



## Short communication

## Identification of elastic properties of human patellae using micro-finite element analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Current homogenized finite element (hFE) models of the patella lack a validated material law and mostly overlook trabecular anisotropy. The objective of this study was to identify the elastic constants of patellar trabecular bone. Using  $\mu$ CT scans of 20 fresh-frozen cadaveric patellae, we virtually extracted 200 trabecular cubes (5.3 mm side length). Bone volume fraction and fabric tensor were measured. The elastic constants were identified from six independent load cases using micro finite element ( $\mu$ FE) analyses. Both anisotropic and isotropic material laws were considered. The elastic constants were validated by comparing stiffness, strain and stress between hFE and  $\mu$ FE predictions of 18 patellar sections and six load cases. The hFE section models were built from  $\mu$ CT (anisotropic law) and CT (isotropic law) scans. The homogenized anisotropic model induced less error ( $13 \pm 5\%$ ) in the global stiffness prediction than the isotropic one ( $18 \pm 6\%$ ), and less error in the prediction of local apparent strain, stress, and strain energy, compared to the isotropic one. This validated hFE model could be used for future applications, either with the anisotropic constants, or with the isotropic ones when the trabecular fabric is unavailable.

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## 1. Introduction

Currently, the existing homogenized finite element (hFE) models of patella rely on material laws identified not on the patellar bone, but, for example, femur or vertebra (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Ho et al., 2014; Takahashi et al., 2012). Furthermore, the anisotropy of the trabecular bone, shown to be crucial for predicting its elastic properties on various anatomical sites (Maquer et al., 2015), is completely overlooked.

Abrupt changes of main trabecular orientations (Raux et al., 1975) and the small size of the patella make it difficult to extract samples of appropriate dimensions for biomechanical testing and complicate accurate experimental measurements (Lammentausta et al., 2006). In such cases, micro finite element ( $\mu$ FE) modeling based on high-resolution  $\mu$ CT reconstruction is a common alternative to in vitro mechanical testing (Pistoia et al., 2002; van Rietbergen and Ito, 2015; Wolfram et al., 2010). This method avoids preparation- and damage-related artefacts and restriction

regarding the number of load-cases used to assess the elastic constants. Besides, the influence of any bony feature observable on  $\mu$ CT images can be reflected in the analysis.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify and validate elastic constants of the patellar bone specifically. The anisotropic constitutive law based on morphology-elasticity relationship and alternative isotropic law based on bone volume fraction were considered. Identification of homogenized models was performed by means of  $\mu$ FE simulated mechanical tests of  $\mu$ CT scanned cadaveric patellae. To validate the identified parameters, predictions of hFE models built from  $\mu$ CT and CT scans of cadaveric patellar sections were compared to  $\mu$ FE predictions of the same patellae.

## 2. Materials and methods

2.1.  $\mu$ CT and CT imaging

Twenty fresh-frozen cadaveric patellae (12 male, 8 female; age range 15–93, mean age  $67 \pm 17$ ) after thawing at room temperature overnight and bubble removal, were scanned with a  $\mu$ CT (Skyscan 1076, Bruker microCT, Kontich, Belgium) in a saline soaked gauze with the following scanning settings:  $18.3 \mu\text{m}$  resolution, 80 kV/120  $\mu\text{A}$ , 540 ms exposure time, 1 mm aluminum filter,  $0.2^\circ$  rotation step. The patellae were then CT scanned (Discovery 110 CT750 HD, GE Healthcare, Milwaukee, USA) with a resolution of  $0.39 \times 0.39 \times 0.625 \text{ mm}^3$ . The  $\mu$ CT

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images were downsampled to 36.6 μm resolution and segmented using a single level threshold algorithm (Ridler and Calvard, 1978). Image pre-processing was done in Medtool ([www.dr-pahr.at](http://www.dr-pahr.at)).

