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VARIABILITY OF MEASUREMENT AND FEASIBILITY OF ASSESSING CHANGES IN BRACHIOCEPHALIC ATHEROSCLEROTIC PLAQUE AFTER ACUTE CORONARY SYNDROME

<i>Aim</i>	Analysis of inter- and intra-study variability of changes in the atherosclerotic plaque (ASP) total height and total area, the main quantitative indexes that were planned to be used in the present study for assessment of the atherosclerotic load of carotid arteries.
<i>Material and methods</i>	The incidence of recurrent cardiovascular complications (CVC) within 1 year after acute coronary syndrome (ACS) ranges from 7–9% (in studies) to 34% (in clinical practice). This indicates insufficient efficacy of traditional approaches to secondary prevention of coronary heart disease. We proposed a study to test a hypothesis that the dynamics of ASP parameters in carotid and subclavian regions can serve as an alternative criterion for the adequacy of secondary prevention after ACS. The analysis was performed on subgroups of main study participants. These patients had ACS of any type documented by coronary angiography with an ASP confirmed by ultrasound of the brachiocephalic arteries (BCA) during the index hospitalization. BCA ultrasound was performed to analyze the inter- and intra-study variability of BCA atherosclerotic load, the ASP total height (Hsum) and total area (ASPTA), in 20 and 24 patients of the main study, respectively. Results of the repeated ultrasound were evaluated in 30 patients of the main study after 6 months of follow-up.
<i>Results</i>	The inter-study variability of each index was significantly higher than the intra-study variability which was consistent with results of previous studies. The intra-study variability of Hsum was 0.10 (95% confidence interval, CI – 0.23–0.44) mm and ASPTA, 1.05 (95% CI, – 0.54–2.63) mm ² . The variability values were considerably smaller than the changes for 6 months: Hsum, 0.92 (95% CI, –0.64–2.49) mm and ASPTA, 3.67 (95% CI, 0.42–6.91) mm ² , although the difference did not reach statistical significance. The above results were obtained at an early stage of the study during the adaptation of specialists to the protocol.
<i>Conclusion</i>	The study results suggest a possibility of a fairly reliable assessment of the dynamics of quantitative indexes of carotid ultrasound 6 months after ACS.
<i>Keywords</i>	Carotid ultrasound; quantitative analysis; variability; acute coronary syndrome
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Introduction

The incidence of recurrent major cardiovascular events within 1 year after acute coronary syndrome (ACS) reaches 7–9% in randomized studies [1]. This rate is significantly higher in clinical practice: according to the current data of the Finnish register, the incidence of cardiovascular complications after the first episode of ACS was 34% within 1 year and 48% within 3 years [2]. Secondary prevention measures after ACS are taken to achieve the target values of atherosclerosis traditional risk factors (RFs): low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, blood pressure, glycated hemoglobin

in diabetes mellitus, etc. However, the above data show that the results of secondary prevention are not optimal.

Vascular imaging, in particular, the carotid ultrasound examination, is an alternative method for controlling the stabilization of atherosclerosis. Assessment of changes in atherosclerotic burden in carotid arteries was proposed for the analysis of the efficacy of cholesterol-lowering therapy in primary prevention [3].

We hypothesized that changes in the parameters of atherosclerotic carotid plaque in patients with the history of ACS can similarly be used as a criterion of atherosclerosis

stabilization and is an independent predictor of cardiovascular complications. In this regard, we designed a new study described in detail earlier [4].

Objective

To analyze inter-investigator and intra-investigator variability of measurements of total plaque height and total plaque area, which are the main measurements planned to be used in this study to analyze the atherosclerotic burden in carotid arteries.

Material and Methods

The main study protocol [4] complies with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Local Ethics Committee of the North-Western State Medical University n.a. I.I. Mechnikov (Protocol # 1 dated 19.01.2022). Patients signed the standard informed consent at study enrollment.

