P < 0.05$ for $j = 1$ and 2, respectively) at volumes as low as 0.01 ml. The relationship between the CEP and the volume of injected air at $j = 1$ and 2 is detailed in Fig. 6. The average data and the error bars in Fig. 6(a) and (b) can be used for viewing inter-subject variations. Linear regressions of Fig. 6(a) and (b) were performed in the log-log scale and the results are shown in Fig. 6(c) and (d). The data of an individual subject (Dog 3) are also shown [Fig. 6(e) and (f)].

For the purpose of comparison, we processed the same datasets using our previous method [6]. Specifically, the maximum frequency, $F_{\text{max}}$, was estimated for each heartbeat using the percentile-and-threshold crossing method [7]. The power of the high-frequency components above $F_{\text{max}}$ (i.e., HF power) of each heartbeat was also computed. The $F_{\text{max}}$ and the HF power of the heartbeats before injection were calculated to serve as controls.

We obtained significant increase ($P < 0.005$) in the single-beat $F_{\text{max}}$ above the control at volumes of 0.01 ml or greater. The correlation between the greatest single-beat $F_{\text{max}}$ and the volume of injected air was also significant ($P < 0.0005, r = 0.64$). As for the HF power, the increase of the HF power compared with control was significant ($P < 0.05$) at larger volumes (i.e., 0.02 ml or greater). The correlation between the HF power and the volume of injected air was also significant ($P < 0.0005, r = 0.68$). Table II summarizes the results obtained from the two methods. It is obvious that the WT method performs better than our previous method in that the former at $j = 1$ or 2 enhances both the sensitivity and correlation with the volume of injected air.
Fig. 6. Relationship between the CEP and the volume of injected air at two different \( j \) values: (a) linear plot of the mean normalized CEP \( (j = 1) \) versus the volume of injected air \( (r = 0.83) \) and (b) linear plot of the mean normalized CEP \( (j = 2) \) versus the volume of injected air \( (r = 0.81) \). Each point shows the mean and standard deviation (error bar) of 12 incidences of air injections obtained in four dogs. Significant increase: * \( P < 0.05 \), ** \( P < 0.01 \) and *** \( P < 0.0005 \) compared with control, (c) linear regression in log-log scale of (a) \( (y = 0.66x + 4.06, r^2 = 0.97) \), (d) linear regression in log-log scale of (b) \( (y = 0.94x + 4.35, r^2 = 0.96) \), (e) log-log plot of the normalized CEP \( (j = 1) \) versus the volume of injected air for Dog 3 \( (y = 0.51x + 3.78, r^2 = 0.98) \), and (f) log-log plot of the normalized CEP \( (j = 2) \) versus the volume of injected air for Dog 3 \( (y = 0.81x + 3.84, r^2 = 0.95) \). Natural log is used for all the log-log plots. Data of (e) and (f) represent averages of three air injections in Dog 3.

V. FAST DETECTION ALGORITHM FOR VENOUS AIR EMBOLISM

A. Comparison of Data Processing Speed

A preliminary speed performance test of the present WT method and the previous time-frequency method was performed on an IBM PC (90 MHz Pentium) and the results are shown in Table III. It is obvious that the former is computationally much more efficient, as it boosts the data processing speed by nearly one-hundredfold of that of the latter. Hence, the WT method can facilitate real-time detection of VAE even in the absence of dedicated signal processing...
tables and figures are not provided, but the text is readable and understandable.
VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The WT of the DHS provides not only a fast detection of VAE, but also an accurate estimation of the volume of embolic air. The WT of the DHS at $j = 1$ can be implemented very efficiently ($O(N)$ complexity with unit complexity constant) by exploiting the antisymmetric two-coefficient impulse response of the highpass filter $G(\omega)$, while the lowpass filtering and power calculation steps can be combined into a fast MSA procedure ($O(N)$ complexity with complexity constant equal to two). The WT also provides good sensitivity ($P < 0.001$ at 0.01 ml of injected air) and significant correlation ($P < 0.0005, r = 0.83$) between the CEP and the volume of injected air so that detailed quantitative analysis of the embolic air can be achieved at a later stage. Although our VAE experiment was carried out on dogs, similar results for humans are expected as they would share similar physiological conditions. As the heart rate of dogs is higher than that of adult humans, the overall processing speed of 8 ms per beat for dogs shows the feasibility of the implementation of a real-time monitoring system for VAE in humans.

