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Image Processing for Mitoses in Sections of Breast Cancer: A Feasibility Study

E.J. Kaman, A.W.M. Smeulders, P.W. Verbeek, I.T. Young, and J.P.A. Baak
Pattern Recognition Group, Department of Applied Physics, Delft University of Technology, Delft (E.J.K., A.W.M.S., P.W.V., I.T.Y.) and Department of Quantitative Pathology, S.S.D.Z., Delft (J.P.A.B.), The Netherlands

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This paper describes an image analysis technique for the counting of nuclei in mitosis in tissue sections. Five experienced pathologists scored mitoses in photographs of preselected areas of tissue sections of the breast. Objects consistently labelled as mitotic cells by all five pathologists were considered "mitoses" in the analysis. In total, there were 45 mitotic nuclei, 68 possible mitotic nuclei and 1,172 nonmitotic nuclei.

The image analysis procedure was designed to give priority to a low false negative rate, i.e., misclassification of mitoses. The procedure consists of three steps:

1. Segmentation of the image.
2. Reduction of the number of nonmitotic nuclei by using feature values based on the brightness histogram of the objects.
3. Fully automatic classification of the remaining objects using contour features.

The objects remaining after the first two steps were visualized in a composite display for interactive evaluation: 10% of the mitotic nuclei were missed, and 85% of the nonmitotic nuclei were eliminated. The result of the fully automatic procedure described in this paper is rather disappointing and gave a loss of 37% of the mitoses while 5% of the nonmitotic nuclei remained.

Key terms: Image analysis, mitotic activity, tissue sections, automated analysis

In the sixties, when digital image processing entered the biomedical area, single cells were among the first topics to be studied. Due to the increased data acquisition and processing capabilities, entire cytological specimens are now ready to be analyzed. At the present time systems are operational for the screening of cervical smears (8,23,27) selection of well-spread metaphases in the field of cytogenetics (6), and automated analysis of blood smears (13,14).

In these screening systems, the use of single cell specimens in a monolayer suspension still is essential. Monolayers are obviously not present in a major part of diagnostic practice: tissue section analysis. As a result of this complication, the literature on the analysis of tissue sections is quite limited. The main issues have been the nuclear architecture of the epithelium of urinary bladder (4,25), intercorrelation of nuclear chromatin features in breast cancer (22), and the texture of the chromatin pattern of nuclei in endometrial hyperplasia and carcinoma (7).

Apart from the presence of multilayers of cells, several factors complicate the quantitative analysis of tissue sections.

1. Tangential cutting artefacts: The tangential cutting implies that image properties of single cells are not directly available, but can only be determined from a population of cells in a statistical sense using stereological methods (2,21). These artefacts may prohibit segmentation of single cells in the digital image.

2. Variability in image intensity: The uncontrolled variability of the tissue section thickness implies that attention should be paid to grey value normalisation (15).

This paper describes an image analysis technique for assessing mitotic activity in tissue sections. The number of mitotic nuclei (hereafter referred to as "mitoses") per unit area in tissue sections is an important feature in various grading systems of breast cancer (3) and also is important in the prognosis of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and other tumors (1,16,19). The practical application in diagnostic pathology, however, is not very popular for two reasons. First, the accurate counting of mitoses is tedious and time-consuming work. Second, the reproducibility between different observers in a routine setting is not perfect (3). For example, the correlation between the first and second assessment by the observers was only 0.80 (16).

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Address reprint requests to Dr. J.P.A. Baak, Dept. of Pathology, S.S.D.Z., Reynier de Graafweg 7, 2625 AD DELFT, The Netherlands.
same observer of the total number of mitoses is approximately .90 (3).

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Tissue Processing and Image Selection**

Tissue sections of breast cancer were used for this pilot study. Standard tissue fixation (4% buffered formalin, for approximately 24 h), dehydration in alcohol of increasing strength, and embedding in paraplast were performed. With this procedure, a majority of quantitative image features remain stable (24). Sections 4 µm thick, were prepared and stained with hematoxylin-eosin, because of the necessity of visual inspection. From the image processing point of view a stochiometric stain is to be preferred. Photographs were made at ×1,000 film magnification ×100 objective, n.a. = 1.25 with green light, oil immersion, field diameter 200 µm using Kodak Panatomic-X (32 ASA) film. Standard grey wedges (kindly provided by Mr. M. Bisschoff, Carl Zeiss, Oberkochen, Germany) were included to confirm standard illumination conditions.

