Morphological variations of the mandibular canal in digital panoramic radiographs: a retrospective study in a Chilean population

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Background: Morphological variations of the mandibular canal (MC) have been described in literature, so the clinician must be able to recognise them and adapt their treatment accordingly. The aim of this study was to determine the prevalence of morphological variations of the MC using digital panoramic radiographs (DPR) of Chilean patients.

Materials and methods: A retrospective study in which 1400 DPR were analysed to identify cases of bifid, trifid and retromolar MC. The radiographs were analysed independently by two examiners who had previously been trained by a specialist in oral and maxillofacial radiology. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to reach a final sample.

Results: Nine hundred and twenty-five radiographs were included (599 female, 326 male; mean age 36.1 ± 15.54 years). The prevalence of bifid MC was 11% (n = 102), with no significant differences by sex (p = 0.069). Proportion of bifid MC was higher among younger patients (p = 0.038). Prevalence of morphological variations of type 1 bifid MC was 7.4% (n = 69), type 2 was 2.3% (n = 23), type 3 was 0% (n = 0) and type 4 was 1.1% (n = 10). Prevalence of retromolar canal was 0.9% (n = 8), with no significant differences by sex (p = 0.893) or age (p = 0.371); of these, 2 (0.2%) cases were forward type and 6 (0.6%) cases were retromolar type. No cases of trifid MC were found.

Conclusions: Digital panoramic radiographs are useful for detecting morphological variations of the MC; we were able to identify three types of bifid MC as well as retromolar canals. Proper identification of these variations by an easily accessible examination is important for avoiding possible complications in clinical-surgical practice. (Folia Morphol 2019; 78, 1: 163–170)

Key words: mandibular canal, morphological variations, bifid canal, trifid canal, retromolar canal

INTRODUCTION

The mandibular canal (MC) extends bilaterally from the mandibular foramen to the mental foramen [6, 12, 19]. It runs longitudinally through the spongy tissue of the bone in an anteroinferior direction and describes a concave anterosuperior curve [7, 18]. It contains the inferior alveolar vasculo-nervous bundle (nerve, artery and vein); the nerve is a branch
of the third division of the fifth cranial pair [9]. This important vasculo-nervous bundle is responsible for the blood supply to and sensory activity of the mandibular teeth, lower lip, adjacent alveolar bone and gum [8, 12]. In radiographs, the MC is observed as a dark linear shadow between two thin, radio-opaque lines (one superior and the other inferior) projected on the bone, which limit the canal [20].

In odontological procedures involving the MC, anaesthesia of the lower teeth may present certain difficulties related with the variability of the canal and its neurovascular content [3]. The MC is vulnerable in procedures like orthognathic surgery, mandibular reconstruction, extraction of third molars or installing dental implants [6], leading to complications such as neurovascular compression with swelling and/or pain [21]. Morphological variations of the MC have been described in medical literature since the 1970s [16], with case reports showing the existence of bifid MC [10, 13], trifid MC [2, 14] and variations such as the so-called retromolar canal [8]. The retromolar canal is an accessory canal which courses superior and lateral of the MC. It may join the MC (in which case it is classified as a subtype of bifid MC), or terminate at the level of the molars, or simply terminate in an accessory foramen located in the anteroinferior region of the coronoid process, in the retromolar fossa (in which case it is classified as a type of retromolar canal) [11]. Investigation into the origins of these variations has found answers in the embryonic development of the mandible. Chávez-Lomeli et al. [4] suggested that during embryonic development there are three different inferior alveolar nerves which innervate three different areas of the hemi-mandible (anteroinferior teeth, primary molars and permanent molars), which finally fuse to form a single nerve. On this basis, some authors suggest that incomplete fusing of these three nerve branches results in the appearance of a bifid or trifid MC [20, 21, 23, 24].

