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Standardized Measurement of Longitudinal and Transverse Relaxation by NMR for the Determination of Contrast-Agent Relaxivity

Inversion Recovery, CPMG, and the Correspondence Between Benchtop Relaxometry and MRI-Based Relaxation Mapping

Technical White Paper

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Abstract

The determination of longitudinal and transverse relaxivity, r_1 and r_2, is the primary physicochemical figure of merit by which magnetic resonance imaging contrast agents are ranked, yet no formally adopted standard method — no ISO, ASTM, IEC, NEMA, or pharmacopeial procedure — currently prescribes how such measurements shall be performed or reported. What exists instead is a strong and largely unwritten set of conventions in the coordination-chemistry literature, a benchmark series of comparative studies performed at clinical field strengths that functions as a de facto reference dataset, and a separate metrological infrastructure on the imaging side that standardizes the measurement of T_1 and T_2 by MRI rather than the measurement of relaxivity itself. This white paper sets out the physical basis of the inversion-recovery and Carr–Purcell–Meiboom–Gill experiments as they are applied to paramagnetic solutions, identifies the specific acquisition and data-reduction choices that determine whether a reported relaxivity is transferable between laboratories, and quantifies the sources of systematic error that most frequently invalidate inter-study comparison. Particular attention is directed at four variables that are routinely under-reported: the magnetic field at which the measurement was made, the sample temperature and the means by which it was controlled and verified, the composition of the medium, and the method by which the paramagnetic concentration axis was established. The correspondence between bulk NMR relaxometry and image-based relaxation mapping is then examined in detail, since the two methodologies are frequently assumed to be interchangeable and are not. It is shown that the inversion-recovery spin-echo sequence occupies the position of reference method in both communities, but that the preferred approach to transverse relaxation diverges: multi-echo CPMG trains are standard in bulk NMR precisely because they suppress diffusive attenuation, whereas in imaging the same multi-echo architecture is regarded with suspicion because slice-selective refocusing generates stimulated-echo pathways that bias T_2 upward. The relationship between relaxivity and phantom image brightness is treated separately and at length, because the two are related only through the signal equation of the specific pulse sequence employed; it is demonstrated that the characteristic rise-and-plateau of signal intensity against contrast-agent concentration reported throughout the literature is a property of spoiled gradient-echo acquisition and of the chosen flip angle, not a property of the agent. A recommended operating framework is proposed for relaxivity determination at 1.41 T and 7.05 T, together with a minimum reporting set, a system-suitability scheme, and an uncertainty budget. Two

recently published studies supplied as source material are appraised critically against this framework, and specific reporting deficiencies in each are identified.

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1. Introduction and Scope

Contrast enhancement in magnetic resonance imaging is achieved indirectly. The paramagnetic complex that is administered is not itself observed; what is observed is the effect that the complex exerts on the relaxation behavior of the surrounding water protons. The efficiency with which that effect is produced is expressed as relaxivity, defined as the increment in the water-proton relaxation rate produced per unit concentration of the paramagnetic species. Because relaxivity is a per-millimolar quantity, its determination requires two independent measurements of comparable quality: a set of relaxation rates and a set of concentrations. Errors in either propagate directly into the reported figure, and it is a persistent feature of the literature that the relaxation axis receives close attention while the concentration axis is frequently assumed rather than measured.[10,14]

The present document was prepared in response to a specific programmatic question: whether recognized standard approaches exist for the NMR measurement of T_1 by inversion recovery and T_2 by Carr–Purcell–Meiboom–Gill such that results generated in one laboratory can be compared with confidence against results generated elsewhere on different contrast-agent chemistries. The short answer, developed at length in Section 7, is that no formal standard exists, but that a well-defined operating convention does, and that adherence to it is what separates a transferable relaxivity from a laboratory-internal number. The longer answer requires an examination of what each experiment actually measures, of the specific approximations embedded in the conventional data-reduction models, and of the physical circumstances under which those approximations fail.

The scope of this paper is deliberately restricted to solution-state measurements on homogeneous samples in the motional-averaging regime, which is the situation that obtains for monomeric gadolinium and manganese chelates in aqueous media. Where the behavior of aggregated, protein-bound, or particulate species diverges from that regime — and it diverges substantially in transverse relaxation — the divergence is identified and its diagnostic signature described, but the theory of superparamagnetic and static-dephasing relaxation is treated only insofar as it is required to recognize when a CPMG measurement has ceased to be echo-spacing independent.[31,32]

A second scope restriction concerns nomenclature. Throughout this document, R_1 and R_2 denote relaxation rates in units of s^{-1}, T_1 and T_2 denote the corresponding time constants, and r_1 and r_2 denote relaxivities in units of $mM^{-1}\ s^{-1}$. This distinction is not pedantic. A recurring error in the review literature is the presentation of an expression for the inner-sphere contribution to the relaxation rate under the label of relaxivity, with concentration retained on the right-hand side; the resulting quantity has units of s^{-1} and is not a relaxivity. One instance of this is noted in Section 10.

2. Physical Basis of Longitudinal and Transverse Relaxation

2.1 Definitions and the Bloch Framework

The phenomenological description of nuclear magnetic relaxation rests on two independent time constants introduced to describe the return of the bulk magnetization vector to thermal equilibrium after perturbation.[1] The longitudinal, or spin–lattice, time constant T_1 governs the recovery of the component of magnetization parallel to the static field B_0 and is associated with energy exchange between the spin system and its molecular surroundings. The transverse, or spin–spin, time constant T_2 governs the decay of the component perpendicular to B_0 and is associated with loss of phase coherence among the precessing spins. Loss of coherence can occur without energy exchange, and consequently T_2 can never exceed T_1; in low-

viscosity liquids in the extreme-narrowing limit the two are equal, while in the presence of an efficient paramagnetic relaxation pathway or slow molecular motion they diverge.

A third quantity, T_2^*, must be distinguished carefully from T_2. The observed free-induction decay envelope contains, in addition to the irreversible loss of coherence described by T_2, a reversible contribution arising from static spatial variation in the local field across the sample volume. That variation may originate in imperfect magnet shimming, in bulk magnetic susceptibility discontinuities at the meniscus and at the glass–liquid interface, or in susceptibility gradients generated by the paramagnetic solute itself. The relationship is conventionally written as an addition of rates, with the inhomogeneous contribution expressed as $\gamma \Delta B_0$ over the sample volume. The essential point for relaxivity work is that the reversible contribution is refocused by a 180° pulse and the irreversible contribution is not, which is precisely why spin-echo methodology rather than free-induction-decay lineshape analysis is required for any quantitative transverse measurement.[2]

2.2 Paramagnetic Relaxation Enhancement and the Definition of Relaxivity

When a paramagnetic solute is introduced into water, the fluctuating dipolar field generated by the unpaired electrons provides a highly efficient relaxation pathway for nearby water protons. The Solomon–Bloembergen–Morgan formalism describes this interaction in terms of a dipolar term modulated by a correlation time and a scalar or contact term, with the electron-spin relaxation of the paramagnetic center itself contributing to the correlation function.[5,6] For gadolinium(III), which possesses seven unpaired electrons in a symmetric ${}^8S_{7/2}$ ground state, the electron-spin relaxation is comparatively slow and the dipolar term dominates.

The observed relaxation rate of a solution containing a paramagnetic solute is treated as the sum of the rate that the diamagnetic medium would exhibit in the absence of the solute and a paramagnetic increment that is, over an appropriate concentration range, linear in solute concentration:

$$R_{i,obs} = R_{i,dia} + r_i \times [CA] \qquad (i = 1, 2)$$

Relaxivity r_i is therefore operationally defined as the slope of the observed relaxation rate against paramagnetic concentration. Two consequences follow immediately and are frequently overlooked. First, relaxivity is a property of the slope alone and is unaffected by any concentration-independent offset; the diamagnetic contribution, including any relaxation enhancement from dissolved oxygen or trace transition metals, cancels in the slope provided that it is genuinely constant across the concentration series. Second, the intercept of the regression furnishes an internal validity check: if the fitted intercept does not agree with an independently measured blank within its uncertainty, then some quantity that was assumed constant across the series was not, and the slope should not be trusted.

2.3 Inner-Sphere, Second-Sphere, and Outer-Sphere Contributions

The total paramagnetic relaxation enhancement is conventionally partitioned into three mechanisms.[8,10,11] The inner-sphere contribution arises from water molecules directly coordinated to the metal center; these experience the full dipolar interaction at short metal–proton distance and then transfer that relaxation to the bulk through chemical exchange. The magnitude of the inner-sphere term therefore depends on the hydration number q, on the metal–proton distance, on the rotational correlation time τ_r of the complex, and on the residence lifetime τ_m of the coordinated water. Because relaxation of the bound water and its exchange into the bulk act as processes in series, the inner-sphere term is limited by whichever is slower, and an optimum exists at intermediate τ_m.

The outer-sphere contribution arises from water molecules that diffuse past the complex without coordinating, and is treated using the translational diffusion models developed for force-free relative motion.[9] It is the irreducible baseline: even a complex with q = 0 exhibits measurable relaxivity. The second-sphere contribution arises from water molecules held in defined positions in a hydrogen-bonded shell around the ligand periphery, with residence times long enough to be relaxed efficiently but short compared with the inner-sphere lifetime.[12] This term is difficult to quantify independently and is frequently invoked as a residual when the sum of calculated inner- and outer-sphere terms falls short of the measured relaxivity. The inference is legitimate but weak, and the burden of proof has often been treated too lightly in the design literature.

2.4 Field Dependence and the Relevance of the NMRD Profile

Relaxivity is not a single number. The dipolar spectral density functions that govern the inner- and outer-sphere terms are evaluated at the proton and electron Larmor frequencies, both of which scale with B_0, and the electron-spin relaxation time of gadolinium(III) is itself field dependent. The result is that r_1 varies by a factor of two or more across the field range spanned by clinical and analytical instrumentation, and does so non-monotonically for slowly tumbling systems, which exhibit a characteristic relaxivity maximum in the 20–60 MHz region that collapses at higher field.[13,18] The complete field dependence is mapped by nuclear magnetic relaxation dispersion, in which R_1 is measured continuously over several decades of field using fast field-cycling relaxometry.[18,19] For a compound intended for use at 1.5 T or 3 T, an NMRD profile is far more informative than a single-field figure, and the collapse of high-relaxivity claims measured at 20 MHz when the compound is examined at 128 MHz is a recurring and predictable disappointment in the field.

