Change in the width of the mandibular body from 6 to 23 years of age: an implant study

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SUMMARY After the ossification of the mandibular symphysis, shortly after birth, changes in mandibular width would be expected to occur only by surface apposition or resorption on the buccal surfaces of the left and right mandibular halves. However, evidence for an opening hinge movement of the two mandibular halves around a vertical axis located in the region of the mandibular symphysis was recently found in longitudinal studies of 29 subjects with unilateral implant markers in the mandible. These subjects were followed from 8.5 to 15.5 years of age (Korn and Baumrind, 1990; Baumrind and Korn, 1992). The aim of the present investigation was to examine whether the presence of such an age-related increase in mandibular body width could be confirmed in a sample with bilateral implant markers in the mandible. The sample comprised 10 subjects (3F, 7M) from the files of another longitudinal study with implant markers (Björk, 1968). A total of 122 pairs of annual lateral and postero-anterior (p-a) cephalometric records were available, covering longitudinal observation periods ranging from 8 to 16 years within an age interval of between 6 and 23 years. The width between a right and left side mandibular implant marker was measured with digital callipers on all p-a radiographs. Each measurement was corrected mathematically for various sources of radiographic enlargement.

A small, but statistically significant increase in the distance between the right and left implant markers, i.e. in the bilateral width of the mandibular body, was observed in all subjects. The total increase in width in each subject ranged from 0.7 to 1.7 mm for the various periods of observation ($P \leq 0.01$). For the 12-year period from 6 to 18 years, the average total increase was 1.6 mm ($P \leq 0.001$, SD = 0.42), i.e. 0.13 mm/year. After this age there was no systematic trend. The mechanism for this increase in width is unknown. It is suggested that during postnatal growth, an increasing load from the masticatory occlusal forces might influence endosteal bone remodelling in the mandibular body, thus producing or allowing a gradual permanent outward bending of the right and left mandibular halves.

Introduction

During facial growth, the positions of all facial bones change by displacement, while at the same time their surfaces undergo extensive appositional and resorptiional surface modelling. The studies of Björk (1963), and Björk and Skieller (1983), have demonstrated the translatory and rotational growth displacements of the mandible in the sagittal and vertical directions, and the accompanying extensive surface modelling. Regarding the transversal growth of the mandible, it is well-known that permanent and total fusion between the right and left mandibular halves occurs early in postnatal life. After that time, postnatal changes in skeletal mandibular width would be expected to occur only by surface apposition or resorption. However, Korn and Baumrind (1990), and Baumrind and Korn (1992), in longitudinal radiographic studies of 29 patients provided with unilateral implants in the mandible and followed from 8.5 to 15.5 years of age, found statistically significant increases in the calculated distances from the implants to a mathematically constructed median sagittal plane of the head. These findings were interpreted to suggest that the two
mandibular halves had separated by an opening hinge movement around a vertical axis located in the region of the mandibular symphysis.

It was the aim of the present study to examine whether such a separation of the two mandibular halves during the postnatal period of growth could be confirmed in a sample with bilateral implants in the mandible. Such a sample would permit precise direct measurement of the width between bilateral implant markers in the mandibular body.

Subjects and methods

The sample was obtained from the archives of the Björk implant studies (1968). The criteria for the selection of subjects from the files was the presence of bilateral tantalum (Ta) implant markers inserted in the mandibular body below the region of the mandibular premolars (Figure 1), and anteriorly and bilaterally in the maxilla (Björk and Skieller, 1974). Subjects with craniofacial anomalies and those treated by orthognathic surgery were excluded. The final sample comprised longitudinal cephalometric radiographic records of 10 subjects (3F, 7M, Table 1). A total of 122 pairs of annual lateral and postero-anterior (p-a) cephalometric radiographs were available, covering longitudinal observation periods ranging from 8 to 16 years within the age interval 6–23 years. The sample represented various types of malocclusions, and records during periods of orthodontic treatment and retention were included.

Radiographic procedures

The films had been taken in a Lumex type B cephalometer (Björk, 1968). The lateral radiographs were recorded with fixed focus to mid-sagittal plane and mid-sagittal plane to film distances of 180 and 10 cm, respectively. For the p-a films, the subjects were positioned in the cephalometer facing the film with the Frankfort plane horizontal. The focus to ear rod plane and ear rod plane to film distances were 180 and 15 cm, respectively. Intensifying screens and a grid were used to reduce exposure dose and scattered radiation on the films.

