

## Original Article

# Is it only a matter of time until the Conventional Treatment Simulator becomes obsolete? Critical evaluation of the CT-simulator

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## Abstract

The benefits of employing computed tomography (CT) into the planning process of radiotherapy has been well established over the last 20 years. The cross sectional images provide invaluable information that enable clinicians to plan patients treatment with confidence. More recently there has been the development of the CT-simulator (CT-sim), however its place in the clinical setting has still to be established.

One of the most anticipated questions is "will the CT-simulator replace the present conventional treatment simulator as a tool for simulation?" There appear to be tremendous reasons why it should, but there are also many issues that need to be addressed.

This discussions aims to critically assess the practical and technical aspects of the new technology, by means of reviewing published literature. The aim is to decipher whether its introduction into the planning process is realistic and appropriate for all radiotherapy patients, and whether it has the possibility to replace the treatment simulator.

Issues concerned with image production, simulation (virtual), planning, cost, quality assurance (QA) and patient criteria (i.e. radical and palliative patients) have been reviewed. The Study concludes that the CT-sim has the realistic possibility to dramatically improve the treatment intent of all radiotherapy patients. Although there are situations where the treatment simulator appears to supersede the CT-sim, there still appears to be a place for it within the planning process.

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## Keywords

CT simulator; new technology; practical implications

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## INTRODUCTION

Any newly developed technique passes through different phases in its lifetime. The CT-simulator is a relatively new piece of technology that has successfully passed the experimental phase, however its use in the clinical setting is not yet universally accepted. This means that the CT-simulator falls into the unconventional phase of its lifetime, as it

certainly has not replaced the existing technology – the *conventional simulator*. However, there is the possibility that the CT-simulator will become conventional, and make the treatment simulator obsolete.

Computed tomography (CT) scans have been slowly integrated into the planning process over the last 20 years.<sup>1</sup> The cross-sectional images provide large amounts of information regarding anatomy and are ideally suited to the clinicians needs for treatment planning. The advent of the

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CT scanner and its subsequent attachment to the treatment simulator has so enhanced the planning process that the dominant function the simulator now provides is in decision making.

CT is invaluable for two distinctly different purposes, for "location" of both target and sensitive structures and for providing the anatomical information necessary for accurate "dose computations". This therefore permits a new approach to treatment optimisation. As anatomical data can be defined with confidence in three dimensions, individualised and complex treatment plans can be actively investigated.

Various studies have indicated that modifications in 30–80% of conventional simulation target volumes have been modified after CT information has been reviewed. It has also been reported that 10–40% of all radiation therapy patients may benefit from CT scanning being integrated into the planning process.<sup>2</sup>

In 1994, Bomford et al.<sup>3</sup> recognised that the CT scanner complimented the conventional treatment simulator and was not an alternative in the treatment planning process. However, they went on to realise that from a patient and staff perspective it would be more convenient and economic if the two procedures could be carried out on the same machine. Since then there has been the development of the CT-simulator which permits the use of virtual simulation.

## BACKGROUND

Virtual Simulation allows "proposed physical treatment parameters to be practically assessed without the need for the patient to be present".<sup>4</sup>

Nishidia et al.<sup>5</sup> described the CT-based simulator as a sophisticated beam portal marking device, but the ability of the CT scan and computer severely limited its capabilities. However it was reported in the same study that the system was useful for complex 3D treatment planning. It has also been reported, more recently, by Perez et al.<sup>6</sup> that the ability and time taken to outline the critical anatomy was inadequate and excessive respectively. However with any technology, improvements are made after clinical experience and so the present

CT-simulator can be seen to have improved since the earlier reports were published.

A modern CT-simulator is a standard CT scanner with additional software that provides the beam edge display, beams eye view (BEV) display, 3D images, and high quality digitally reconstructed radiographs (DRR's). A DRR is a "ray-line reconstruction through a three dimensional (3D) volumetric CT data set, which generates the equivalent of a conventional transmission radiograph using a virtual source and the geometry of the planned radiation therapy beam".<sup>7</sup>

Target volumes and critical structures can be outlined on the CT axial images and the software integrates these targets and structures with beam geometries to perform virtual simulation in 3D. This tool ideally permits CT images to be manipulated allowing the 3D target and normal tissue localisation, treatment field design, dose calculations, patient marking and verification simulation to be completed in one patient sitting.

