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# RADIATION RESEARCH

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## CONTENTS OF VOLUME 132

NUMBER 1, OCTOBER 1992

|   |   |    |
|---|---|----|
| V. Noethig-Laslo, T. A. Himdan, and H. Bilinski   | Paramagnetic Molecular Centers in $\gamma$ -Irradiated Precipitates in the System $\text{AlCl}_3$ -DL- $\alpha$ -Valine-NaOH . . . . .  | 1  |
| A. Saha, P. C. Mandal, and S. N. Bhattacharyya  | Radiation-Induced Inactivation of Dihydroorotate Dehydrogenase in Dilute Aqueous Solution . . . . .   | 7  |
| L. J. Shyr and B. A. Muggenburg   | A Comparison of the Predicted Risks of Developing Osteosarcoma for Dogs Exposed to $^{238}\text{PuO}_2$ Based on Average Bone Dose or Endosteal Cell Dose . . . . .                     | 13 |
| John R. J. Sorenson   | Essential Metalloelement Metabolism and Radiation Protection and Recovery . . . . .   | 19 |
| Lynn Harrison, Milan Skorvaga, Richard P. Cunningham, Jolyon H. Hendry, and Geoffrey P. Margison  | Transfection of the <i>Escherichia coli nth</i> Gene into Radiosensitive Chinese Hamster Cells: Effects on Sensitivity to Radiation, Hydrogen Peroxide, and Bleomycin Sulfate . . . . . | 30 |
| C. J. Koch and K. A. Skov   | Comparisons of Cellular Radiation Response Using Absolute Rather Than Relative Parameters . . . . .   | 40 |
| Mary Avery, S. David Nathanson, and Fred W. Hetzel  | Lymph Flow from Murine Footpad Tumors before and after Sublethal Hyperthermia . . . . .   | 50 |
| Louis K. Wagner, Dennis A. Johnston, and Daniel J. Felleman   | Radiation-Induced Micrencephaly in Guinea Pigs . . . . .  | 54 |
| Mark W. Dewhirst, Edgardo T. Ong, David Madwed, Bruce Klitzman, Timothy Secomb, David Brizel, Joseph Bonaventura, Gary Rosner, Brian Kavanagh, Jeri Edwards, and Joseph Gross | Effects of the Calcium Channel Blocker Flunarizine on the Hemodynamics and Oxygenation of Tumor Microvasculature . . . . .  | 61 |
| Jamie R. Milligan, Allister D. Arnold, and John F. Ward   | The Effect of Superhelical Density on the Yield of Single-Strand Breaks in $\gamma$ -Irradiated Plasmid DNA . . . . .   | 69 |
| Candace D. Carter and Ted P. McDonald   | Thrombopoietin from Human Embryonic Kidney Cells Causes Increased Thrombocytopoiesis in Sublethally Irradiated Mice . . . . .   | 74 |
| R. W. M. van der Maazen, I. Verhagen, B. J. Kleiboer, and A. J. van der Kogel   | Repopulation of O-2A Progenitor Cells after Irradiation of the Adult Rat Optic Nerve Analyzed by an <i>in Vitro</i> Clonogenic Assay . . . . .  | 82 |
| Stephen M. Hahn, Lynn Wilson, C. Murali Krishna, James Liebmann, William DeGraff, Janet Gamson, Amram Samuni, David Venzon, and James B. Mitchell                             | Identification of Nitroxide Radioprotectors . . . . .   | 87 |
| Edward A. Bump, Beth A. Cerce, Ramsey Al-Sarraf, Susan M. Pierce, and Cameron J. Koch   | Radioprotection of DNA in Isolated Nuclei by Naturally Occurring Thiols at Intermediate Oxygen Tension . . . . .  | 94 |

|  |  |     |
|--|--|-----|
| Yin Zhang, Kevin M. Sweet,<br>Marguerite A. Sognier, and<br>James A. Belli | Interaction between Radiation and Drug Damage<br>in Mammalian Cells. VI. Radiation and Doxorubi-<br>cin Age-Response Function of Doxorubicin-Sen-<br>sitive and -Resistant Chinese Hamster Cells . . . . . | 105 |
|--|--|-----|

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| Björn Zackrisson and Mikael Karlsson  | Relative Biological Effectiveness of 50-MV X Rays<br>on Jejunal Crypt Survival <i>in Vivo</i> . . . . .                  | 112 |
| J. H. Hendry, S. A. Roberts, and<br>C. S. Potten  | The Clonogen Content of Murine Intestinal<br>Crypts: Dependence on Radiation Dose Used in Its<br>Determination . . . . . | 115 |
| Q. Chen, M. Chopp, M. O. Dereski,<br>B. C. Wilson, M. S. Patterson,<br>A. Schreiber, and F. W. Hetzel | The Effect of Light Fluence Rate in Photodynamic<br>Therapy of Normal Rat Brain . . . . .                                | 120 |

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| Nandanuri M. S. Reddy and<br>Christopher S. Lange | Comments on "Radiation-Induced DNA Un-<br>winding Is Influenced by Cell Shape and Trypsin"                       | 124 |
| P. L. Olive and S. H. MacPhail                    | Reply to Comments on "Radiation-Induced DNA<br>Unwinding Is Influenced by Cell Shape and Tryp-<br>sin" . . . . . | 125 |