Age grouping

In the implant sample of Björk (1968), each subject was followed with annual observations. However, between subjects, the fixed annual date of observation varied randomly in relation to the subject’s birthday. This design of the data collection is in contrast to most studies of human growth, but is in agreement with many clinical studies. It preserves more information than conventional growth studies in which the observations are made on the subjects’ birthdays, but the statistical processing is somewhat more complicated (Solow, 1969). In the present study, the statistical analyses were based on the series of increments between the annual measurements of the distance between the bilateral groups of implant markers in the mandibular body. Each increment was characterized by its class mid-point age. Age groups (Table 2) were defined by means of these mid-point ages. The first age group, ‘7 years’, thus comprised increments with mid-point ages in the interval 6.50–7.49 years. In four instances of missing films, the corresponding 2- or 3-year intervals were deleted from the calculation of average increments. Age increments were calculated for a total of 109 individual 1-year periods.
Reference points

In all subjects, bilateral anterior and posterior implant markers in the maxilla as well as anterior and bilateral posterior implants in the mandible had been inserted. The bilateral posterior implants in the mandible comprised two implants inserted in each side of the mandibular body below the region of the mandibular premolars. Based on these bilateral mandibular implants, one left (ipl) and one right (ipr) mandibular implant point were defined on each p-a film, throughout each series of films (Figure 2a). All implant points on the p-a films could also be identified on the lateral films. A maxillary anterior implant point and the mid-point between the right and left mandibular implant points were marked on the lateral films (Figure 2b). All points were marked directly on each film with a soft, finely pointed carbon tip pencil (Schwan Stabilo 8008). The width between the left and right implant points on the p-a films (Wm) was measured with digital callipers with a resolution of 0.01 mm.

Correction for radiographic enlargement

Corrections for variations in linear enlargement were necessary before calculation of the growth data. Although all films had been taken in a cephalometer, the radiographic enlargement of the implant distance in each series of films showed within-subject variation due to small differences in head posture on the different films and due to the continued forward growth of the mandible which carried the implant markers.
closer to the film. Moreover, between-subject variations in radiographic enlargement of the implant distance were caused by differences in the distances from the implants to the film plane due to the variability in craniofacial morphology and minor variations in the site of insertion of the implant markers. These variations in radiographic enlargement were corrected mathematically by combining the information from the lateral and p-a films with information about the fixed geometry of the cephalometer as described in Figure 2.

**Growth data**

Since the sample was mixed longitudinal in nature, with each series of films covering different but overlapping periods of growth, a special technique was used to obtain annual growth data. Average annual increments in width were calculated from those subjects that were included in each of the sixteen 1-year age groups (Table 1). The average distance curve was obtained by setting the curve point at the lower class limit of the first age group, 6.5 years, to zero and plotting the cumulated average annual increments in the upper class limits of the age groups (Table 2). The average velocity curve was determined by plotting the average increments in the class midpoints of the age groups.

**Statistical analysis**

The statistical analyses were carried out using the Minitab and SAS statistical program packages (SAS Institute Inc., 1982; Ryan et al., 1989). The statistical significance of average changes was assessed by t-tests, and the statistical significance of the change in mandibular body width of the individual subjects was assessed by linear regression analyses. The total average increase in mandibular width was determined by summation of the annual average increments, and the variance for the total change was assessed according to the rules for linear functions of stochastic variables (Hald, 1952).
Method error

For assessment of the error of the method, all marks were removed from the first and last pair of films in each series, and the films were marked again after a period of several months. The calculation of the true width between the implant points on each p-a film was repeated and the total change in width from first to last film was calculated again. There was no significant difference in the average change in width calculated at the two occasions. The method error, \( s(i) \), of the assessment of change in width was 0.13 mm (Dahlberg, 1940) and the coefficient of reliability was 0.91 (Houston, 1983).

Results

The average data for the annual and the cumulated annual increments in the mandibular body width, measured between the bilateral mandibular implant points and corrected for radiographic enlargement, are given in Table 3.

The average distance curve from 6 to 23 years of age is shown in Figure 3. From 6 to 18 years, there was a gradual increase, but after 18 years of age there was no systematic trend. The ±2 SE confidence limits for the mean of each annual increment are indicated in the figure. The total average increase was 1.6 mm \( (P \leq 0.001) \) for the age intervals 7–18 years. This corresponds

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Average changes in width (Wt) of the mandibular body (ipl–ipr, mm).</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
<td>Mean increment (mm)</td>
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<td>Class mid-points</td>
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to an average annual increase of 0.13 mm ($P \leq 0.001$). The standard deviation for the total increase was 0.42 mm, and the 5 per cent confidence interval 0.8–2.4 mm.

The average velocity curve (Figure 4) decreased gradually from 6 to 10 years of age. The curve peaked at 11 and 14 years and showed a post-pubertal decrease in velocity until the age of 18.

The individual curves for the 10 subjects (Figure 5) all showed a statistically significant increase in width between the right and left mandibular implant points ranging from 0.7 to 1.7 mm for the various periods of observation (Table 1, $P \leq 0.01$, $P \leq 0.001$). The true width at the initial observation ($W_{t1}$) is indicated for each case in Figure 5.

**Discussion**

Detection of small annual changes on sequential p-a radiographs requires high-precision techniques. A major source of random error in cephalometric investigations is usually the identification of the landmarks. This source of error was markedly reduced in the archive material used in the present study, due to the availability of previously inserted sets of metallic markers ('implants') in both sides of the mandibular body (Björk, 1968). When properly inserted in the endosteal bone, such markers remain permanently stationary.