The selection criteria and the protocol were described in detail earlier [4]. The patients with ACS of any type confirmed by coronary angiography were included. Patients of the main group had the carotid plaque confirmed by the carotid and subclavian artery ultrasound at index hospitalization. Patients with stenosis of more than 70% of the vessel diameter (ESCT) [5] and severe calcification, which prevented adequate assessment, were not included in the study. The most significant cardiac and non-cardiac factors influencing the cardiovascular prognosis were assessed at baseline. Carotid ultrasound was repeated in 6 months. Typically, repeat ultrasound was performed by the same operator who performed the baseline examination of the patient. During the follow-up, the control of RFs was evaluated, and cardiovascular complications were registered. Changes in the following ultrasound variables were assessed: number and localization of plaques, plaque height and area, lumen diameter stenosis by the ESCT method. They were selected for analysis as the potential independent prognostic factors in patients with the history of ACS.

Carotid ultrasound measurement variability analysis

Extracranial carotid arteries were examined on an expert-grade ultrasound scanner Philips Affiniti 50 (Netherlands) using a 5–12 MHz linear probe in B mode, color coded Doppler flow mapping mode, and spectral Doppler mode. Common carotid artery, carotid bifurcation, and both internal carotid arteries were examined throughout the length accessible for ultrasound scan in the longitudinal anterior and lateral views and cross-sectional view. Due to the technical difficulties of detecting the left subclavian artery ostium by the linear ultrasound probe, the plaque assessment was performed only in the right subclavian artery, for which a 2–5 MHz convex

probe was additionally used, if necessary. Examination of the right subclavian artery, which is not included in the standard protocol of quantitative ultrasound analysis of atherosclerosis in most cases, was considered appropriate given the findings by Pescetelli et al. [6] on the detection of plaques in this localization even in the absence of carotid and coronary atherosclerosis in asymptomatic patients at low risk of CVD. The criterion for the presence of atherosclerosis was a plaque detection, defined as a focal protrusion into the vessel lumen of more than 0.5 mm or 50% of the adjacent intima-media thickness, or a local wall thickening of more than 1.5 mm from the lumen intima border to the media adventitia border according to the Mannheim consensus [7].

The variability of carotid ultrasound measurements was assessed by estimating the following two quantitative parameters:

- 1) Total plaque height (TPH). The plaque height was measured from the view, in which it was the greatest. Total height of the plaque was calculated as a sum of the maximum heights of all identified plaques;
- 2) Total plaque area (TPA). The plaque area was measured from the view, in which it was the greatest. The plaque perimeter was outlined to calculate the area [8, 9]. Areas of all the identified plaques were Total to calculate TPA. Examples of TPH and TPA measurements in the common carotid artery and in the right subclavian artery are shown in Figure 1.

In all patients included in the variability analysis, the main clinical, angiographic, echocardiographic, and laboratory data were recorded and evaluated following the examination protocols for patients with ACS [10, 11].

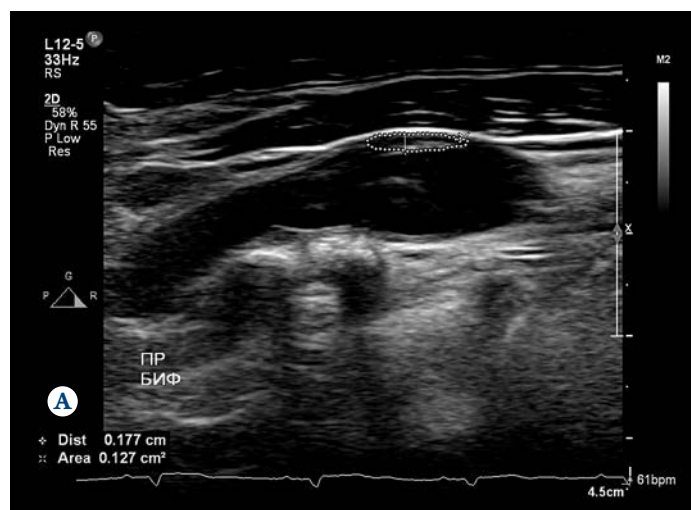
The analysis of the inter-investigator variability of these measurements was conducted based on independent estimation of ultrasound variables by two specialists (MDL and TVN) in the same patients (participants of the main study) at the beginning of the study. Measurements were performed off-line on images saved by a specialist during the patient examination in the DICOM format.