ERRATUM

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| M. P. Little, M. M. Hawkins,<br>R. E. Shore, M. W. Charles, and<br>N. G. Hildreth | Volume 126, Number 3 (1991): "Time Variations<br>in the Risk of Cancer following Irradiation in<br>Childhood," pp. 304-316 . . . . . | 126 |
|---|--|-----|

|                         |  |     |
|-------------------------|--|-----|
| ANNOUNCEMENTS . . . . . |  | 127 |
|-------------------------|--|-----|

NUMBER 2, NOVEMBER 1992

FAILLA MEMORIAL LECTURE

|             |   |     |
|-------------|---|-----|
| G. E. Adams | Redox, Radiation, and Reductive Bioactivation | 129 |
|-------------|---|-----|

SYMPOSIUM: THE MOLECULAR BASIS FOR RADIATION EFFECTS ON CELL PROGRESSION THROUGH THE CELL CYCLE

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| J. L. Roti Roti   | Introduction . . . . .   | 140 |
| Ted A. Weinert  | Dual Cell Cycle Checkpoints Sensitive to Chromo-<br>some Replication and DNA Damage in the Bud-<br>ding Yeast <i>Saccharomyces cerevisiae</i> . . . . .        | 141 |
| Roy Rowley  | Radiation-Induced Mitotic Delay: A Genetic Char-<br>acterization in the Fission Yeast . . . . .  | 144 |
| Ruth J. Muschel, Hong Bing Zhang,<br>George Iliakis, and<br>W. Gillies McKenna  | Effects of Ionizing Radiation on Cyclin Expression<br>in HeLa Cells . . . . .  | 153 |
| R. B. Mikkelsen and C. Gentry   | A Radiation-Induced Inhibitor of Chromosome<br>Condensation and Nuclear Envelope Breakdown<br>in HeLa Cells . . . . .  | 158 |
| P. C. Goswami, M. Hill,<br>R. Higashikubo, W. D. Wright,<br>and J. L. Roti Roti | The Suppression of the Synthesis of a Nuclear Pro-<br>tein in Cells Blocked in G <sub>2</sub> Phase: Identification of<br>NP-170 as Topoisomerase II . . . . . | 162 |

REGULAR ARTICLES

|  |  |     |
|--|--|-----|
| C. Malamut, P. J. Paes-Leme,<br>and A. S. Paschoa  | Diffusion of Low-Energy Electrons in Tissue-like Liquids . . . . .   | 168 |
| Harald H. Rossi and Marco Zaider   | Compound Dual Radiation Action. I. General Aspects . . . . .   | 178 |
| A. Rodriguez, E. L. Alpen,<br>and P. Powers-Risius   | The RBE-LET Relationship for Rodent Intestinal Crypt Cell Survival, Testes Weight Loss, and Multicellular Spheroid Cell Survival after Heavy-Ion Irradiation . . . . .             | 184 |
| Yi Jin, Fredric J. Burns,<br>and Seymour J. Garte  | Oncogene Amplification Detected by <i>in Situ</i> Hybridization in Radiation-Induced Skin Cancers in Rats . . . . .  | 193 |
| John M. Buatti, Luis R. Rivero, and<br>Timothy J. Jorgensen  | Radiation-Induced DNA Single-Strand Breaks in Freshly Isolated Human Leukocytes . . . . .  | 200 |
| M. P. Little, M. M. Hawkins,<br>M. W. Charles, and N. G. Hildreth  | Fitting the Armitage-Doll Model to Radiation-Exposed Cohorts and Implications for Population Cancer Risks . . . . .  | 207 |
| K. A. Kunugi, E. M. Miller,<br>M. A. Vazquez-Padua,<br>and T. J. Kinsella  | Low pH Does Not Affect the Dose Response for 5'-Amino-5'-deoxythymidine Modulation of IdUrd DNA Incorporation and Radiosensitization in a Human Bladder Cancer Cell Line . . . . . | 222 |
| Dominique Bonnefont-Rousselot,<br>Monique Gardès-Albert,<br>Sylvie Lepage, Jacques Delattre,<br>and Christiane Ferradini | Effect of pH on Low-Density Lipoprotein Oxidation by $O_2^-/HO_2^-$ Free Radicals Produced by Gamma Radiolysis . . . . .   | 228 |
| Celso Luiz S. Lage and<br>Maria Aparecida Esquibel   | Developmental Changes Induced by $\gamma$ Irradiation in <i>Ipomoea batatas</i> L. Lam (Sweet Potato) . . . . .  | 237 |
| Danuta Wlodek and Peggy L. Olive   | Neutral Filter Elution Detects Differences in Chromatin Organization Which Can Influence Cellular Radiosensitivity . . . . .   | 242 |
| W. H. Y. Roa and J. D. Chapman   | Killing of EMT-6 Cells by Decays from Isotopes Incorporated on Sensitizer Adducts . . . . .  | 248 |
| Colin A. Bill, Brigitte M. Grochan,<br>Eduard Vrdoljak,<br>Elizabeth A. Mendoza, and<br>Philip J. Tofilon                | Decreased Repair of Radiation-Induced DNA Double-Strand Breaks with Cellular Differentiation . . . . .   | 254 |
| SHORT COMMUNICATIONS   |  |     |
| Sydney M. Evans,<br>Thomas Van Winkle,<br>Bernard F. Szuhaj,<br>Kathryn E. Michel,<br>and Ann R. Kennedy                 | Protection against Metastasis of Radiation-Induced Thymic Lymphosarcoma and Weight Loss in C57Bl/6NCr1BR Mice by an Autoclave-Resistant Factor Present in Soybeans . . . . .       | 259 |
| John T. Leith, Gia Padfield,<br>and Seth Michelson   | Effects of Partial Hepatectomy on the Growth Characteristics and Hypoxic Fractions of Xenografted DLD-2 Human Colon Cancers . . . . .  | 263 |
| IN MEMORIAM  |  |     |
| G. E. Adams  | John Freeman Loutit . . . . .  | 269 |

