Histopathology of thymectomy specimens from the MGTX-trial: Entropy analysis as strategy to quantify spatial heterogeneity of lymphoid follicle and fat distribution

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Abstract

The thymectomy specimens from the “thymectomy trial in non-thymomatous myasthenia gravis patients receiving prednisone therapy” (MGTX) underwent rigid and comprehensive work-up, which permits analysis of the spatial distribution of histological and immunohistological features. This analysis revealed strong intra- and inter-case variability. While many histological features (e.g. median percent fat content among different specimens) can easily be correlated with clinical parameters, intra-case spatial variability of histological features has yet defied quantification and statistical evaluation. To overcome this gap in digital pathology, we here propose intra-case entropy of measured histological features in all available slides of a given thymectomy specimen as a quantitative marker of spatial histological heterogeneity. Calculation of entropy led to one value per specimen and histological feature. Through these ‘entropy values’ the so far neglected degree of spatial histological heterogeneity could be fed into statistical analyses, extending the scope of clinico-pathological correlations.

Introduction and objectives

The “thymectomy trial in non-thymomatous myasthenia gravis patients receiving prednisone therapy” (MGTX) [1] showed that extended trans-sternal thymectomy in combination with prednisone was significantly more beneficial than prednisone alone in terms of myasthenia gravis (MG) clinical status and corticosteroid requirements. The study protocol included a rigid method for handling and inspection of thymectomy specimens (Fig 1A) [2]. This standardization has allowed i) the calculation of overall, mean or median values of various
immunohistological features (e.g., the mean number of CD23(+) lymphoid follicles per slide per thymectomy specimen), and ii) analysis of the spatial distributions of immunohistological features across different anatomical regions of individual thymectomy specimens and across specimens of the thymectomized cohort.

The objective of this analysis is to correlate quantitative histological findings (including their heterogeneity as a new morphological ‘dimension’) with clinical outcome parameters to eventually identify at the time of surgery pathological features with prognostic value in terms of MG outcome. Furthermore, it is hoped that recommendations for an appropriate and economical evaluation of thymectomy specimens will result from the analysis.

**Material**

1.1 Thymectomy specimens

Thymectomy specimens were retrieved at different clinical centers and processed according to the MGTX protocol, including removal of all mediastinal fat from the thymus proper [1–3]. This protocol requested local pathologists to retrieve numerous tissue blocks of defined size from strictly defined bilateral regions of the formalin fixed thymectomy specimens (see below for details) [3, 4]. This rigid, spatially standardized sampling scheme enabled us to comparatively analyse spatial tissue heterogeneity among the resection specimens from different patients [3, 4]. From the 66 thymectomy specimens that were recruited for the MGTX trial, 11 dropped out because i) local pathologists disregarded the sampling protocol; ii) the diagnosis was incorrect (thymoma instead of non-neoplastic thymus); or iii) patients withdrew their

![Specimen work-up and heterogeneous spatial distribution of the number of follicles on one slide](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0197435.g001)

**Fig 1.** Specimen work-up and heterogeneous spatial distribution of the number of follicles on one slide A) Work-up scheme for the specimens in the MGTX trial [1, 3]. Thymuses were sub-divided into regions that underwent predefined evaluation (e.g., complete work-up of the central A-region, partial work-up of other regions) B) Distribution of the median number of lymphoid follicles in CD23-stained sections per case and the associated minimum-maximum-value-range across all available slides per case. Case 37T004 from the MGTX-trial is highlighted as an example showing high in-case variation.

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consent to the scientific evaluation of their resected thymuses. Therefore, 55 cases were included in the current study. Each thymus was subdivided into several predefined sub-regions (Fig 1A). The central horizontal slice of each formalin-fixed specimen (plane / region A) underwent complete work-up, while representative single sections of at least 1 cm² were obtained from defined regions of the right and left thymic lobe above and below the central plane (Fig 1A). All blocks with formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded tissue from the 55 cases were finally submitted to the Institute of Pathology, University Medical Centre Mannheim, Germany.