Analysis of the intra-investigator variability of TPH and TPA was based on repeated off-line measurements of the ultrasound variables by the same specialist in the images saved by each of the specialists during the patient examination in the DICOM format.

Finally, TPH and TPA variability between two independent measurements of these variables was calculated without considering which of the specialist made the measurements (i.e., both the first and the second measurements could have been performed by either of the two specialists).

Variability was compared with changes in the same variables in 6 months.

Figure 1. B-mode measurement of the plaque height and area in the carotid bifurcation (A) and the right subclavian artery (B)



The statistical processing of data obtained was carried out using Statistica version 10.0 (StatSoft Inc. Tulsa, USA). The qualitative variables are presented as the means \pm standard deviations. The means in the variability analysis groups were compared with the study group using the Student's test for independent variables. Qualitative variables are expressed as the absolute and relative values (n (%)). The Yates's chi-squared test was used to compare percentages between the two groups.

Comparison of quantitative variables as part of the assessment of inter-investigator and intra-investigator variability of carotid ultrasound variables and comparison of the mean values of the variables of the baseline and 6-month examinations were conducted using the Bland-Altman method with the calculation of the 95% confidence interval (CI) and the construction of disagreement plots [12]. Disagreement plots reflect the difference between the two observations (vertical axis) as a function of a variable mean (horizontal axis).

The correlations between variables, for which the variability was measured, were assessed using the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The differences were statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Analysis of inter-investigator variability in carotid ultrasound measurements

The analysis of inter-investigator variability included 20 patients (10 patients examined by MDL and 10 patients examined by TVN) from the main study group. The characteristics of these patients (Group 1) compared to the subjects not included in the inter-investigator variability analysis (Group 2; $n=99$) are presented in Table 1.

The group of the analysis of the variability of the carotid ultrasound measurements had mostly the same characteristics as the study subjects in general. The difference was a larger percentage of patients with ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI) and lower LVEF.

Total plaque height

Here and below, total plaque height variability values are presented in the disagreement plots that reflect the differences between the two observations (vertical axis) as a function of a mean variable (horizontal axis). The inter-investigator variability of TPH is presented in Figure 2.

Mean difference in TPH measured by the two investigators was 4.28 (95% CI $-1.33-9.89$) mm. The correlation between TPH (MDL) and TPH (TVN) was 0.83 ($p < 0.05$).

Total plaque area

The inter-investigator variability in TPA is shown in Figure 3.

Mean difference in TPA measured by the two investigators was 4.19 (95% CI $-1.26-9.64$) mm². The correlation between TPA (MDL) and TPA (TVN) was 0.88 ($p < 0.05$).

Analysis of intra-investigator variability in carotid ultrasound measurements

The analysis of intra-investigator variability of the carotid ultrasound measurements included 24 patients (12 patients of MDL and 12 patients of TVN) from the main study group. The characteristics of these patients (Group 3) compared to the subjects not included in the intra-investigator variability in carotid ultrasound analysis (Group 4; $n=98$) are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of patients in Group 1 and Group 2