For practical purposes it is essential to record that the proton gyromagnetic ratio corresponds to 42.577 MHz T^{-1}, and therefore that a benchtop instrument operating at 60 MHz sits at 1.41 T, a 20 MHz relaxometer at 0.47 T, a clinical 1.5 T scanner at 63.9 MHz, a 3 T scanner at 127.7 MHz, and a 7 T scanner at 298.1 MHz. A 300 MHz high-resolution spectrometer therefore operates at 7.05 T and is, to within one percent in Larmor frequency, field-matched to a 7 T human scanner. This is a useful and under-exploited correspondence: a laboratory equipped with 60 MHz and 300 MHz instrumentation can generate relaxivity data directly comparable to the low-field chemistry literature and to the 7 T imaging literature, but cannot address 1.5 T or 3 T without either an intermediate-field instrument or a field-cycling relaxometer.[19,44]

3. Measurement of T_1 by Inversion Recovery

3.1 The Experiment and Its Recovery Function

The inversion-recovery experiment inverts the equilibrium magnetization with a 180° pulse, allows longitudinal recovery to proceed for a variable interval τ conventionally denoted TI, and then samples the recovered magnetization with a 90° read pulse.[20] For ideal inversion and complete recovery between transients, the signal follows

$$S(TI) = S_0 \left[1 - 2 \exp(-TI / T_1)\right]$$

The experiment remains the reference method for longitudinal relaxation in both the bulk-NMR and imaging communities, for the straightforward reason that the recovery is sampled directly rather than inferred from a steady state, and that the functional form contains no dependence on the accuracy of the read pulse. An error in the 90° read flip angle scales every point in the recovery curve by the same factor and therefore does not bias T_1; an error in the inversion pulse does not have that property and must be handled explicitly.

3.2 Two- Versus Three-Parameter Fitting and Inversion Efficiency

Perfect inversion is not achieved in practice. Radiofrequency field inhomogeneity across the sample volume, off-resonance effects, and pulse-width calibration error all reduce the effective inversion below 180°. The consequence is that the recovery curve does not begin at $-S_0$ but at some lesser negative value, and a two-parameter fit that constrains the initial condition will return a biased T_1. The universally recommended remedy is to fit a three-parameter model in which the amplitude of the exponential term is allowed to float:

$$S(TI) = A + B \exp(-TI / T_1)$$

Here A corresponds to the fully recovered magnetization and B carries the inversion efficiency, with B/A approaching −2 for ideal inversion. The three-parameter model absorbs imperfect inversion, and the ratio B/A should be reported as a routine diagnostic; values substantially less negative than −1.8 indicate a pulse calibration or homogeneity problem that will also be degrading every other measurement made on that probe.[22,24] Where the radiofrequency homogeneity of the probe is marginal, which is a real consideration on wide-bore benchtop systems with large sample volumes, a composite inversion pulse of the 90_x–180_y–90_x type provides substantially improved inversion over a range of B_1 amplitudes and is worth implementing where the pulse programmer permits.[23]

A separate complication arises when the receiver is operated in magnitude mode, as is common on benchtop instruments and universal in image-domain measurements. Magnitude detection folds the negative half of the recovery curve about the null, and a naive fit to magnitude data will fail. Three remedies exist: acquisition with phase-sensitive detection and correct phasing of the whole series, which is preferred; polarity restoration by inspection or by algorithmic search for the null crossing prior to fitting; or fitting the absolute value of the three-parameter model directly. The polarity-restoration approach and its numerical behavior have been treated rigorously and should be followed rather than improvised.[25]

3.3 Recycle Delay, TI Sampling, and the Propagation of Error

The recycle delay between transients must permit essentially complete longitudinal recovery, since residual magnetization at the start of the next inversion perturbs the initial condition in a manner that the three-parameter model cannot cleanly separate from inversion inefficiency. A recycle delay of five times T_1 leaves approximately 0.7 percent of the magnetization unrecovered and is generally regarded as the working minimum; seven times T_1 reduces the residual to below 0.1 percent. The relevant T_1 is that of the slowest-relaxing sample in the series, which in a relaxivity experiment is the diamagnetic blank, not the most concentrated sample. This is a frequent and consequential error: a recycle delay chosen to suit a 100 ms sample will grossly under-recover a blank whose T_1 approaches three seconds, and the resulting intercept error will propagate into the slope if the delay is not held constant.

The choice and distribution of TI values has been analyzed formally, and the conclusion is that for a fixed number of transients the precision of the estimate is maximized by concentrating sampling near the null and near the plateau rather than by uniform spacing.[22] In routine practice a logarithmic distribution of twelve to sixteen TI values spanning roughly 0.01 T_1 to 5 T_1, supplemented by at least one point at or beyond 5 T_1 to anchor the asymptote A, provides a robust compromise that also permits visual detection of non-exponential behavior. Fewer than eight points should be regarded as insufficient for a measurement intended to support a published relaxivity, since the residual structure that reveals a systematic problem cannot be seen in a sparse dataset.

The propagation of uncertainty from T_1 into R_1 deserves explicit attention because it determines the correct weighting of the subsequent regression. Since $R_1 = 1/T_1$, the absolute uncertainty transforms as $\sigma(R_1) = \sigma(T_1)/T_1^2$. If the fitting procedure delivers approximately constant relative uncertainty in T_1, as it typically does when the TI range is scaled to each sample, then the relative uncertainty in R_1 is likewise constant and the absolute uncertainty grows in proportion to R_1. Ordinary unweighted least squares applied to R_1 against concentration therefore over-weights the high-concentration points. Weighted regression with weights proportional to R_1^{-2} is the statistically correct treatment and will generally shift the slope by a small but non-negligible amount relative to the unweighted result.

3.4 Alternatives and Their Trade-offs

Saturation recovery replaces the inversion with a saturating pulse or pulse train and removes the requirement for a long recycle delay, since the sequence begins from a defined zero rather than from equilibrium. The dynamic range of the recovery is halved and the precision is correspondingly reduced for the same number of transients, but where T_1 is long and instrument time is limited, saturation recovery is frequently the better use of the available signal averaging.[22] The Look–Locker approach samples the recovery with a train of small-flip-angle read pulses following a single inversion, gathering the entire curve in one recovery period.[21] The efficiency gain is very large, but the read pulses themselves perturb the recovery, so that the observed time constant is an apparent T_1^* that must be corrected using the known flip angle and pulse interval. The correction depends on the accuracy of the flip angle, which reintroduces exactly the B_1 sensitivity that inversion recovery was chosen to avoid. In the imaging domain this trade-off is unavoidable and is managed through the MOLLI family of sequences and their known systematic biases.[50,53] In the bulk-NMR domain there is rarely any justification for accepting it, and inversion recovery should be used.

4. Measurement of T_2 by CPMG

4.1 From the Hahn Echo to the Meiboom–Gill Modification

The Hahn echo demonstrated that dephasing caused by static field inhomogeneity is reversible: a 180° pulse applied at time τ after excitation refocuses the accumulated phase and generates an echo at 2τ.[2] Measurement of T_2 by acquisition of a series of independent Hahn echoes at increasing τ is conceptually clean but suffers a severe and often unrecognized defect. Molecular diffusion carries spins between regions of differing local field during the echo period, so that their phase is not fully refocused. The attenuation from this mechanism scales as the cube of the echo period for free diffusion in a constant gradient, and consequently the apparent T_2 obtained from a single-echo series in a real magnet is shorter than the true T_2 by an amount that grows rapidly with τ.

Carr and Purcell resolved this by replacing the single refocusing event with a train of 180° pulses at spacing 2τ, sampling the echo amplitude at each even multiple of τ.[3] Because the diffusive attenuation accumulated per echo scales as τ^3 while the number of echoes required to reach a given total time scales as τ^{-1}, the total diffusive attenuation over a fixed decay period scales as τ^2. Reducing the echo spacing therefore suppresses the diffusion contribution quadratically, and this — not acquisition speed — is the fundamental reason that short echo spacing is used. The Carr–Purcell train, however, accumulates flip-angle error: if each refocusing pulse is not exactly 180°, the error compounds through the train and the decay is distorted. Meiboom and Gill removed this by phase-shifting the refocusing pulses by 90° relative to the excitation pulse, which makes the even-numbered echoes self-compensating to first order in the flip-angle error.[4] The resulting

CPMG sequence, with acquisition restricted to the even echoes, is the standard bulk-NMR measurement of T_2 and has been for more than sixty years.

4.2 Echo Spacing Dependence: The Control That Is Almost Never Reported

For a homogeneous solution of a small monomeric gadolinium chelate at low to moderate field, the transverse relaxivity is close to the longitudinal relaxivity, typical r_2/r_1 ratios lying between about 1.1 and 1.3, and the CPMG-derived T_2 is essentially independent of echo spacing over any reasonable range. The reason is that the fluctuating dipolar field experienced by a water proton diffusing past the complex is modulated on a timescale of nanoseconds, which is many orders of magnitude shorter than any achievable echo spacing; the system is deep in the motional-averaging regime and the refocusing pulses have nothing to refocus.

This comfortable situation ceases to hold as soon as the paramagnetic centers become spatially correlated on a scale comparable to the water diffusion length within one echo period. Aggregation, micellization, binding to serum albumin, incorporation into liposomes or dendrimers, and any form of particulate formulation all produce regions of locally enhanced magnetic susceptibility around which water diffuses more slowly than the echo spacing. The relaxation then moves progressively out of the motional-averaging regime, through the diffusion-limited regime described by the partial-refocusing treatment, toward the static-dephasing limit.[31,32] In this transition the measured R_2 becomes strongly dependent on echo spacing, increasing as the spacing is lengthened, while R_1 is unaffected. The diagnostic signature is an r_2/r_1 ratio substantially greater than about two accompanied by echo-spacing sensitivity.

