Surgical knot training in ophthalmic surgery: Skill assessment with eye-tracking

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Introduction
Suturing is a fundamental task in ophthalmic surgery. Training is necessary to master technical as well as cognitive skills and develop a high level of hand-eye coordination. Formulating novel objective measures of operational performance will be beneficial for training and computer-based image guidance. Capturing eye movements while performing surgical tasks can provide meaningful information to access operator’s skill and overall performance. This study explores: eye tracking for developing performance metrics for suturing tasks and focuses on time-based metrics and the spatial distribution of fixations.

Materials and Methods
This study was conducted in the Royal College of Ophthalmologists (London, UK) during the training course “Introduction to Ophthalmic Surgery”. We recruited 34 volunteers, 9 experts (faculty members) and 25 novices (trainees). All participants were asked to execute a single surgical knot on the training board, whilst wearing the eye-tracking glasses. A surgical knot consists of two major subtasks, which are needle passing (NP) and knot tying (KT), whose start and end moments are shown in Fig. 1. For capturing eye movements, the Tobii Pro Glasses 2 was used and deployed as shown in Fig. 2(a). Time-stamped gaze focus points are synchronized with the FoV video and overlayed (circle) as shown in Fig.2(b). Inspired from the literature [1],[2] for every recording we then calculated i) the total duration of the entire suturing task ii) the duration of the NP subtask, as well as iii) the duration of KT. These time-based metrics were further used for statistical analysis. Spatial distribution of gaze points and fixations were also investigated during the KT phase. The distribution of fixations [3],[4] is illustrated as a heatmap plot (Fig. 3), where one can observe significant differences between expert and novices. To quantify this distribution, fixation sparsity is introduced as the ratio of the total number of color- valued pixels (locations that we obtain fixations) in the heatmap divided by the image resolution 1080×1920.

Results
Statistical analysis was performed with the Mann-Whitney U-test (p = 0.05 significance level). Results are summarized in Table 1.

Conclusion and Discussion
Experts were found to be significantly faster than novices. Additionally, experts’ fixations are clustered together in smaller areas indicating that they focus their gaze almost entirely on areas of interest (e.g., suture, tools), whereas novices’ fixations are dispersed. It is evident that analysis of the spatial distribution of fixations can indicate areas of high/low interest, and patterns associated with levels of expertise. Future work will focus on developing novel eye-tracking features and examining their correlation with standardized manual assessment, and on machine learning algorithms for predicting surgical skills.

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References