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Fully automatic quantification of knee osteoarthritis severity on plain radiographs

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Summary

Objective: Although knee osteoarthritis (OA) is a major public health issue causing chronic disability, there is no objective or accurate method for measurement of the structural severity in general clinical practice. Here we have established a fully automatic program KOACAD (knee OA computer-aided diagnosis) to quantify the major OA parameters on plain knee radiographs, validated the reproducibility and reliability, and investigated the association of the parameters with knee pain.

Methods: KOACAD was programmed to measure joint space narrowing at medial and lateral sides, osteophyte formation, and joint angulation. Anteroposterior radiographs of 1979 knees of a large-scale cohort population were analyzed by KOACAD and conventional categorical grading systems.

Results: KOACAD automatically measured all parameters in less than 1 s without intra- or interobserver variability. All parameters, especially medial joint space narrowing, were significantly correlated with the conventional gradings. In the parameters, osteophyte formation was associated with none of the joint space parameters, suggesting different etiologic mechanisms between them. Multivariate logistic regression analysis after adjustment for age and confounding factors revealed that medial joint space narrowing and varus angulation of knee joints were risk factors for the presence of pain (594/1979 knees), while neither lateral joint space nor osteophyte area was.

Conclusion: KOACAD was shown to be useful for objective, accurate, simple and easy evaluation of the radiographic knee OA severity in daily clinical practice. This system may also serve as a surrogate measure for the development of disease-modifying drugs for OA, just as bone mineral density does in osteoporosis.

Key words: Osteoarthritis, Knee, Diagnosis, Computer-aided diagnosis, Imaging, Plain radiograph.

Introduction

Due to the rapidly increasing fraction of aging people today, osteoarthritis (OA) is now considered as a major public health issue causing chronic disability in most developed countries. It is estimated that up to 10% of the entire world population, and more than 50% of those aged over 50 years, are suffering from OA[1]. Knee OA, affecting about 30% of those over 65 years and as often associated with disability as heart and chronic lung diseases[2,3], is characterized by pathological features including joint space narrowing, osteophyte formation, and joint angulation. Although OA and osteoporosis are the two major skeletal disorders with strong social impact[4], OA falls far behind osteoporosis in the assessment of its disease severity and in the development of disease-modifying drugs. This is mainly due to the lack of an objective and accurate method to evaluate the structural severity and thereby to assess the efficacy of drugs as surrogate measures like bone mineral density (BMD) in osteoporosis.

Although magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) with high resolution has been rapidly advanced as a promising technique, it is still too laborious and expensive to perform in general clinical practice or in population-based epidemiologic studies, and the interpretation remains controversial as a primary end-point in clinical trials of the disease-modifying drugs[5–7]. Biochemical markers of cartilage turnover are being tested to measure the disease progression; however, their validation as a surrogate measure will require significant additional work[5,8]. Hence, plain radiography is considered the gold standard as a method that is non-invasive, inexpensive, convenient, simple, and fast to use in assessing OA severity. The most conventional system to grade the radiographic severity has been the Kellgren/Lawrence (K/L) grading[9]. However, this categorical system is limited by incorrect assumptions that progression of distinct OA features like joint space narrowing and osteophyte formation is linear and constant, and that their relationships are proportional. Since the system emphasizes the development of osteophytes, it is unclear how to handle knees with severe joint space narrowing but no osteophyte formation. To overcome the problem,

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a radiographic atlas of individual features was published by the OA Research Society International (OARSI) in 1995[10] and a revised version in 2007[11]. This system separately evaluates joint space narrowing and osteophyte formation at the medial and lateral tibiofemoral compartments on radiographs; however, the grading is still limited in reproducibility and sensitivity due to the subjective judgment of individual observers and the categorical classification into four-grade (0–3) scales. Although several semi-automatic methods for objective measurement with continuous variables of joint space or angle using computer-assisted systems have recently been developed, there still remain intra- and interobserver variabilities since initial operations like identifying points or drawing lines must be manually performed[12–16].

The present study has developed a novel computer program, KOACAD (knee OA computer-aided diagnosis), which for the first time has realized a fully automatic measurement of major parameters of knee OA: joint space area (JSA) and the minimum joint space width (mJSW) at medial and lateral sides, osteophyte area, and tibiofemoral angle (TFA) on plain anteroposterior radiographs. We examined the reproducibility and reliability of KOACAD by comparing it with conventional grading systems and semi-automatic measurements.