It follows that a reported r_2 for which the CPMG echo spacing is not stated is not a reproducible quantity for any system in which aggregation or macromolecular binding is possible, and that a reported r_2/r_1 ratio above two without an accompanying echo-spacing study is an incomplete result. The recommended control is trivial to perform and takes minutes: acquire the CPMG decay at the working echo spacing, then repeat at twice and at four times that spacing. If the fitted T_2 is invariant within its uncertainty, the measurement is in the motional-averaging regime and the number is a molecular property. If T_2 shortens as the spacing is lengthened, the number is an operating-condition-specific property and must be reported as such. This control appears in a very small minority of published relaxivity studies, and its absence is the single most common reason that r_2 values from different laboratories fail to agree.

4.3 Pulse Imperfection, Stimulated Echoes, and Sample Heating

Three practical failure modes deserve specific mention. The first is incomplete compensation of flip-angle error. The Meiboom–Gill phase relationship protects the even echoes only to first order; with a severely miscalibrated refocusing pulse or with pronounced B_1 inhomogeneity across a tall sample, the odd and even echo envelopes separate visibly and the decay acquires a fast initial component that has nothing to do with relaxation. Inspection of the raw echo train — not merely the fitted time constant — will reveal this immediately, and it is worth making that inspection a routine step.

The second is stimulated-echo contamination. Imperfect refocusing pulses store part of the magnetization along the longitudinal axis, from which it is subsequently returned to the transverse plane by a later pulse. Because the stored magnetization relaxes at R_1 rather than R_2 during the storage interval, and since $R_1 < R_2$, the contaminating pathway decays more slowly than the primary pathway and biases the apparent T_2 upward. In bulk NMR with a homogeneous non-selective pulse this effect is modest; in imaging, where the refocusing pulses are slice-selective and consequently have imperfect profiles across the slice, it is severe and has motivated a substantial methodological literature.[33,34]

The third is radiofrequency heating. A CPMG train delivering many hundreds or thousands of refocusing pulses at short spacing represents a high duty cycle, and in a small thermostatted sample the deposited power can raise the sample temperature measurably during the acquisition itself. Since the relaxivity of a gadolinium chelate is temperature dependent through both τ_r and τ_m, and since the water viscosity changes by roughly two percent per degree near ambient temperature, an uncontrolled thermal excursion of two or three degrees during a long echo train is not a negligible error. The practical checks are to verify that the fitted T_2 does not depend on the number of echoes acquired, and to confirm that a repeat measurement immediately following a long train reproduces the first.

4.4 Data Reduction and the Interpretation of Non-Exponential Decay

For a single homogeneous aqueous phase containing a freely dissolved paramagnetic complex, the CPMG decay should be monoexponential to within the noise. Departure from monoexponentiality is therefore informative rather than merely inconvenient. Two proton populations in slow or intermediate exchange, phase separation, incipient precipitation of the complex, and the presence of an unrecognized second solvent species all produce multiexponential decay. Where such behavior is observed, the appropriate response is diagnostic rather than computational: the sample should be examined by high-resolution NMR and by inspection before any attempt is made to extract multiple components.

When multiexponential analysis is genuinely warranted, the ill-conditioning of the inverse Laplace problem must be respected. The number of exponential components that can be resolved from data of realistic signal-to-noise ratio is small, and unregularized multiexponential fitting will return whatever component structure the noise happens to support.[26] Regularized inversion producing a continuous distribution of relaxation times is preferable to discrete component fitting where the underlying physical model is not known independently, and the regularization parameter must be reported alongside the result.

5. From Relaxation Times to Relaxivity

5.1 The Regression and the Diagnostic Value of the Intercept

Relaxivity is obtained as the slope of observed relaxation rate against paramagnetic concentration. The regression should not be forced through the origin. Two distinct pieces of information are contained in the fit, and constraining the intercept discards one of them and biases the other. The intercept represents the relaxation rate of the medium in the absence of the agent and can be measured independently on a matrix-matched blank prepared in the same session from the same water, the same buffer, and the same glassware. Agreement between the fitted and measured intercept, within their combined uncertainty, is a genuine test of the internal consistency of the dataset. Disagreement indicates that some quantity assumed constant across the series was not — most commonly the temperature, the dissolved-oxygen content, or the true concentration of the stock from which the dilutions were prepared.

The concentration range should be selected so that the paramagnetic contribution is comfortably larger than the diamagnetic baseline at the top of the range while remaining small enough that the linear model holds. In water at 1.41 T and 37 °C, where the diamagnetic R_1 is of order 0.3 s^{-1} and a typical clinical chelate exhibits r_1 near 3–5 $mM^{-1}\,s^{-1}$, a range of 0.1 to 1.0 mM spans observed R_1 values from roughly 0.7 to 5 s^{-1}, which is well conditioned. Five to seven concentration points prepared by independent gravimetric dilution, rather than by serial dilution from a single vessel, protect against the propagation of a single pipetting error through the entire series and should be preferred where sample quantity permits.

5.2 The Concentration Axis Is the Weakest Link

The dominant source of disagreement between laboratories reporting relaxivity for the same compound is not the relaxation measurement but the concentration determination. A nominal concentration calculated from the mass of a synthesized complex assumes that the material is anhydrous, of the stated stoichiometry, free of residual salt and solvent, and fully dissolved. For a lanthanide complex isolated by lyophilization from an aqueous buffer, none of these assumptions is safe. Variable hydration alone can introduce a ten percent error in molar concentration, which translates directly into a ten percent error in relaxivity and is entirely sufficient to manufacture an apparent superiority over a reference agent.

Two independent methods are available and should ideally both be applied. Inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry or optical emission spectrometry, calibrated against a certified gadolinium standard, matrix-matched to the sample, and referenced to an internal standard such as indium, yttrium, or rhodium, is the primary method and is the one the imaging community expects to see. Every dilution should be verified, not merely the stock, since adsorption of the complex to container walls at sub-millimolar concentration is real and is concentration dependent.

The second method is available on any NMR instrument and is under-used. The bulk magnetic susceptibility of a paramagnetic solution shifts the resonance frequency of a reference compound relative to the same compound in a coaxial diamagnetic insert, and the magnitude of that shift is proportional to the concentration of the paramagnetic species.[35,36] For a cylindrical sample coaxial with B_0 in a superconducting magnet, the fractional frequency difference between the internal and external reference is one third of the difference in volume susceptibility expressed in SI units; the corresponding factor for the transverse geometry of an electromagnet differs in both magnitude and sign, and the wrong choice is a common error. Given the effective magnetic moment of gadolinium(III), which is 7.94 Bohr magnetons for a spin-only ${}^8S_{7/2}$ configuration, the paramagnetic concentration follows directly. The attraction of the method for relaxivity work is that it interrogates the gadolinium actually present in the solution, in the same tube, at the same temperature, immediately before or after the relaxation measurement itself, and requires no sample destruction. Its principal limitations are a requirement for accurate temperature knowledge, since susceptibility follows Curie behavior, and a sensitivity floor that makes it unsuitable below roughly 0.5 mM on a benchtop instrument.

5.3 An Uncertainty Budget

A defensible relaxivity should be accompanied by an uncertainty statement that accounts for the contributions listed in Table 1 rather than reporting only the standard error of the regression slope, which typically captures a minority of the total. The regression standard error describes only the scatter of the points about the fitted line and is blind to any error that acts systematically on all points, which includes every concentration error, every temperature offset, and every field-strength error.

Contribution	Typical magnitude	Character	Mitigation
Gadolinium concentration (ICP, verified)	1–3 %	Systematic on slope	Certified standard, internal standard, matrix match, verify every dilution
Gadolinium concentration (nominal, gravimetric only)	5–15 %	Systematic on slope	Not acceptable for a reported relaxivity
Sample temperature offset from setpoint	2–4 % per °C	Systematic on slope	Independent thermometry in the sample position; equilibration time

Contribution	Typical magnitude	Character	Mitigation
T_1 fit precision (3-parameter, ≥12 TI)	0.5–2 %	Random	Adequate TI sampling and signal averaging
T_2 fit precision (CPMG, monoexponential)	0.5–2 %	Random	Adequate echo count and averaging
CPMG echo-spacing dependence (aggregating systems)	up to >100 %	Systematic on r_2	Echo-spacing invariance study; report τ
Incomplete recycle delay	1–10 %	Systematic on intercept and slope	TR ≥ 5×T_1 of the blank
Dissolved oxygen variation across series	0.5–5 % of R_1 at 0.1 mM	Systematic if not constant	Uniform equilibration or uniform sparging; sealed tubes
Field-strength or Larmor-frequency mis-statement	Comparison-invalidating	Systematic	Report measured ^{1}H frequency, not nominal field

Table 1. Principal contributions to the uncertainty of a measured relaxivity, with the character of each contribution and the corresponding control. Contributions acting systematically on the slope are not captured by the standard error of the regression.

6. Experimental Variables That Must Be Controlled and Reported

6.1 Magnetic Field

Because relaxivity is field dependent, a relaxivity reported without its field is uninterpretable. The convention in the coordination-chemistry literature has long been to work at 0.47 T (20 MHz) or 1.41 T (60 MHz) using dedicated low-resolution relaxometers, and a very large fraction of the published values for candidate agents were acquired at one of these two fields. The imaging community, by contrast, reports at 1.5 T, 3 T, and increasingly 7 T, because those are the fields at which the agents are used.[37,40,42,43] The two bodies of data are not interchangeable and the discrepancy is not small: for macromolecular and protein-bound systems the relaxivity measured at 20 MHz can exceed that at 128 MHz by a factor of two or more.[13]

The recommended practice is to report the measured ^{1}H Larmor frequency in megahertz alongside the nominal field in tesla. Benchtop permanent-magnet instruments drift with magnet temperature and the actual operating frequency of a nominal 60 MHz system may differ appreciably from 60.00 MHz; since the quantity that enters the spectral density function is the frequency and not the manufacturer's model designation, the measured value is the one that belongs in the report.[44]

6.2 Temperature

Three temperature conventions coexist in the literature and are frequently confused. The medical-imaging and pharmaceutical communities report at 37 °C, on the reasonable ground that this is the temperature at which the agent will be used. Much of the coordination-chemistry literature reports at 25 °C, which is the conventional temperature for physicochemical characterization. The MRI metrology community, including the reference values distributed for the standard system phantom, works at 20 °C.[57,58] A relaxivity measured at 25 °C cannot be converted to 37 °C without knowledge of the exchange regime, because the temperature dependence of the inner-sphere term changes sign depending on whether the system is limited by water

exchange or by relaxation of the bound water. Values must therefore be compared only within a temperature convention, and the temperature must be stated.