Parameter	Group 1 (n = 20)	Group 2 (n = 99)	p
Age, years	64.1 ± 10.1	64.4 ± 11.0	0.912
Male, n (%)	14 (70)	63 (64)	0.772
BMI, kg/m ²	29.0 ± 4.8	29.7 ± 4.4	0.531
DM, n (%)	3 (15)	28 (28)	0.343
Smoking, n (%)	6 (30)	57 (58)	0.050
Total cholesterol, mmol/L	5.15 ± 1.26	5.26 ± 1.50	0.738
LDL cholesterol, mmol/L	3.3 ± 1.06	3.67 ± 1.28	0.201
HDL cholesterol, mmol/L	1.16 ± 0.28	1.14 ± 0.20	0.787
STEMI, n (%)	5 (25)	49 (50)	0.087
NSTEMI, n (%)	8 (40)	28 (28)	0.048
Unstable angina, n (%)	7 (35)	22 (22)	0.359
LV dysfunction area, %	16.3 ± 14.8	11.7 ± 15.4	0.242
LVEF, %	58.9 ± 10.6	64.9 ± 6.3	0.022
Number of stenosed coronary arteries	1.8 ± 0.8	1.5 ± 0.7	0.163
SYNTAX score	15.5 ± 8.3	13.0 ± 7.7	0.253
Charlson comorbidity score	4.0 ± 1.7	3.4 ± 1.3	0.216
Maximum carotid/subclavian stenosis, %	29.6 ± 21.6	29.9 ± 15.5	0.961

BMI, body mass index; DM, diabetes mellitus; TC, total cholesterol; LDL, low-density lipoprotein; HDL, high-density lipoprotein; STEMI, ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction; NSTEMI, non-ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction; LVEF, left ventricular ejection fraction

Patients in the group for the analysis of intra-investigator variability in the carotid ultrasound measurements were mainly comparable to the study subjects. The differences were lower body mass index and lower LVEF.

Variability in TPH and TPA measured by specialist 1 (MDL)

Total plaque height

Mean difference between TPH measured by specialist 1 (MDL) was 0.01 (95% CI –0.22–0.20) mm. The correlation coefficient between TPH1 and TPH2 was 0.99 ($p < 0.05$).

Total plaque area

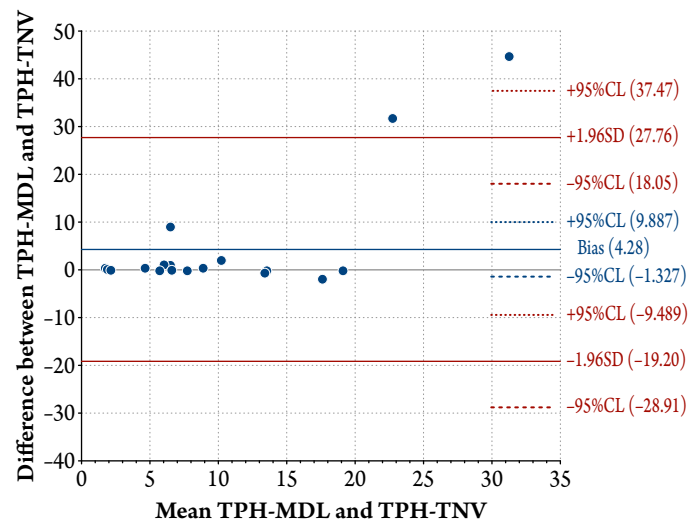
Mean difference between two measurements of TPA made by specialist 1 (MDL) was 2.11 (95% CI –0.77–4.99) mm². The correlation coefficient between TPA1 and TPA2 was 0.99 ($p < 0.05$).

Variability in TPH and TPA measured by specialist 2 (TVN)