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| J. Chen, H. Roos, and A. M. Kellerer  | Microdosimetry of Diagnostic X Rays: Applications of the Variance-Covariance Method . . . . .  | 271 |
| Nestor Azziz, Ferenc Hajnal,<br>Wayne M. Lowder, and Phil Murley  | Stopping Power and the Concept of Effective Ion Charge at Low Energies . . . . .   | 277 |
| Michael A. Xapsos   | A Spatially Restricted Linear Energy Transfer Equation . . . . .   | 282 |
| Edwin E. Budzinski,<br>Alexander E. Maccubbin,<br>Marianne S. Evans,<br>Molly Kulesz-Martin,<br>and Harold C. Box | Analysis of DNA Damage at the Dinucleoside Monophosphate Level: Application to the Formamido Lesion . . . . .  | 288 |
| Björn Anderstam, Carlos Vaca,<br>and Mats Harms-Ringdahl  | Lipid Peroxide Levels in a Murine Adenocarcinoma Exposed to Hyperthermia: The Role of Glutathione Depletion . . . . .  | 296 |
| Brian Endlich, Reza Salavati,<br>Thomas Sullivan, and C. Clifton Ling   | Rat Embryo Cells Immortalized with Transfected Oncogenes Are Transformed by $\gamma$ Irradiation . . .   | 301 |
| D. L. Lundgren, F. F. Hahn,<br>J. H. Diel, and M. B. Snipes   | Repeated Inhalation Exposure of Rats to Aerosols of $^{144}\text{CeO}_2$ . I. Lung, Liver, and Skeletal Dosimetry  | 312 |
| D. L. Lundgren, F. F. Hahn,<br>and J. H. Diel   | Repeated Inhalation Exposure of Rats to Aerosols of $^{144}\text{CeO}_2$ . II. Effects on Survival and Lung, Liver, and Skeletal Neoplasms . . . . .               | 325 |
| Qiu-mei Zhang, Shuji Yonei,<br>and Mikita Kato  | Multiple Pathways for Repair of Oxidative DNA Damages Caused by X Rays and Hydrogen Peroxide in <i>Escherichia coli</i> . . . . .                                  | 334 |
| N. F. Metting, S. T. Palayoor,<br>R. M. Macklis, R. W. Atcher,<br>H. L. Liber, and J. B. Little                   | Induction of Mutations by Bismuth-212 $\alpha$ Particles at Two Genetic Loci in Human B-Lymphoblasts . . . . .   | 339 |
| Eric P. Cohen, Brian L. Fish,<br>and John E. Moulder  | Treatment of Radiation Nephropathy with Captopril . . . . .  | 346 |
| Virginia K. Langmuir<br>and Holly L. Mendonca   | The Combined Use of $^{131}\text{I}$ -Labeled Antibody and the Hypoxic Cytotoxin SR 4233 <i>in Vitro</i> and <i>in Vivo</i> . . . . .                              | 351 |
| Thomas L. Walden, Jr.   | Leukotriene $\text{C}_4$ -Induced Radioprotection: The Role of Hypoxia . . . . .   | 359 |
| R. H. Mannan, J. R. Mercer, L. I.<br>Wiebe, V. V. Somayaji, and J. D.<br>Chapman                                  | Radioiodinated 1-(2-Fluoro-4-iodo-2,4-dideoxy- $\beta$ -L-xylopyranosyl)-2-nitroimidazole: A Novel Probe for the Noninvasive Assessment of Tumor Hypoxia . . . . . | 368 |
| SHORT COMMUNICATION   |  |     |
| H. Nagasawa, J. B. Little,<br>N. M. Tsang, E. Saunders, J. Tesmer,<br>and G. F. Strniste                          | Effect of Dose Rate on the Survival of Irradiated Human Skin Fibroblasts . . . . .   | 375 |
| AUTHOR INDEX FOR VOLUME 132 . . . . .   |  | 380 |
| CUMULATIVE AUTHOR INDEX FOR VOLUMES 129-132 . . . . .   |  | 381 |
| CUMULATIVE SUBJECT INDEX FOR VOLUMES 129-132 . . . . .  |  | 384 |



# Microdosimetry of Diagnostic X Rays: Applications of the Variance–Covariance Method

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CHEN, J., ROOS, H., AND KELLERER, A. M. Microdosimetry of Diagnostic X Rays: Applications of the Variance–Covariance Method. *Radiat. Res.* 132, 271–276 (1992).