**Description of the Material Used**

An implicit complicating factor in the study of mitotic figures is the lack of absolute agreement among pathologists as to which objects constitute a mitosis. The inconsistency may be due to the inherent difficulty in defining the begin-and-end phase of a mitosis or be due to contradictory judgement on the same object. To reduce the inconsistency due to the definition of a mitosis, we consider as the endstage the moment when the nuclei of the two daughter cells are seen separately. As we could not rely on a data base selected by a single pathologist, images of cells were shown (Fig. 1) to a panel of five experienced, independent pathologists, who were asked to indicate mitoses, and objects which might, to their doubt, the object was labelled as a “possible.” The results of this panel opinion are summarized in Table 1.

Objects consistently labelled by all five pathologists as either mitosis or cell not in division were considered, in the further analysis to be “mitosis” or “nonmitosis,” respectively. All other objects were labelled as “possibles.” In total, there were 45 mitoses, 68 possibles, and 1,172 nonmitoses including epithelial, inflammatory, and fibrocytic cell nuclei.

Due to the preselection, the images used were enriched with mitoses and tissue elements resembling mitoses. The percentage of mitoses in the photographs is about 3.5%, whereas in tissue sections of breast cancer this percentage is in the range of 0.1%–1.5% (J.P.A. Baak, unpublished results).

**Instrumentation and Image Acquisition**

The images were processed and evaluated in a large image processing and measurement system including the DIP (Delft Image Processor) pipelined image processor (10). The system is programmable through a command string interpreter encompassing some 250 operations on binary and grey-scale images and a variety of image measurements. Numerical data resulting from feature value measurements can be stored in a data base. A statistical package, ISPAHAN (12), is used for interactive evaluation and classification.

The black-and-white photographic negatives were scanned by a flying spot scanner and reduced to 5 bits (32 levels), with a 256 × 256 pixel field of scan. The pixel-to-pixel distance corresponded to 0.25 µm at the specimen level. A data base of 107 images of 64 × 64 µm² was compiled. Half of the images were put aside to be used as an independent test set for the evaluation of the developed image processing procedure.

**Image Processing**

The image processing procedure was designed to give priority to a low false negative rate—that is, very few mitoses should be missed. At the same time the false positive rate should be reduced to a low percentage as well. The reduction of nonmitoses and final classification of the remaining objects was implemented by means of the following steps:

1. Normalisation: In spite of the standard conditions during the treatment of the film, one can expect small differences in the exposure level of the photographic negatives. Therefore, prior to the image processing, the “minimum” grey level in the image, defined by skipping the first 10 low grey values, was subtracted from the image in order to normalize all the images.

2. Global thresholding: In the first image processing step the image was segmented with a global grey level threshold (heuristically set at 8 grey levels over the minimum) to locate objects. Pixels with a grey level greater (brighter) than the threshold were background pixels; the others were defined as object pixels. The selected part of the image consisted of mitoses and other elements such as artefacts, pyknotic nuclei, inflammatory cells, and nuclear fragments.

3. Elimination of small objects: Half of these fragments were removed by application of a threefold erosion operation (21) which eliminated objects having an inscribed circle with a diameter smaller than 1.5 µm.

4. Local thresholding: Subsequently, the objects were thresholded a second time, now locally, to approximate their contours more accurately. This was of importance for the calculation of the feature values derived from the contour later on. The image was again thresholded globally, now at a grey level slightly less than the grey level of the background. To be sure that an entire object is included in this local area, the area was dilated by three steps. The histogram of brightness within this new local area was then calculated and smoothed with a one-dimensional linear filter with coefficients 1,2,1.

If there were not two clearly distinct peaks present in this histogram, it was assumed that the local area did not contain a mitosis. By application of this “peak-to-peak criterion” this object was removed from further
FIG. 1. Four hematoxylin-eosin-stained images of breast cancer with, in the centre, objects labelled by a panel of five pathologists. Image a) contains a mitosis consistently labelled by the five panel members. b) Four out of five label mitosis, one pathologist was in doubt. c) Two pathologists label mitosis, two were in doubt, one concluded no mitosis. d) Inflammatory cells. Note the large variety in overall staining intensity level. Magnification ×640.
The a Priori Assignment by a Panel of Five Pathologists

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<td>Possibles</td>
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<td>Nonmitoses</td>
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processing. The local histogram of dark objects, like mitoses, in a bright local environment yields a local histogram in which the two peaks are present. The local threshold is set at the minimum between these two peaks.

5. Local histogram features: The following three features were then calculated from the local histogram and used to further reduce the number of objects: the area (AREA), the average grey value (AGV), and a measure for the homogeneity of the object (HOM). The value of the homogeneity was calculated by dividing the number of pixels under the local threshold by the number of pixels under the second global threshold.

6. Reduction using local histogram features: Reduction of the number of objects was achieved by setting the following limits to the feature values: if an object was either too small (AREA < 15μm²) or too large (AREA > 90μm²) or was too bright (AGV > 8) or had too much internal contrast (HOM < 0.4) then the object was removed. In that case the object presumably was not a mitotic nucleus. The remaining objects were all gathered in a composite image and displayed for visual control and interactive evaluation (Fig. 2).