Total plaque height

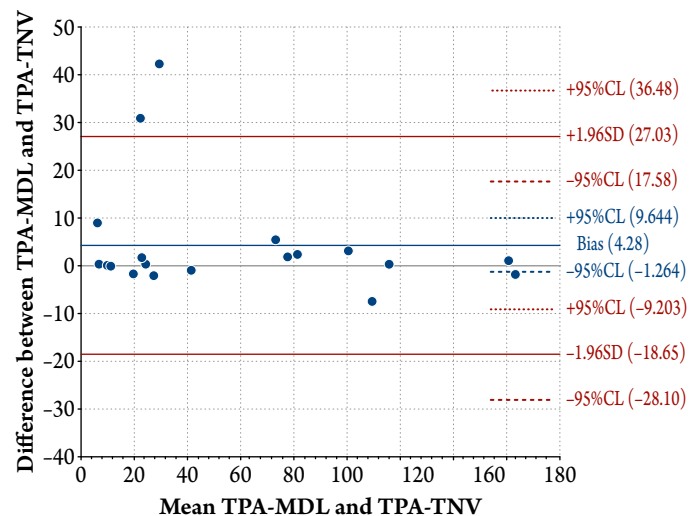
Mean difference between TPH measured by specialist 2 (TVN) was 0.22 (95% CI –0.47–0.91) mm. The correlation coefficient between TPH1 and TPH2 was 0.99 ($p < 0.05$).

Figure 2. Inter-investigator variability of Total plaque height



TPH-MDL, Total plaque height measured by specialist MDL; TPH-TNV, Total plaque height measured by specialist TVN; blue color: Bias, mean difference; 95% CI, 95% confidence interval; red color: SD, standard deviation; 95% CI, 95% confidence interval; MDL, specialist 1; TVN, specialist 2.

Figure 3. Inter-investigator variability of carotid plaque TPA



TPA-MDL, Total plaque area measured by MDL; TPA-TNV, Total plaque area measured by TVN. The remaining abbreviations are as in Figure 2.

Total plaque area

Mean difference between two measurements was –0.02 (95% CI –1.62–1.59) mm². The correlation coefficient between TPA1 and TPA2 was 0.99 ($p < 0.05$).

Evaluation of intra-investigator variability of TPH and TPA Total based on data collected by two ultrasound specialists

Finally, the variability between the two independent measurements of TPH and TPA by both specialists

Table 2. Comparative characteristics of patients in Group 3 and Group 4

Parameter	Group 3 (n = 24)	Group 4 (n = 98)	p
Age, years	63.6 ± 10.4	66.9 ± 9.3	0.179
Male, n (%)	16 (67)	64 (65)	0.905
BMI, kg/m ²	28.7 ± 4.6	31.1 ± 4.9	0.033
DM, n (%)	3 (13)	27 (27)	0.206
Smoking, n (%)	11 (46)	45 (46)	0.832
Total cholesterol, mmol/L (M ± SD)	5.2 ± 1.27	5.07 ± 1.4	0.697
LDL cholesterol, mmol/L	3.38 ± 1.06	3.4 ± 1.28	0.933
HDL cholesterol, mmol/L	1.15 ± 0.27	1.17 ± 0.23	0.799
STEMI, n (%)	7 (29)	48 (49)	0.110
NSTEMI, n (%)	8 (33)	29 (30)	0.944
Unstable angina, n (%)	9 (38)	21 (21)	0.353
LV dysfunction area, %	16.3 ± 14.8	11.7 ± 15.4	0.563
LVEF, %	58.6 ± 10.6	65.9 ± 5.8	0.003
Number of stenosed coronary arteries	1.7 ± 0.8	2.0 ± 0.8	0.244
SYNTAX score	14.4 ± 7.7	18.3 ± 9.8	0.066
Charlson comorbidity score	3.8 ± 1.7	4.1 ± 1.6	0.419
Maximum carotid/ subclavian stenosis, %	37.4 ± 29.4	28.6 ± 19.4	0.089

BMI, body mass index; LDL, low-density lipoprotein; HDL, high-density lipoprotein; STEMI, ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction; NSTEMI, non-ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction; LVEF, left ventricular ejection fraction

was calculated. The results are shown in Figure 4. Mean difference between TPH values measured by the two specialists was 0.10 (95% CI –0.23–0.44) mm (Figure 4, A). The correlation coefficient between TPH1 and TPH2 was 0.99 ($p < 0.05$).