Arthritis is the most common cause of pain in the elderly[17], and knee pain is the principal clinical symptom of knee OA. Although much effort has been devoted toward a definition of knee pain, the correlation with radiographic severity of the knee OA was not as strong as one would expect[18–20]. Hence, this study finally sought to identify radiographic factors related to knee pain by examining the association of the KOACAD parameters with the presence of pain using a baseline database of our large-scale OA cohort study ROAD (research on OA against disability).

Subjects and methods

SUBJECTS

The ROAD study is a nationwide OA cohort study that started in 2005, and is constituted of four cohorts. So far, we have completed creation of a baseline database including clinical and genomic information of 3040 participants in three cohorts in urban, mountainous, and seacoast areas. The database includes anteroposterior and lateral radiographs of bilateral knees of all participants. For evaluation of the KOACAD system, we used 1979 anteroposterior radiographs from 2002 knees of 1001 participants of the urban cohort after 15 artificial knee joints and eight knees with more than 5° flexion contracture were omitted. The study was conducted with approval of the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of the University of Tokyo and the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology, and all participants provided written informed consent.

RADIOGRAPHY

Plain radiographs with standing on both legs and the knee extended were taken with a horizontal X-ray beam unless otherwise described, using a Fuji 5000 Plus Reader on a 36×46 cm Fuji ST-VI Computed Radiography (CR) imaging plate (Fuji Medical Systems, Tokyo, Japan) with a 20×30 mm rectangular metal plate beside it as a magnification index. Rotation of the foot was adjusted to keep the second metatarsal bone parallel to the X-ray beam. Images were downloaded into Digital Imaging and Communication in Medicine (DICOM) format files with a spatial resolution of 1584×2016 pixels (giving a pixel size of 0.01 mm) and 1024 gray levels.

IMAGE PROCESSING BY KOACAD

The KOACAD was programmed to perform the following operations automatically on the digital images above using the object-oriented programming language C++ [Fig. 1(A)]. Initially, correction for radiographic magnification was performed based on the image size of the rectangular metal plate. To reduce the image noise, the entire radiograph underwent filtering three times with a 3×3 square neighborhood median filter as reported previously[21]. Then, the Robert's filter was applied to extract the rough outlines of tibia and femur, so that medial and lateral sides could be judged by the difference of calculated widths of tibia and fibula at the level of 100 pixels above the bottom of the image [Fig. 1(B)].

Next, to determine the region of interest (ROI) including the tibiofemoral joint space, a vertical neighborhood difference filter was applied to identify points with high absolute values of difference of scales. The center of all the points was then calculated, and 480×200 pixels of a rectangle with the center was decided as the ROI [Fig. 1(C)]. Within the ROI, the outline of femoral condyle was designated as the upper rim of the joint space by vertical filtering with the 3×3 square neighborhood difference filter [Fig. 1(D)]. The two ends were determined using a Canny's filter to remove the noise of lines[22], and vertical lines from the ends were designated as the outside rims of the joint space. Outlines of anterior and posterior margins of the tibial plateau were drawn similarly to that of the femoral condyle, and the middle line between the two outlines was designated as the lower rim of the joint space [Fig. 1(E)]. Then, a straight regression line for the lower rim outline was drawn, and their intersections were designated as the inside rims [Fig. 1(F)]. The medial and lateral JSAs were determined as the areas surrounded by the upper, lower, inside, and outside rims above [Fig. 1(G)]. The medial and lateral mJSWs were further determined as the minimum vertical distances in the respective JSA [Fig. 1(H)].

To measure osteophyte area and TFA, the medial and lateral outlines of femur and tibia were drawn by the 3×3 square horizontal neighborhood difference filter and Canny's filter as described above. Then, the inflection points for the outlines were calculated. The medial outline of the tibia from the inflection point was drawn upward to the joint level [Fig. 1(I)], and the area that was medially prominent over the smoothly extended outline was designated as the osteophyte area [Fig. 1(J)]. For TFA, a middle line between the medial and lateral outlines of the femur from the top of the image to the inflection points was drawn [Fig. 1(K)], and the straight regression line was determined to be the axis of the femur. Similarly, the straight regression line of the middle line of the tibia from the bottom to the inflection points was designated as the axis of the tibia. The lateral angle between the two axis lines was calculated as TFA [Fig. 1(L)].