2.2. Identification of the material laws

The following constitutive law was considered (Zysset, 2003; Zysset and Curnier, 1995):

$$E_i = E_0 \rho^k (m_i^2)^l, \frac{E_i}{\nu_{ij}} = \frac{E_0}{\nu_0} \rho^k (m_i m_j)^l, G_{ij} = G_0 \rho^k (m_i m_j)^l, \forall i \neq j = 1, 2, 3, \quad (1)$$

where  $E_i$ ,  $\nu_{ij}$ , and  $G_{ij}$  are engineering constants,  $E_0$ ,  $\nu_0$ ,  $G_0$ ,  $k$ ,  $l$  are model parameters,  $\rho$  is the bone volume fraction, and  $m_i$  are the normalized eigenvalues of the second-order fabric tensor  $\mathbf{M}$  (Cowin, 1985). The isotropic case was based on the same relationship with  $\mathbf{M}$  equal to the identity tensor  $\mathbf{I}$ .

To identify the model parameters, simple mechanical tests were conducted via μFE on 200 trabecular cubes (5.3 mm side length), virtually extracted from μCT scans of all patellae. Cubes were visually checked to have relatively homogeneous bone distribution within volume, without abrupt change in trabecular direction, and a sufficient amount of trabecular on the sides to provide proper load transition (Fig. 1). Bone volume fraction ( $\rho$ ), defined as bone volume over the total tissue volume, fabric tensor  $\mathbf{M}$ , established through mean intercept length (MIL) (Laib et al., 1998; Whitehouse, 1974), and the degree of anisotropy (DA), defined as a ratio between maximum and minimum eigenvalues of fabric tensor (Hildebrand et al., 1999), were measured for each cube. All cubes were converted into μFE models with linear hexahedral elements (about 9 million degrees of freedom) following a linear elastic law ( $E = 12$  GPa,  $\nu = 0.3$ ) for bone tissue (Wolfram et al., 2010). Three compression and three shear load cases were applied to each cube under kinematic uniform boundary conditions (KUBC) (Pahr and Zysset, 2008). The full stiffness tensor ( $\mathbf{C}_{\mu FE\_aniso}$ ) of each cube was obtained by averaging μFE local strain and stress predictions. The orthotropic approximation ( $\mathbf{C}_{\mu FE\_ortho}$ ) of the stiffness tensor was considered for further analysis. The norm error associated with this assumption was calculated by

$$NE_{aniso-ortho} = \frac{\|\mathbf{C}_{\mu FE\_aniso} - \mathbf{C}_{\mu FE\_ortho}\|}{\|\mathbf{C}_{\mu FE\_aniso}\|} \quad (2)$$

Model parameters were identified by fitting the material law (1) to components of μFE stiffness tensor, using multi linear regressions in logarithmic scale. The same procedure was repeated for the isotropic model. Pre- and post-processing were done in Medtool, and μFE simulations were performed using ParFE ([parfe.sourceforge.net](http://parfe.sourceforge.net)).

2.3. Validation of the material laws

To validate the material laws, μFE and hFE predictions of cuboid sections ( $15 \times 22 \times 16$  mm<sup>3</sup> ( $\pm 8$  mm<sup>3</sup>)) of 18 out of 20 patellae were compared. One patella was excluded due to bone defects (probably metastases), and for one section μFE simulations did not converge. The sections were extracted from μCT scans by cropping the superior-inferior and medial-lateral sides, and embedding the anterior and posterior sides (Fig. 1). The embedding was modeled as linear elastic material ( $E = 1400$  MPa,  $\nu = 0.3$ ). Three tension and three shear KUBC load cases were simulated. Each μFE model had approximately 350 million degrees of freedom. The μFE simulations were performed using ParOSol ([bitbucket.org/Elanukumar/parosol-tu-wien](http://bitbucket.org/Elanukumar/parosol-tu-wien)). The hFE model meshes were created based on the same cropped μCT images downsampled to 0.54 mm voxel size. Each voxel was converted to a linear hexahedral element. Material properties of each bone element of the anisotropic model were automatically assigned by Medtool from original segmented μCT images, according to bone volume fraction and fabric (MIL) measured in 5.3-mm-diameter spherical volumes positioned in nodes of the μCT 2.0-mm-side-length background grid (Pahr and Zysset, 2009). In case of the isotropic model, the bone volume fraction was estimated from Hounsfield units (HU) of CT calibrated images (Latypova et al., 2016):

$$\rho = 1.0614 \times BMD - 0.0573, BMD = HU/1510. \quad (3)$$

The same parameters for background grid and spherical volumes were used. Each hFE model had approximately  $9 \times 10^4$  degrees of freedom. The hFE simulations were performed with Abaqus/Standard (Simulia, Providence, RI, USA).