Microdosimetric measurements in beams of diagnostic X rays (between 30 and 125 kV) have been performed. In these pulsed radiation fields, microdosimetric measurements are possible only by application of the variance–covariance technique. The dose mean lineal energy,  $\bar{y}_D$ , is determined for various simulated diameters, at different depths in the absorber, and at different points within the pulse intervals. From the measured temporal dependences one can also obtain values of  $\bar{y}_D$  for different X-ray pulse generators. The results demonstrate the potential of the variance–covariance method for a diversity of microdosimetric measurements in radiation protection and in the quality control of radiation beams. © 1992 Academic Press, Inc.

## INTRODUCTION

The quality factor in radiation protection is currently defined as a function of the linear energy transfer ( $L$ ) which can be calculated in radiation fields of known spectral distribution. But the experimental determination of the quality factor, especially for radiation fields with incompletely known spectra, needs to be based on the measurable microdosimetric parameter dose mean lineal energy,  $\bar{y}_D$ , which is closely related to the dose mean linear energy transfer. This parameter therefore becomes increasingly important in the practice of radiation measurements.

The variance–covariance method permits one to determine  $\bar{y}_D$  in time-varying radiation fields ( $I$ ). Until now, several applications of this method have been made. Some experiments were performed in the laboratory with low dose rate (2, 3), some were performed with neutron beams (4, 5), and some were done with therapeutic electron beams (6, 7). All of the experiments show the potential of the variance–covariance method and its applicability in radiation protection and radiation beam control.

However, while microdosimetry in its conventional form has become more and more important in their fields, the variance–covariance method has still not entered into routine practice. We felt, therefore, that a new investigation with added features would be useful.

X rays are widely used in diagnostic radiology, but there are very few microdosimetric measurements so far for such radiation fields. In the pulsed diagnostic radiation fields, the variance method cannot be used, and measurements of single-event spectra would be possible only if one reduced the dose rate sufficiently by increasing the source-to-detector distance, which is usually impracticable. Furthermore, measurements with the single-event technique would require impracticable time for this kind of radiation instrument. With the variance–covariance method one avoids this dilemma. Therefore, a special aim of this paper is to demonstrate the potential of the variance–covariance method in pulsed diagnostic radiation fields. We give new data for these commonly used radiation fields and show that not only the averaged information for a whole pulse train but also the microdosimetric characteristics of individual subpulses can be determined by the variance–covariance method. We achieve this by the use of a sufficiently high sampling frequency.

The measurements with the variance–covariance method were performed in the field of a “two-pulse” X-ray generator for radiography. It will be seen subsequently that measurements on this type of generator provide microdosimetric information even for other pulsed X-ray generators.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

We chose to determine the quality of the diagnostic X rays produced by a Siemens “Nanomobil 2” X-ray generator. It is a two-pulse generator, i.e., there are two sinusoidal pulses within each 20-ms period (see Fig. 1). The anode voltage<sup>1</sup> of this type of instrument can be varied between 30 and 125 kV.

A pair of tissue-equivalent cylindrical proportional counters (height equal to diameter) with methane-based tissue-equivalent gas was employed for the measurements. The geometry and construction of the detectors have been described earlier (3). They have tissue-equivalent walls 12 mm thick. The counters are linked to the same gas-flow system and to the same high voltage supply; any fluctuations of gas gain in the two detectors are therefore correlated and can, as is the case with the dose fluctuations, be eliminated with the variance–covariance technique. The proportional counters are calibrated with a collimated <sup>241</sup>Am  $\alpha$ -particle source for different gas pressures and electrode voltages.

The electronic signal processing system is represented in Fig. 2. Two detectors, A and B, are exposed to the same radiation field and register

<sup>1</sup> The term anode voltage is here used for the maximum of the pulsed potential.

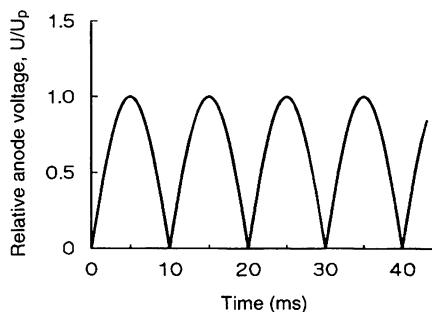


FIG. 1. Pulse form of anode voltage of a two-pulse X-ray generator.

synchronously the electric signals which are proportional to the energy imparted within each of the detectors. The currents from the detectors are measured by electrometers in an integrating mode. The current and the voltage noise of the electrometers are  $10^{-15}$  A and  $20 \mu\text{V}$  (rms), respectively. To achieve optimal resolution, the signals of each irradiation pulse are further amplified to cover most of the dynamic range of the analog-to-digital converter (12-bit). The influences of electronic noise and of the converter's resolution on the measured signals are below 5%.

The digitized data are stored in the computer as time sequences. The variance-covariance method does not require information on the temporal interrelationship of the specific energies registered in consecutive measurement intervals. The information can, however, be used to determine from the data for the two-pulse generator the dose mean lineal energy as a function of instantaneous voltage, and thus the variations of  $\bar{y}_D$  within irradiation pulses. Figure 3 shows, as an example, the measured data from three irradiation pulses for two detectors; the duration of the sampling intervals was  $100 \mu\text{s}$ . Due to attenuation of the softer X rays as well as the decline of photon yield at low anode voltages, Fig. 3 shows "zero" energy imparted during an appreciable portion of each cycle.