ANALYSES

To decide the ideal conditions for the taking of radiographs for the KOACAD analysis, we initially evaluated the reproducibility of the six parameters by an intraclass coefficient of correlation (ICC) on radiographs of 20 individuals taken at a 2-week interval with various knee flexion angles (0, 10, 20, and 30°) and X-ray beam angulations (0, 5, 10, and 15°).

Conventional gradings by the K/L system and the OARSI radiographic atlas were performed by experienced orthopedists on 50 radiographs randomly selected from the 1979 radiographs above, and intra- and interobserver variabilities were evaluated by κ values. The KOACAD parameters were also evaluated by semi-automatic measurement by a conventional computer-assisted program (Quick Grain Standard, Inotech, Hiroshima, Japan) after drawing of the outlines of femur and tibia by the orthopedists, and intra- and interobserver ICCs of each parameter were compared with those of KOACAD.

Correlations of the KOACAD parameters with the K/L grading (0–4) were examined by Spearman's correlation test on the entire 1979 radiographs. Correlations with the OARSI grading (0–3) were similarly examined for five common parameters: the KOACAD mJSW and JSA at the medial and lateral sides were compared with the OARSI joint space narrowing grades at the respective sides, and the KOACAD osteophyte area with the OARSI osteophyte grade of the medial tibial plateau. Since there was no radiograph of OARSI grade 3 of lateral joint space narrowing, correlations of the KOACAD lateral JSA and lateral mJSW were examined with the OARSI grade 0–2.

Correlations among the KOACAD parameters were analyzed using Pearson's correlation test, and parameters with correlation value of more than 0.5 were defined as confounding factors.

For the assessment of factors associated with symptomatic knee pain, age and the six KOACAD parameters were compared between knees with and without pain by Student's *t* test on the 1979 radiographs. Logistic regression analyses were used to estimate odds ratio (OR) and the associated 95% confidence interval (CI). Final multivariate logistic models were created through stepwise elimination of variables of interest from univariate analysis after adjustment for age and confounding factors.

A *P*-value of <0.05 for analysis of safety variables was considered significant. Data analyses were performed using SAS version 9.0 (SAS Institute Inc., NC, USA).

Results

REPRODUCIBILITY OF KOACAD PARAMETERS BY KNEE FLEXION ANGLES AND X-RAY BEAM ANGULATIONS

The KOACAD system could automatically measure the six parameters on an anteroposterior knee radiograph in