The prevalence reported of these variations ranges between 0.9% and 34.6% in radiographic studies [8]. The panoramic radiograph is one of the examinations most frequently used in these types of studies and it is a diagnostic tool frequently indicated by dentists, since it provides a general view of the maxillary structures and is not expensive for patients [3]. This panoramic image can provide to the clinician good anatomical information on the location of the inferior alveolar nerve, mental foramen and other important anatomical structures in the mandible [1] and its variations. The clinician must be able to recognise the presence of these variations during preoperative radiographs examination and adapt odontological treatment accordingly to avoid possible complications. For these reasons, the aim of this study was to determine the prevalence of different morphological variations of the MC (bifid, trifid and retromolar) using digital panoramic radiographs (DPR) in a Chilean patients sample.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study was approved by the Scientific Ethics Committee (CEC) of Universidad de La Frontera (Folio no. 015/2014). We carried out a retrospective, descriptive study in which we examined a database of 1400 routine DPR (ratio 1:1) of patients attended in the Dental Teaching Clinic of the Dental School of Universidad de La Frontera, Temuco, Chile. The radiographs were taken using standard technique with a PAX-400C orthopantomograph (VATECH, Korea, 2010).

The images examined in the study belonged to patients of known age and sex. The following exclusion criteria were applied: radiographs with distortion or altered contrast, patients aged less than 18 years, presence of teeth in the intra-osseous development stage (apart from third molars), signs compatible with osseous pathology, presence of included teeth, titanium plates or indications of orthognathic surgery in the mandibular area.

For the analyses, all the radiographs were projected in a LED 29” monitor screen with 2560 × 1080 pixels resolution and analysed independently by two examiners who had previously been trained by a specialist in oral and maxillofacial radiology. The two examiners were also calibrated against one another through examination of 100 radiographs to identify variations in the MC; the agreement between them was calculated using the kappa coefficient (k). The examiners assessed the radiographs separately; where there was disagreement between them, a third examiner was consulted (a specialist in oral and maxillofacial radiology) who took the final decision. In each radiograph the examiners identified the MC and its possible morphological variations described in the literature: bifid or double MC, trifid or triple MC, and retromolar canal. The presence of the so-called Serres canal was not considered in this study, since this canal has a different embryonic origin from the MC. The demographic data (sex and age) of the patients and
the prevalence of each variation were recorded. We used some of the classifications proposed in the literature for the more prevalent morphological variations of the MC. Bifid MC were sub-classified according to the criteria of Langlais et al. [17] (Figs. 1–3). The retromolar canal was classified using the criteria of Choi et al. [5] (Fig. 4). The prevalence of each of these classifications was also recorded.

**Statistical analysis**

The data on the prevalence of the different morphological variations of the MC were compared with
the sex and age of the individuals. Statistical analysis was carried out using the SPSS software v20.0 (IBM SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA). The quantitative data were presented using the mean ± standard deviation; the \( \chi^2 \) test was applied to contrast the qualitative variables. The threshold of significance was set at \( p < 0.05 \).
RESULTS

In total, 925 DPR of patients (599 women, 326 men) were analysed. The kappa coefficient to calculate the agreement between the examiners was 99% (very good). The average age of the individuals was 36.1 ± 15.54 years (36.76 ± 15.55 years for females; 34.87 ± 15.49 years for males) in a range from 18 to 86 years. The total prevalence of bifid MC was 11% (n = 102), with no significant differences by sex (p = 0.069) although there was a high percentage of bifid MC cases in women among men (72.5% of the total bifid MC identified). With respect to age, the prevalence was significantly higher among younger patients (p = 0.038), with the 18 to 30 age-range presenting 56.9% of all the bifid MC identified. However, for each sub-classification of bifid MC, no statistically significant differences were found between the different ages (p > 0.05). The prevalence of morphological variations of type 1 bifid MC was 7.4% (n = 69; Fig. 1), type 2 was 2.3% (n = 23; Fig. 2), type 3 was 0% (n = 0; Fig. 3) and type 4 was 1.1% (n = 10; Fig. 3).