Temperature must also be verified rather than assumed. The setpoint of a variable-temperature controller refers to the gas stream or the heater block, not to the interior of the sample, and offsets of several degrees are routine. The standard NMR remedy is a chemical-shift thermometer: the separation between the resonances of neat ethylene glycol or of methanol is a well-characterized function of temperature and permits calibration in the sample position under the actual gas-flow conditions in use.[27] A calibration curve should be established for each probe and re-verified periodically. Equilibration time is a separate matter; a 5 mm sample introduced into a preheated probe requires roughly ten minutes to reach thermal steady state, and considerably longer if the sample is large or the gas flow modest.

A practical constraint deserves explicit statement for laboratories working on benchtop platforms. Compact permanent-magnet spectrometers are thermally stabilized at an elevated magnet-block temperature, commonly in the region of 28–32 °C, and the sample equilibrates toward that block temperature rather than toward an independently selectable setpoint. Not every such instrument offers user-selectable sample temperature control up to 37 °C. Before a relaxivity program is committed to a benchtop platform, the achievable and verifiable sample temperature should be established experimentally with a chemical-shift thermometer. If 37 °C cannot be held and verified, the resulting relaxivities will not be comparable with the clinical benchmark literature, and the work should either be reported explicitly at the achievable temperature or transferred to a superconducting system with a conventional variable-temperature unit.

6.3 Medium

Relaxivity depends on the medium in which it is measured, and the dependence is large enough to change conclusions. Water, physiological saline, buffered saline, human plasma, human serum, whole blood, and solutions of bovine or human serum albumin at defined concentration all give different answers for the same compound, and the differences arise from more than one mechanism: non-covalent binding to albumin lengthens the rotational correlation time and raises the inner-sphere term dramatically, while increased microviscosity and macromolecular crowding raise it more modestly even for compounds that do not bind.[17,39]

Table 2 reproduces values measured on five clinically used agents across three media and three field strengths in a single study using nuclear magnetic relaxation dispersion, and illustrates the point quantitatively. Gadoterate meglumine, a macrocyclic chelate not expected to bind protein, is reported at 3.06 $mM^{-1}\,s^{-1}$ in water at 1.5 T but at 4.35 $mM^{-1}\,s^{-1}$ in human plasma at the same field, an increase of more than forty percent.[41] Gadodiamide is reported at 5.80 $mM^{-1}\,s^{-1}$ in serum but 4.41 $mM^{-1}\,s^{-1}$ in pooled human plasma, a divergence between two protein-containing media that is itself instructive regarding how tightly medium composition must be specified.

Agent	Water 1.5 T	Water 3 T	Water 7 T	Serum 1.5 T	Serum 3 T	Serum 7 T	Plasma 1.5 T	Plasma 3 T	Plasma 7 T
Gadopentetate dimeglumine	3.33	3.14	3.00	3.93	3.55	3.26	4.37	3.89	3.51
Gadodiamide	3.27	3.23	3.04	5.80	5.10	3.75	4.41	3.89	3.57
Gadoterate meglumine	3.06	2.87	2.70	3.81	3.42	3.18	4.35	3.89	3.53
Gadoteridol	3.07	2.89	2.75	5.16	4.64	4.20	4.07	3.76	3.49

Agent	Water 1.5 T	Water 3 T	Water 7 T	Serum 1.5 T	Serum 3 T	Serum 7 T	Plasma 1.5 T	Plasma 3 T	Plasma 7 T
Gadobutrol	3.08	2.92	2.80	5.15	4.64	4.19	4.86	4.34	3.81

Table 2. Longitudinal relaxivity r_1 ($mM^{-1}\ s^{-1}$) of five clinical gadolinium chelates in water, serum, and pooled human plasma at 37 °C, derived by interpolation of NMRD profiles acquired from 0.1 to 300 MHz. Values at 3 T were obtained by interpolation to 120 MHz. Reproduced from the data of Vander Elst and co-workers.[41]

Independent measurement of the same agents by inversion recovery on clinical scanners in human whole blood at 37 °C returned 3.9 ± 0.2 $mM^{-1}\ s^{-1}$ for gadoterate meglumine at 1.5 T, falling to 3.4 ± 0.4 at 3 T and 2.8 ± 0.4 at 7 T, together with markedly higher values of 7.2 ± 0.2, 5.5 ± 0.3, and 4.9 ± 0.1 $mM^{-1}\ s^{-1}$ for the albumin-binding hepatobiliary agent gadoxetate disodium at the three fields.[42] The approximately ten percent difference between the plasma value of 4.35 obtained by NMRD interpolation and the whole-blood value of 3.9 obtained by scanner-based inversion recovery for the same compound at the same nominal field is a fair illustration of the reproducibility that should realistically be expected between methodologies and media, and of why claims of small relaxivity advantages between candidate compounds require far more careful control than is usually applied.

6.4 pH, Ionic Strength, and Dissolved Oxygen

The pH of the medium influences relaxivity where the complex bears protonatable groups in the second coordination sphere or where prototropic exchange contributes to the transfer of relaxation to the bulk. For complexes bearing hydroxyl, phosphonate, or sulfonate substituents, a flat r_1 profile across pH 2 to 11 is evidence that catalyzed proton exchange is not contributing and that the enhancement originates in second- and outer-sphere water exchange; this is a useful and easily performed diagnostic.[12] Ionic strength should be held constant across the series, particularly for charged complexes, and the buffer identity recorded, since phosphate buffers can precipitate free gadolinium and thereby remove it from the paramagnetic pool.

Dissolved oxygen is paramagnetic and contributes measurably to the longitudinal relaxation of water. The proton spin–lattice relaxation time of thoroughly degassed water at ambient temperature is appreciably longer than that of air-equilibrated water, and the difference corresponds to a paramagnetic increment in R_1 of order 0.2 s^{-1} at atmospheric equilibrium.[28,29,30] That increment is comparable to half the total paramagnetic enhancement produced by a 0.05 mM solution of a typical gadolinium chelate. Provided the oxygen content is identical across the concentration series and in the blank, the contribution appears entirely in the intercept and cancels in the slope; the danger arises when it is not identical, for example when the blank has stood open on the bench while the samples were prepared in sealed vials, or when heating a series to 37 °C expels dissolved gas to differing extents. The practical instruction is simple: treat every member of the series identically with respect to headspace, sealing, and thermal history, and consider deliberate sparging with argon followed by sealing if the lowest concentrations of the series are to carry weight in the regression.

6.5 Sample Geometry and Probe Considerations

The sample must fill the active volume of the coil uniformly, and the sample height should be identical across the series so that the filling factor and the B_1 distribution experienced by the sample do not change from tube to tube. This matters more for inversion recovery than for a simple pulse-and-acquire experiment, because inversion efficiency varies across the B_1 profile and a taller sample samples a wider range of effective flip angles. Where the probe has a well-defined active region, restricting the sample to that region using a plug or a restricted-volume tube improves inversion efficiency at the cost of signal, and the trade is

usually worth making. Susceptibility-matched tubes reduce the field distortion at the meniscus and at the tube base, which affects T_2* strongly and T_2 only marginally, but which also affects the quality of the shim and hence the reliability of a lineshape-based check on sample condition.

6.6 A Minimum Reporting Set

Table 3 sets out the parameters that should accompany any reported relaxivity. The list is not aspirational; every entry corresponds to a documented mechanism by which omission has been shown to prevent inter-laboratory comparison. A relaxivity reported without the entries in the first group is not a transferable quantity.

Group	Parameter	Why it is required
Essential	Nominal field (T) and measured ^{1}H Larmor frequency (MHz)	r_1 and r_2 are field dependent; nominal designations are approximate
Essential	Sample temperature (°C) and verification method	Three conventions coexist; setpoint ≠ sample temperature
Essential	Medium and full composition, including pH and ionic strength	Protein binding and microviscosity change r_1 by tens of percent
Essential	Method of concentration determination and its uncertainty	Dominant systematic error in the reported slope
Essential	CPMG echo spacing τ and total echo count	r_2 is τ-dependent outside the motional-averaging regime
Acquisition	Number and distribution of TI values; recycle delay as multiple of blank T_1	Determines fit conditioning and intercept accuracy
Acquisition	Transients per point, receiver mode, phase cycle	Magnitude versus phase-sensitive detection changes the fitting model
Acquisition	Inversion pulse type (hard or composite) and fitted B/A ratio	Direct diagnostic of inversion efficiency
Analysis	Fitting model (2- or 3-parameter), weighting scheme, software	Two-parameter fits are biased by imperfect inversion
Analysis	Number of concentration points and their preparation route	Serial dilution propagates a single error through the series
Analysis	Fitted intercept versus independently measured blank	Internal consistency test of the whole dataset
Analysis	Regression statistics and full uncertainty budget	Slope standard error alone understates total uncertainty

Table 3. Minimum reporting set for a transferable relaxivity determination. Omission of any entry in the Essential group prevents meaningful comparison with published values.

7. Recognized Methods and De Facto Standards

7.1 No Formal Standard Exists for Relaxivity Determination

It should be stated plainly at the outset of this section, because the expectation is otherwise reasonable and is frequently held, that no consensus standard method for the determination of contrast-agent relaxivity has been published by ISO, ASTM International, the International Electrotechnical Commission, the National Electrical Manufacturers Association, or any pharmacopeia. Relaxivity is not a release specification for any marketed gadolinium-based contrast agent; the pharmacopeial monographs address identity, assay, related

substances, free gadolinium, free ligand, and endotoxin, and are silent on relaxation. Standards activity within the imaging community has been directed at the measurement of T_1 and T_2 by MRI and at the qualification of scanner performance, which is a related but distinct problem addressed in Section 7.4.