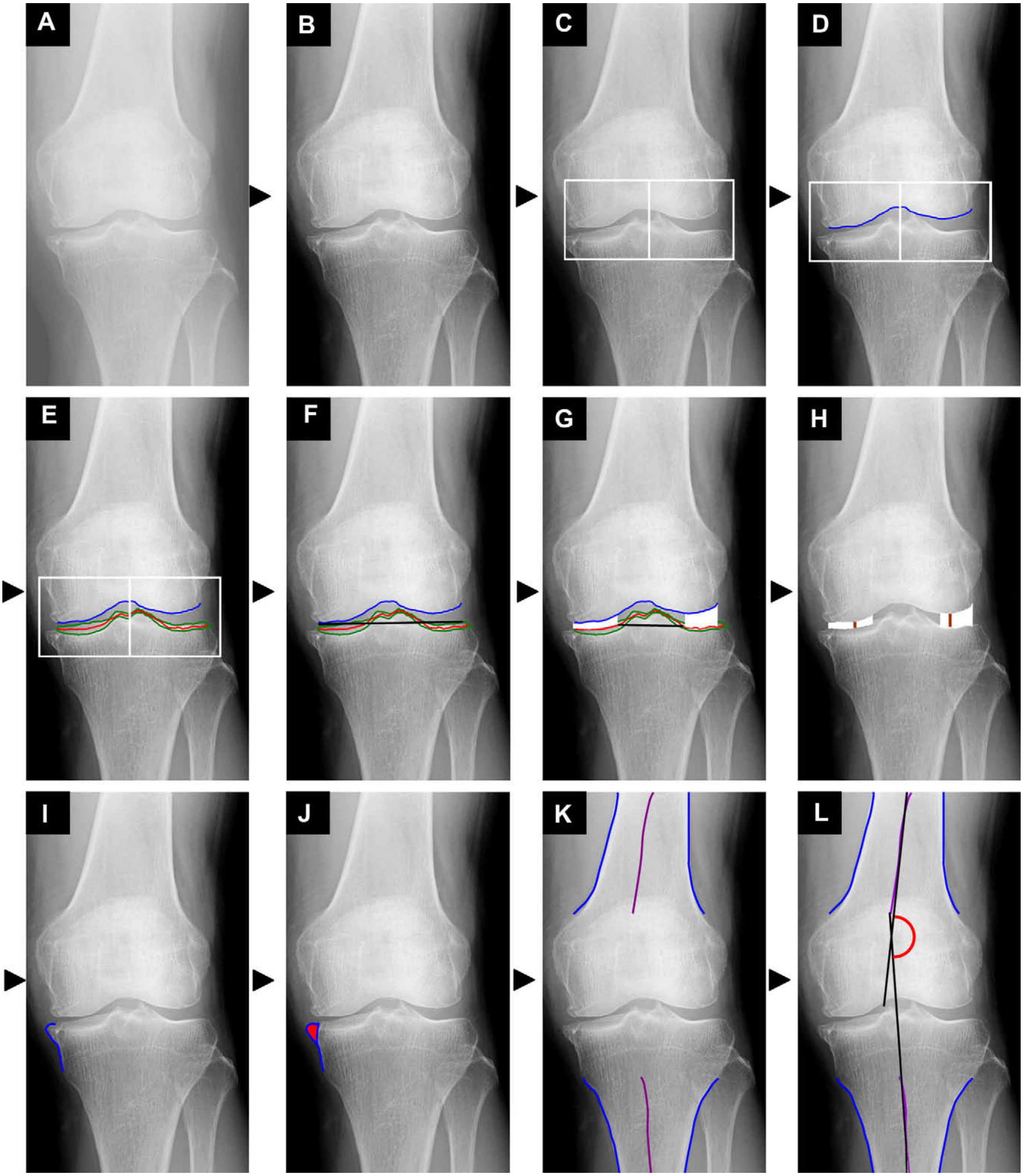

Fig. 1. Schema of image processing by KOACAD. (A) A digitized knee radiograph as a DICOM file. (B) Filterings to reduce the image noise and to extract outlines of tibia and femur. (C) ROI and the center including the tibiofemoral joint space. (D) An outline of femoral condyle (blue line) as the upper and outside rims of the joint space. (E) Outlines of anterior and posterior margins of the tibial plateau (green lines), and the middle line between the two outlines (red line) as the lower rim of the joint space. (F) A straight regression line (black line) for the lower rim line, and their intersections as the inside rims. (G) Medial and lateral JSAs (white areas) surrounded by the upper, lower, inside, and outside rims. (H) Medial and lateral mJSWs (brown lines) as the minimum vertical distances in the JSAs. (I) Medial outline (blue line) of the tibia drawn from the calculated inflection point upward to the joint level. (J) Osteophyte area (red area) that is medially prominent over the smoothly extended outline of the tibia. (K) Medial and lateral outlines (blue lines) of the femur and tibia from the edges of the image to the inflection points, and the middle lines (purple lines). (L) TFA as the lateral angle between the straight regression lines (black lines) of the middle lines above in the femur and tibia.

less than 1 s without any manual operation. To decide the ideal conditions of taking radiographs for the KOACAD analysis, we first examined the reproducibility of the parameters measured on radiographs of 20 individuals taken at a 2-week interval with various knee flexion angles and X-ray beam angulations (Table I). The reproducibility of all parameters was highly maintained with 0° of the knee flexion angle (ICC = 0.88–0.99), which became lower as the angle was increased. It was also maintained with 0 and 5° of X-ray beam angulations (ICC = 0.87–0.99), while it was not determined in most of the radiographs with 10 and 15° due to overlap of femoral condyle and tibial plateau. Hence, we decided to take radiographs with the knee extended and a horizontal X-ray beam for the KOACAD measurement.