1.2 Evaluation of histological parameters

Of the 55 thymectomy specimens, all obtained tissue blocks (11±5 blocks per specimen) underwent a pre-defined standard diagnostic protocol: First, all sections were hematoxylin-eosin (HE)-stained and evaluated for percentage of fat tissue on the slide; percentage of intra-thymic fat tissue; grading of cortical atrophy; grading of follicular hypertrophy; number of follicles, and proportion of cortical and medullary areas (Table 1). Second, slides containing thymic parenchyma were immunohisto-chemically stained for CD23 (expressed by follicular

Table 1. Overview of gathered histomorphological data. For most of the slides of the 55 thymectomy specimens 16 histomorphological parameters were collected using different means of measurement as indicated in column. Region “A” designates the completely processed central horizontal tissue plane of a given thymus as shown in Fig 1A. HE, hematoxylin and eosin.

| Variable | Mode of acquisition | Regions analyzed | Staining | Value range | Measurement scale | Basic summary statistics |
|----------|---------------------|------------------|----------|-------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Narrative description of follicle morphology | Visual inspection | all | HE, CD23 | nominal |
| Grading atrophy | Visual inspection | all | HE | grades 0–4 | ordinal | Grade 2 (modus) |
| Grading follicular atrophy | Visual inspection | all | HE, CD23 | grades 0–4 | ordinal | Grade 0 for HE / Grade 1 for IHC (modus) |
| Grading overall fat content | Visual inspection and estimation | all | HE | 0–100% | interval | 66.6±24.7% (mean±std) |
| Grading intrathymic fat content | Visual inspection and estimation | all | HE | 0–100% | interval | 46.9 ± 21.3%(mean±std) |
| Area with B-cellular infiltrate | Visual inspection and estimation | all | CD20 | 0–100% | interval | 31.2±16.9%(mean±std) |
| Number of follicle | Visual inspection and counting | all | HE, CD23 | 0–100 | interval | 1.2±2.5 follicles (mean±std) for HE / 7.1±6.7 follicles (mean±std) for IHC |
| Cortical area | Automatic image processing | all | HE | 0–10.000pixel | interval | 2.9±1.4 mm² (mean±std) |
| Medullary area | Automatic image processing | all | HE | 0–10.000pixel | interval | 13.1±6.9 mm² (mean±std) |
| Follicle area | Manual segmentation | A | HE, CD23, IgD, | 0–10.000pixel | interval | 1896±14225 μm² (mean±std) |
| Germinal centre area | Manual segmentation | A | HE, CD23, IgD | 0–10.000pixel | interval | 7877.5±6466.3 μm² (mean±std) |
| Mantle zone area | Manual segmentation | A | HE, CD23, IgD | 0–10.000pixel | interval | 12510±8496.2 μm² (mean±std) |
| Marginal zone area | Manual segmentation | A | HE, CD23, IgD | 0–10.000pixel | interval | 27116.8±17851.9 μm² (mean±std) |
| Area thymic tissue | Manual segmentation | A | HE | 0–10.000pixel | interval | 8820.7±6609.9 mm² (mean±std) |
| Number of follicle with germinal centre | Visual inspection and counting | A | HE | 0–100 | interval | 12.7±12.6 follicles (mean±std) |
| Number of follicle without germinal centre | Visual inspection and counting | A | HE | 0–100 | interval | 5.3±6.7 follicles (mean±std) |

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dendritic cells) using a routine immunoperoxidase technique [5, 6]. Numbers and morphology of lymphoid follicles were 'manually' assessed on digitalized sections (Table 1).

This process led to 16 histological variables (Table 1) per slide (e.g. percentage of fat tissue as interval scaled data (0–100%); grading of thymic follicular hyperplasia (grades 0–4) as ordinal scaled data) [4]. Nine of these parameters (e.g. the number of lymphoid follicles per slide) were derived on the basis of the visual inspection of histological slides by two pathologists (CW and AM), i.e. by a technique that can realistically be integrated into a routine pathology workflow. For the semiautomatic quantification of 5 different types of areas (e.g. the area of lymphoid follicles) we applied manual segmentation on a subset of the slides. Finally, two parameters (e.g. cortical area) were assessed by fully automatic image processing in all available slides. On the basis of these data, statistical “location parameters” (mean, median, modus) were calculated in order to correlate quantitative histological features with clinical outcome parameters.

2.3 Data accessibility

The raw data we are dealing with in this work has been collected in the course of the MGTX trial and is centrally managed by the MGTX Data Coordinating Center [3, 4]. The data described and used in this work is available at heiData (http://dx.doi.org/10.11588/data/NWE2JJ).

2.4 Data management and gathering in R

As described above (Table 1) data were produced using very different approaches (e.g. visual inspection with estimation of cortical atrophy; grading or counting; semi-automatic image processing in Fiji (www.fiji.sc) and automatic image processing in MATLAB (MATLAB R2016a, Mathworks, Natick, MA, USA) and saved in spreadsheets (Microsoft Excel 2010, Microsoft Corporation, Redmond WA, USA). Furthermore, demographic and clinical data associated with each case were obtained from Dr. Cutter, University of Alabama at Birmingham and submitted in spreadsheets.

