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► To cite this version:

B Berthon, M Evans, C Marshall, N Palaniappan, N Cole, et al.. Head and neck target delineation using a novel PET automatic segmentation algorithm. *Radiotherapy & Oncology*, 2017, 122, pp.242 - 247. 10.1016/j.radonc.2016.12.008 . hal-03269455

HAL Id: hal-03269455

<https://hal.science/hal-03269455>

Submitted on 30 Jun 2021

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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Radiotherapy and Oncology

journal homepage: www.thegreenjournal.com

Head and neck target delineation using a novel PET automatic segmentation algorithm

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 June 2016

Received in revised form 5 December 2016

Accepted 5 December 2016

Available online xxxxx

Keywords:

Positron Emission Tomography

Image Segmentation

Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy

Automatic PET segmentation

ABSTRACT

Purpose: To evaluate the feasibility and impact of using a novel advanced PET auto-segmentation method in Head and Neck (H&N) radiotherapy treatment (RT) planning.**Methods:** ATLAAS, Automatic decision Tree-based Learning Algorithm for Advanced Segmentation, previously developed and validated on pre-clinical data, was applied to ¹⁸F-FDG-PET/CT scans of 20 H&N patients undergoing Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy. Primary Gross Tumour Volumes (GTVs) manually delineated on CT/MRI scans (GTV_{CT/MRI}), together with ATLAAS-generated contours (GTV_{ATLAAS}) were used to derive the RT planning GTV (GTV_{final}). ATLAAS outlines were compared to CT/MRI and final GTVs qualitatively and quantitatively using a conformity metric.**Results:** The ATLAAS contours were found to be reliable and useful. The volume of GTV_{ATLAAS} was smaller than GTV_{CT/MRI} in 70% of the cases, with an average conformity index of 0.70. The information provided by ATLAAS was used to grow the GTV_{CT/MRI} in 10 cases (up to 10.6 mL) and to shrink the GTV_{CT/MRI} in 7 cases (up to 12.3 mL). ATLAAS provided complementary information to CT/MRI and GTV_{ATLAAS} contributed to up to 33% of the final GTV volume across the patient cohort.**Conclusions:** ATLAAS can deliver operator independent PET segmentation to augment clinical outlining using CT and MRI and could have utility in future clinical studies.

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Positron Emission Tomography (PET) imaging using ¹⁸F-Fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG) plays an increasingly valuable role in Radiotherapy Treatment (RT) planning for a number of cancers [1]. Loco-regional recurrences have been shown to occur in PET-avid regions of the tumour [2] and studies have demonstrated the feasibility and usefulness of PET/CT-guided Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy (IMRT) planning [3]. PET/CT-based outlining can lead to more accurate and reproducible delineation of the Gross Tumour Volume (GTV), compared to outlining done using CT alone [4]. The PET-based GTV is usually smaller than the CT based volume [5,6]. Nishioka et al. showed with 21 oropharyngeal and nasopharyngeal cancer patients that adjacent normal tissue, particularly parotids, could be spared in 71% of patients when using PET in the delineation process [7], which could potentially lead to reduced long term morbidity, xerostomia and improved quality of life.

Although FDG-PET has been adopted in oncology as a key tool in diagnostic imaging, its use in RT planning has, until now, been limited due to a lack of consensus on GTV delineation method. The low resolution of PET coupled with the proximity to the tumour of other metabolically active structures make the delineation challenging. In particular in the Head and Neck (H&N), organs such as the pharyngeal muscles, spinal cord and salivary glands, which should be spared to minimise morbidity and improve quality of life, can generate additional background FDG uptake.

Manual PET-based GTV delineation, currently used in most centres, is time consuming and highly operator-dependent and several studies have shown significant variations in the GTV delineated by different operators using PET [5,8]. This has led to the development and recommended use of various PET automatic segmentation (PET-AS) methods for H&N [9]. However, only a small number of prospective clinical studies have reported on the use of PET-AS in RT planning [6]. Comparing different studies is difficult because of the different PET-AS methods used. Basic thresholding methods lack accuracy and reliability [10,11], but more advanced PET-AS methods, such as gradient-based, clustering or region-growing approaches are rarely used, and their impact on RT planning is still

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Fig. 1. Example of steps in the decision tree method implemented in the ATLAAS segmentation model.

unclear. There is a need for studies investigating the feasibility and clinical benefits of using advanced PET-AS in RT planning.