COMPARISON OF KOACAD WITH CONVENTIONAL SYSTEMS

We measured the six parameters by KOACAD more than twice on 1979 radiographs, and confirmed that all parameters were unchanged independent of observer or time measured (all ICC = 1.0). Contrarily, when we examined the intra- and interobserver variabilities of the conventional categorical grading systems on 50 randomly selected radiographs, the intra- and interobserver variabilities were high by the K/L system (κ value = 0.84 and 0.76) and the OARSI radiographic atlas ($\kappa \leq 0.75$ and ≤ 0.65) (Supplementary Table S1). In addition, the intra- and interobserver ICCs of semi-automatic measurements using a conventional computer-assisted procedure of the parameters were less than 0.7 and 0.6, respectively, for joint space parameters and osteophyte area, and were less than 0.8 for TFA, indicating that even this computer-assisted system is robust with respect to variability in lines drawn by observers for the computer to analyze (Supplementary Table S1).

We then examined the correlations of the KOACAD parameters with the K/L and OARSI gradings on the 1979 radiographs (Table II). All parameters were significantly correlated with the K/L grading ($P < 0.0001$); with medial JSA, medial mJSW, and TFA being most strongly correlated with it. Five common parameters showed good correlation between KOACAD and OARSI grading ($P < 0.0001$), and medial JSA and medial mJSW also showed most of the strong correlations.

CORRELATIONS AMONG THE KOACAD PARAMETERS

Although all KOACAD parameters are known to be affected as OA progresses, the changes are neither proportional nor is the relationship constant. We therefore examined the correlations among the parameters on the 1979 radiographs by Pearson's correlation test (Table III). As expected, correlation values were more than 0.5 between medial JSA and medial mJSW, and between lateral JSA and lateral mJSW, indicating that these are confounding factors for each other. More interestingly, although osteophyte area was measured at the medial tibia, it was significantly associated with neither medial JSA nor mJSW, suggesting different etiologic mechanisms between osteophyte formation and joint destruction. Furthermore, JSA and mJSW at the lateral side were positively correlated with those at the medial side, and TFA was strongly associated with decreased mJSWs not only at the medial side but also at the lateral side. This implies that there is a background generally affecting the whole joint for OA progression rather than the medial-lateral shift of loading axis of mechanical stress within the joint.

CORRELATIONS OF THE KOACAD PARAMETERS WITH KNEE PAIN

To further identify radiographic factors associated with knee pain using the KOACAD system in the 1979 radiographs, we compared the parameters between groups with (594 knees) and without (1385 knees) knee pain (Table IV). Although age was comparable, all parameters were significantly different between the two groups. Especially, medial JSA and medial mJSW were lower and TFA was higher in the group with pain than that without pain. Univariate logistic regression analysis after adjustment for age revealed that female sex (OR = 1.64; 95% CI = 1.47–1.84), medial JSA (1.16; 1.05–1.27), medial mJSW (1.66; 1.49–1.87), and TFA (1.07; 1.03–1.10) were significantly associated with the presence of pain.

Considering that medial mJSW and medial JSA, as well as lateral mJSW and lateral JSA, were found to be confounders for each other (Pearson's correlation value > 0.5; Table III), we performed a multivariate analysis after adjustment for age and confounding factors in both genders

Table I

Reproducibility of KOACAD parameters measured on radiographs of an individual with various knee flexion angles and X-ray beam angulations

Knee flexion angle (°)	0	10	20	30
KOACAD parameters (ICC)				
Medial JSA (mm^2)	0.88	0.77	0.74	0.74
Lateral JSA (mm^2)	0.92	0.87	0.73	0.73
Medial mJSW (mm)	0.96	0.92	0.90	0.78
Lateral mJSW (mm)	0.95	0.86	0.88	0.80
Osteophyte area (mm^2)	0.99	0.91	0.79	0.81
TFA (°)	0.94	0.93	0.86	0.86
X-ray beam angulation (°)	**0**	**5**	**10**	**15**
KOACAD parameters (ICC)				
Medial JSA (mm^2)	0.88	0.87	ND	ND
Lateral JSA (mm^2)	0.92	0.92	(17/20)	(20/20)
Medial mJSW (mm)	0.96	0.96		
Lateral mJSW (mm)	0.95	0.95		
Osteophyte area (mm^2)	0.99	0.99		
TFA (°)	0.94	0.93		

Reproducibility of six parameters was evaluated by an ICC on radiographs of 20 individuals taken at a 2-week interval. ND: not determined due to overlap of femur and tibia.