To compare global μFE and hFE predictions, the stiffness matrices of the whole sections were calculated through the averaged strain and stress tensors and the

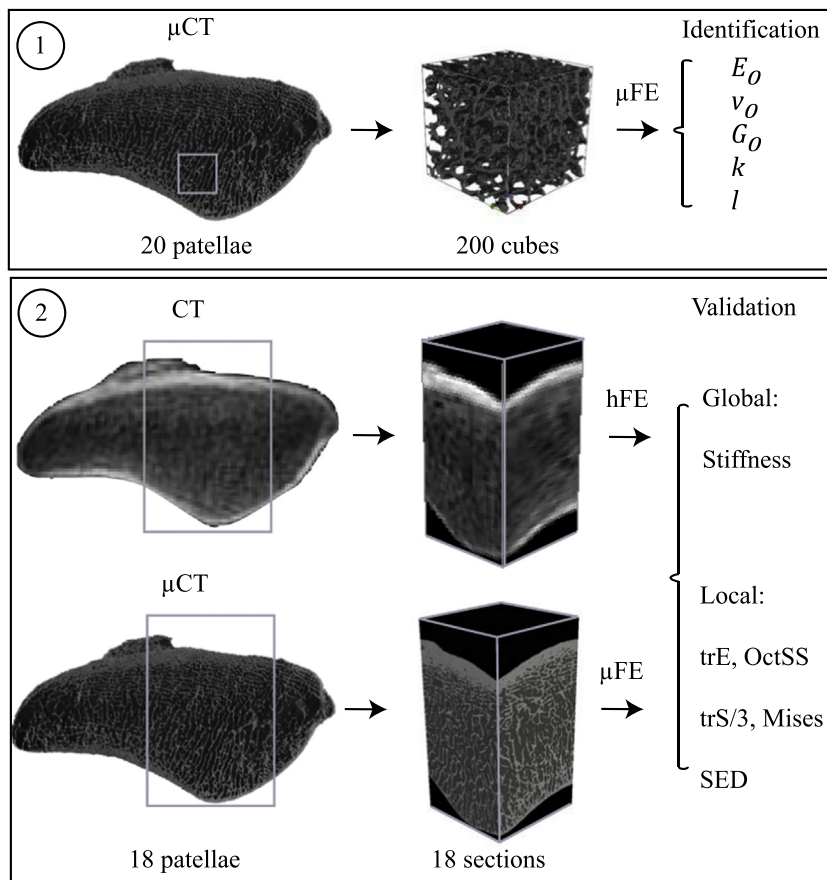


Fig. 1. Workflow of the study. The isotropic and anisotropic elastic laws for trabecular bone based on bone volume fraction and fabric anisotropy were identified via μFE for 200 cubic specimens (1). Those material models were validated against μFE by comparing the global stiffness and local strain and stress measures (trE, OctSS, trS/3, Mises, SED) of 18 patellar sections (2).

orthotropic part was considered ( $C_{\mu FE}$  and  $C_{hFE}$ ). The difference was estimated by

$$NE_{hFE} = \frac{\|C_{\mu FE} - C_{hFE}\|}{\|C_{\mu FE}\|} \quad (4)$$

In addition, the statistical significance between error induced by isotropic and anisotropic assumption was estimated with paired *t*-test. For local comparison, ten cubic (5.4 mm side) regions of interest (ROI) were extracted from each section. The size of the cubes was chosen to be consistent with the homogenization during the identification study. The components of strain and stress tensors were averaged on these ROIs. Volumetric strain (trE), octahedral shear strain (OctSS), volumetric stress (trS/3), von Mises stress (Mises), and strain energy density (SED) were compared. The hFE predictions were quantified with adjusted correlation coefficient ( $r^2_{adj}$ ), concordance correlation coefficient (ccc) (Lin, 1989), root mean square error (RMSE) and *p* value. The statistical significance between the correlations was analyzed with Williams formula proposed by (Steiger, 1980). Significance level was set to 95% ( $p < 0.05$ ) for all statistical analyses. The analysis of OctSS, Mises and SED followed a logarithmic transformation. Global stiffness was obtained by post-processing functions of Medtool. Strain and stress tensors in integration points of ROI were extracted from  $\mu FE$  results with Paraview (paraview.org), and with python script (Python 2.6.6) from the hFE results. ROIs were extracted from 10 patellar sections since 8 of 18 sections could not be loaded in Paraview, probably due to large (up to 42 GB) file sizes.