This prospective study investigated the use of an optimised PET-AS tool, developed and validated in house using phantom and clinical PET data [12,13], for GTV delineation in the RT planning of 20 oropharyngeal cancer patients. We evaluated the feasibility and impact of including this method into the RT planning process.

Methods

The ATLAAS optimised segmentation model

PET-AS was performed using the Automatic decision Tree-based Learning Algorithm for Advanced Segmentation (ATLAAS)² method developed at our centre. The ATLAAS model is designed to select the most accurate PET-AS method for a given PET image. This is achieved using a decision tree supervised machine learning method, optimised with a training dataset for which the segmentation outcome is known, to achieve optimal performance for cases in which the outcome is not known. ATLAAS is described elsewhere [14], and its accuracy was shown for 6 classes of advanced PET-AS methods used to segment a large range of data including simulated H&N tumours, and phantom H&N images of complex and realistic tumours obtained with a sub-resolution printed sandwich phantom [15]. ATLAAS was optimised for H&N data using 65 sub-resolution printed sandwich phantom images. The optimised version included the two algorithms Adaptive Thresholding method (AT) and Gaussian mixture models Clustering Method using 5 clusters (GCM5), described in previous work [12]. The best method was predicted on the basis of TBR_{peak} defined as the ratio between the tumour peak intensity value, (mean value in a 1 cm^3 sphere centred on the maximum intensity voxel) and the background intensity (mean intensity in a 1 cm thick extension of a thresholded volume at 50% of the peak intensity value). An example of the typical steps involved in the segmentation with ATLAAS is given in Fig. 1. The ATLAAS model was implemented for this work in the Computational Environment for Radiotherapy Research (CERR) [16]. The segmentation accuracy was evaluated by quantifying the overlap between the segmented and true contour using the Dice Similarity Coefficient (DSC) described in other work [17].

Acquisition of clinical data

The POSITIVE (Optimization of Positron Emission Tomography based Target Volume Delineation in Head and Neck Radiotherapy) study was set up to test ATLAAS for the first time in patients under-

going H&N radiotherapy (REC No. 12/WA/0083) and was carried out at Velindre Cancer Centre (UK). Twenty stage III/IVa-b oropharyngeal cancer patients were recruited after informed consent to the study. The patients were treated with neoadjuvant (induction) chemotherapy followed by radical chemoradiotherapy (66 Gy in 30 fractions over 6 weeks) using IMRT. A planning FDG PET/CT scan was carried out on a GE Discovery 690 PET/CT scanner before chemotherapy to avoid changes in tumour volumes prior to outlining. The scans were acquired 90 min after FDG administration in the treatment position with an RT immobilisation shell. The PET was acquired using 6–8 bed positions of 3 min each. The patient was injected with contrast for a subsequent CT used in the planning process. The images were reconstructed to 512×512 voxels for CT and 256×256 voxels for PET, using the algorithm Vue Point FX (24 subsets, 2 iterations, 6.4 mm cut-off) including CT-based attenuation-, scatter- and Time-Of-Flight corrections.

Six weeks on average separated the PET/CT planning scan and the start of RT. The fit of the immobilisation shells was adjusted if needed after induction chemotherapy and the patient was re-outlined and re-planned if necessary using the original CT/MRI/PET scan. Reporting was done by PET specialist radiologists after acquisition of the planning scans.

Workflow and analysis

MRI scans acquired before recruitment were available for all patients and were fused to the planning PET-CT scan using the Mutual Information registration algorithm in the ProSoma software (MedCom GmbH, Darmstadt, Germany).

Planning scans for the first 10 patients recruited were used to validate the workflow and verify that ATLAAS provided relevant contours for use. In this subgroup the primary GTVs were manually outlined by three consultant radiation oncologists, in discussion with a specialist PET radiologist, on the registered PET/CT, using the software VelocityAI (Varian Medical Systems, Palo Alto, USA). The resulting $GTV_{PET/CT}$ contours were compared with ATLAAS contours in terms of their volume and geometrical overlap, using the DSC index.

Once the ATLAAS output was verified, another 10 oropharyngeal cancer patients were recruited for the study. Manual delineation of the primary GTV was performed by the consultant radiation oncologists on the fused MRI and CT images in ProSoma ($GTV_{PCT/MRI}$). ATLAAS (GTV_{ATLAAS}) contours were then imported into ProSoma where the final GTV (GTV_{final}) was drawn by the treating clinician using all the available contour data.