Table 1 presents the number and percentage of the prevalence of the different classifications of bifid MC identified, grouped by sex and age. The chi-squared test was applied to determine statistical differences between the variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total sample</th>
<th>Type 1</th>
<th>Type 2</th>
<th>Type 3</th>
<th>Type 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age [years]:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–20</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–45</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The prevalence of retromolar canal was 0.9% (n = 8), with no significant differences by sex (p = 0.893) or age (p = 0.371). Table 2 presents the number and percentage of the prevalence of the two retromolar canal classifications. Of the retromolar canals identified, only 2 (0.2%) cases were the forward type on the right side of the mandible (both in men); while among the retromolar type, 3 (0.3%) cases were identified on the right side, 2 (0.2%) cases on the left side and 1 (0.1%) case was bilateral (only 1 case was found in a man and the rest in women). Figure 5 presents the distribution of the prevalence of the retromolar canal by side of the mandible (right, left or bilateral). No cases of trifid MC were found in this study.

DISCUSSION

The present study established the prevalence of morphological variations of the MC in a sample of Chilean patients by exhaustive analysis of DPR. Although these variations are described in the literature as unusual findings, it is by no means rare to encounter them in clinical practice. Much of the literature on the topic is mainly concerned with case reports in order to describe the considerations and possible...
difficulties facing the clinician [2, 6, 10, 13, 24]. In addition, few studies focus on describing these morphological variations of the MC on different samples of populations to report interesting data like morphological configurations and its prevalence.

Panoramic radiography is a routine preoperative examination, widely used by dentists [3], which enables a wide range of variations to be detected. This examination also provides good morphological information for identification of the MC (and its content), mental foramen and other important structures in the mandible [1] without the need for other examinations which, although more precise, are much more expensive for the patient. It is therefore logical to find that cone beam computed tomography (CBCT) is indicated as an examination protocol prior to surgery after indications or suspicions of morphological variations in panoramic radiographs [3]. This is precisely the rational basis for the use of DPR in preference to CBCT for identification of anatomical variation in dental clinical practice, as a first radiographic examination. The information provided by the DPR is sufficient to allow an accurate evaluation in cases of suspected morphological variations of MC. In this regard, Neves et al. [15] compared detection of these variations using panoramic radiographs and CBCT images of the same patients, observing that there were no significant differences in the incidence of cases determined by the two methods. The importance of detecting these variations in some surgical procedures arises from the premise that true bifid MCs, for example, contain nervous and vascular elements which might cause certain complications if care is not taken [11].

Different classification systems exist in the literature for the different configurations that may be found in variations of the MC. The best-known for cases of bifid MC is the classification proposed by Langlais et al. in 1985 [17]; this proposes four types with sub-divisions of types 1 and 2, depending on whether they are unilateral or bilateral and whether they extend through the mandibular ramus and/or body. For cases of retromolar canal, the classification proposed by Choi et al. [5] seems to be the most suitable because of its simplicity. This classification distinguishes two types of retromolar canal on the basis of their origin in two independent mandibular foramina: in one the accessory canal courses forward and laterally to the MC, either joining the MC or terminating at the level of the mandibular molars.

Table 2. Number and percentage of the prevalence of the classifications of retromolar canal, grouped by sex and age. The chi-squared test was applied to determine statistical differences between the variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total sample</th>
<th>Retromolar canal</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forward type p</td>
<td>Retromolar type p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>599 (64.8%) 0.055</td>
<td>5 (0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>326 (35.2%) 0</td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>925 (100%)</td>
<td>6 (0.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age [years]:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–30</td>
<td>438 (47.4%) 0</td>
<td>2 (0.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–45</td>
<td>230 (24.9%) 0</td>
<td>3 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>186 (20.1%) 0</td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>71 (7.6%) 0</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>925 (100%)</td>
<td>6 (0.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant differences
(forward type). The other type is an accessory canal with course anteroinferior to the MC, terminating in an accessory foramen in the retromolar fossa (retromolar type). The forward type of retromolar canal has been associated with the classification of bifid MC described by Nortjé et al. [16]. These authors describe the existence of three patterns of division or bifurcation of the MC. Type 1 consists of two canals originating from a single foramen; the inferior canal is generally the longer. Type 2 consists of a bifurcation which generates a short canal extending towards the second or third molar. Finally, type 3 (the least frequent) consists of two canals of similar dimensions apparently originating from independent mandibular foramina which merge into a single canal in the molar region of the mandibular body. In this study we have used the classification proposed by Langlais et al. [17] to categorise our findings, due to its greater standardisation.