From paired data for the two detectors the mean,  $\bar{\epsilon}$ , of the energy imparted, its relative variance,  $V$ , and its relative covariance,  $C$ , are determined. The dose mean of the energy imparted per energy deposition event is given by the variance-covariance method.

$$\bar{\epsilon}_D = (V - C) \cdot \bar{\epsilon}$$

The corresponding values of the dose mean lineal energy,  $\bar{y}_D$ , are given by

$$\bar{y}_D = \bar{\epsilon}_D / \bar{l}$$

where  $\bar{l}$  is the mean chord length of the simulated volume.

Figure 3 indicates that detector B registered a somewhat higher dose rate than detector A. However, the values of the microdosimetric parameters,

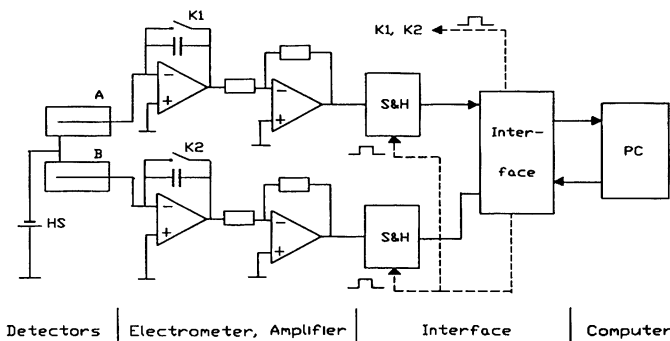


FIG. 2. Electronic signal processing system to perform measurements with the variance-covariance technique.

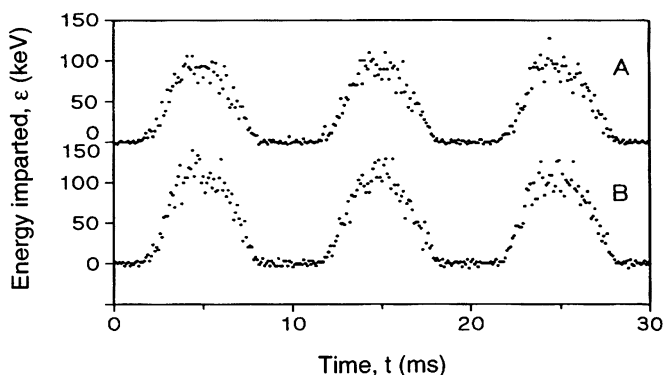


FIG. 3. Data for the energy imparted in sampling intervals of  $100 \mu\text{s}$  from the pair of detectors. The peak voltage on the anode is 90 kV; the simulated diameter of the cylindrical detector volume is  $0.5 \mu\text{m}$ .

as well as those of the relative variance and the relative covariance, are not dependent on dose rate, and equality of the dose rate in the two detectors or centering of two detectors in radiation field is therefore not a requirement of the variance-covariance method.

Another advantage of the method is the correction for correlated additive disturbances (3, 4, 7), such as pick-up, that affect the two detectors equally. As shown in the Appendix, such disturbances are eliminated if the parameters for the two detectors are averaged.

$$\bar{y}_D = (\bar{y}_{D,A} + \bar{y}_{D,B})/2$$

### $\bar{y}_D$ FOR VARIOUS SITE SIZES AND DIFFERENT ANODE VOLTAGES

The dose mean lineal energies,  $\bar{y}_D$ , for simulated diameters of 0.2, 0.5, 1, and  $8 \mu\text{m}$  were measured at different anode voltages between 30 or 35 and 125 kV (Table I). For simulated diameters smaller than  $1 \mu\text{m}$  signals at 30 kV were too weak to be measured with the required accuracy. All measurements were performed with a filter equivalent to 2 mm of aluminum. Figure 4 and Table I summarize the results. The standard deviations given in Fig. 4 are devia-

TABLE I  
The Dose Mean Lineal Energy ( $\text{keV}/\mu\text{m}$ ) at Different Anode Voltages (kV) for Two-Pulse X-Ray Generator

| Voltage | 0.2 $\mu\text{m}$ | 0.5 $\mu\text{m}$ | 1 $\mu\text{m}$ | 8 $\mu\text{m}$ |
|---------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 30      |                   |                   | $3.42 \pm 0.25$ | $1.98 \pm 0.03$ |
| 35      | $5.89 \pm 0.60$   | $4.55 \pm 0.24$   | $3.35 \pm 0.11$ | $2.17 \pm 0.12$ |
| 42      |                   |                   |                 | $1.84 \pm 0.07$ |
| 48      | $5.37 \pm 0.54$   | $4.30 \pm 0.28$   | $3.21 \pm 0.09$ |                 |
| 51      |                   |                   |                 | $1.50 \pm 0.02$ |
| 60      | $5.98 \pm 0.48$   | $4.27 \pm 0.25$   | $3.19 \pm 0.16$ | $1.41 \pm 0.06$ |
| 75      | $5.82 \pm 0.48$   | $4.38 \pm 0.13$   | $2.94 \pm 0.05$ | $1.46 \pm 0.06$ |
| 90      | $5.86 \pm 0.10$   | $4.36 \pm 0.19$   | $2.97 \pm 0.03$ | $1.47 \pm 0.08$ |
| 110     | $6.10 \pm 0.62$   | $4.37 \pm 0.27$   | $2.94 \pm 0.04$ | $1.47 \pm 0.09$ |
| 125     | $5.93 \pm 0.44$   | $4.38 \pm 0.35$   | $2.99 \pm 0.04$ | $1.35 \pm 0.04$ |