All these datasheets were gathered in R (www.r-project.org) and merged into two main databases: one database with values per slide and another database with summation values per case (on the basis of unique case IDs).

2.5 Statistical methods applied

All statistical analysis were performed in R (www.r-project.org) by built-in functions or separately loaded libraries [7]:

P-values were calculated accordingly after testing for normal distribution using the Shapiro-Wilk test [7, 8]. T-test and Wilcoxon-test were performed in case of normally distribution and non-normally distributed variables, respectively. P-values <0.05 were considered as significant.

Pearson-correlation were calculated to check for the linear correlation between two variables [7].

Linear modelling was performed with single or multiple independent variables to check for their correlation and prediction quality regarding the modelled endpoints [7, 8].

2.6 Evaluation of entropy as marker of spatial heterogeneity

Since statistical “location parameters” (e.g. means, medians) are not helpful to evaluate “intra-case variance”, i.e. spatial heterogeneity of a particular histological feature in a given case (as depicted for follicle counts in Fig 1B), we first quantified variance as an additional feature [9].
Since summation of the deviation values per feature (e.g. range of the follicle number or standard deviation of fat content) can describe the variance of one feature, but is not suitable to measure the compound spatial heterogeneity of variables with different measurement scales, we here propose a probability based model for the quantification of heterogeneity based on entropy measurement (in bit) per case [10]. This strategy has been successfully used in other scientific disciplines such as ecology [10] and digital image processing [11–14]. In these fields, entropy was defined in terms of information theory [15, 16] and has been used to quantify spatial heterogeneity.

This approach can be divided into several steps: i) For the sake of simplification, every region (measurement point) could have one pre-defined level per variable from a certain range (e.g. number of lymph follicles with levels 1–10 in Fig 2A; atrophy grading with levels 0 to 4 in Fig 2B). The rationale behind choosing and defining the numbers of levels and the
thresholds were to not over estimate (e.g. in the case of estimated fat-content 5% and 8% are not significant different) and not to under estimate heterogeneity (e.g. two levels for a fat-content ranging from 0–100%). This is analogous to digital image processing [12], where entropy calculation of grayscale images with intensities between 0 and 256 (for an 8bit image) is achieved through reduction of the 256 intensities to 16 intensity levels. ii) For these levels the relative probability can be calculated (compare Fig 2). In case of complete randomness the probability of every level \( p_i \) should converge to one divided by the number of measurement points / region \( m^{-1} \). Then, according to Shannon [10,16,17], entropy \( H \) can then be calculated as \( H = -\sum_{i=1}^{m} p_i \log_2(p_i) \) with \( m \) as the number of measurement points and \( p_i \) as the relative probability of the level of the measurement point \( i \).

iii) Entropy can be defined per variable (e.g. number of lymphoid follicles, atrophy grade) and case (depending on the number of measurement points), which results in a maximum possible entropy per variable as a function of the number of measurement points and the probability of the examined feature. Accordingly, when 6 slides (measurement points) per case were studied, the respective entropy is \( H_{\text{max}} = -\sum_{i=1}^{6} \frac{1}{6} \log_2 \left( \frac{1}{6} \right) = 2.786 \) for the atrophy grading that was subdivided into 5 levels (grades 0–4) and \( H_{\text{max}} = -\sum_{i=1}^{6} \frac{1}{10} \log_2 \left( \frac{1}{10} \right) = 1.993 \) for the number of lymphoid follicles, since their absolute numbers (range = 0–50) were subdivided into 10 levels (levels 1–10). If there are identical values in all regions, i.e. if there is a completely random distribution, the entropy \( H_{\text{max}} = -\sum_{i=1}^{6} 1 \log_2 \left( \frac{1}{6} \right) = 0 \) (compare Fig 2).

**Results**

3.1 Thymic histomorphological heterogeneity across the cohort of MGTX-patients

Based on HE-stained (for fat) or CD23-stained (for follicles) sections, entropy per case was calculated for four histological features: The number of follicles; the grade of lymphofollicular hyperplasia (based on follicles per low power field)[4]; the grade of atrophy and the estimated percentage of intra-thymic fat) (Fig 2). The entropy values showed a remarkable variability for all features across the cases (compare the histograms on the diagonal in Fig 2). Furthermore, the entropy values of each single feature showed no significant correlation with any one of the other three features. Therefore, the entropies of these four histological features of the thymectomy specimens appeared independent of each other and usable as independent variables for further statistical analyses.