The prevalence of bifid MC was 11% (102 patients out of a total sample of 925 radiographs). This is much higher than the prevalence of 0.35% reported by Sanchis et al. [22] in a sample of 2012 radiographs, the prevalence of 0.038% reported by Kim et al. [11] in a sample of 1000 radiographs, or the prevalence of 0.9% reported by Nortjé et al. [16] in a sample of 3612 radiographs. These differences in values may be explained by the quality of the examination used to detect variations in the MC. Thus, studies that report low prevalences of bifid MC (generally less than 1%) use conventional panoramic radiographs [11, 16, 17, 22], in contrast to our study which used digital format radiographs, increasing the clarity and precision of the image. This is proved if we compare the prevalences reported by other studies in which digital radiographs were used, such as Neves et al. [15] who reported a prevalence of 7.4% in a small sample of 127 records, or Kalantar Motamedi et al. [9], who found a prevalence of 1.2% in a sample of 5000 records. Despite these differences, we also observed that among the cases of bifid MC in our study, the most prevalent variation was type 1, with 69 of the 102 cases (67%); a similar finding was reported by Kuczynski et al. [12], who found 50 cases of this variation in the 60 cases of bifid MC (83.33%) identified. The classic study of Langlais et al. [17] mentions that in a total sample of 6000 panoramic radiographs the prevalence of bifid MC was 0.95%, of which the most frequent types were type 2 with 54.4% followed by type 1 with 38.6%. Kalantar Motamedi et al. [9] disagree with the above findings, reporting that the most frequent variations of bifid MC are type 2 with 82%, followed by type 3 with 16.4% and finally type 1 with 1.6%. In respect of the three studies mentioned above it should be noted that apart from the differences in the number of records or radiographs used, they were performed in three ethnically different populations (Iran, United States and Brazil, respectively).

In addition, to our best knowledge in this field, the prevalence of morphological variations of the MC has been barely reported in samples of populations from the United States [17], Korea [5, 11], Iran [9], Spain [22], South Africa [16] and Brazil [12, 15]. In this context, our study is a valuable contribution to the knowledge about these variations in a sample of Caucasian South American population.

In our study the prevalence of retromolar canal was 0.9% (8 patients) out of a total sample of 925 radiographs; this was similar to the sample reported by Choi et al. [5], who identified 6 cases of double mandibular foramina with corresponding accessory canal using CBCT, but in a smaller sample of 446 records. Examination by CBCT offers great advantages in sensitivity and precision, which would explain why our study found a low presence of this variation despite analysing a larger number of records. In our study, as in Choi et al. [5], 6 (0.6%) cases of retromolar type were found.

Finally, we would mention that no cases of trifid MC were found in our study; this is an extremely rare anatomical variation, and the evidence in the literature is limited to a few case reports [2, 14]. The diagnosis of morphological variations of MC has an important role in some routine procedures such as local anaesthesia for dental treatment, since the existence of double or triple vasculo-nervous bundle in different canals may cause an insufficient effect and incomplete anaesthesia in some mandibular regions [25].

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study provides new information on morphological variations of the MC in a sample of Chilean population, in which we identified three types of bifid MC described by Langlais et al. [17] as well as retromolar canals as described by Choi et al. [5]. Digital panoramic radiography proved to be a valuable tool for identifying morphological variations simply and without major investment in technological resources and sophisticated equipment. Digital panoramic
radiography offers advantages over conventional radiography (which produces poorer quality images) and CBCT (in which indications or suspicions of the presence of anatomical variations must be treated with caution).

REFERENCES