7. Contour features: For these objects two other features were calculated as well: average Roberts gradient (20) along the contour of the objects in a 5 × 5 window and the bending energy (5,26) which is a measure for the roughness of the contour.

8. Fully automatic classification: In the learning phase of the statistical classification only two classes of objects were considered: The class of mitoses and the class of nonmitoses. For fully automatic classification, the complete data-set, including the half previously put aside, was used. This complete data-set was subjected to the processing steps 1–7. The objects remaining after these steps were divided into two equal groups; first one group was used as a learning set and the other as a test set and then the two roles were reversed (11). A linear discriminant function (12) was used for classification. In the test phase the objects labelled by the panel as "possibles" were classified as well. The classification matrix thus contains three a priori classes and two a posteriori classes.

RESULTS

The result of the analysis after each image processing step is shown in Table 2.

After segmentation with the global grey-value threshold the number of non-mitoses was reduced by a half, while the number of mitoses did not decrease. The reduction by three erosion steps again removed half of the remaining non-mitoses while again none of the mitoses was removed. Thus after these two steps 25% of the initial nonmitoses remained. Subsequently, an additional 2.5% of the nonmitoses were removed by application of the "peak-to-peak criterion."

At this point the objects were eliminated by subsequent application of a window on the feature values area, homogeneity, and the average grey value. This step eliminated 40% of the remaining nonmitoses and 10% of the mitoses, giving a total elimination of 85% of the nonmitoses and 10% of the mitoses.

With a Fisher linear discriminant function (9) the remaining objects were classified into two classes. This classification can be represented in a confusion matrix (Table 3).

When the results of the image processing and the classification were combined we obtained the results given in Table 4.

A Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve was generated with a kernel-based classifier (12); see Figure 3. This curve is given for the entire classification procedure. Presently, the best result of a fully automatic procedure has been a loss (false negative) of 37% of the mitoses while 5% of the nonmitoses remain (false positive).

DISCUSSION

The objective of this pilot study is to investigate the possibility of scoring semiautomatically the mitotic activity in tissue sections. The basic approach is to detect and count mitoses in a diagnostically interesting area of the section.

The uncertainty in the a priori assignment of mitoses was overcome, in this study, by referring preselected

FIG. 2. Monitor display of composite image of automatically selected objects, suitable for interactive evaluation.
areas of tissue sections to a panel of five pathologists. In this way, a reliable data set of mitoses and nonmitoses was composed.

There are several causes for the large number of "possibles" resulting from the panel assignments. First, the pathologists were asked to be conservative in their labelling of a mitosis. Second, because of the use of black-and-white photo prints, neither depth information nor color information was available. This is, of course, not a normal diagnostic situation. The total number of possibles (68) decreases to 33 if objects for which four out of five pathologists agree are removed from the set of possibles and either added to the mitoses or nonmitoses. The images used in this pilot study were selected for the presence of cells in division and objects which show strong resemblance to mitoses to investigate the true selective power of the developed procedure. It is likely that the use of such a data-base degraded the classification result in this study.

Although the data-set may seem relatively small the following preliminary conclusion may be drawn. In the first stage of processing, three quarters of the nonmitoses were removed and all mitoses were retained. This is an encouraging result for a preselection system. The results change to a removal of 85% of the nonmitoses losing 10% of the mitoses by the application of simple-to-compute object features.

The display of the remaining objects in a composite image makes the quantitative assessment of the mitotic activity feasible. Now, as an alternative for automatic classification the remaining objects could be eliminated interactively giving a considerable work reduction.
Analysis of the false negative and false positive classifications indicates the following two main causes for misclassification. First, the local contrast of some of the mitoses was low with respect to the surrounding background value. This seems to occur particularly in late stages of division. Second, the segmentation procedure is inadequate in some cases. In these cases a local threshold is not sufficient to retain a contour as perceived visually. The contour is of prime importance for the classification based upon shape features. So far, the results obtained with the shape analysis are disappointing. Application of an adaptive contour algorithm e.g., (18) or (17), might improve the result. In addition, gain might be expected from the use of a higher sampling resolution as the characteristic little folds in the shape of mitoses are obscured by the size of the present digitization grid. The presence of these folds may then be established by the bending energy feature (5, 26).

In summary, the study presented here indicates the feasibility of an interactive image processing system for the scoring of mitotic activity. In a subsequent study more sophisticated processing techniques, such as determination of the integrated optical density and texture measures, and specimen decision strategies are planned. These techniques will be implemented in a real-time system working directly from microscopic slides and thus making the photographic step unnecessary.

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LITERATURE CITED