3.2 Comparing histological parameters and their entropy

Entropy of histological parameters (e.g. the percentage of intrathymic fat, the number of CD23-positive lymphoid follicles etc.) was calculated in order to generate new variables to be used for further statistics and modeling [9]: Here, we found no evidence of a correlation between the entropy of the grading of the intra-thymic fat content and the patient age (Pearson correlation -0.12). This finding is in contrast to the percentage of intra-thymic fat itself that needs normalization to age because of thymic involution (Pearson correlation 0.47 and \( p < 0.001 \) for the correlation of intrathymic fat and the patient age)[3,18]. Interestingly, we found a marginally non-significant correlation between the percentage of intrathymic fat and the BMI as surrogate of the body weight (Pearson correlation 0.44, \( p = 0.051 \)). In turn, for the entropy of the intrathymic fat there is no correlation to the BMI.

Furthermore, we found that that the entropy of the number of CD23-positive follicles was not significantly different between patient groups stratified according to basic patient parameter like gender (mean entropy in females 0.52±0.66, mean entropy in males 0.47±0.60,
p = 0.786) and age (Pearson correlation across an age range of 18–68 years was -0.23, p = 0.319).

This could indicate that entropy of these particular features is an independent variable, which does not need normalization to patient age and gender.

3.3 Checking the independence of entropy

One possible limitation of the entropy approach is its relation to the number of measurement points per case. If there are only few points (e.g. due to a small specimen or to limited sampling), the maximal possible entropy of that case is relative low (e.g. for 3 measurement points with 10 possible levels (p_i = 0.1) H_{max} = 0.99). This low value of entropy could lead to the erroneous conclusion that the investigated variable shows a high degree of order. To test for this possibility, we correlated the calculated entropy values with the number of underlying measurement points. Indeed, there was no significant correlation between the entropy values for the number of follicles and the number of measurement points, i.e. slides per case (Pearson-correlation 0.07, p = 0.652). We interpret this finding as an indication of having enough sample points per case to avoid over-estimation of the entropy of the number of follicles.

3.4 Correlation of histomorphological heterogeneity with clinical parameters

We next analyzed the correlation between the entropy of the four histological parameters and several clinical parameters by explorative modeling (compare Table 1) [19, 20]. Thereby, the main idea was to include many variables in the linear model and to subsequently further focus on the ones with a significant contribution. The following clinical outcome parameters were analyzed separately: prednisone exposure (area under the dose-time curve) from the time point of surgery to 12 months after surgery; MG-severity (measured by the QMG-score) at enrollment; MG-duration before surgery; a 3-point drop in the QMG score (which has been defined as significant improvement by neurologists [1, 21, 22]), and the achievement or not of minimal manifestation status between month 12 and month 36 after surgery. On this analysis, only the entropy of the grading of intra-thymic fat content showed a statistically significant contribution in a linear regression model for the absolute post operative prednisone dose (henceforth called post-operative prednisone-load) (Table 2). Subsequently, the factors with a significant contribution to the model were analyzed alone. Then, a significant positive correlation between the entropy of the grading of the intra-thymic fat content (as single independent

| end-point variable | entropy [bit] |
|--------------------|--------------|
| QMG-drop M12-36    | <0.001 0.914 0.974 0.904 0.971 logistic regression |
| MMS M12-36         | <0.001 0.402 0.847 0.082 0.621 |
| QMG-score at baseline | 0.006 0.489 0.479 0.575 0.712 linear regression |
| MG-duration        | 0.028 0.363 0.992 0.48 0.301 |
| Absolute prednisone dose before surgery | 0.05 0.47 0.386 0.129 0.725 |
| Absolute prednisone dose after surgery | 0.674 0.755 0.533 0.015 * 0.741 |

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Fig 3. Correlation between the entropy of intra-thymic fat and post-operative absolute prednisone-dose. On linear modelling, a significant correlation ($p = 0.03$) between the entropy of intra-thymic fat per case and the post-operative absolute prednisone dose (area under the dose-time curve for prednisone months 0–12) could be shown. To visualize the correlation the values per case are plotted against each other with the calculated regression line.