Mean difference between two TPA values Total based on the data measured by the two specialists was 1.05 (95% CI –0.54–2.63) mm² (Figure 4, B). The correlation coefficient between TPA1 and TPA2 was 0.99 ($p < 0.05$).

Changes in ultrasound measurements conducted in 6 months

Changes in ultrasound variables were estimated in 30 patients of the main group, whose data were available for the analysis at the time of analysis. Their main characteristics are comparable with Group 2 and Group 4 (not provided).

Total plaque height

Mean change in TPH in 6 months was 0.92 (95% CI –0.64–2.49) mm (Figure 5, A).

Total plaque area

Mean difference between TPA at the baseline visit and in 6 months was 3.67 (95% CI 0.42–6.91) mm² (Figure 5, B).

Table 3 summarizes the inter-investigator and intra-investigator variability of TPH and TPA.

Discussion

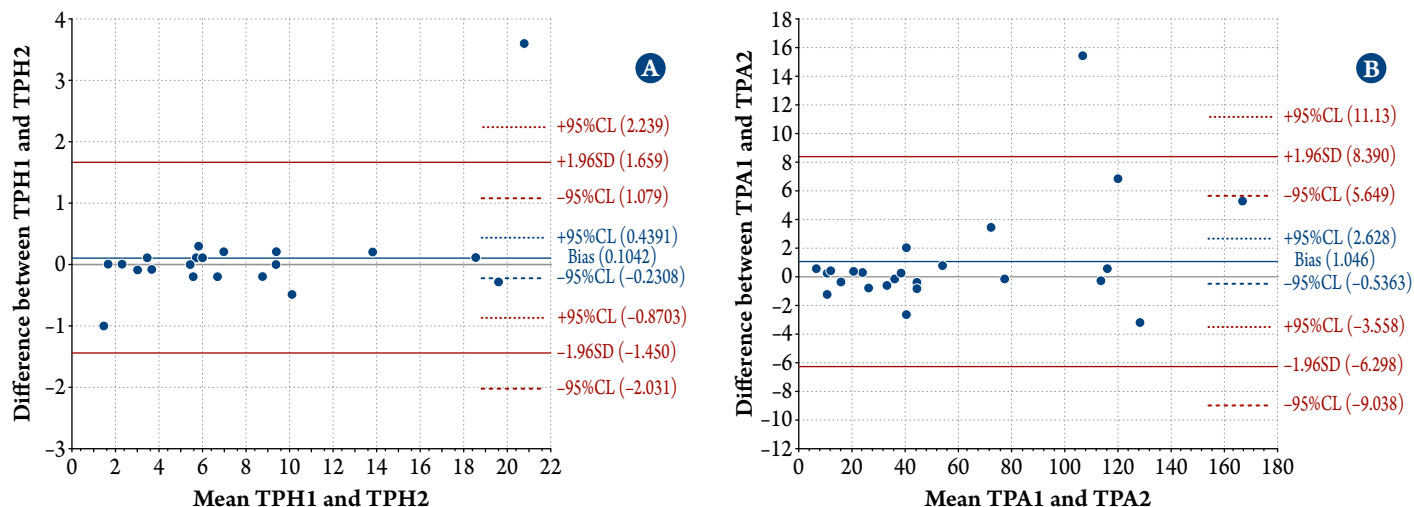
Available data show high incidence of recurrent cardiovascular complications in patients with the history of ACS despite coronary revascularization and evidence-based therapy [1, 2]. They cannot be explained only by insufficient treatment adherence and are more likely to be associated with the presence of residual risk that persists despite the control of traditional RFs according to the current guidelines [13–15]. In this regard, personalized monitoring of the efficacy of secondary prevention after ACS based on vascular imaging seems to be a promising option especially considering the interest to the focused ultrasound vascular protocols [16]. We had initiated the study to assess the value of this approach in evaluating the secondary prevention efficacy after ACS [4].