Table II

Correlations of the KOACAD parameters with the K/L and OARSI gradings

	0	1	2	3	4	R^2
K/L grading						
Number	162	625	956	205	31	
Medial JSA (mm^2)	112.4 ± 1.8	97.0 ± 0.9	91.1 ± 0.7	83.2 ± 1.9	52.4 ± 5.4	−0.29
Lateral JSA (mm^2)	114.3 ± 2.0	110.6 ± 1.1	107.2 ± 0.9	105.3 ± 1.9	106.2 ± 6.1	−0.09
Medial mJSW (mm)	3.9 ± 0.1	3.4 ± 0.0	3.1 ± 0.0	2.5 ± 0.1	1.5 ± 0.2	−0.41
Lateral mJSW (mm)	4.7 ± 0.1	4.4 ± 0.0	4.3 ± 0.1	4.2 ± 0.1	4.2 ± 0.3	−0.11
Osteophyte area (mm^2)	2.7 ± 1.4	2.0 ± 0.2	3.2 ± 0.2	7.9 ± 1.3	10.9 ± 4.2	0.15
TFA (°)	175.7 ± 0.2	176.2 ± 0.1	177.4 ± 0.1	179.6 ± 0.3	184.2 ± 1.2	0.31
OARSI grading						
Medial JSA (mm^2) (n)	105.9 ± 0.9 (602)	89.8 ± 0.7 (953)	90.0 ± 1.3 (317)	65.4 ± 2.2 (107)		−0.34
Lateral JSA (mm^2) (n)	109.6 ± 0.6 (1926)	87.7 ± 4.2 (38)	61.7 ± 7.3 (15)	− (0)		−0.16
Medial mJSW (mm) (n)	3.6 ± 0.0 (602)	3.1 ± 0.0 (953)	2.7 ± 0.0 (317)	1.8 ± 0.1 (107)		−0.45
Lateral mJSW (mm) (n)	4.3 ± 0.0 (1926)	3.3 ± 0.2 (38)	2.5 ± 0.3 (15)	− (0)		−0.19
Osteophyte area (mm^2) (n)	2.0 ± 0.2 (1212)	2.8 ± 0.4 (421)	4.7 ± 0.6 (215)	14.7 ± 0.7 (131)		0.25

Analyses were performed by Spearman's correlation test on 1979 radiographs, and data are expressed by means ± S.E.M. (all *P*-values < 0.0001).

(Table V). It was found that low medial mJSW and high TFA were associated with the presence of pain, while neither lateral mJSW nor osteophyte area was.

Discussion

In the present study, we established a fully automatic computer-assisted program, KOACAD that can quantitate the major features of knee OA on plain radiographs. This system has achieved objective, accurate, simple and easy assessment of the structural severity of knee OA without any manual operation in general clinical practice or in population-based epidemiologic studies. The system could also accurately evaluate distinct features of knee OA like joint space narrowing, osteophyte formation, and joint angulation in one sitting. By applying this system to the baseline data in the ROAD study, medial joint space narrowing and varus angulation, though neither lateral joint space narrowing nor osteophyte formation, was shown to be associated with symptomatic knee pain.