What exists in place of a formal standard is a three-part de facto framework. The first part is an operating convention in the coordination-chemistry literature, unwritten but consistently applied, which specifies benchtop relaxometry at fixed low field and controlled temperature with inversion recovery for T_1 and CPMG for T_2. The second is a benchmark series of comparative studies performed at clinical field strengths, which functions as a reference dataset against which new measurements can be checked. The third is the metrological infrastructure developed for quantitative MRI, which provides traceable relaxation-time reference materials and defines reference measurement procedures. A relaxivity program that anchors to all three is defensible; one that anchors to none is not.

7.2 The Benchtop Relaxometer Convention

The prevailing convention in the physicochemical literature is measurement on a dedicated low-resolution relaxometer at 0.47 T (20 MHz) or 1.41 T (60 MHz), with the sample thermostatted at 25 °C or 37 °C by a circulating bath connected to the sample holder, using an inversion-recovery sequence in which the inversion time is varied from a few milliseconds to at least five times T_1 across of order fifteen steps, and a CPMG sequence for the transverse measurement. Concentration is verified by ICP, five or more concentrations spanning roughly 0.1 to 1 mM are prepared, monoexponential fitting is applied to each relaxation curve, and linear regression of rate against concentration yields the relaxivity. This procedure is described, with minor variations, in the experimental sections of a large fraction of the primary literature and in the patent literature of the principal manufacturers, and it is the procedure that a reviewer or an opposing expert will expect to see.

The physical logic behind the choice of 20 or 60 MHz is partly historical, reflecting the availability of the Minispec class of instrument, and partly scientific: for slowly tumbling systems the relaxivity maximum falls in this region, so measurements there are maximally sensitive to changes in rotational correlation time and hence to the structural modifications that ligand designers are attempting. The corresponding disadvantage is that this is not where the compounds are used, and relaxivity advantages that are conspicuous at 20 MHz frequently vanish at 128 MHz.[13,14] Any program that reports only a low-field figure should expect that criticism and should preempt it.

This convention maps directly onto instrumentation now widely available. A modern 60 MHz benchtop spectrometer operates at the same 1.41 T as the classical mq60 relaxometer, and the field-cycling relaxometers used to construct NMRD profiles cover the range below 1 T continuously.[19,44] The practical caveats for benchtop platforms concern temperature control, as discussed in Section 6.2, and the availability of a properly implemented inversion-recovery routine with phase-sensitive output and user access to the raw echo train rather than only a vendor-fitted time constant. A vendor-supplied single-number T_1 output that does not expose the underlying data and the fitting model should not be used for work that will be published or placed into evidence.

7.3 The Clinical-Field Benchmark Series

A series of systematic comparative studies performed on clinical scanners now constitutes the reference dataset for relaxivity at imaging field strengths. The measurements of Rohrer and co-workers across field strengths and media established the pattern and remain the most frequently cited source.[37] Subsequent work extended the comparison to 0.2, 1.5, and 3 T in human blood plasma,[38] to 7 T in plasma,[40] to human whole

blood at 1.5, 3, and 7 T for the full set of eight chelates in clinical use,[42] and specifically to the macrocyclic agents in plasma and blood.[43] The comprehensive physicochemical characterization of six low-molecular-weight agents by Laurent and colleagues provides the corresponding chemistry-side dataset, including water exchange and NMRD.[39]

The practical use of this literature is as an external check. If a laboratory measures a well-characterized clinical agent under conditions matching one of these studies and recovers a value outside the reported uncertainty, the discrepancy identifies a problem in the laboratory's procedure and should be resolved before any novel compound is measured. This is, in effect, a system-suitability test constructed from the open literature, and its use is strongly recommended.

7.4 The ISMRM/NIST System Phantom and Traceable Reference Values

On the imaging side, the situation with respect to formal standardization is considerably better developed. The need for traceable quantitative MRI reference materials was set out in a community review that surveyed the phantom landscape and argued for a standardized system phantom,[56] and that phantom was subsequently designed, characterized, and described in detail.[57] It comprises a 200 mm spherical shell containing separate arrays of fourteen spherical vials each, one array doped with nickel(II) chloride to span a range of T_1 values and the other with manganese(II) chloride to span a range of T_2 values, together with proton-density and geometric-distortion elements and liquid-crystal thermometry vials that permit the internal temperature to be read from the images themselves.

Two features of this phantom are directly relevant to the present discussion. The first is that the reference values distributed with it were established at the National Institute of Standards and Technology by NMR inversion-recovery and CPMG methodology, not by imaging. The imaging measurement is validated against the bulk NMR measurement, which reflects the correct hierarchy: the NMR experiment is the reference method and the imaging experiment is the field method. The second is that the reference values are quoted at a defined temperature, conventionally 20 °C, with temperature-resolved values supplied over a range, because the relaxation times of the doped solutions are appreciably temperature dependent. The manganese-doped T_2 array is substantially more temperature sensitive than the nickel-doped T_1 array, and the magnitude of the temperature dependence has been characterized experimentally in a dedicated study.[58] Investigators who use such a phantom without recording and correcting for its internal temperature are introducing an error that the phantom was specifically designed to expose.

Complementary phantoms have been developed for particular applications, notably the medical-device-grade T_1 and extracellular-volume phantom developed for cardiovascular magnetic resonance quality assurance, which was distributed to a large number of centers to permit longitudinal monitoring of T_1 mapping performance.[59] For contrast-enhanced applications, the classical approach of doping agarose gel with a relaxation agent to decouple T_1 and T_2 independently remains valuable; nickel-DTPA-doped agarose was introduced specifically to provide a tissue-mimicking matrix in which the T_1 could be adjusted without the extreme transverse relaxation that agarose alone imposes.[55] That last point deserves emphasis for any phantom study of contrast-agent brightness: agarose exhibits a very large r_2/r_1 ratio because the gel matrix restricts water motion, so a gadolinium chelate dissolved in agarose does not behave as it does in solution, and the transverse relaxation of the matrix will dominate the image contrast at moderate concentration.

7.5 QIBA Profiles and Multicenter Reproducibility Findings

The Quantitative Imaging Biomarkers Alliance publishes profiles that specify acquisition, analysis, and quality-assurance requirements for particular quantitative measurements, together with claims regarding the

achievable precision, and its recommendations for improved precision of diffusion-weighted and dynamic contrast-enhanced biomarkers in multicenter oncology trials include explicit requirements for T_1 mapping and phantom-based quality control.[61] The empirical basis for the caution embedded in those documents is substantial. A multicenter phantom study of the T_1 quantification methods used for dynamic contrast-enhanced MRI examined accuracy, repeatability, and interplatform reproducibility and found systematic differences between methods and platforms sufficient to affect derived pharmacokinetic parameters.[60] A community-wide reproducibility challenge in which multiple sites implemented inversion-recovery T_1 mapping to a common protocol subsequently quantified the residual variability that survives careful protocol specification.[54]

The lesson that transfers to relaxivity work is that agreement between laboratories is achieved by specifying the measurement procedure in detail and by exchanging physical reference materials, not by assuming that a nominally identical experiment produces identical numbers. It does not.

8. NMR Relaxometry Compared With MRI-Based Relaxation Mapping

8.1 Why the Two Methods Disagree

It is frequently assumed that a T_1 measured on a spectrometer and a T_1 measured on a scanner are the same quantity determined by different instruments. They are the same physical quantity, but the measurements are not equivalent, and the differences are systematic rather than random. The bulk NMR measurement interrogates a small, thermostatted, homogeneous sample volume sitting in a well-shimmed field, using non-selective hard pulses whose flip angle is calibrated directly on the sample, with no gradients applied, no spatial encoding, and free choice of recycle delay and sampling density. The imaging measurement interrogates a voxel within a large object, using slice-selective pulses with imperfect profiles, in the presence of transmit-field inhomogeneity that at 3 T and above varies by tens of percent across the field of view, with gradients that introduce eddy currents and with a repetition time constrained by total scan duration.

The consequences have been documented quantitatively. A systematic comparison of inversion recovery, variable flip angle, and Look–Locker T_1 mapping applied to the same phantoms and subjects found differences between methods that exceeded the precision of any one of them, and concluded that the community lacked common ground on what constitutes an accurate T_1.[52] The distinction between accuracy and precision, which is not always maintained in the imaging literature, has been set out carefully for cardiac T_1 mapping: a method may be highly repeatable and simultaneously substantially biased, and repeatability statistics say nothing about bias.[53] This distinction transfers directly to relaxivity work, where a laboratory can generate exquisitely reproducible relaxivities that are systematically ten percent wrong because the concentration standard is wrong.

8.2 Correspondence of Methods

Table 4 sets out the correspondence between the bulk NMR experiments and their imaging counterparts, together with the principal bias mechanism affecting each. The most important structural observation is that the two communities agree on the reference method for longitudinal relaxation and diverge on transverse relaxation. Inversion recovery is the reference in both domains. For T_2, however, the bulk NMR community uses CPMG precisely because the multi-echo train suppresses diffusive attenuation, while the imaging community regards multi-echo spin-echo trains with suspicion and treats the single-echo spin echo acquired at multiple echo times as the reference, because slice-selective refocusing pulses generate stimulated-echo

pathways that bias the apparent T_2 upward.[33,34] The same architectural feature is a virtue in one domain and a defect in the other, and the reason is entirely a matter of whether the refocusing pulses are non-selective and homogeneous.

Quantity	Bulk NMR reference method	MRI reference method	Principal MRI bias mechanism
T_1	Inversion recovery, 3-parameter fit, TR ≥ 5×T_1[20,22,24]	2D inversion-recovery spin echo, long TR[52,54]	Slice profile; incomplete recovery when TR is shortened for time
T_1 (rapid)	Saturation recovery; Look–Locker[21,22]	Variable flip angle / DESPOT1; Look–Locker / MOLLI[49,50]	B_1^+ inhomogeneity; imperfect spoiling; magnetization transfer
T_1 (dictionary)	Not conventionally used	Magnetic resonance fingerprinting	Dictionary resolution; B_1 correction; model completeness
T_2	CPMG, even echoes, short τ[3,4]	Single spin echo at multiple TE	Stimulated echoes from imperfect slice-selective refocusing[33,34]
T_2 (rapid)	CPMG at longer τ	Multi-echo spin echo; DESPOT2	Upward T_2 bias; requires echo-modulation or EPG correction
T_2*	FID lineshape (rarely used quantitatively)	Multi-echo gradient echo	Macroscopic B_0 inhomogeneity; through-slice dephasing
Temperature control	VT gas, verified by shift thermometer[27]	Ambient bore temperature, often unmonitored	Drift during scan from gradient heating
Concentration	ICP or bulk susceptibility shift[35,36]	Prepared gravimetrically, rarely verified	Adsorption, hydration state, dilution error

Table 4. Correspondence between bulk NMR relaxometry and MRI-based relaxation mapping, with the principal bias mechanism affecting each imaging implementation. Note the inversion of preference for multi-echo acquisition between the two domains.