The use of the additional information brought by ATLAAS contours was evaluated by comparing the different contours ($GTV_{PCT/MRI}$, GTV_{ATLAAS} , and GTV_{final}) for each patient, in terms of volume and geometrical overlap using the DSC. In addition,

² Patent pending No PCT/GB2015/052981.

Table 1

GTVp volumes and DSC index for manual and ATLAAS contours.

	Patient no										Mean
	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Final volume (mL)	33.1	45.9	21.5	38.2	27.5	54.7	33.1	19.0	33.8	17.4	–
CT/MRI volume (mL)	27.1	40.6	19.8	32.8	26.9	60.8	28.5	16.6	31.3	15.6	–
ATLAAS volume (mL)	27.3	41.9	7.8	26.2	15.6	52.5	29.0	16.1	23.7	8.6	–
DSC(ATLAAS vs CT/MRI)	0.77	0.76	0.44	0.75	0.67	0.82	0.74	0.74	0.76	0.51	0.70
DSC(ATLAAS vs final)	0.90	0.77	0.53	0.81	0.68	0.97	0.84	0.92	0.83	0.58	0.77

	Patient No									
	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1 % ATLAAS included in GTV _{Pfinal}	99.6	83.2	100	100	94.0	99.1	91.8	100	100	88.0
2 Modifications to GTV _{PCT/MRI} (% GTV _{PCT/MRI})	25.1	32.0	7.9	17.0	6.5	33.1	16.3	28.4	7.7	9.8
3 GTV _{PCT/MRI} extent locally increased based on ATLAAS (mL)	8.3	10.6	1.7	5.4	1.7	5.8	4.9	3.9	2.6	1.5
3a of which superior-inferior extent	0.9	–	–	0.7	0.3	–	–	0.6	–	1.1
4 GTV _{PCT/MRI} extent locally reduced based on ATLAAS (mL)	–	4.1	–	1.1	0.1	12.3	0.5	1.5	–	0.2
4a of which superior-inferior extent	–	0.9	–	–	–	1.5	–	–	–	–
5 Difference between GTV _{Pfinal} and ATLAAS (mL), of which:	6.9	20.0	12.7	12.0	45.1	0.6	11.5	3.4	10.0	11.1
5a Bone regions (%)	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5b Air cavities or vicinity (%)	0	37	6	0	9	0	10	12	0	7
5c Superior-inferior extent (%)	14	0	30	0	13	0	19	1	4	30
5d Transverse soft tissue extent (%)	84	60	64	100	78	100	71	87	96	63

Fig. 2. Quantification of the changes to the final volume (locally reduced or increased extent) based on the ATLAAS outlines, and differences between ATLAAS and CT/MRI not taken into account in the final GTV. Calculations corresponding to the different rows are schematically described under the table.

the clinicians were asked to report any changes made to the GTV_{Pfinal} due to the ATLAAS contour. Lymph nodes, which are well defined on CT/MRI images, were not outlined using ATLAAS, and are therefore not reported on in this paper.

Results

The patient cohort included 17 men and 3 women with a median age of 63 years. Ten patients had tonsillar tumours, 8 base of tongue tumours and 2 soft palate tumours. Two patients needed re-planning after induction chemotherapy.

In the preliminary group of 10 patients, ATLAAS successfully delineated the PET-avid tumour for all patients. The segmentation of the tumour ROI was fully automatic and took no more than 2 min on a dual core 3.1 GHz processor. GTV_{PATLAAS} were smaller than the manually delineated GTV_{PCT/MRI} for 7 out of 10 patients. The mean DSC between GTV_{PCT/MRI} and GTV_{PATLAAS} was 0.82, when 0.7 is considered to be an indicator of good overlap [18]. On the basis of these results, it was decided that only ATLAAS and CT/MRI contours would be used for the subsequent 10 patients recruited.

A comparison in terms of volume and conformity between the GTVp delineated using ATLAAS and both CT/MRI-based and final contours delineated by the investigators is presented in Table 1. ATLAAS volumes were smaller than the corresponding CT/MRI volumes in 7 out of 10 cases, and were within 10% of CT/MRI volumes in 4 out of 10 cases. The spatial conformity of GTV_{PATLAAS} and GTV_{PCT/MRI} was 0.70 DSC on average. GTV_{PATLAAS} and GTV_{Pfinal} were close, with neither being larger than 30% of the other, in 6 out of the 10 cases. GTV_{Pfinal} volumes were larger than the

GTV_{PATLAAS} in all cases. However, the ATLAAS volumes showed good conformity to the final contour, with an average DSC of 0.77.