The major components of a CT-simulator are:

1. A CT scanner and couch. The couch top should be flat to imitate that of the treatment machine.
2. A CT computer console.
3. One or more networked 3D image and virtual simulation workstations, so that clinicians can work without disturbing the planning and scanning of other patients.
4. A laser marking system, so that patients are set up in the correct treatment position and points of origin can be marked.
5. A laser hardcopy device for the production of data and DRR's.

## DISCUSSION

Conway and Robinson<sup>8</sup> recognised that many of the limitations of the CT-simulator are caused by the limitations of hardware. The production of DRR's with good quality resolution require a greater number of CT slices to be produced; meaning that scanning times will increase. By purchasing a spiral CT-simulator this issue could be resolved.

This does increase cost and seems too luxurious for the purpose of radiotherapy planning. However,

**Table 1.** Steps involved in the "virtual-simulation" process

Stage	Steps involved
CT image acquisition	CT images acquired with the patient in the treatment position. An appropriate reference point is chosen (i.e. an approximate centre on a stable part of the body) and then transferred to the patient by employing the use of the CT scanner origin and laser system.
Clinical volume definition	The clinical consultant outlines the gross tumor volume (GTV) and the planning target volume (PTV) can then be constructed by applying specific growth margins in all conventional directions (i.e. sup/inf, ant/post and left/right). Standard software tools allow the user to manipulate the images so that visualisation in 2 or 3D is made easier.
Beam placement and	The virtual simulation software enables four different views to be displayed simulation so the maximum information can be assessed to provide adequate beam placement. Advanced field shaping, including MLC optimisation makes the software suitable for almost any treatment. Shielding can be designed more accurately, as volumes of interest (VOI's)/critical structures can be visualised more easily.

it may be a consideration if centres wish to carry out virtual simulation in one patient sitting, as the scanning times would be shorter, allowing the patient to spend less time on the CT couch.

In turn it is also important that the CT-simulator produces a real time image, like the conventional simulator. Again this will reduce patient planning time. However due to the simulation of these patients being virtual and CT computer based, there is the ability to virtually simulate at a later date. This could increase patient throughput, and with the inherent economic constraints of the National Health Service (NHS) this would prove preferable to management.

There have been some controversies when comparing both types of scans, regarding image quality. Gerber and Root<sup>9</sup> showed that if the appropriate pitch parameter is employed, then spiral images were of comparable quality to axial images. However scanning times and patient dose are increased, which therefore expels the major benefits of employing spiral CT scanning.

There have also been issues regarding the accuracy of the Hounsfield Units (HU), when comparing both types of scans. However, Lilly<sup>10</sup> indicated that when used for radiotherapy planning, spiral images are essentially equivalent to true axial scans, in terms of final dosimetry. Therefore there has to be some compromise made between the image acquisition speed and image quality, so the appropriate pitch parameter can be determined, as the data

necessary for accurate dose computation does not appear to be affected by the choice of scanner.

Due to quicker scanning times with spiral CT, image mis-registration is decreased, which is an important consideration when planning radiotherapy treatments. There is also the possibility of scanning patients in one single breath hold. This would be a significant improvement in the simulation of radical lung patients, as respiration not only alters image quality, but the accurate delineation of the planning target volume (PTV).<sup>11</sup> An area where this technology would clearly be beneficial is in the simulation of patients who are to undergo Active Breathing Control (ABC) treatment techniques.

Within the CT Virtual simulation process there are three distinct procedures. These are described in Table 1, and some of the issues will be discussed below.

### Clinical Volume Definition

Within this stage there are a number of software tools that enable target volumes and structures of interest to be defined considerably easier. One of these tools permits the CT numbers to be manipulated. Van Dyk and Mah<sup>12</sup> recognised this would be useful for dose calculations where images contained artefacts, generated by metallic prostheses. The structure can be mathematically removed and reconstruction can then take place to reduce distortion. This also improves the quality of the DRR permitting accurate verification of the treatment plan.

Another area where this tool would be useful is in the simulation of brachytherapy patients. Clinicians generally require the position of the applicators to be verified and so source localisation and dose computation can be achieved using the CT-simulator. However the resultant images should be checked for geometric distortions if the applicators are made of metal.