### 3. Results

The average bone volume fraction  $\rho$  of 200 cubes was  $0.29 \pm 0.11$ . Eigenvalues of the fabric tensor were  $m_1 = 0.77 \pm 0.07$ ,  $m_2 = 0.99 \pm 0.06$ ,  $m_3 = 1.23 \pm 0.09$ . DA was  $1.62 \pm 0.23$ . The norm error  $NE_{aniso-ortho}$  was  $6.15 \pm 2.92\%$ . Both anisotropic and isotropic homogenized laws were strongly correlated to the  $\mu FE$  reference (Table 1).

The validation was conducted on 18 sections. Both anisotropic and isotropic hFE showed good match to  $\mu FE$  reference (Table 1). The anisotropic norm error  $NE_{hFE}$  was lower ( $13 \pm 5\%$ ) than the isotropic one ( $18 \pm 6\%$ ). The isotropic norm error was statistically significantly different from anisotropic norm error ( $p = 0.0009$ ).

Local comparison was conducted on 100 cubic ROIs. The correlations of hFE against  $\mu FE$  for volumetric strain and stress were strong for anisotropic and isotropic models, but better for anisotropic one (Table 1). For OctSS, SED and Mises, anisotropic predictions also provided higher correlation coefficients, slopes of regression line closer to unit and lower RMS errors. The correlations were statistically significantly different ( $p < 0.001$ ). The strain and

stress distribution of hFE model was visually consistent with  $\mu FE$  reference (Fig. 2).

### 4. Discussion

Currently, literature is lacking validated material law for the patellar bone that can be implemented in hFE models. Such models can be used for numerical predictions of patellar strain in order to better understand patellar pathologies such as fracture after total knee arthroplasty (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011, 2013) or anterior knee pain (Ho et al., 2014). In this study we identified and validated anisotropic and isotropic material models for patellar trabecular bone by means of  $\mu FE$  analyses on 20 cadaveric patellae that can be further used in hFE models.