Fig. 2 reports the details of the global and local changes to the final volume based on ATLAAS, and outlines the differences between ATLAAS and CT/MRI contours not taken into account in the final GTV. For instance, the data in the top row of the table shows that more than 83% of the ATLAAS volume was included in the final GTV for all patients, and 100% of the ATLAAS volume was included in the final GTV in 4 cases. The second row reports the proportion of the CT/MRI volume modified on the basis of the ATLAAS outline. This value ranged from 6.5% to 33%. This modification could include both additional extension of the volume when the ATLAAS contour was outside the GTV_{PCT/MRI} or local reduction of the volume in cases where the inverse was true. This is detailed in rows 3–5 as illustrated under the table.

Fig. 3 illustrates specific differences found between GTV_{PCT/MRI}, GTV_{PATLAAS} and GTV_{Pfinal} overlaid on the corresponding CT/PET scan, for seven clinical cases of interest.

Extending The GTV locally based on ATLAAS

As reported in the third row of Fig. 2, GTV_{PCT/MRI} was locally extended based on the information provided by ATLAAS (cf. Fig. 3a) for all clinical cases, with up to 10 mL added to make the final volume. Visual examination and reporting by the clinicians showed that this was done when additional disease extension was detected by ATLAAS, and confirmed by clinical or CT/MRI findings. This included larger superior-inferior disease extension (by up to 1.1 cm in one patient as reported in Fig. 3b), and disease extension identified across the midline (cf. Fig. 3c).

Fig. 3. $GTV_{CT/MRI}$, $GTV_{PATLAAS}$, and GTV_{Final} compared for 7 clinical cases.

Reducing the GTV locally based on ATLAAS

As shown in the fourth row of Fig. 2, local reduction (on one or more transverse slices) of the CT/MRI volume based on ATLAAS was observed for 7 patients. For two patients, it resulted in a reduction to the final volume of more than 2 mL. The extent of the contours was locally reduced when the smaller disease extent indicated by ATLAAS was in agreement with the clinical findings and the CT or the MRI information. The extent was also reduced in the superior-inferior direction for two patients (by 1.5 cm for patient No 16). In cases of largely conflicting information between image modalities, the CT/MRI contour was reduced down to a compromise following the edge of the anatomical structures, as depicted in Fig. 3d.

ATLAAS information discarded

Differences between $GTV_{CT/MRI}$ and $GTV_{PATLAAS}$ were not considered in the final GTV when they included:

- (a) bone (0.1 mL for patient No 11, cf. Fig. 3e),
- (b) air (for 5 patients, up to 6.6 mL for patient No 12, cf. Fig. 3f),
- (c) different superior-inferior disease extension in $GTV_{PATLAAS}$ which was not confirmed by anatomical imaging or clinical examinations (for 6 patients, up to 6.4 mL for patient No 13, cf. Fig. 3g),
- (d) different transverse disease extension unconfirmed by anatomical imaging or clinical examinations (cf. some regions in Fig. 3f).

In these cases, the difference between $GTV_{PATLAAS}$ and GTV_{Final} (expressed in mL), is given in row 5 of Fig. 2 and includes both over and under contouring.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated the clinical feasibility of using the novel ATLAAS optimised segmentation model in 20 H&N cancer patients undergoing radical chemoradiotherapy. ATLAAS was applied for the first time to 20 prospectively recruited patients in a clinical trial with a strict scanning protocol, which involved expert PET radiologist and H&N radiation oncologists. It was

prospectively used, in combination with manual CT/MRI data, to derive the final GTV for use in RT planning. To the best of our knowledge, advanced PET-AS methods (beyond simple thresholding) have only been included as part of RT treatment planning in two studies in H&N cancer [19,20], which were based on the same gradient-based segmentation method. In this work, we additionally evaluated the impact of using the PET-AS contour on local modifications of the final GTV contour.