In general, the complexity of our present algorithm is $O(N)$ with unit complexity constant involving computation of integers. This is an improvement regarding computational
Doppler ultrasonic instruments are normally equipped with effective shielding mechanism that suppresses radio-frequency interference. Battery operation is often possible, thereby eliminating the noise picked up from the power line. Except for short noisy periods due to electrocautery during skin incision or coagulation at the beginning of the operation, DHS signals in the operating room are often clear and clean. As a result, we could use the absolute power of the signal after the $j = 1$ filter for the detection of VAE. However, in those cases of persistent noisy DHS signals, the ratio of the power of the signal at some combinations of the $j = 1, 2,$ and $3$ filters (Fig. 8) should be used as they might be more robust in a noisy environment. The additional complexity of calculating these ratios is not computationally intensive and real-time processing may still be feasible. We also studied the performance of our present method with different intensities of additive white Gaussian noise on the DHS. In general, the enhancement of the contrast of the embolic to normal signal power decreases with increasing noise intensity [i.e., decreasing signal-to-noise ratio (SNR)]. Fig. 9 shows that the enhancement suffers minor degradation at SNR above 20 dB. Then, it decreases linearly from 20 dB down to $-10$ dB and gradually approaches unity (i.e., no enhancement) below $-10$ dB. At twice-baseline threshold (i.e., normalized power equals two), the minimum SNR at which the EHS can be detected is around 0 dB. This minimum SNR decreases with increasing volume of injected air (Fig. 10).

REFERENCES

Brent C. B. Chan (S’95) was born in Hong Kong in 1970. He received the Bachelor of Engineering (First Class Honors) degree in 1992, and is now pursuing the Ph.D. degree, both in electrical and electronic engineering at the University of Hong Kong.

He worked for more than two years in industries before joining the Ph.D. program. His research interests include biomedical engineering, medical signal processing, and real-time processing.

Francis H. Y. Chan (M’80) was awarded the Ph.D. degree in electrical engineering in 1975 from Bristol University, Bristol, U.K.

He worked for more than four years in British industries before joining the Electrical and Electronic Engineering Department, the University of Hong Kong in 1976. Currently, he is Professor and the Director of the University of Hong Kong Biomedical Engineering Centre, coordinating biomedical engineering research in the university. His current research interests are in biomedical engineering and medical signal processing.

Dr. Chan is a Chartered Engineer, and Fellow of both the Institution of Electrical Engineers (IEE) and Hong Kong Institution of Engineers.

Ping-Wing Lui received the Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1981 from the National Defense Medical Center of Taiwan. He was also awarded the Ph.D. degree in medical science in 1989 from the National Yang-Ming University, Taiwan.

Since then, he has been working as an anesthesiologist in Veterans General Hospital, Taipei, Taiwan. Currently, he is the head of Neuroanesthesia and Associate Professor of Anesthesiology in the Department of Anesthesiology, School of Medicine, National Yang-Ming University, Taiwan. His major research interests include monitoring in neurosurgical anesthesia, neuropharmacology of muscular rigidity induced by opiates, and mechanism and clinical management of chronic pain.

Paul W. F. Poon received the B.Sc. degree in biology from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the M.Phil. degree (physiology) from the University of Hong Kong, and the Ph.D. degree (neuroscience) from the Indiana University, Bloomington, in 1972, 1974, and 1979, respectively.

From 1979 to 1994, he was Lecturer in the Department of Physiology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Hong Kong. Currently, he is Professor in the Department of Physiology, School of Medicine, National Cheng Kung University, Tainan, Taiwan.

Dr. Poon is member of Chinese Biomedical Engineering Society, American Physiological Society, Chinese Neuroscience Society, and Association for Research in Otolaryngology. His research interests include neural coding of complex sounds, auditory physiology, and biomedical signal processing.