

The Potential Reduction in Musculoskeletal Injury Risk in the Non-Scanning Arm by Utilizing Voice-Scan Technology During Ultrasound Examinations

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Abstract

Between 84% and 93% of sonographers in North America and Australia have reported musculoskeletal injury related to their work activities. One type of occupational injury affects the non-scanning arm as sonographers reach for the control panel to manipulate the controls of the ultrasound equipment. A number of factors contribute to the reduction of these injuries, including improved ergonomic equipment designs. An important ergonomic design that targets the operator's non-scanning arm is a voice-activated control panel. This design feature reduces muscle activity by decreasing the number of reaches necessary to manipulate the most frequently used keys on the ultrasound equipment control panel. The goals of this study were to test the alternate hypothesis that there is significant difference in muscle activity of the upper trapezius muscle between 3 positions of forward flexion of the non-scanning arm.

Introduction

Surveys conducted in the United States, Canada, and Australia have shown that between 84% and 93% of diagnostic medical sonographers suffer from some degree of occupational musculoskeletal injury(1,2). Biomechanical factors, such as repetitive motions, static postures, and ultrasound equipment design contribute to the risk factors for this type of injury, which can involve the worker's neck, back, and both upper extremities (3). Extended reaches and static postures involved in manipulating the ultrasound equipment control panel can contribute to risk for injury in the non-scanning arm.

In this study, the left upper trapezius muscle was evaluated because of its function in elevating the shoulder, an action necessary to reach the ultrasound equipment control panel. One goal of this study was to achieve reproducible results for evaluating the efficacy of using voice-activated control panel controls as a method of reducing required muscular activity when manipulating the ultrasound equipment with the non-scanning arm.

Surface electromyography (SEMG) was used to compare muscular activity as the upper trapezius muscle was recruited to extend the left arm various distances from the trunk while reaching for the control panel. SEMG is used to analyze the musculoskeletal stress associated with certain body postures or limb positions and to evaluate the efficacy of ergonomic interventions (5,6). Electromyography

records the total electrical activity of a muscle, which is detected by surface electrodes, and a change in an SEMG signal can indicate muscle fatigue. The goal of these measurements was to determine the level of upper trapezius muscle activity required to access the control panel of the ultrasound unit while performing an exam. Repetitive reaching and maintaining the arm in a static posture while performing control panel functions increases a worker's injury risk, therefore, this study was undertaken to evaluate the non-scanning arm.

GE Logic 9 keystroke data obtained from Baptist Hospital, Southaven, Mississippi for lower extremity venous exams without using voice command showed the average number of keystrokes for the following functions:

Touch Panel	Doppler	Freeze/Unfreeze	Print	Length of Exam
46	30	91	42	34 min.

Table 1. Average keystrokes necessary to perform a lower extremity venous exam without voice command.

GE Logic 9 keystroke data obtained from Baptist Hospital, Southaven, Mississippi for lower extremity venous exams showed the average number of keystrokes required when voice commands were used for the following functions:

Touch Panel	Doppler	Freeze/Unfreeze	Print	Length of Exam
4	2	14	2	26 min.

Table 2. Average keystrokes necessary to perform a lower extremity venous exam while using voice commands.

Materials & Method

Thirty-four subjects were enlisted from an ultrasound customer education program at the GE Medical Systems Educational Center. Years of scanning experience varied within the cohort. There were 4 males and 30 females with a variety of physical features and fitness levels. Four subjects were left handed, 29 were right handed. Only the left upper trapezius was evaluated in this study since the majority of sonographers operate the control panel of the ultrasound system with their left hand while scanning with the right.