ATLAAS had previously shown accuracy and robustness on phantom and simulated data for the evaluation of H&N PET scans [14]. Evaluation on images from the 10 first patients involved in this study showed that ATLAAS provided PET-avid GTVs for all patients with a high degree of similarity to PET GTVs manually delineated by experts. In addition, the segmentation was fully automatic and therefore reproducible, and lasted no more than 2 min per patient. The use of ATLAAS instead of manual PET/CT outlining for the 10 subsequent patients in this study, considerably reduced the clinicians' workload and removed inter-observer variability. We have shown that ATLAAS not only could segment the PET-avid areas of disease reliably in patients compared to manual PET outlining but that it could also add valuable information to guide clinical delineation of the primary GTV.

The ATLAAS contours were smaller than the CT/MRI contours in most cases, which is in agreement with findings from other studies where threshold-based delineation was used for H&N patients [21]. Furthermore, the ATLAAS derived contours provided additional information to anatomical contours manually drawn on CT and MRI. This is in line with the study by Newbold et al. in 19 H&N patients, where threshold-based delineation was used to derive the PET-based GTV [22]. In our study, we found that additional information from ATLAAS included (a) identification of superior-inferior disease extension, and extension across the mid-line not seen on CT (e.g. Fig. 3c), and (b) other disease extension boundaries differing from anatomical data. The information provided by ATLAAS was used in all patients and this shows the confidence of the clinicians in the usefulness of our segmentation method for RT planning at our centre. The clinician's judgment and expertise and the additional clinical data available (endoscopy or clinical examination results) remained paramount in the process. Nevertheless ATLAAS was very useful (a) in confirming the GTV outline when this was close to the CT/MRI based contour, and (b) as a delineation guide when in disagreement with CT/

MRI based contours, due for instance to different patient positioning and/or poor image registration.

We have methodically investigated the impact of ATLAAS on the final GTV for our cohort. We found that although ATLAAS led to reducing the extension in some areas of the GTV_{CT/MRI} for 7 patients, the PET information led to a globally smaller final GTV for only 1 patient. This is in line with the findings of Ciernik et al. for a cohort of 12 H&N patients [5], and Paulino et al. for 40 H&N patients [23], both using manual PET segmentation. This confirms the suggestion that clinicians may not be prepared yet to reduce the GTV volume based on PET. Indeed, although some studies have shown that PET-AS contours can accurately identify the whole tumour burden in laryngeal cancer [4,24], it may be more useful for defining the metabolically active tumour region, especially for tumours which can be highly heterogeneous such as in the H&N [25]. This is in line with the suggestion of considering the Biological Tumor Volume as defined by Ling et al. [26], which can be used for dose escalation [27,28] to increase the dose to the biologically active tumour while sparing the surrounding tissue. The ATLAAS model could be useful for determining, with a consistent and operator independent approach, highly metabolically active areas of the tumour requiring a radiation boost and it could therefore be extremely useful for treatment plan adaptation. Correlation with additional information and clinical input would still be required in finalising the volumes for dose escalation.

Differences between the GTV_{final} and GTV_{ATLAAS} volumes were in the range [0.6,45] mL (cf. row 5 of Fig. 2). CT/MRI based outlining was preferred when: (a) no PET signal was found in abnormal mucosa (Fig. 3g), (b) high PET uptake was observed in and around air cavities and/or bone (Fig. 3c and h) due to signal spill-out or inflammation. Spill-out effects can be corrected with CT-based thresholding, whereas unconfirmed soft tissue extensions of the disease, which represent a large part of the differences observed between CT/MRI and PET contours (cf. rows 5c and 5d of Fig. 2), are inherent to the difference between modalities.

One of the limitations of this study is that we could not carry out a full comparison between GTV_{ATLAAS} and the PET GTV outlined manually without reference to anatomical data from the CT scan. In this case the correlation between manual and GTV_{ATLAAS} could have been greater because based on the same underlying data. In addition, this work was carried out as a single centre study. Both limitations shall be addressed in the design of a forthcoming multicentre clinical trial.

Conclusions

The ATLAAS optimised segmentation model based on the decision tree machine learning method is a novel, fast and operator independent tool for tumour delineation in radiotherapy treatment planning of Head and Neck cancer. ATLAAS can potentially be applied to any tumour site and tumour type and holds promise for future multi-centre clinical studies investigating the use of PET in radiotherapy outlining, prior to starting treatment and also for adaptive re-planning of residual metabolically active disease during treatment.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by Cancer Research Wales grants No. 7061 and 2476. The funder was not involved in the study design,

conception, data collection acquisition and analysis nor writing or submission of this manuscript.

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