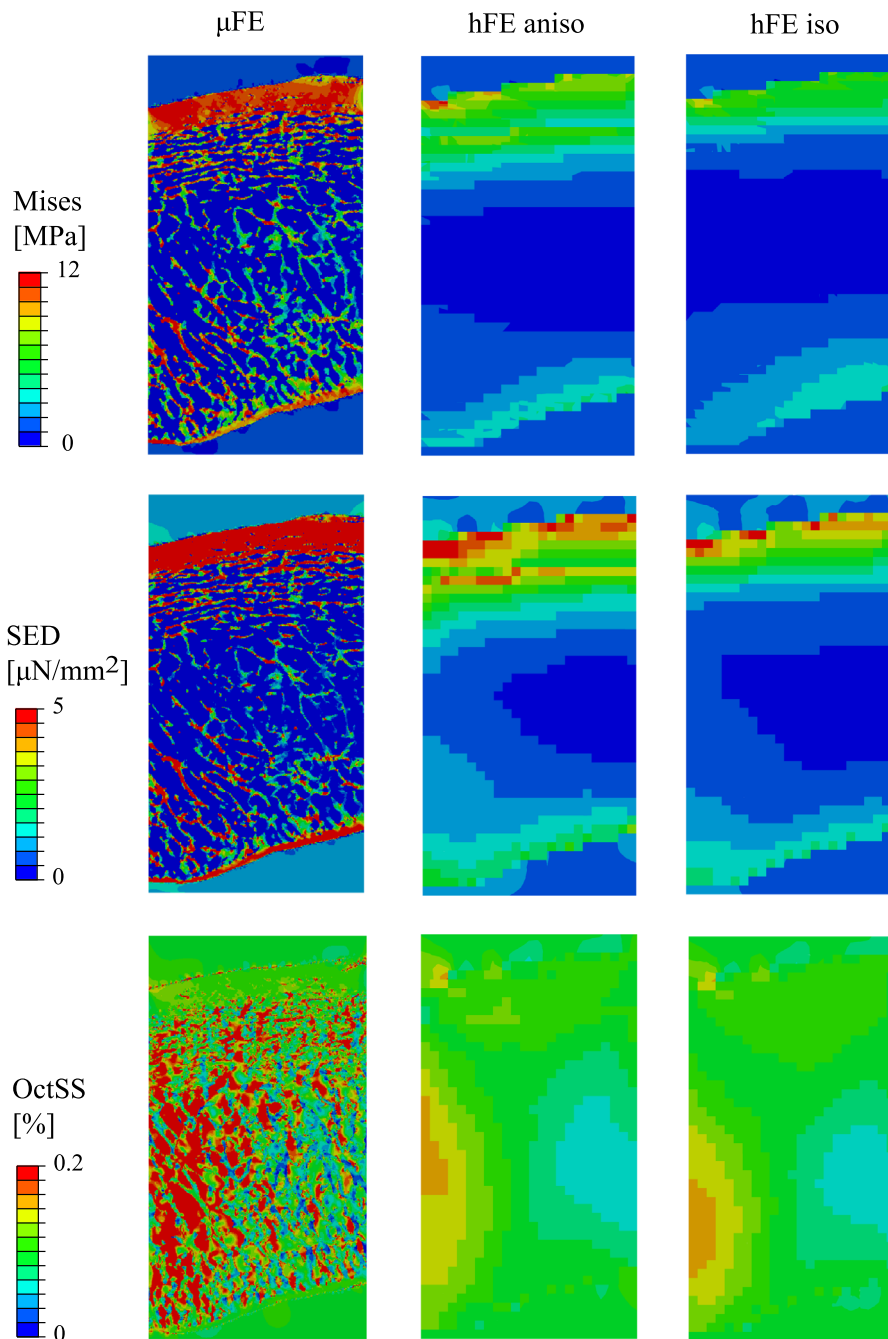
The average bone volume fraction  $\rho$  of the extracted cubes was consistent with the reported values (Lammentausta et al., 2006; Raux et al., 1975). The structure of the patellar trabecular was found to be closer to orthotropic rather than isotropic or transverse isotropic. The low error caused by orthotropic approximation confirmed this observation. The average degree of anisotropy was in the range of other anatomical zones (femur, radius, and vertebra) (Gross et al., 2013), but no data for the patellar bone was found for comparison. The identified model parameters were also consistent with the literature (Gross et al., 2013), but higher exponential constants were obtained. It suggests that higher stiffness at low bone volume fraction zones and lower stiffness at higher bone volume fraction zones will be assigned to the patellar hFE if material parameters from other anatomical sites are used.

For validation of the identified elastic laws, the global stiffness and local strain and stress invariants of the bone sections modeled as hFE was compared to its  $\mu FE$  equivalent. The isotropic hFE was based on CT images since currently it is a gold standard in clinical application. The analyzed invariants were chosen as the common descriptors of bone strain and stress state that can be linked with bone damage. Both models showed highly significant correlation to  $\mu FE$  predictions, however, as expected, accounting for the trabecular fabric improved the correlation of the model against the  $\mu FE$  analyses (Gross et al., 2013; Maquer et al., 2015). Even though the anisotropic model better predicted the  $\mu FE$  global stiffness, it

**Table 1**

Identification and validation, for anisotropic and isotropic morphology-elasticity models. Identification includes parameters for elasticity models and results of regression analysis. Validation includes regression analysis between components of global stiffness matrices, and local strain and strain measures calculated with anisotropic and isotropic hFE models (*x*) against  $\mu FE$  reference (*y*).