For each subject, a single SEMG Triode electrode of the MyoTrac 2 (Thought Technology, Ltd., Montreal, Canada) was applied to the skin over the left upper trapezius muscle. The SEMG sensor leads of the MyoTrac 2 were then connected to the electrodes to measure the electrical activity of the muscle in microvolts (μV). The MyoTrac 2 unit was programmed for actual display. An

average maximum voluntary contraction (MVC) of the upper trapezius muscle was determined for each subject. Each subject was asked to resist downward force against his or her left arm for 6 seconds while the arm was abducted 90 degrees from the trunk. (9) This action was repeated in each subject after a brief rest period during which the upper trapezius muscle relaxed to a state of minimal electrical activity. These 2 measurements were then averaged together, providing the basis against which the 3 test measurements were compared. To normalize the results, SEMG test data were determined as a percentage of the MVC, representing the total effort in a percent of maximum required for the task. When static postures are used, blood flow to muscles is reduced in proportion to the amount of force that is exerted. If static effort is less than 15-20% of maximum voluntary contraction (MVC), blood flow to the muscles should be normal. Muscle fatigue due to static postures will occur more rapidly as increasing force is exerted. (4)

Each subject was then asked to perform a forward shoulder flexion (reach) at 44 degrees, 55 degrees, and 70 degrees from the trunk and to sustain each position for 10 seconds, which was arbitrarily determined as the length of time similar to that necessary to perform many of the control panel functions used during an ultrasound exam. Elbow flexion was standardized at 160 degrees. A goniometer was used to verify forward shoulder flexion and elbow flexion prior to each recording. Each subject rested his or her arm between the 3 forward reaches for a period of time sufficient enough for the upper trapezius muscle to return to minimum electrical activity.

Results

SEMG data were analyzed using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test. ANOVA is used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the means of 2 or more groups, requiring that the data are independent and normally distributed (7). In this study, each subject was treated as a group with the assumptions of independence and normal distribution.

Table 3. Electrical activity of the upper trapezius muscle in 3 different degrees of forward flexion as a percent of the electrical activity of the same muscle during maximum voluntary contraction (MVC)

Mean MVC = 402.7 μ V, n=33

Degrees of upper extremity forward flexion	Mean electrical activity of the upper trapezius muscle (in μ V)	Percent of MVC
44	22.4	5.56%
55	28.67	7.12%
70	36.12	8.97%

As the forward shoulder flexion in this study was increased from 44 degrees to 70 degrees in the majority of subjects, there was an associated increase in upper trapezius muscle recruitment. The mean change in voltage output for muscle recruitment was determined to be a statistically significant ($p < 0.0001$) difference between each of 3 angles of forward flexion as compared with the maximum voluntary contraction (MVC) for each subject.



Fig. 1. Excess reach of non-scanning arm without voice command



Fig. 2. Reduced number of reaches with non-scanning arm by using voice command

Table 4. Analysis of Variance showing significance of position changes for left upper extremity

(DF = degrees of freedom; SS= sum of squares; MS = mean square; F value = probability distribution of the ratio of the mean square between groups to the mean square within groups)

Source	DF	SS	MS	F value	Pr>F
Model	34	4208.56	123.78	34.59	<0.0001
Error	64	229.05	3.58		
Corrected Total	98	4437.62			

Table 5. The difference in muscle activity as the angle of forward flexion increased was significant for each change in position as follows:

Between 44 degrees and 55 degrees - $p=0.0081$

Between 55 degrees and 70 degrees - $p < 0.0001$

Tukey Grouping	Mean	n	Position #
A	11.6004	33	70 degrees
B	8.9606	33	55 degrees
C	7.69	33	44 degrees

Studies have indicated that expected time to reach maximum shoulder muscle fatigue decreases with increasing reach. At 30 cm reach, the significant (severe pain) fatigue point has been established as 30 minutes, 20 minutes for 40 cm reach, and 7 minutes for a 50 cm reach. (8)

The analysis thus supports the alternate hypothesis that there is an increase in muscle electrical activity with an increase in forward flexion. Muscle activity was measured as a percentage of the individual maximum voluntary contraction. In this cohort, the mean percent of maximum voluntary contraction at 44 degrees of forward flexion was 5.56% ; at 55 degrees forward flexion, the percent of maximum voluntary contraction was 7.12%; at 70 degrees forward flexion, the mean percent of maximum voluntary contraction was 8.97%. Twenty one percent of subjects exhibited percentages of MVC recruitment at 70-degrees forward shoulder flexion that exceeded the recommended 15-20% of maximum voluntary contraction. (4) Nine percent of subjects showed percent MVC recruitments of greater than 15% at both 44 degrees and 55 degrees of forward shoulder flexion. These percentages of MVC increase the subject's risk for muscle fatigue and injury by decreasing available blood flow and the removal of waste products. (4) This degree of reach often occurs when a sonographer

reaches for the control panel of the ultrasound equipment to manipulate the controls during an exam. At an average distance of 20-25 cm from the ultrasound equipment control panel, it has previously been determined that the mean angle of reach for the time-gain compensation controls was 70 degrees and the mean degrees of reach to annotate an image was 63.3 degrees.