In 1995, Dong and Boyer<sup>13</sup> generated megavoltage DRR's from the CT data. These were then used to verify the plan using electronic portal imaging devices (EPID) on the treatment machines. This seriously degraded image quality on the DRR, but made comparison of the two much easier.

An area where the use of CT is limited is in the viewing of some soft tissues, especially in the head and neck region. However, there are ways of rectifying this problem. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), single photon emission CT (SPECT) and positron emission tomography (PET) may be attached to the CT images using image registration software packages. This would further enhance tumour visualisation and permit greater confidence in the delineation of the GTV. Khoo<sup>14</sup> reported that by integrating MRI and CT alone, GTV's were frequently larger, especially in the head and neck region.

In the volume delineation process, it is important to consider that the images captured during the image acquisition stage are not truly representative of the "whole patient". As with any imaging technique, the images captured only display a small amount of data regarding the position of that structure in "true life". It is well known that organs and structures within the human body are not fixed and are highly active and so the exact extremities of the area to be localized can never be truly defined with CT data. It is therefore important for clinical oncologists to consider the amount of movement the structure can be subjected to, while defining growth margins for the PTV.

There are ways of minimising the movement of some organs and this has been a focus for research recently, especially with the increasing pressure to perform 3D conformal radiotherapy techniques and the advent of intensity modulated

radiotherapy (IMRT). For example, significant amounts of research have concentrated on the movement of the prostate. In 2000, Landry<sup>15</sup> reported that in 88% of cases when the bladder and rectum were empty, the movement of the prostate was reduced to less than 6 mm. However when the bladder is full, the movement is significantly increased. It is therefore very important that organ "immobilisation" is considered as significant as patient immobilisation.

Another example is tumour localisation within the thorax. Hatton,<sup>16</sup> recognised that conventional simulation incurred 40% geometric misses when planning lung patients. This is an area that causes great problems, as the movement of tumours varies so much in different directions, due to the movement of the diaphragm. In 1997, Wong et al.<sup>17</sup> demonstrated that the diaphragm moved non-uniformly in the AP direction. It was shown that near the dome of the diaphragm movement was less than 1 cm, but in the posterior direction it was about 3 cms.

There could be the possibility to determine this movement and therefore reduce the number of localisation misses. If the patient was simulated using a spiral CT-simulator, then images could be acquired in the inspiration and also the expiration part of the breathing cycle. Both sets of data could then be matched using image registration and the clinician could define the true limits of the GTV and construct the PTV with confidence.

It could be argued that this technique would unnecessarily irradiate the patient (by using 2 CT scans), waste valuable CT scanning appointments and also cause large amounts of time being wasted for contouring. However, Sibley et al.<sup>18</sup> have showed that the main cause of death in lung patients, was caused by failure to locally control the disease and occurred in 42% of cases. The same report also noted that dose escalation studies are warranted, as higher doses of radiotherapy appear to improve local cure rates. It could therefore be said that if clinicians are confident in the delineation of the PTV, then dose escalation could occur.

However, with large volumes of normal lung being irradiated there is the aspect of late treatment reaction to be considered. However with an



increasing number of centres now using MLC's, it is much easier to tailor treatment fields to specified shapes, even in palliative techniques. This will limit the amount of normal tissue irradiated and therefore reduce the treatment reactions incurred.

As described above, contouring tools within the software, allow quicker and easier volume definition. Therefore if departments wish to undertake the simulation of palliative patients using the CT-simulator, the ability to mark the extremities of the GTV on as few a slices as possible, will make the planning more appealing for these patients. On reflection it could then be said that the CT-simulator would benefit all radiotherapy patients and not just patients with radical intent.

### **Beam Placement and Simulation**

Within the third stage, the BEV plays rather a significant part. It is not only an advantage for conformal techniques but can also improve the accuracy in conventional techniques. For example, when clinicians are translating geometric information from diagnostic scans to treatment portals, there are a number of inaccuracies that are unavoidable. With the use of CT-simulation, clinicians can readily view the required anatomy and therefore "simulate" with confidence. However, the issues of static image and organ motion (described above), must be taken into consideration.

Software measuring tools enable desired distances to be calculated. One area this could be particularly useful in is prescribing electron energies for breast boosts. If the simulation of the tangential fields was undertaken on the CT-simulator, then the clinician can accurately determine the depth of tissue requiring treatment.