8.3 Imaging Implementations and Their Specific Vulnerabilities

The variable-flip-angle family, of which DESPOT1 is the best-known implementation, derives T_1 from the flip-angle dependence of the spoiled gradient-echo steady state and is extremely fast.[49] Its accuracy depends entirely on knowing the actual flip angle delivered at every voxel, which is not the nominal flip angle, and consequently an independent B_1^+ map and a correction are mandatory rather than optional; methods for acquiring that map and applying the correction have been developed specifically to make variable-flip-angle T_1 mapping accurate in the presence of transmit inhomogeneity.[51] The method is additionally sensitive to incomplete radiofrequency and gradient spoiling, which produces a residual steady-state free-precession contribution that biases the fit.

The Look–Locker family, and in cardiac imaging the modified Look–Locker inversion-recovery scheme and its variants, samples the inversion recovery with a train of low-flip-angle readouts and is the workhorse for in vivo T_1 mapping where breath-hold duration constrains everything.[50] Its known biases are well characterized and include dependence on heart rate, on the flip angle of the readout, and on the T_2 of the tissue through the magnetization preparation. Magnetic resonance fingerprinting departs from parametric fitting entirely, matching an acquired signal evolution against a precomputed dictionary; its accuracy is

bounded by the resolution and completeness of that dictionary and by the fidelity of the Bloch simulation used to generate it.

For a phantom study of contrast-agent behavior, the recommendation that follows from this is unambiguous. If the objective is to determine relaxivity, the measurement should be made by bulk NMR at controlled temperature, not on a scanner. If the objective is to characterize how a given agent behaves under a specific imaging protocol, the scanner measurement is appropriate but must be reported as protocol specific and should be accompanied by an independent bulk NMR determination of the underlying relaxation times on the same tubes. Where scanner-based T_1 mapping is unavoidable, the same mapping method should be used both to characterize the agent and to make the subsequent measurements, since a systematic bias common to both partially cancels.

9. Phantom Signal Intensity Is Not Relaxivity

9.1 The Spoiled Gradient-Echo Signal Equation

The connection between relaxivity and image brightness runs entirely through the signal equation of the pulse sequence employed, and it is not a simple one. For the spoiled gradient-echo sequence used almost universally in phantom brightness studies, of which SPGR and FLASH are vendor-specific implementations, the steady-state signal is[45]

$$S = M_0 \sin\alpha \times (1 - E_1) / (1 - E_1 \cos\alpha) \times \exp(-TE / T_2^*), \quad E_1 = \exp(-TR / T_1)$$

Three features of this expression govern everything that is observed in a concentration series. First, the dependence on T_1 enters only through E_1, and as T_1 becomes short relative to TR the factor $(1 - E_1)/(1 - E_1 \cos\alpha)$ approaches unity and the signal saturates at $M_0 \sin\alpha$. Beyond that point, further reduction in T_1 produces no further increase in signal whatever the relaxivity of the agent. Second, the transverse factor $\exp(-TE/T_2)$ *reduces the signal monotonically as concentration increases, and since* r_2 *exceeds* r_1 *and since susceptibility effects add to* T_2 on top of T_2, this term eventually dominates and the signal falls. The composite behavior is a rise, a plateau, and then a decline, and this shape is a property of the sequence rather than of the agent.

Third, the flip angle that maximizes signal is the Ernst angle, $\alpha_e = \arccos(\exp(-TR/T_1))$, which is itself a function of T_1 and therefore of concentration. A single fixed flip angle applied across a concentration series is optimal at exactly one concentration and is progressively further from optimal elsewhere. At low concentration, where T_1 remains long, a flip angle chosen to suit the high-concentration end of the series produces heavy saturation and suppresses precisely the region where relaxivity differences would be most visible. This is not a subtle effect: for a repetition time of 20 ms, the Ernst angle is approximately 35° for a sample with T_1 of 100 ms, 48° for T_1 of 50 ms, and 59° for T_1 of 30 ms. A fixed flip angle of 55° is therefore near optimal only for the most concentrated samples in a typical series.

9.2 The Empirical Literature and What It Actually Shows

The non-linearity of signal intensity with gadolinium concentration has been documented repeatedly. An early in vitro study at high field established that signal intensity correlates with concentration only over a limited low-concentration range and departs from linearity thereafter,[46] and a more recent systematic study of three macrocyclic agents at 1.5 T and 3 T examined the effect of concentration and dilution on signal intensity directly and confirmed that the relationship is protocol dependent.[48] The important consequence for a comparative study is that two agents with different relaxivities can produce indistinguishable signal

intensities under one protocol and clearly separated intensities under another, without either measurement being wrong.

A more fundamental point was established by Hagberg and Scheffler, who modeled the achievable contrast enhancement as a function of r_1, r_2/r_1, and field strength and showed that for a bounded maximum tissue concentration there exists an optimum r_1 that maximizes enhancement, above which further increases in relaxivity are counterproductive because transverse effects intrude.[47] They further showed that the same maximum enhancement obtainable at low field can be recovered at high field provided the r_2/r_1 ratio is maintained, at the cost of longer repetition time or higher dose. The practical implication is that the widespread design objective of maximizing r_1 is not equivalent to maximizing image contrast, and that r_2/r_1 is at least as important a figure of merit as r_1 alone.

The same conclusion was reached empirically in a comparison of five commercial agents in which relaxivities were extracted from NMRD profiles and compared with simulated spin-echo contrast and with in vivo contrast-to-noise ratio in a glioma model.[41] The r_1 values of the five agents differed by less than ten percent in plasma, no statistically significant difference in in vivo contrast-to-noise ratio was observed between the two agents taken forward for imaging, and the authors concluded that r_1 relaxivity is not in fact predictive of in vivo contrast efficacy. That conclusion, reached by workers with every commercial reason to prefer the opposite, should be taken seriously by anyone designing a phantom brightness study.

9.3 Designing a Defensible Phantom Brightness Experiment

If the objective is to demonstrate that agent A produces greater signal enhancement than agent B under conditions of practical relevance, then the experiment must be constructed so that the conclusion is not an artifact of the acquisition parameters. Several requirements follow directly from the preceding analysis.

The relaxation times of every tube must be measured independently by bulk NMR at the temperature at which the phantom will be imaged, and the concentrations must be verified analytically. Without this, the phantom experiment measures an unknown function of unknown quantities. The phantom should be imaged at more than one flip angle, at minimum bracketing the Ernst angles of the extremes of the concentration range, so that the dependence of the apparent ranking on flip angle is exposed rather than concealed. The echo time should be as short as the system permits, and a second echo time should be acquired to allow the T_2* contribution to be identified and, if desired, extrapolated away. All tubes must be imaged in the same slice and the same acquisition, with a common reference tube present in every image, so that receiver gain and coil-loading differences do not masquerade as contrast differences. Tube position within the phantom should be randomized or rotated between replicates, since transmit and receive sensitivity vary across the field of view.

Most importantly, the predicted signal should be computed from the measured T_1, T_2*, and the known sequence parameters using the signal equation above, and compared with the observed signal. Agreement validates the experiment. Disagreement identifies an uncontrolled variable and should be resolved before any conclusion about relative agent performance is drawn. This forward-modeling step converts a qualitative brightness comparison into a quantitative and defensible measurement, and it costs nothing beyond the arithmetic.

10. Critical Appraisal of Three Source Documents

Three publications were supplied as source material for this review. Each is examined below against the framework developed above, not to disparage the work, which in each case is competent and in two cases

substantial, but because the specific reporting deficiencies present in them are precisely the deficiencies that a program intending to generate defensible relaxivity data must avoid.

10.1 Chiral DOTA Contrast Agents (Zhang and Co-workers, 2023)

This study reports two chiral gadolinium DOTA derivatives with relaxivities substantially exceeding that of the parent Gd-DOTA, characterized by relaxometry, HPLC, ^{17}O NMR, potentiometry, biodistribution, and phantom imaging.[62] Several aspects of the methodology are exemplary and should be adopted. Gadolinium concentrations were determined by ICP-MS against a seven-point calibration rather than assumed from mass, which addresses the dominant systematic error identified in Section 5.2. Five concentrations were used for the regression, and relaxivity was obtained as a slope rather than from a single-point calculation. The pH dependence of r_1 was measured from pH 2 to 11 and shown to be flat, which is a legitimate and well-chosen control against catalyzed prototropic exchange.

Four reporting problems are nonetheless present, and the first is a straightforward internal inconsistency. The abstract and the footnote to Table 1 both state that relaxivities were measured at 1.4 T, whereas the Methods section states that the measurements were performed on a Bruker mq60 Minispec at 1.5 T. The mq60 designation refers to a ^{1}H operating frequency of 60 MHz, which corresponds to 1.41 T; the value of 1.5 T given in the Methods is therefore incorrect. The discrepancy is small in absolute terms but is exactly the kind of ambiguity that prevents a subsequent worker from reproducing the measurement, and a reader who takes the Methods statement at face value would compare these values against the 1.5 T clinical benchmark literature, which is a different field.

The second problem is that the CPMG parameters are not reported. The Methods state only that transverse relaxation times were measured using a CPMG pulse sequence; the echo spacing, the number of echoes, the sampling of odd or even echoes, and the fitting model are all omitted. For the specific systems studied this is consequential rather than pedantic. In water, the SAP isomer of Gd-LS exhibits r_1 of 14.5 and r_2 of 20.0 mM^{-1} s^{-1}, an r_2/r_1 ratio of 1.38 that is already elevated above the value near 1.1 expected for a freely tumbling monomeric chelate. In 4.5 percent human serum albumin, the same isomer exhibits r_1 of 17.5 and r_2 of 51.9 mM^{-1} s^{-1}, an r_2/r_1 ratio of 2.97, and the reported standard deviation on r_2 rises to 2.8 while that on r_1 remains 1.0. As set out in Section 4.2, an r_2/r_1 ratio approaching three with a disproportionate increase in scatter is the characteristic signature of a system leaving the motional-averaging regime, and the transverse relaxivity of such a system is echo-spacing dependent. Without the echo spacing, the value of 51.9 mM^{-1} s^{-1} cannot be reproduced by another laboratory and should not be compared against literature values acquired at unknown spacing.