Independent measurement of the parameters by KOACAD enabled us to examine the correlation of distinct features of OA, which may lead to better understanding of the OA pathophysiology. For example, a lack of association between osteophyte formation and joint space narrowing indicates independent backgrounds of the two representative features of knee OA. A previous prospective study using a famous OA cohort, the Chingford study, has reported that there was no association between the two features[23]. Although the authors described in the paper that this might possibly be due to inaccurate and subjective measurement on radiographs, the present KOACAD analysis has confirmed the reliability by accurate and objective measurement. A recent cross-sectional study has also shown that osteophyte formation was unrelated not only to joint space narrowing on plain radiographs, but also to cartilage loss measured by quantitative MRI[24]. Furthermore, by creating an OA model through induction of instability in mouse knee joints, we have identified a cartilage specific molecule, carminerin, that regulates osteophyte formation without affecting cartilage destruction during the OA progression[25,26]. Further clinical and basic research will disclose the distinct backgrounds of the two OA features. The correlation analysis among the parameters also revealed that joint space narrowing at medial and lateral sides was positively correlated, indicating an etiologic mechanism that affects the whole joint. Although this does not necessarily deny the mechanistic contribution of medial-lateral shift of the loading axis within the joint to the OA progression, the limitation of efficacy of a valgus knee brace, lateral wedged insole, or valgus high tibial osteotomy for medial compartment OA of the knee may at least partly be explained by the result.

For accurate and reproducible assessment of tibiofemoral joint space on plain radiographs, a variety of radiographic methods have been developed. Several reports have claimed that positioning of the knee with several angles of flexion provides more accurate joint space measurement than conventional extended knees due to superimposition of the anterior and posterior margins of the tibial plateau[13,27,28]. Among the reports, angulation of the X-ray beam and rotation of the foot were different, and some of them included fluoroscopic assistance for the adjustment of margins of the tibial plateau. Despite these efforts, none of the radiographic protocols has realized high reproducibility or sensitivity for long-term longitudinal

Table III

Correlations among the KOACAD parameters

	Medial JSA	Lateral JSA	Medial mJSW	Lateral mJSW	Osteopyte area	TFA
Medial JSA	1.00					
Lateral JSA	0.22 (<0.0001)	1.00				
Medial mJSW	0.70 (<0.0001)	0.13 (0.0008)	1.00			
Lateral mJSW	0.18 (<0.0001)	0.72 (<0.0001)	0.22 (<0.0001)	1.00		
Osteophyte area	0.02 (NS)	−0.13 (0.0006)	0.04 (NS)	−0.13 (NS)	1.00	
TFA	−0.08 (0.03)	0.03 (NS)	−0.21 (<0.0001)	−0.19 (<0.0001)	−0.02 (NS)	1.00

Analyses were performed by Pearson's correlation test on 1979 radiographs, and data are expressed as Pearson's correlation values and *P*-values in the parentheses. NS: not significant ($P > 0.05$).

Table IV
Differences of age and the KOACAD parameters between knees with and without pain

	Pain (+)	Pain (−)	*P*-value
Participants (men/women)	594 (124/470)	1385 (575/810)	
Age (years)	76.8 ± 4.7	77.0 ± 4.4	NS
Parameters			
Medial JSA (mm^2)	88.0 ± 1.0	95.7 ± 0.7	<0.0001
Lateral JSA (mm^2)	105.9 ± 1.1	110.2 ± 0.7	0.0013
Medial mJSW (mm)	2.9 ± 1.0	3.3 ± 1.2	<0.0001
Lateral mJSW (mm)	4.3 ± 0.1	4.4 ± 0.0	0.0044
Osteophyte area (mm^2)	4.8 ± 5.4	2.9 ± 7.0	0.0002
TFA (°)	177.9 ± 3.3	176.9 ± 4.3	<0.0001

Analyses were performed on 1979 radiographs, and data are expressed by means ± S.E.M. *P*-values were determined by Student's *t* test. NS: not significant ($P > 0.05$).

studies[27,29]. And, first of all, since these methods increase the cost and require the technician to be specifically trained, they are unlikely to be applicable in general clinical practice or population-based epidemiologic studies. Meanwhile, the conventional standing extended view knee radiographs that the KOACAD system adopted are known to be sensitive to change if the tibial plateau is adequately aligned[30]. To overcome variability of the tibiofemoral joint space by the positioning of the knee and the angulation of the X-ray beam causing the misalignment of the anterior and posterior margins of the tibial plateau, the KOACAD system for the first time designated the middle line between outlines of anterior and posterior margins of the tibial plateau as the lower rim of the radiographic joint space. In fact, reproducibility of all KOACAD parameters was highly maintained with 0° knee flexion and 0−5° X-ray angulation (Table I). This, however, indicates that OA patients with flexion contracture of the knee cannot be appropriately assessed by the KOACAD system, so that patients with more than 5° flexion contracture were excluded from the present study.