There is also the ability to make the planning of multiple field techniques much simpler. One such example is in the simulation of cranio-spinal irradiation. The virtual simulation software allows all fields to be viewed simultaneously in any plane and so matching field junctions is considerably easier. The ability to select gantry, collimator and floor rotation, focus to skin distance (FSD) and field sizes allows the user to match the beams more accurately and quickly.<sup>19</sup>

Virtual simulation also enables complex treatment plans to be explored, unlike the conventional simulator. Although most of the required gantry and floor angles can be achieved on the treatment machines, the image intensifier can cause problems during the conventional simulation process. However with virtual simulation there are no restrictions to the angles employed.

Although this is considered an advantage, there is also a downside to the issue. If there are no limitations to the gantry, collimator or floor angles, then how can we tell if the plan is achievable before the patient arrives for treatment? One option would be to test the simulated angles on the treatment machine prior to the start of treatment. However this would occupy vital machine time and therefore limit the number of patients able to be treated.

### **Practical consideration**

As with any radiotherapy treatment simulation, patients must be scanned in the exact treatment position. Immobilisation devices have to be chosen with care, as metal screws/clips or attachments will create large amounts of "noise" causing artefacts on the images produced. However this can be corrected at a later stage as described above.

There is also a problem that the patient and/or the immobilisation device will not be able to fit through the aperture of the CT scanner. This is an area where conventional simulation appears to have the greatest benefit. At the present time, the size of the CT-simulator aperture is still too small for the simulation of many standard techniques, namely the tangential breast technique. Many centres immobilise their patients on a standard breast board, where both arms are elevated above the head. Unfortunately this type of immobilisation device will not fit through the scanner. Therefore this requires some treatment techniques/immobilisation devices to be re-developed.

The patient could be simulated with one arm immobilised, or there could be the possibility to treat patients flat on the treatment couch. However this would cause large pendulous breast to lay at the patients side. This would increase the lateral border, thus increasing the volume of underlying lung irradiated.

If centres decided to simulate patient with only one arm immobilised, then problems may arise when large breasted ladies require steep breast board angles. This technique has been used to ensure that the volume of lung irradiated is kept to a minimum. However as the angle of the breast board increases, there is the increasing possibility that the patient will not fit through the CT aperture.

Another technique that could be problematic is the simulation of patients that require treatment in the upright position, advanced lung tumour patients. However, there is the possibility of simulating these patient on the treatment machines, by utilising EPIDs or where departments are not so fortunate with standard films and cassettes.

There can also be a limit on the size of the patient being scanned. Although the conventional simulator has a weight restriction, the CT scanner also has a "width" restriction. This can be problematic in two different ways.

Very large patients may not be able to fit through the physical aperture of the scanner. This will mean that certain patients cannot be simulated. There is also an issue to consider when regarding the circle of reconstruction. Generally the smallest circle of reconstruction is chosen to yield the best resolution of internal anatomy.<sup>20</sup> This could be problematic when patients are too large, as parts of the patient will not be able to fit in to that circle. Therefore dose calculations will not be truly representative as the CT number accuracy can be affected.

Many of the issues highlighted above can be overcome by using the simulator-CT (sim-CT). The sim-CT has CT hardware and software attached to the conventional simulator, thus allowing virtually all patients to be simulated in the treatment position. However, by law the gantry can only complete one 360° rotation in a maximum of 1 minute, this therefore means that image acquisition is slow. As only one slice can be completed at any one time, then the collection of a reasonable data set (i.e. three or more CT slices), means patient simulation times will be increased. Patient dose is also significantly increased and there are controversies surrounding the accuracy of the HU.

## EVALUATION

There is no doubt that the CT-simulator is an exciting piece of technology that could change the way that patients are simulated in the future. The powerful tools allow simple and easy virtual simulation of patients and the ability to accurately calculate dose, can be used to actively investigate different treatment plans. Although most of the published articles concentrate on the simulation of patients with radical intent, there seems to be no reason why palliative patients cannot be planned in the same way.

Although there is the possibility of simulating and verifying patients in the same planning session, there appears to be no valid reason as to why the patient has to be present. After the images have been acquired, the patient can leave and virtual simulation can occur at a later date. This means that patients will only have to be present for short periods (roughly 15 minutes) and so a greater number of patients can be scanned during a working day, thus allowing some compensation for the additional cost of the equipment.