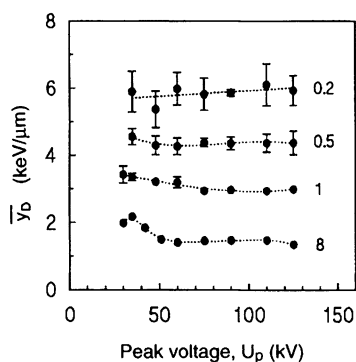


FIG. 4. Dose mean lineal energy as function of the peak voltage at different simulated diameters. The bars represent the standard deviations between different measurements. At large simulated diameters (1 and 8  $\mu\text{m}$ ) most error bars are too small to be drawn.

tions between different measurements; they depend not only on electronic noise of the measurement system but also on the noise of the radiation generator and of the environment.

#### Dependence on Site Size

As seen in Fig. 4, the dose mean lineal energy increases as the simulated diameter decreases. This is shown more directly in Fig. 5, which gives the overall values of  $\bar{y}_D$  for the entire pulse distribution as a function of diameter. The values for the points are averages over the range of possible voltages; they are plotted together with their standard deviations, which are small.

The decrease in  $\bar{y}_D$  with increasing site size is a general feature of microdosimetric distributions. At large site sizes and with short particle ranges, it reflects the increasing fraction of “starters” and “stoppers” and then of “insiders,” i.e., of particles that do not traverse the entire site. In the present case one deals with electrons that have, on average, ranges that are considerably larger than the site sizes that are investigated. But even under this condition  $\bar{y}_D$  decreases with increasing site diameter, because there are only small distances over which the electrons exhibit high LET; i.e., the small range of the track ends accounts for the large values of  $y$  in small sites.

A further very important factor at small site sizes is energy loss straggling, i.e., the clustering of energy in  $\delta$  rays or groups of  $\delta$  rays. Such local energy concentrations can lead to high values of  $\bar{y}_D$  in small regions, but less so in larger sites.

The joint influence of the different, complex factors on  $\bar{y}_D$  is more clearly seen in the fundamental relationship that links  $\bar{y}_D$  to the proximity function,  $t(x)$ , of a radiation.

$$\bar{y}_D = \frac{1}{\bar{l}} \int_0^d U(x/d) \cdot t(x) \cdot dx$$

The proximity function,  $t(x)$ , is defined as the distribution of distances between all energy transfers in particle

tracks, and  $U(x/d)$  is the geometric reduction factor of a given site, i.e., the sum distribution of chord lengths of the site for so-called internal source randomness (8). The diameter of the site is  $d$ . For a sphere or a right cylinder (cylinder length equals the diameter of the cylinder) the mean chord length is

$$\bar{l} = 2d/3.$$

Using the distance scaled by the diameter,  $x' = x/d$ , one has

$$\bar{y}_D = \frac{3}{2} \int_0^1 U(x') \cdot t(d \cdot x') \cdot dx'.$$

Apart from its behavior at very small distance  $t(x)$  is a monotonously decreasing function of distance  $x$ , and the formula shows that  $\bar{y}_D$  must be a monotonously decreasing function of  $d$ . The argument applies to any function  $U(x)$ , i.e., to an arbitrary convex shape.

#### Dependence on Anode Voltage

The dependence of  $\bar{y}_D$  on anode voltage is far more complex. It reflects the change of electron energies with photon energies, and the change in  $\bar{y}_D$  with changing electron energy at specified site sizes. Both dependences are nonmonotonic. For the anode voltages in the range of 30 to 125 kV and for the filter and the detector wall thickness that are employed in the present experiments the average photon energies vary from about 25 to 60 keV (9). Due to the variation of relative cross sections for the photo- and Compton effects in this range of photon energies, the average initial energy of the released electrons decreases with increasing photon energy, as seen in Fig. 6. There is then an increase in the average LET. However,  $\bar{y}_D$  increases only at small site sizes, while there is a decrease with decreasing electron energy at larger site sizes. Figure 4 shows all these complexities.

Due to the thickness of the filter and of the detector wall the spectra of X rays in the detector volume are very narrow for anode voltages around 35 kV, i.e., they are almost mono-

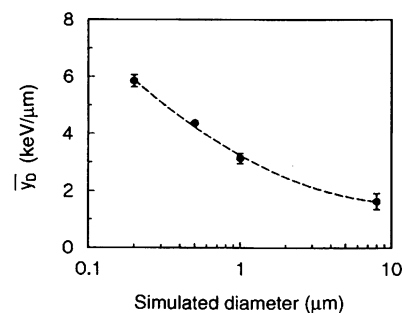


FIG. 5. The dose mean lineal energy as function of the site diameter.