		Identification									
	$E_0$ (MPa)	$\nu_0$	$G_0$ (MPa)	<i>k</i>	<i>l</i>	Regression	$r^2_{adj}$	ccc	RMSE	<i>p</i> -Value	
<b>Anisotropy</b>	12723.1	0.24	4224.6	2.1	1.02	$y = 0.949x + 0.316$	0.95	0.97	0.20	< 0.001	
<b>Isotropy</b>	11035.9	0.26	4395.1	2.13	–	$y = 0.838x + 1.000$	0.85	0.92	0.32	< 0.001	
		Validation									
						Regression	$r^2_{adj}$	ccc	RMSE	<i>p</i> -Value	
<b>Anisotropy</b>	<b>Global stiffness matrices</b>					$y = 1.070x - 0.641$	0.96	0.96	0.16	< 0.001	
	<b>Volumetric strain (trE)</b>					$y = 0.961x + 1e^{-5}$	0.98	0.99	$8e^{-5}$	< 0.001	
	<b>Octahedral shear strain (OctSS)</b>					$y = 0.988x - 0.083$	0.84	0.91	0.07	< 0.001	
	<b>Volumetric stress (trS/3)</b>					$y = 0.972x + 0.013$	0.98	0.98	0.08	< 0.001	
	<b>Von Mises stress (Mises)</b>					$y = 0.913x - 0.001$	0.96	0.98	0.19	< 0.001	
<b>Isotropy</b>	<b>Strain energy density (SED)</b>					$y = 0.913x - 0.662$	0.98	0.98	0.17	< 0.001	
	<b>Global stiffness matrices</b>					$y = 0.978x + 0.094$	0.93	0.96	0.21	< 0.001	
	<b>Volumetric strain (trE)</b>					$y = 0.962x + 2e^{-5}$	0.96	0.98	$1e^{-4}$	< 0.001	
	<b>Octahedral shear strain (OctSS)</b>					$y = 0.946x - 0.367$	0.71	0.84	0.10	< 0.001	
	<b>Volumetric stress (trS/3)</b>					$y = 0.846x + 0.021$	0.94	0.96	0.16	< 0.001	
<b>Von Mises stress (Mises)</b>					$y = 0.792x - 0.112$	0.80	0.79	0.33	< 0.001		
<b>Strain energy density (SED)</b>					$y = 0.835x - 1.316$	0.89	0.86	0.29	< 0.001		



**Fig. 2.** Comparison of von Mises stress (Mises), strain energy density (SED) and octahedral shear strain (OctSS) contour plots of  $\mu$ FE and hFE predictions for the patella under tension in superior-inferior direction (patellar cut in sagittal plane).

was still found slightly less stiff, possibly due to the lack of explicit cortex modeling (Pahr and Zysset, 2009). The highest variation between  $\mu$ FE and hFE stress predictions was found in cubes with low stress values caused by low bone volume fraction. These findings support results of a similar study conducted on the proximal femur (Hazrati Marangalou et al., 2012). The correlation of the local strain predictions was lower than those of stress predictions most probably due to the lower variation of strain values.

Several limitations of the study should be mentioned. The identification was conducted on bone cubes using kinematic uniform boundary conditions that tend to overestimate bone effective stiffness (Hazanov and Huet, 1994). The bone tissue was assumed homogeneous and isotropic material, but it was demonstrated previously that heterogeneous tissue mineralization has only a

minor effect on apparent trabecular bone elastic properties (Gross et al., 2012). The material model validation with six canonical loading cases of patellar cuboid sections allowed controlled boundary conditions and easy result interpretation (van Rietbergen and Ito, 2015; Zysset et al., 2013). However, predictions of anisotropic and isotropic models should be further compared for a whole patella under more physiological loading conditions. The importance of modeling anisotropy could be further emphasized in such case.

In conclusion, an anisotropic and an isotropic morphology-elasticity model for patellar trabecular bone were identified and validated. When high-resolution images are available, the anisotropic material parameters can be assigned to hFE models, assuming direct access to bone volume fraction and fabric tensor

from images. When only low-resolution images are available, such as clinical CT scans, the isotropic model is a reasonable alternative. The anisotropic model might still be applicable by estimating anisotropy with recently proposed approaches, such as database approach or  $\mu$ CT template registration (Marangalou et al., 2013; Taghizadeh et al., 2016).

### Conflict of interest

None of the authors has any conflict of interest.

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