Discussion

The 2 components of muscle activity that are involved in most work tasks are dynamic effort and static effort. However, the static component assumes greater importance since it is more strenuous. Dynamic effort is the alternation of muscle contraction and relaxation, while static effort is the prolonged state of muscle contraction. Common examples of static effort are those movements that require the arm to be held outstretched at or above shoulder level. Keyboarding is an example of the combination of both static and dynamic effort with the shoulders and arms performing mainly static work to hold the hands in position over the keyboard, while the hand are performing dynamic movements. Normal flow of blood to muscles is required to maintain the oxygen supply and waste product removal. If static effort is 60 percent of the maximum voluntary contraction, blood flow can be almost completely interrupted.(4) Normal blood flow is maintained when muscle effort is less than 15-20% of maximum voluntary contraction. In static efforts, the constriction of blood flow is proportional to the muscle force exerted.(4) Constricted blood flow leads to decreased oxygen perfusion of the muscle and an accumulation of waste and carbon dioxide. This results in muscle fatigue and soreness resulting from static muscle contractions and awkward postures and can lead to injury if sustained for long periods. Improvements in postural alignment and frequent changes in positioning help to keep muscles and tendons flexible and well supplied with nutrients.

The goal is to maintain an upright posture, while keeping the upper arms as close to the body as possible. The most common positioning error in many ultrasound studies is excessive reach. Excessive reach is generally related to improper positioning of the ultrasound system or patient. Critical issues for reducing risk factors related to shoulder and neck injuries include reducing reach and abduction of the upper extremity. This can be achieved by optimizing the relationship between the user and the equipment and utilizing available technology as a means for reducing risk factors.

Overall Reduction of Reaches for All Actions Using VS	86.68%
Overall Reduction of Touch Panel Reaches	91.30%
Overall Reduction of PW Button Reaches	93.33%
Overall Reduction of Freeze Button Reaches	84.62%
Overall Reduction of Print Button Reaches	95.24%
Average Reach Reduction for Touch Panel, PW, Freeze, and Print	91.12%

Table 6. Percent reduction in reaches for the most frequently used keys on the ultrasound equipment control panel by using voice command during a lower extremity venous exam (from Baptist Hospital, Southhaven, MS keystroke data)

Comparison of keystroke data showed an overall reduction of 91% in forward reaches required while scanning by utilizing the voice command option. Through the use of this technology, there exists a potential for reducing the muscular effort required for forward flexion of the non-scanning arm by reducing the number of times the operator is required to perform extended reaches for the ultrasound equipment keyboard. Additionally, the use of voice control reduced the average length of time required to perform an exam by 8 minutes (see Tables 1 & 2), thus reducing the operator's "exposure time" to injury-producing scanning postures and limb positions. Further reduction of muscular effort may be realized by improvements in scanning technique designed to minimize awkward postures.

Conclusion

Occupational musculoskeletal injury risk is multifactorial and can be addressed through postural changes and ergonomic equipment design. Ergonomics strives to reduce or eliminate injury through different types of intervention. One of these, engineering controls, removes the presence of the hazard, and can be implemented by redesigning workstation equipment. One such design change is a voice-activated control panel. This reduces the frequency of reaches for the control panel or the need to maintain extended, static reaches to access the most frequently utilized controls. Fewer required keystrokes can be directly related to reduced muscular effort. Reduction of muscular effort and a decrease in sustained postures have been shown to prolong muscular endurance during work tasks.

This is a pre-publication manuscript. The final, peer-reviewed article, **The Potential Reduction in Musculoskeletal Injury in the Nonscanning Arm by Using VoiceScan Technology During Sonographic Examinations**, was published in the *Journal of Diagnostic Medical Sonography*, Jul 2005; 21:304-308.

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