Another important source of random error is the variability in the radiographic enlargement of transverse skeletal dimensions projected onto p-a films. The first problem is the position of the head in the cephalometer. The subject is positioned facing the film and the head is placed in the cephalometer with the Frankfort plane horizontal. Although in the present archive material, the positioning of the head had been performed by the same operator on all occasions throughout the period of study, some degree of up- and down-tilting was inevitable between films in a series. Therefore, depending upon the differences in the distance from the mandibular implants to the film, the enlargement and, accordingly, the projected width between the implant points, could vary from film to film in a series.
A second problem was created by the sagittal growth of the mandible. The film cassette is mounted at a fixed distance (15 cm) from the plane of the ear rods. The growth of the mandibular condyles carries the mandibular body and the implant markers closer to the film and, therefore, the projected distance between the right and left implant points on the p-a films will be reduced.

Moreover, in addition to these intra-individual changes in radiographic enlargement in a longitudinal series of films, the variability in craniofacial morphology of the different subjects and minor variations in the site of insertion of the implants, results in between-subject variations in radiographic enlargement of the implant distance on the p-a films.

Since lateral and p-a cephalometric radiographs were available at each age stage, the 3-D radiographic projection geometry could be reconstructed. It was possible, therefore, to mathematically correct each annual measurement of mandibular width for the radiographic enlargement, thus eliminating these sources of variability.

After correction for enlargement, a gradual increase in the distance between the right and left side mandibular implants was found in all subjects. The total increase in the individual subjects ranged from 0.7 to 1.7 mm for the various periods of observation and the total average increase in mandibular width for the whole group was 1.6 mm (SD = 0.42 mm). In Baumrind and Korn’s study (1992) the average linear increase in the mandibular width was found to be 1.84 mm (0.92 mm one side) with a SD of 2.22 mm. The findings of the present study thus confirm those of Korn and Baumrind (1990), and Baumrind and Korn (1992), that an increase in width between the two mandibular halves does, indeed, occur postnatally. On the other hand, the variability of the increase in width of the mandible was markedly smaller in the present study ($P \leq 0.001$), probably due to the fact that in the previous studies only

![Figure 4](image-url) Average rate of change in the width of the mandibular body, corrected for radiographic enlargement.
unilateral implants were available, so that the width had to be calculated by projection onto a constructed median sagittal plane of the head, a method that is probably quite sensitive to the precision of the positioning in the cephalometer. Furthermore, the 3-D correction for radiographic enlargement in the present study would also have contributed to reduction of the component precision of the positioning in the cephalometer.
of random error in the width measurements. The average distance curve was, therefore, remarkably smooth despite the small number of observations in each age group.

The data for males and females were pooled in the calculation of average data, due to the small number of subjects. The average curve increased gradually until 18 years of age, after which the course remained horizontal. The same shape was observed for almost all of the individual distance curves. This shape of the curves is remarkably similar to that of distance curves for variables that reflect the growth of the skeleto-muscular system and skeletal craniofacial growth (Tanner, 1962; Iseri and Solow, 1990). These observations lead to the conclusion that the increase in width between the two mandibular halves is, in some way, probably related to the general development of the skeleto-muscular system of the subjects.

The mechanism that allows the distance between the two mandibular halves to increase is unknown. It is well-known that the mandibular symphysis ossifies shortly after birth, so there is no synchondrosis, suture, or joint that allows an opening hinge movement of the jaws. The implants are below the surface of the bone and remain stable, unaffected by apposition on the bone surface. Usually, several implant markers had been inserted at each implant location. Such implants retained their mutual positional relationship throughout the period of observation. It is not likely that they could move identically through the bone. Moreover, the similar course of all the individual curves makes it unlikely that factors of a random nature could be responsible for the observed changes.

Baumrind and Korn (1992) concluded that ‘accommodational changes in the region of the symphysis’ was the most likely explanation for the changes observed in their study. Since the symphyseal region ossifies shortly after birth, the question of the detailed nature of such changes remains. Several experimental and simulation studies have demonstrated an outward elastic bending of the mandible under load from masticatory occlusal forces (Hylander, 1977; Wejs and Jongh, 1977; Hylander et al., 1987, Korioth and Hannam, 1994). It seems possible, therefore, that the cause of the outward bending of the two mandibular halves could be related to the increasing long-term intermittent load from masticatory occlusal forces during post-natal growth. The only possible mechanism for such a change seems to be a restructuring of the cancellous and compact bone in the symphyseal region, occurring in connection with the continuous turnover of osteons (Frost 1990a,b).

A permanent increase in width, apparently related to bending of the mandibular body as demonstrated by Korn and Baumrind (1990), Baumrind and Korn (1992), and in the present study, has not previously been reported. To obtain deeper insight into the mechanism responsible for these changes, it is suggested that biomechanical investigations that simulate the transverse strain in the mandibular body caused by masticatory occlusal forces and other functional loads, and also studies of the bone turnover in the human mandible should be carried out.

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