Digital images by computed radiographic techniques offer several advantages compared with conventional analog film-screen radiography, and are increasingly available in routine patient management because they allow image enhancement, quantification, archiving, transmission, simultaneous access to the image at multiple sites, and reduction in radiation dose[31]. Although this study used digitized images as the DICOM file, we have confirmed that images digitized from analog radiographs by general image scanners could be used for the KOACAD analysis with perfect reproducibility (ICC = 1.0). In addition, since KOACAD is programmed based on a personal computer, and not on a massive workstation, it can be used anywhere, even away from clinics.

Table V
Multivariate logistic regression analysis for OR and 95% CI of the KOACAD parameters for knee pain

	Men (699)		Women (1280)	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Medial mJSW	1.46	1.16−1.90	1.41	1.23−1.63
Lateral mJSW	0.99	0.79−1.23	1.10	0.98−1.24
Osteophyte area	0.99	0.96−1.04	0.99	0.98−1.00
TFA	1.07	1.01−1.13	1.07	1.03−1.10

Data were calculated by stepwise logistic regression analysis after adjustment for age and confounding factors on 1979 radiographs.

The relationship between the radiographic findings and the symptomatic pain in knee joints remains controversial, but at least the severity of radiographic OA is not linearly correlated with that of pain[18−20]. Although the present multivariate analysis was able to detect significant associations of knee pain with low medial mJSW and high TFA, they were not strong (Table V). This may be due to the complicated mechanism underlying the pain. Although articular cartilage is viewed as a major target tissue of OA, knee pain may arise from a number of different structures like joint capsule, ligaments, menisci, bursae, and the bone marrow. Pathological structures caused by OA may contribute to pain indirectly. For example, inflammatory synovitis and associated capillaries are innervated by pain fibers and may be affected in OA[32]. Furthermore, previous MRI surveys among patients with radiographic knee OA showed that knee pain was due not only to OA-related disorders, but also to spontaneous osteonecrosis and bone marrow edema around the knee joint[33−35]. A limitation of the KOACAD system is that these periarticular disorders are not included in the parameters but are best shown by MRI, which might possibly lead to failures in the treatment of knee pain.

Another limitation of this study is a lack of longitudinal investigation to validate the sensitivity of the KOACAD system. One criticism has been that plain radiographs are insensitive to change over time, and that even a small radiographic change is associated with substantial cartilage loss[36]. Nevertheless, the current recommendations suggest that clinical studies of knee OA should include a structural measure of OA severity[5,28]. This emphasizes the need for further refinement in the definition of radiographic outcomes in prospective clinical trials. Recent longitudinal studies using quantitative MRI have shown that subjects with knee OA lose 5% of their tibial cartilage volume per year[37,38] and that the cartilage loss is correlated with worsening of symptoms and portends knee replacement[20,39]. Although the cartilage loss detected by quantitative MRI is much greater than that detected in plain radiographs, the MRI-based cartilage volume correlates with the change of radiographic features to some extent[40,41]. Since the KOACAD system can provide continuous measures of parameters of OA severity, it is possible that the system is as sensitive to change over time as quantitative MRI. Also, the association between knee pain and radiographic features cannot be appropriately assessed in a cross-sectional survey, but should be evaluated over a defined period of time, as indicated by previous reports[42,43]. Our baseline survey in the ROAD study has included quantitative MRI on a group of randomly selected participants. In 2008−2010, we are planning a second survey including the KOACAD radiographic analysis on more than 3000 participants and the quantitative MRI on a portion of these. Comparison of the KOACAD parameters and the MRI findings will validate the sensitivity of the KOACAD system over time, and lead to further understanding of the association between knee pain and radiographic features.

In conclusion, we have established a fully automatic computer-assisted program, KOACAD, to quantify knee OA severity on plain radiographs, and validated its high reproducibility and reliability in a cross-sectional study. This system may not only be useful for objective evaluation of knee OA patients in daily clinical practice or in population-based epidemiologic studies, but also act as a proper surrogate measure for the development of disease-modifying drugs for OA. We hope in the future that this system will be prevalently used worldwide to lead to international criteria for diagnosis and treatment of knee OA, just like BMD in osteoporosis.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Supplementary material

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