The third problem concerns the interpretation of the ^{17}O data. The authors report that the characteristic slow-exchange profile, a negative slope in $\ln(1/T_{2r})$ against reciprocal temperature, could not be observed, and conclude that both complexes are very fast exchange systems, which they suggest may contribute to the enhancement of overall relaxivity. The observation is sound but the inference is loose. Absence of the slow-exchange branch establishes that water exchange is not rate limiting over the temperature range examined; it does not by itself constitute an explanation for elevated relaxivity, because in the fast-exchange limit the inner-sphere term is governed by T_{1m} and therefore by the rotational correlation time, not by τ_m. Fast exchange is a necessary condition for high inner-sphere relaxivity and not a sufficient one, and the distinction matters because the alternative explanation for a four-fold enhancement over Gd-DOTA in water — self-association of an amphiphilic tetra-aryl-sulfonate complex, which would lengthen τ_r and simultaneously elevate r_2/r_1 — is not excluded by any measurement presented. A concentration-dependence

study of r_1, a dynamic light scattering measurement, or a diffusion-ordered NMR experiment would have distinguished the two hypotheses directly.

The fourth problem concerns the phantom imaging, and it is the most consequential for anyone planning a comparable study. The relaxivities were measured at 1.41 T while the phantom images were acquired on a 3.0 T clinical scanner. Since r_1 is field dependent, and since the field dependence is steepest precisely for the slowly tumbling and macromolecule-associated systems that this work targets, the relaxivities reported in Table 1 are not the relaxivities operative in the phantom experiment, and the reported agreement between the two is therefore weaker evidence than it appears. Compounding this, the SPGR parameters are stated twice with different values: the main text gives a repetition time of 20 ms, while the Methods give 120 ms, with the flip angle of 55° and echo time of 2.1 ms common to both. The distinction is not trivial. As shown in Section 9.1, the shape of the signal-versus-concentration curve is controlled almost entirely by the ratio TR/T_1 and by the relationship between the chosen flip angle and the Ernst angle. The plateau reported above roughly 0.7 mM is quantitatively consistent with longitudinal saturation under the longer repetition time, at which point the factor $(1 - E_1)/(1 - E_1 \cos\alpha)$ has risen to approximately 0.85 of its limiting value and is asymptoting; it is a property of the acquisition, and no ranking of agents derived from the plateau region carries information about relaxivity.

10.2 Ligand Design for Stability (Clough, Jiang, Wong and Long, 2019)

This review surveys ligand-design strategies directed at increasing the thermodynamic stability and kinetic inertness of gadolinium chelates, and its central argument — that kinetic inertness rather than thermodynamic stability is the useful predictor of in vivo gadolinium release, and that macrocyclic chelators are therefore almost certain to form the basis of future clinical development — is well supported and correctly weighted.[63] For present purposes its relevance lies in the tension it documents between relaxivity and stability: raising the hydration number q by reducing ligand denticity raises relaxivity but exposes the metal, and the authors are appropriately skeptical of designs that purchase relaxivity at the cost of inertness. Any high-relaxivity claim should therefore be read alongside its kinetic inertness data, and a relaxivity advantage obtained through increased q should be regarded as provisional until the dissociation half-life has been established.

One technical point should be recorded for accuracy. The expression given as Equation 1 of that review is presented as defining relaxivity r, with concentration c appearing on the right-hand side alongside the hydration state q, the water molarity of 55.6, the longitudinal relaxation time of the bound water, and the water exchange lifetime. As written, and with c retained, the quantity computed has units of reciprocal seconds and is the inner-sphere contribution to the relaxation rate, not the relaxivity, which is that quantity divided by concentration. This is a units slip rather than a conceptual error, and the surrounding discussion is correct, but it is worth noting because the same conflation of rate and relaxivity recurs widely in the secondary literature and is a source of confusion for readers approaching the field from outside.

10.3 Comparative Relaxivities of Commercial Agents (Vander Elst and Co-workers, 2013)

This conference contribution is the shortest of the three documents and arguably the most useful, because it addresses directly the question of whether relaxivity predicts clinical performance and because it makes explicit a methodological disagreement that is otherwise implicit in the literature.[41] The authors recorded NMRD profiles from 0.1 to 300 MHz on dedicated relaxometric instrumentation, interpolated to obtain values at 1.5, 3, and 7 T in water, serum, and pooled human plasma, and compared these against simulated spin-echo contrast and against in vivo contrast-to-noise ratio in a C6 glioma model. Their conclusion was that r_1 relaxivities differ by less than ten percent between the commercial chelates examined, that no

statistically significant in vivo contrast-to-noise difference was observed between the two agents taken forward, and that r_1 relaxivity is not really predictive of in vivo contrast agent efficacy.

Two features of this work deserve emphasis. The first is the explicit methodological criticism embedded in its introduction: the authors observe that the widely cited comparative relaxivity data of Rohrer and colleagues were collected on 1.5 T and 3 T clinical systems rather than on dedicated relaxometric instruments, and they present their own relaxometer-derived values as lower than those obtained on non-dedicated systems. This is a substantive and unresolved disagreement about which instrument class yields the correct answer, and it goes to the heart of the question of whether a standard method exists. It does not; there is instead an active dispute between the relaxometry and imaging communities regarding the reference measurement, and any laboratory entering this field should be aware that its choice of platform is itself a contestable methodological position.

The second feature, which must be stated for balance, is that both of the principal comparative datasets carry commercial sponsorship on opposite sides of the same competitive question. The authors of the study under discussion are affiliated with Guerbet, the manufacturer of gadoterate meglumine, while the frequently cited comparative study to which they object originated with the manufacturer of gadobutrol and gadopentetate dimeglumine. Neither fact impugns the technical quality of either study, and both are competently executed, but a laboratory that relies on either as an external reference standard should be aware of the provenance and should preferentially anchor to the independent academic measurements where these are available.[42,43]

11. A Recommended Operating Framework

The following framework consolidates the requirements identified above into a working procedure suitable for relaxivity determination on the instrumentation typically available in an analytical NMR laboratory. It is written for measurement at 1.41 T on a 60 MHz benchtop platform and at 7.05 T on a 300 MHz superconducting system, which together bracket a useful portion of the published corpus and which correspond, to within one percent in Larmor frequency, to the classical mq60 relaxometer and to a 7 T human scanner respectively. Measurements at 1.5 T and 3 T cannot be made on either platform and must be obtained either by field-cycling relaxometry, by access to a clinical system, or by acknowledged interpolation.

11.1 Sample Preparation

A stock solution is prepared gravimetrically and its gadolinium content determined by ICP-OES or ICP-MS against a certified standard with an internal standard and matrix matching. Working solutions at a minimum of five and preferably seven concentrations spanning 0.05 to 1.0 mM are prepared by independent gravimetric dilution from the stock rather than by serial dilution, and the gadolinium content of each is verified analytically. A matrix-matched blank is prepared in the same session from the same water, buffer, and glassware. Where the medium is plasma, serum, or albumin solution, a single pooled lot is used throughout and its lot identity recorded, since inter-lot protein composition varies. All solutions are transferred to identical tubes to identical fill heights, sealed, and equilibrated together so that headspace, dissolved gas content, and thermal history are common to every member of the series.

11.2 Acquisition Parameters

Table 5 sets out the recommended acquisition parameters. The values given are starting points and should be adjusted to the relaxation times actually encountered, but the constraints expressed as multiples of T_1 or T_2 are not negotiable.

Parameter	Recommendation	Rationale
Sample temperature	37.0 ± 0.2 °C, verified by ethylene glycol or methanol shift thermometry in the sample position	Matches the clinical benchmark convention; setpoint is not sample temperature[27]
Equilibration time	≥10 min after insertion, extended for large samples	Thermal steady state before first transient
T_1 sequence	Inversion recovery, phase-sensitive detection where available	Reference method; read-pulse errors do not bias the fit[20,24]
Inversion pulse	Hard 180°, or composite 90_x–180_y–90_x where B_1 homogeneity is marginal	Improves inversion efficiency across the sample volume[23]
TI values	≥12, logarithmically spaced from $0.01\times T_1$ to $5\times T_1$, plus one $\geq 5\times T_1$	Conditions the three-parameter fit and anchors the asymptote[22]
Recycle delay	$\geq 5\times T_1$ of the blank, held constant across the entire series	Incomplete recovery biases the intercept and hence the slope
T_1 fitting model	Three-parameter $S = A + B\exp(-TI/T_1)$; report B/A	Absorbs imperfect inversion; B/A is a direct probe diagnostic
T_2 sequence	CPMG, even echoes only, τ in the range 0.1–1.0 ms	Meiboom–Gill phase cycling; short τ suppresses diffusion[3,4]
Echo count	Sufficient to reach $\geq 5\times T_2$; verify T_2 is independent of echo count	Detects radiofrequency heating and baseline drift
Echo-spacing control	Repeat at 2τ and 4τ on at least the highest and lowest concentration	Establishes whether r_2 is a molecular or an operating-condition property[31,32]
Transients	≥4 with full phase cycle, increased until residuals are structureless	Systematic residual structure is more informative than the fit statistic
Regression	Weighted least squares, weights $\propto R_i^{-2}$, intercept unconstrained	Correct error propagation from T to R; intercept is a validity test

Table 5. Recommended acquisition and analysis parameters for relaxivity determination by bulk NMR relaxometry.