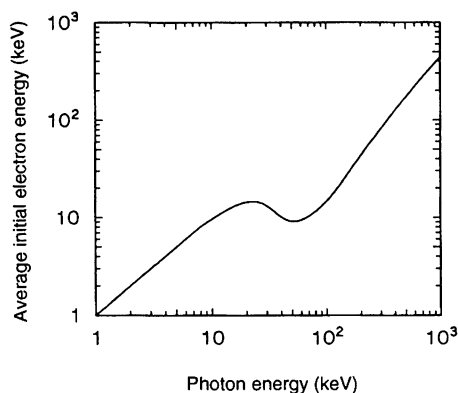


FIG. 6. Average initial energy of the (first collision) released electrons as a function of photon energy in water.

energetic. The values of  $\bar{y}_D$  for these anode voltages agree well with the data for monoenergetic photons obtained by Kliauga and Dvorak (10) in single-event measurements.

#### $\bar{y}_D$ AT DIFFERENT DEPTHS

Measurements of absorbed dose as a function of depth in a receptor are fundamental to dosimetry. But beyond the dose distributions one needs to consider also the variation of radiation quality with depth. It is therefore of interest to examine the dependence of the lineal energy on depth.

Different depths in tissue were simulated simply by placing different acrylic blocks (density 1.17 g/cm<sup>3</sup>) in front of detectors. The thickness of the blocks was changed from 0 to 11.5 cm. Taking the detector wall (A150, density 1.12 g/cm<sup>3</sup>) into account, one simulates in this way depths in tissue from 1.34 to 14.8 cm. There appeared to be no need for providing backscatter beyond that taking place in the detector wall. The measurements were performed for anode voltages of 42 and 70 kV, and with a filter equivalent to 1 mm of aluminum. The results are given in Fig. 7.

For a small simulated site the dose mean lineal energy decreases somewhat with increased depth, as seen in Fig. 7. This dependence is in line with the "hardening" of the radiation quality that has been demonstrated by Hahn<sup>2</sup> in Monte Carlo calculations for photon energies below 100 keV.

#### VARIATION OF THE LINEAL ENERGY WITH PULSE PHASE

Using the temporal information in the measured data, one can determine the dose mean lineal energy for any point within the radiation pulse; one merely needs to select in the analysis the observations at this point. As examples, two such phase dependences are shown in Fig. 8.

For a simulated diameter of 1  $\mu\text{m}$  and an anode voltage of 75 kV, the dose mean lineal energy does not vary substantially. This agrees with the results for 1  $\mu\text{m}$  in Fig. 4, which show little change in  $\bar{y}_D$  with anode voltage. In contrast, one sees in Fig. 4 a significant rise in the dose mean lineal energy with anode voltages below 50 kV and at a simulated diameter of 8  $\mu\text{m}$ . The anode potential is pulsed, as illustrated in Fig. 1, and the dose mean lineal energy varies in phase with the anode potential. The variations in  $\bar{y}_D$  are exemplified in Fig. 8 for a simulated diameter of 8  $\mu\text{m}$  and for the anode voltage 51 kV; the maximal difference in  $\bar{y}_D$  is, in this case, about 44%.

These two examples demonstrate the potential and the diverse possibilities of the variance-covariance technique for the measurement, with high sampling frequency, of the time dependence of microdosimetric parameters in periodic radiation fields.

#### $\bar{y}_D$ FOR DIFFERENT X-RAY GENERATORS

A 2-pulse generator exhibits variations of the anode voltage that are larger than those for 6-pulse or 12-pulse generators. Using part of the data on the voltage dependence for a 2-pulse generator one can therefore deduce the variations for 6-pulse or 12-pulse generators. As it happens, the superposition pulses for 6- or 12-pulse generators are of the same shape as subregions around the peaks of the 2-pulse generator (see Fig. 9). It is therefore particularly easy to derive the values  $\bar{y}_D$  for the multipulse generators by using only the suitably restricted pulse data measured for the 2-pulse generator.

Results are given in Fig. 10. The decrease in  $\bar{y}_D$  with anode voltage for generators of different pulse numbers is represented. More marked dependences of  $\bar{y}_D$  would have to be seen, if the measurements were performed with detectors of thin wall or with wall-less counters; the role of low-energy photons would then be more important.

#### CONCLUSION

The measured microdosimetric data for the commonly used diagnostic X rays show the considerable potential of

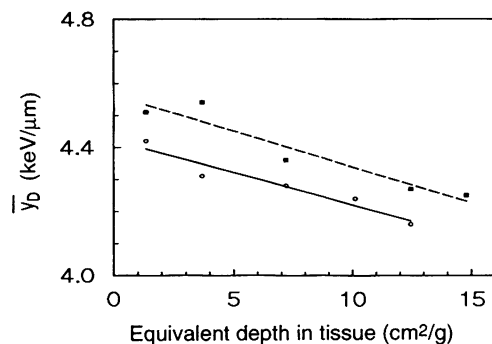


FIG. 7. Depth dependence of the dose mean lineal energy for anode voltages of (—) 42 and (---) 70 kV. The simulated diameter is 0.5  $\mu\text{m}$ .

<sup>2</sup> K. Hahn and A. M. Kellerer, private communication, 1990.