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variable) and the postoperative prednisone load could be confirmed (p-value for entropy grading intra-thymic fat 0.031). Fig 3 illustrates the trend to higher post-operative prednisone loads for cases with higher entropy. However, since the correlation analysis showed a small R-squared ($R^2 = 0.071$), the predictive power of our model was low. In order to check, whether
our model was suitable at all for this set of data, we performed cross validation by randomly dividing our patient collective of \( n = 55 \) into three sub-groups (folds) of similar size, of which two subgroups were selected to serve as training set for the model, while the remaining third subgroup served as test set. The mean squared error of the three folds was 82.9±11.2g (prednisone load) as compared to a mean squared error of 82.1g when the model was trained on all data. Thus, there seems to be no over fitting.

Translating these statistical findings into common clinicopathological terms, it appears that thymectomy specimens with more heterogeneous fat distribution show a trend for higher postoperative prednisone requirements, which is a surrogate for a more delayed clinical improvement. However, due to the great heterogeneity of our data, this correlation is not sufficient to predict clinical outcome.

**Discussion**

4.1 Advantages and limitations of using entropy as measure of heterogeneity

Generally speaking, entropy belongs to the few basic measurable entities in nature. It can be mathematically formulated using different axioms. For example, Shannon’s entropy definition follows a basic additive algorithm (\( H_1 + H_2 = H_3 \)), in contrast to Pincus’s entropy which includes a non-zero additional term dependent upon boundary conditions [23]. Having spatial data, as shown above, Shannon’s entropy could easily be calculated for all obtained parameters. In this context we could show that it is an independent and valuable new variable: The entropy of a given parameter showed other correlations than the parameter itself. For instance, the entropy of the intra-thymic fat content was independent of age (compare section 8.2), whereas intrathymic fat content showed a correlation with age (because of thymic involution). Vice versa, the entropy of intrathymic fat content showed a correlation to the BMI, whereas the parameter itself showed no correlation.

Basically, the relation of the entropy to the number of measurement points is one possible limitation. However, we could rule out this potential flaw as illustrated in section 8.3: We did not find a significant correlation between the sample sizes and entropy values using our data. However, regarding the strategy of tissue work-up, the strong relation between entropy and the number of sample points argues for an extensive work-up scheme with sufficiently spaced sampling point: Too few or too closely located sampling points would reduce the meaningfulness of the resulting entropy value. Another possible limitation is the choice of the number of parameter levels (compare Fig 4A and 4B): For interval scaled variables (e.g. the number of follicles in Fig 4A), an appropriate number of chosen levels will result in entropy values that are robust against minimal variations, thereby avoiding over-estimation of disorder / heterogeneity. On the other hand, if the number of chosen levels is too low, entropy will appear deceptively low, pretending a high degree of order / homogeneity. Accordingly, we deemed 10 levels with an interval of 5 follicles as reasonable compromise that is similar to the choice of levels that is commonly used in image processing software [12].

4.2 New perspectives through the introduction of entropy in digital pathology

In imaging based disciplines the term “entropy” has mostly been used in the context of image processing as a textural feature. For instance, in radiology the ‘textural entropy’ has been used to predict different stages of rectal cancer [24] or the survival of breast cancer patients [25], while, in pathology, it has been used to quantify nuclear features after toxic interventions [26, 27].
However, since it is a tool to measure any type of system complexity, entropy analysis and its variations (e.g. “minimum spanning tree (MST) entropy”) might be useful wherever heterogeneity plays a diagnostic or biological role, be it in cancer or beyond [23, 28–30]: Examples
comprise the quantification of heterogeneity of inflammatory infiltrates (e.g. in the fields of tumor immunology, pulmonary interstitial diseases and transplant rejection) or degenerative and regenerative processes (e.g. bone marrow alterations after toxic insults or following hematopoietic stem cell transplantation). For any of these applications no special statistical software would be needed, since entropy can easily be calculated and the features it relies on can be quite heterogeneous in regard to their means of measurement (compare Table 1). In practical terms and in order to determine entropy e.g. of a simple parameter like follicular grade, a pathologist would just need a specimen worked up in more than one section, a microscope (to estimate the parameter on visual inspection) and a spreadsheet (to collect the data). A sophisticated spatial work up scheme like the one used in this work (compare Fig 1) would allow to compare different regions of a specimen (e.g. entropy on the right as compared to the left lobule), but is not mandatory to determine entropy overall.

Beyond the analysis of heterogeneity of tissue images, entropy analysis may help to quantify the heterogeneity of RNA-seq data [31] and the heterogeneity of tumors in terms of subclone composition. [32] Finally, through correlation with clinical endpoints, entropy analysis might have the potential to detect new, quantitative types of predictive biomarkers on the morphological and molecular level in neoplastic as well as reactively changed tissue.

Appendix A

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