11.3 System Suitability and Quality Control

A system-suitability scheme constructed from the open literature is strongly recommended and costs little. At the beginning and end of every measurement session, the relaxivity of a well-characterized reference agent is determined under the same conditions and compared against published values. Gadoterate meglumine is a suitable choice because it is a rigid macrocyclic chelate that does not bind protein and does not aggregate, and because comparative values are available across media and fields.[37,39,41,42,43] A session in which the reference agent does not reproduce within a predefined tolerance is rejected, and no data from that session are reported. In addition, a fixed aqueous solution of a stable paramagnetic salt, sealed permanently, provides a day-to-day instrument check that is independent of the reference agent supply, and its measured T_1 and T_2 should be trended on a control chart.

Where the work is intended to support a formal quality system, the following controls map naturally onto the requirements of a testing-laboratory accreditation scheme: documented temperature verification with a traceable reference and a stated calibration interval; documented ICP calibration against certified reference material with recovery and precision acceptance criteria; retention of raw relaxation curves rather than fitted constants alone; a defined acceptance criterion for the agreement between fitted and measured intercept; and

a documented uncertainty budget of the form given in Table 1. None of these is burdensome, and their absence is the most likely finding in any technical assessment of a relaxivity dataset.

11.4 Reporting

Every entry in Table 3 is reported. In addition, the raw relaxation data should be retained and made available, since the single most useful thing a subsequent worker can do with a published relaxivity is refit the underlying curves with a different model. Where a phantom imaging component is included, the measured T_1 and T_2 of every tube at the imaging temperature, the verified concentration of every tube, the complete sequence parameter set including the actual repetition time and flip angle, and the forward-modeled predicted signal are all reported alongside the observed signal.

12. Limitations and Residual Sources of Systematic Error

Several limitations of the framework proposed above should be acknowledged. The first is that adherence to it does not confer accuracy in an absolute metrological sense. There is at present no certified reference material for relaxivity, and the traceability chain terminates at the certified gadolinium standard used to calibrate the ICP measurement and at the traceable thermometer used to verify the sample temperature. The relaxation-time reference values distributed with quantitative MRI phantoms are traceable in a stronger sense, having been established at a national metrology institute, but they characterize doped aqueous solutions rather than relaxivity and cannot be used to validate a relaxivity measurement directly.[57,58]

The second limitation concerns the linear model itself. The assumption that the observed relaxation rate is linear in paramagnetic concentration is an approximation that fails at high concentration through solute–solute interaction, through changes in bulk viscosity, and through any concentration-dependent self-association. In systems where self-association occurs, the departure from linearity may be subtle over a limited concentration range and may be absorbed into an apparently satisfactory regression, so that a curved relationship is reported as a linear one with an inflated slope. Extending the concentration range downward and testing for curvature is the only reliable guard, and a coefficient of determination close to unity over five points spanning less than one decade of concentration is weak evidence of linearity.

The third limitation concerns temperature in a manner not yet addressed. Relaxivity is temperature dependent through several independent mechanisms with different signs, and the net temperature coefficient therefore differs between compounds and cannot be assumed. A laboratory that reports at a single temperature is reporting a single point on an unknown curve, and comparison between two compounds measured at slightly different temperatures is not safe merely because the difference is small. Where the temperature coefficient matters, it should be measured over a range rather than assumed.

The fourth limitation is the one most likely to be raised by an expert reviewer or an opposing expert. A relaxivity measured at a single field on a single instrument in a single medium at a single temperature is a narrow claim, and it is routinely presented as though it were a general property of the compound. The defensible presentation states the four conditions explicitly in the same sentence as the number, presents at minimum a two-field comparison so that the direction of the field dependence is visible, and refrains from ranking compounds on differences smaller than the combined uncertainty of the two measurements. Given the uncertainty budget developed in Section 5.3, differences below roughly five percent between compounds measured in the same session should not be treated as meaningful, and differences below roughly ten percent between compounds measured in different sessions or different laboratories should not be treated as meaningful at all.

Finally, it should be recognized that the relationship between relaxivity and clinical or experimental utility is weaker than the prominence of relaxivity in the design literature suggests. The modeling of Hagberg and Scheffler establishes that an optimum r_1 exists beyond which further increases are counterproductive, and that the r_2/r_1 ratio co-determines achievable enhancement.[47] The empirical comparison of Vander Elst and colleagues found no significant difference in in vivo contrast-to-noise ratio between agents whose plasma relaxivities differed by approximately twelve percent.[41] A program that optimizes r_1 in isolation, and that demonstrates its success by phantom brightness under a single fixed protocol, is optimizing a proxy for a proxy and should expect that characterization from a critical reader.

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Summary

No formally adopted standard method exists for the determination of contrast-agent relaxivity. Neither ISO, ASTM International, the IEC, NEMA, nor any pharmacopeia has published a procedure specifying how r_1 and r_2 shall be measured, and relaxivity does not appear as a release specification in the monographs for marketed gadolinium-based agents. This is the direct answer to the question that prompted the present review, and it is important because the assumption that such a standard exists leads laboratories to under-document their procedures.

What exists instead is a three-part framework to which a defensible program should anchor. The first part is the operating convention of the coordination-chemistry literature: relaxometry at 0.47 T or 1.41 T with the sample thermostatted at 25 °C or 37 °C, inversion recovery for T_1 with the inversion time varied across at least a dozen steps from a small fraction of T_1 to five times T_1, CPMG for T_2, five or more concentrations verified by ICP, and relaxivity taken as the slope of the rate against concentration with an unconstrained intercept. The second part is the benchmark comparative literature acquired at clinical field strengths, which supplies an external check in the form of a system-suitability test constructed from published values for well-characterized agents. The third part is the metrological infrastructure built around the ISMRM/NIST system phantom and the QIBA profiles, whose reference relaxation times were established by NMR inversion recovery and CPMG at a national metrology institute and which correctly places the bulk NMR experiment as the reference method and the imaging experiment as the field method.

Four variables determine whether a reported relaxivity is transferable, and all four are routinely under-reported. The magnetic field must be stated as a measured ^{1}H Larmor frequency, because relaxivity varies by a factor of two or more across the accessible field range and because instrument model designations are approximate. The temperature must be stated and independently verified in the sample position, because three incompatible conventions coexist at 20, 25, and 37 °C and because a controller setpoint is not a sample temperature. The medium must be fully specified, because even a non-binding macrocyclic chelate exhibits relaxivity in human plasma some forty percent above its value in water. Above all, the method by which the concentration axis was established must be stated, because concentration error is the dominant systematic contribution to a reported relaxivity and because a nominal gravimetric concentration for a lyophilized lanthanide complex of uncertain hydration can be wrong by ten percent or more, which is entirely sufficient to manufacture an apparent advantage over a reference agent.

For transverse relaxation specifically, one additional control is required and is almost never reported. The CPMG echo spacing must be stated, and the invariance of the fitted T_2 with respect to that spacing must be demonstrated by repeating the measurement at twice and four times the working value. For freely tumbling monomeric chelates in the motional-averaging regime the measurement is spacing independent and the control costs minutes. For any system in which aggregation, micellization, or protein binding occurs, the transverse relaxation moves out of that regime, r_2 becomes strongly spacing dependent, and a reported value without its echo spacing is not reproducible. An r_2/r_1 ratio substantially above two, particularly when accompanied by disproportionate scatter in r_2, is the diagnostic signature and should trigger the control rather than a claim.

The correspondence between bulk relaxometry and image-based mapping is closer for longitudinal than for transverse relaxation. Inversion recovery is the reference method in both domains. For transverse relaxation the two communities diverge, and the divergence is instructive: multi-echo CPMG is standard in bulk NMR precisely because it suppresses diffusive attenuation, whereas the same multi-echo architecture is distrusted in imaging because slice-selective refocusing generates stimulated-echo pathways that bias T_2 upward, so that the single spin echo acquired at multiple echo times remains the imaging reference. The practical

conclusion is that relaxivity should be determined by bulk NMR at controlled temperature and not on a scanner; where scanner-based relaxation mapping is unavoidable, the same mapping method should be used for both characterization and application so that a common systematic bias partially cancels.

Phantom image brightness is not relaxivity and should not be presented as a proxy for it. The relationship between the two runs entirely through the signal equation of the pulse sequence employed, and for the spoiled gradient-echo acquisition used in nearly all such studies the observed rise, plateau, and eventual decline of signal with concentration is a consequence of longitudinal saturation, of transverse attenuation at the chosen echo time, and of the mismatch between a fixed flip angle and a concentration-dependent Ernst angle. The plateau in particular carries no information about relative relaxivity. A defensible brightness experiment therefore requires independently measured relaxation times and verified concentrations for every tube, acquisition at more than one flip angle and more than one echo time, a common reference tube in every image, and explicit forward modeling of the predicted signal for comparison against the observed signal. Where the prediction and the observation disagree, an uncontrolled variable is present and must be found before any ranking of agents is asserted.

Two further cautions should accompany any program of this kind. The first is that the design objective of maximizing r_1 is not equivalent to maximizing image contrast; an optimum r_1 exists beyond which transverse effects intrude, the r_2/r_1 ratio co-determines achievable enhancement, and at least one careful comparative study found no significant difference in in vivo contrast-to-noise ratio between commercial agents whose plasma relaxivities differed by approximately twelve percent. The second is that the two most widely cited comparative relaxivity datasets originated with competing manufacturers, disagree with one another about the appropriate instrument class, and should therefore be used as external references only with that provenance in mind, with preference given to independent academic determinations where these are available.

Finally, a note on the instrumentation available to this laboratory. A 60 MHz benchtop platform operates at 1.41 T and is therefore field-matched to the classical relaxometer on which a large fraction of the published chelate literature was acquired, while a 300 MHz superconducting system operates at 7.05 T and is matched to within one percent in Larmor frequency to a 7 T human scanner. That pairing brackets a useful portion of the corpus and permits the direction and magnitude of the field dependence to be established, which is more valuable than any single-field figure. Neither platform addresses 1.5 T or 3 T, and any claim at those fields must be obtained by field-cycling relaxometry, by scanner access, or by explicitly acknowledged interpolation. The principal practical risk lies in temperature: compact permanent-magnet spectrometers are thermally stabilized at an elevated block temperature and do not all permit a verified sample temperature of 37 °C. That capability should be established experimentally with a chemical-shift thermometer before the program is committed to a benchtop platform, because relaxivities acquired at an unverified temperature near 30 °C are not comparable with the clinical benchmark literature and the deficiency cannot be corrected retrospectively.