

Tim J. Senden
Klaus H. Moock
John D. Fitz Gerald
William M. Burch
Rodney J. Browitt
Christopher D. Ling
Graham A. Heath
Australian National University
Canberra, Australia

Interactive Compartmental Modeling

TO THE EDITOR: Burger and Buck (1) emphasize that their interactive compartmental modeling software package is a highly versatile tool for the analysis of time-activity curves from clinical PET and SPECT studies. They conclude that its main features are easy model configuration, evaluation and use after a short training session (1).

Mathematical models in nuclear medicine literature appear to be rather plain and straightforward (1-4), though they are not necessarily so simple (5-8). Relevant description of organ function in complex biological structures is difficult, particularly because the complexity is both geometrical and temporofunctional and data are based on external measurement of radioactivity distribution in space and time (5,8). Also, classical medical training often has not prepared physicians to use mathematical models properly, although image resolution (spatial and temporal), reconstruction errors, signal-to-noise ratio and other quantitation inaccuracies are well understood. Nuclear medicine physicians who begin to use quantitative models and software packages for describing and interpreting their data on tracer kinetics in situ, however, often find it difficult to get started. Here, I would like to emphasize that the suitable approach is often not to start with the direct formulation of the equations as suggested by Burger and Buck (1), but with (a) thorough consideration of the in vivo reactions during the study and (b) deep analysis of the basic and fundamental assumptions of the model.

Often the principal questions are the following:

- What is the reaction of interest (perfusion or metabolism or both) under study?
- How is this reaction related to local structure? (In most instances, structure and function are intimately inter-related because tracers distribute according to their substrate nature and to the anatomic distribution of the system features.)
- Do local functions affect global input?
- To what degree does fundamental nonlinearity of the systems exist?
- Are measured features common to all individuals and under all pathophysiological conditions?

It is most essential to make "correct" assumptions that are based wherever possible on previous physiological and anatomical observations. The biochemical fate of tracers has to be known completely. In addition, no fundamental chemical and physical laws can be broken. Only by thoroughly combining data from a particular nuclear medicine procedure with actual structure and function of the system under the study can a logical model be composed.

Next, there are several basic and fundamental assumptions underlying the compartmental model:

- The system is mathematically linear.
- Each compartment is wholly and instantaneously mixed so that the concentration within it is uniform at all times.
- The system is in a steady state with respect to mother substance (tracee) so that tracer exchange rates are first order.
- The volumes and exchange rates between compartments are constant.

The main problem with the compartmental, stirred tank model is its failure to meet the second condition. For example, it is obvious that the plasma is not an instantaneously mixed compartment although this is commonly assumed. A further condition is therefore appropriate: Time required for complete mixing in a volume (compartment) is very short compared to the time constant of the fastest exchange process. These are very restrictive assumptions. For example, the arteriovenous (A-V) difference of glucose across most organs is small (only a few percent). However, a steady-state A-V difference for the nontracer mother substance is not critical here, but it is the first-pass, instantaneous extraction of the tracer that counts (8). The first-pass extraction of fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG) is about 50%, a huge gradient, and so the estimates of the transfer rate constants (k_{ij}) by compartmental models tend to be too high, sometimes by a factor of 2 to 4 (8). Even in the brain, where the capillary network is a well-ordered, highly tortuous stereoscopic arrangement of capillaries (a well-mixed compartment), there is a relevant concentration gradient for the slowly diffusible tracers (such as FDG) that destroys the validity of the compartmental model, which assumes that each compartment is wholly and instantaneously mixed so that the concentration within it is uniform at all times.

Applied software packages are an essential part of the imaging system to analyze the data to provide clinically and scientifically relevant information. In particular, in-house programming, which certainly represents the developing edge of nuclear medicine, usually lacks proper quality assurance and testing (9). In short, with thorough consideration of the in vivo reactions during the study (under normal or pathophysiological conditions) and with the valid assumptions and testing of the model, the proposed software package (1) can be used to add diagnostic or scientific value to the nuclear medicine procedure.

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Jyrki T. Kuikka
Kuopio University Hospital
Kuopio, Finland

Is It Time for a Change?

TO THE EDITOR: I read with interest Dr. Henry N. Wagner's recent letter to the editor concerning merging the Society of Nuclear Medicine (SNM) and the American College of Nuclear Physicians (ACNP) (1). Dr. Wagner is a respected member of our community, and any time he voices an opinion we should give it due consideration. However, in terms of the material presented to support Dr. Wagner's point of view, there are a few confounding issues.