We analyzed inter-investigator and intra-investigator variability of carotid ultrasound measurements in the subgroups of our study participants to assess the reproducibility of such measurements.

Patients in the groups selected for the analysis of the carotid ultrasound measurements variability had mostly the same characteristics as the study participants in general. The differences included higher percentage of patients with STEMI (inter-investigator variability), lower BMI (intra-investigator variability), and lower LVEF (both subgroups). The variability of the two main ultrasound measurements (TPH and TPA) was estimated. It was shown that the inter-investigator variability of both variables was significantly higher than the intra-investigator variability (for both specialists), a greater difference between measurements and smaller correlation were detected. This is consistent with the previous studies [17] and emphasizes the importance of control ultrasound to be done by the same specialist who performed the initial examination. It should be noted that, unlike some researchers, we used an ultrasound protocol relevant to the clinical practice setting, without special angle gauges used to accurately reproduce the scanning views [17]. Moreover, patients with severe stenosis and severe plaque calcification were not included in the study given a possible decrease in the accuracy of ultrasound measurements. Patients without severe carotid/subclavian stenosis prevailed in our population (1 patient was excluded from the study due to this criterion), which is apparently typical for this category of patients.

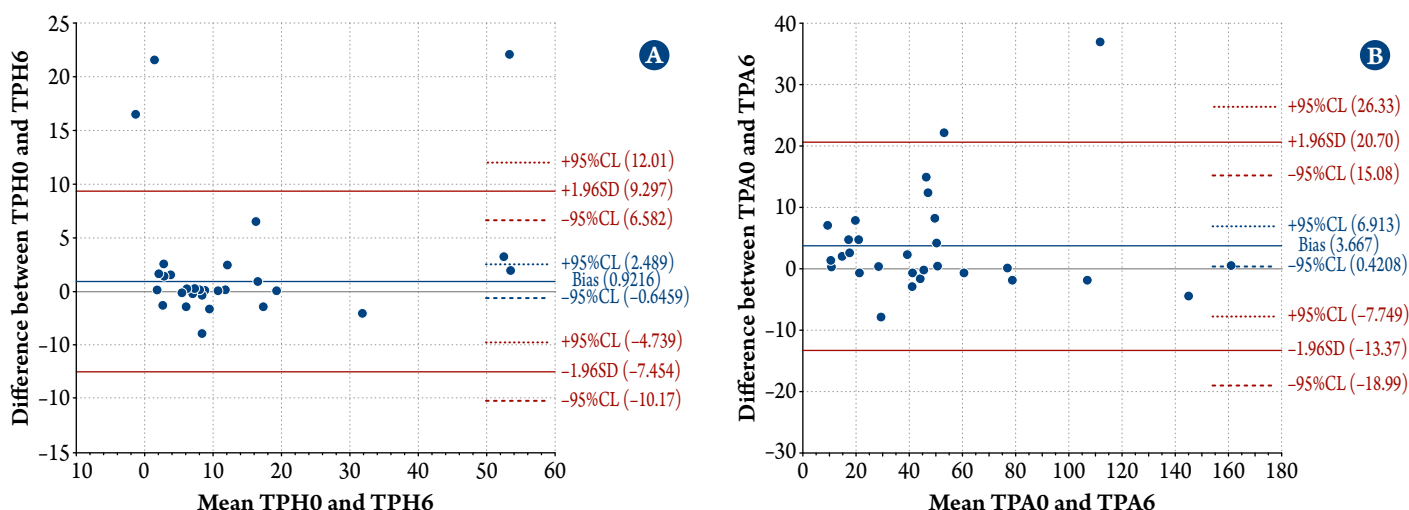
The intra-investigator variability of TPH was higher for TVN, and TPA was higher for MDL. Given that data changes will be evaluated regardless of which specialist performed both examinations, we calculated the intra-

Figure 4. Intra-investigator variability of TPH (A) and TPA (B) for both ultrasound specialists



TPH1, Total plaque height in the first measurement; TPH2, Total plaque height in the second measurement; TPA1, Total plaque area in the first measurement; TPA2, Total plaque area in the second measurement. The remaining abbreviations are as in Figure 2.