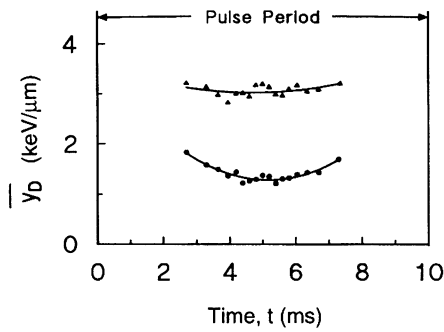


FIG. 8. Variation of the dose mean lineal energy with the pulse phase of the periodic X-ray fields. ( $\Delta$ )  $1 \mu\text{m}$ ; ( $\bullet$ )  $8 \mu\text{m}$ , 51 kV.

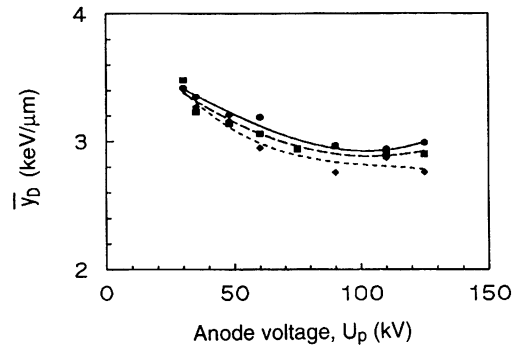


FIG. 10. Dose mean lineal energy as function of anode voltage for the ( $\bullet$ ) 2-pulse, ( $\blacksquare$ ) 6-pulse, and ( $\blacklozenge$ ) 12-pulse generator. The simulated diameter is  $1 \mu\text{m}$ .

the variance-covariance method. Such data could not readily be obtained with the conventional single-event technique in microdosimetry, and they would, of course, be impossible with the simple variance technique. The variance-covariance method is thus seen to be a useful technique for radiation protection and quality control, especially in time-varying or in incompletely known radiation fields.

APPENDIX

Reduction of the Influence of Correlated Additive Noise by Averaging of the Parameters for the Two Detectors

The signal to be measured,  $u_s$ , is accompanied by the noise,  $u_N$ . The result of a measurement is then

$$u_m = u_s + u_N.$$

The mean value  $\bar{u}_m$ , the variance  $V_m$  and the covariance  $C_m$  are given by the relationships

$$\bar{u}_m = \bar{u}_s$$

$$V_m = V_s + V_N$$

$$C_m = C_s + C_N.$$

According to the variance-covariance method one derives from detector A the dose mean value

$$\bar{u}_{s,D} = \frac{V_s(A)}{\bar{u}_s(A)} - \frac{C_s}{\bar{u}_s(B)}.$$

But because of the noise,  $u_N$ , one obtains

$$\bar{u}_{m,D}(A) = \frac{V_m(A)}{\bar{u}_m(A)} - \frac{C_m}{\bar{u}_m(B)} = \bar{u}_{s,D} + \frac{V_N(A)}{\bar{u}_s(A)} - \frac{C_N}{\bar{u}_s(B)}.$$

Similarly, one obtains from detector B

$$\bar{u}_{m,D}(B) = \frac{V_m(B)}{\bar{u}_m(B)} - \frac{C_m}{\bar{u}_m(A)} = \bar{u}_{s,D} + \frac{V_N(B)}{\bar{u}_s(B)} - \frac{C_N}{\bar{u}_s(A)}.$$

For correlated noise one has

$$V_N(A) = V_N(B) = C_N = \sigma^2.$$

The average of the two dose mean values from detectors A and B equals

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{\bar{u}_{m,D}(A) + \bar{u}_{m,D}(B)}{2} &= \bar{u}_{s,D} \\ &+ \frac{\sigma^2}{2} \left( \frac{1}{\bar{u}_s(A)} - \frac{1}{\bar{u}_s(B)} + \frac{1}{\bar{u}_s(B)} - \frac{1}{\bar{u}_s(A)} \right) = \bar{u}_{s,D}. \end{aligned}$$

Thus the correlated additive noise has no influence on the results of the variance-covariance method, if the averaging is performed.

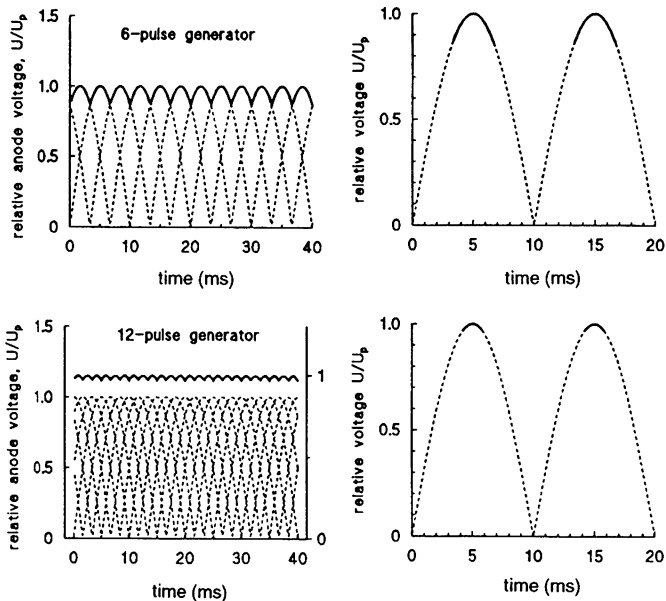


FIG. 9. Pulse form of anode voltage of a 6-pulse and a 12-pulse X-ray generator. The pulse forms of the 6-pulse and 12-pulse generators are part of that performed by the 2-pulse generator.

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