The American Society of Internal Medicine and the American College of Physicians are two organizations that permit only physicians to be members. To the best of my knowledge, they do not represent technologists, basic scientists or other medical professionals.

In contrast, less than one-half of the members of SNM are physicians. The remainder of the membership is constituted in large part by nuclear medicine technologists and to a lesser degree by basic scientists working in nuclear medicine. This immediately raises issues concerning the mission, goals and ability of SNM to serve specific physician-driven interests. This should not be viewed as impugning the role or importance of technologists or scientists, but rather as an attempt to demonstrate the multifaceted membership of SNM. In such a situation, resources cannot be committed to projects to satisfy all segments of the membership.

ACNP was founded, as Dr. Wagner indicated, because a number of nuclear medicine physicians felt that SNM's structure did not permit adequate response to strictly physician issues. Essentially, the ACNP represents the full-time physician practitioners of nuclear medicine. There are a handful of basic scientist members of ACNP. I agree with Dr. Wagner that merger of the two organizations would offer economies of scale and allow us to speak with a single voice. However, as long as SNM has its current governance structure, the issues of physicians may not be dealt with as expeditiously within SNM as they will from outside.

Dr. Wagner's goal is laudable and, in fact, I support it. However, the devil is in the details. How a structure that permits physicians to have significant direct control over physician issues without having to balance those issues against the interests of scientists or technologists remains

elusive. Even within the chapters, these issues persist and often divert the chapters from some of their educational goals.

There is another organization that should be considered for merger if we wish to speak with one voice—the American Society of Nuclear Cardiology (ASNC). This organization was formed for exactly the same reasons as ACNP. My perception is that ASNC is not ready to reunite with SNM either.

SNM has undertaken numerous restructuring efforts over the last several years. Some of these efforts appear to have worked, and others appear to be failing. Another significant restructuring effort would be required before one could say that ACNP, ASNC and SNM could merge into a single organization. The cultures of the various societies are somewhat different, as are their goals and operations. So, while I support Dr. Wagner's position in principle, the reality is that such a merger is not necessarily in the best interests of all involved at this time.

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Robert E. Henkin

*Loyola University Medical Center
Maywood, Illinois*

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS Unusual Extrathyroidal Uptake

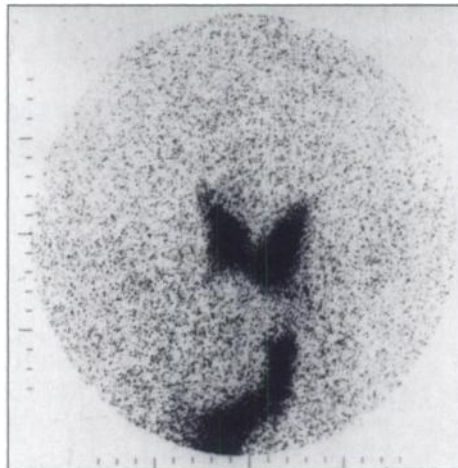


Figure 1.



Figure 2.

PURPOSE

A 69-yr-old man with severe hypothyroidism had a thyroid radioiodine study, which demonstrated an unusual extrathyroidal uptake in a routine neck image (Fig. 1). An anterior chest view confirmed the finding (Fig. 2). Thyroid uptake ratio was low: 2.6% at 3 hr and 3.2% at 24 hr. Patient's medical history included resection of esophageal cancer and retrosternal reconstruction with a stomach tube 6 yr before, followed by postoperative external radiation to the neck. Postirradiation hypothyroidism was diagnosed and thyroid hormone replacement was initiated.

TRACER

Iodine-123 sodium-iodine (7.4 MBq; 0.2 mCi)

ROUTE OF ADMINISTRATION

Oral

TIME AFTER INJECTION

3 hr

INSTRUMENTATION

Hitachi Gamma View-F scinticamera (Tokyo, Japan) with a low-energy, high-resolution, parallel-hole collimator

CONTRIBUTORS

Takashi Misaki, Yasuhiro Iida, Kanji Kasagi and Junji Konishi, Department of Nuclear Medicine and Diagnostic Imaging, Kyoto University School of Medicine, Kyoto, Japan