Additional planning sessions for the simulation of phased treatments need not occur either. As data is stored digitally the clinician is able to plan subsequent treatments by using the same data set. However if there are significant changes to the treatment planning during treatment (i.e. patient weight loss, patient swelling or patient fitness), the patient will need to be re-simulated. This will cause additional work, but as the volumes had previously been defined on the first data set, the volumes can be matched using image registration. If the same process had to occur using the conventional simulator, then the amount of work would be significantly increased.

As patients can be virtually simulated after image acquisition has occurred, there appears to be no need for clinicians to be present. Clinicians can therefore define volumes at their convenience and by purchasing extra workstations there is no reason why further planning and simulation should be interrupted. There is no doubt that this is favourable to all members of the planning process, including patients.

With different visualisation, contouring and magnification tools the accurate delineation of GTV and CTV is made considerably easier. Images can be manipulated so that areas of interest can be actively contemplated and with the addition of image registration, treatment planning can only get more effective. However, it becomes increasingly important that clinicians are aware of the major limitation of CT (static image) and consider it when constructing the PTV. This should not cause too much disruption at the present time, due to the increasing pressure of performing conformal radiotherapy.

With clinical research now proving that tumour control probability (TCP) is increased with even small increases in dose, the pressure is now on the clinical oncologist to dose escalate. As PTV's can be defined with confidence and "true" dosimetric plans can be produced, clinicians can dose escalate where appropriate.

There appears to be some concerns regarding the accuracy of the CT-simulator. Conway<sup>21</sup> reported that there was less than 1mm discrepancy between the CT couch and the physical, in head and neck techniques. However immobilisation devices in this region are of the highest quality, so it would be appropriate to see the results of different body sites, before this issue could be resolved.

True patient verification is an area that could arouse concerns in many radiographers. As there appears to be no need for patients to attend a scheduled verification appointment, how can we be sure that we are treating patients to the true intent? Departments may decide to undertake a verification session on the conventional simulator, but this appears to contradict the reasons for purchasing a CT-simulator.

It is possible to verify treatment plans on the treatment units themselves, by utilising EPID's where appropriate. This is made considerably easier when departments are networked, as DRR's can be compared digitally. As DRR's lose some of their resolution when they are printed out, this method should be preferable.

There is no doubt that patient dose is increased when using this technology, but as there is great

potential to significantly improve the way that we treat patients, a small diagnostic dose seems rather insignificant. It is also important to consider that the time taken to outline and define all VOI's and target volumes is rather excessive. However, there are a great number of contouring tools that can make the delineation of target volumes and VOI's much quicker and easier. It should also be noted, that this specific task is the clinicians responsibility and so if they are interested in employing the CT-simulator, they have to be committed to undertaking this task.

The use of the CT-simulator can also be seen to benefit palliative patients and not just those with radical intent. However there may be issues of resource and time wasting. With non-small cell lung cancer being one of the highest causes of death in the UK, can we really let time and resource wasting be of any consideration? There is a theoretical estimate that indicates that CT planning could improve the local control probability by 6%, with an estimated 3.5% increase in 5 year survival. As professionals should we not ensure that our patients receive the best possible treatment?

Evidence also suggests that after the virtual CT-simulator, other imaging modalities are not accurate enough for the planning of radical treatments. Therefore is it morally wrong not to have the best imaging modality available, so that treatment accuracy is not compromised? After all we have to consider that in an era where clinicians are being faced with dose escalation, the likelihood of treatment related complications may become prevalent, unless our localisation techniques are of the highest standard.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, it appears that with the integration of new technology into the radiotherapy setting (EPID's, MLC's and efficient computer planning systems), the CT-simulator seems to be the next logical step. There are undoubtedly tremendous reasons why the conventional simulator, should move into the out-dated phase in its life time and let the CT-simulator take its place as the *conventional CT-simulator*. However, there are limitations to this equipment, such as aperture size and

patient size, but most of the problems seem to arise when assessing the confidence in using this technology.

In an era where radiotherapy treatments are rapidly becoming more complex by the day, we have to remember that our work is made considerably easier by computers. Without them we would not be able to perform the complex treatment plans that we do today. With the increasing pressure on us to perform 3D conformal techniques and the advent of IMRT, we must start to place trust in the computer systems available in radiotherapy.

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