Figure 5. Changes in TPH (A) and TPA (B) in 6 months



TPH0, Total plaque height at the initial visit; TPH6, Total plaque height at the 6-month visit; TPA0, Total plaque area at the initial visit; TPA6, Total plaque area at the 6-month visit. The remaining abbreviations are as in Figure 2.

investigator variability of TPH and TPA for both specialists together.

Such intra-investigator variability of TPA of 1.05 mm² (95% CI -0.54–2.63) was close to the data of one reference paper (from -0.85 mm² to 1.97 mm² for several researchers) [17]; in another study, variability was significantly lower: -0.2 cm² [18].

In our study, the intra-investigator variability of both measurements was numerically several times lower than their changes within 6 months, although the differences were not statistically significant: TPH 0.10 (95% CI -0.23–0.44) versus 0.92 (95% CI -0.64–2.49) mm; TPA 1.05 (95% CI -0.54–2.63) versus 3.67 (95% CI 0.42–6.91)

mm². It should be noted, however, that the rate of changes in the ultrasound measurements in the very high-risk group (patients with recent ACS), particularly, a 3.67 mm² increase in TPA despite the standard therapy was predictably significantly higher than in individuals without symptomatic coronary artery disease, including the elderly (a mean of 1.20 mm² within 6 months [17]). These data suggest that the estimation of changes in the carotid ultrasound variables within 6 months after ACS can be reliable enough, especially with the increasingly longer time of the ultrasound specialists' involvement in the work with this specific ultrasound protocol likely resulting in a further decrease in the variability of measurements.

Table 3. Inter-investigator and intra-investigator variability in the measurements of Total plaque height and Total plaque area

Parameter	Variability	95% CI
TPH inter-inv, mm	4.28	–1.24–9.89
TPA inter-inv, mm ²	4.19	–1.26–9.64
TPH intra-inv, MDL, mm	0.01	–0.22–0.20
TPA intra-inv, MDL, mm ²	2.11	–0.77–4.99
TPH intra-inv, TVN, mm	0.22	–0.47–0.91
TPA intra-inv, TVN, mm ²	–0.02	–1.62–1.59
TPH intra-inv, MDL and TVN, mm	0.10	–0.23–0.44
TPA intra-inv, MDL and TVN, mm ²	1.05	–0.54–2.63

Inter-inv, inter-investigator variability; intra-inv, intra-investigator variability; TPH, Total plaque height; CI, confidence interval; TPA, Total plaque area; MDL and TVN, ultrasound specialist 1 and ultrasound specialist 2.

Conclusion

We hypothesized that changes in the parameters of atherosclerotic carotid plaque in patients with the history of acute coronary syndrome can be used as a criterion of atherosclerosis stabilization and are the independent predictors of major cardiovascular events. This work was carried out as part of a large study aimed at confirming this hypothesis.

At the initial stage of patient inclusion, we conducted preliminary estimation of the inter-investigator and intra-

investigator variability of carotid ultrasound measurements in the study subjects. In our work, the intra-investigator variability of the variables of interest (Total plaque height and Total plaque area) turned out to be numerically several times less than their changes in 6 months, although the differences were not statistically significant. These results were obtained at an early stage of the study when specialists were adapting to the protocol. The data obtained suggest the possibility of a sufficiently reliable estimation of changes in the carotid ultrasound measurements 6 months after the episode of acute coronary syndrome.

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Conflict of interest

The research study "Studying the dynamics of carotid atherosclerotic load as a criterion for the adequacy of secondary prevention of acute coronary syndrome (ACS)" was funded as a part of a State Assignment.

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