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Investigating the impact of atrial fibrillation on the vascular onset of glaucoma via multiscale cardiovascular modeling / Scarsoglio, Stefania; Congiu, Luca; Ridolfi, Luca. - In: COMPUTER METHODS AND PROGRAMS IN BIOMEDICINE. - ISSN 0169-2607. - 267:(2025). [10.1016/j.cmpb.2025.108783]

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/3000500 since: 2025-05-29T15:00:02Z

Publisher:

Elsevier Ireland Ltd

Published

DOI:10.1016/j.cmpb.2025.108783

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Investigating the impact of atrial fibrillation on the vascular onset of glaucoma via multiscale cardiovascular modeling

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Abstract

Background and objective: Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common tachyarrhythmia, exhibiting faster and irregular beating. Although there is growing evidence of the impact of AF on the cerebral hemodynamics, ocular hemodynamic alterations induced by AF are still poorly investigated to date. The objective of this study is to computationally inquire into the role of AF on the ocular hemodynamics as one of the possible vascular triggers of glaucoma, which is the leading cause of blindness due to the damage of the optic nerve.

Methods: A validated 0D-1D multiscale cardiovascular model is exploited to compute the hemodynamic response of AF against sinus rhythm (SR), by simulating 2000 beats for each condition. To mimic AF rhythm, its main features are accounted for: (i) accelerated, variable and uncorrelated beating; (ii) absence of atrial kick; (iii) ventricular systolic dysfunction.

Results: We focused on intraocular pressure (*IOP*), ocular perfusion pressure (*OPP*), and translaminal pressure (*TLP*). Apart from a modest *OPP* decrease, beat-averaged values of *IOP* and *TLP* barely vary in AF with respect to SR. Instead, during AF a significant reduction and dispersion of pulsatile values (i.e., maximum minus minimum values reached in a beat),

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as well as wave amplitude damping, is observed for *IOP*, *OPP* and *TLP*. The marked variability of pulsatile values, which are hardly measured due to clinical difficulties, can induce transient hypoperfusions and hypo-pulsatility events (for *OPP*) as well as hypertensive episodes (for *TLP*).

Conclusions: Awaiting necessary clinical data which are to date lacking, the present study can enrich - through hemodynamic-driven hints in the AF framework - the vascular theory, which associates reduced ocular perfusion (by means of decreased *OPP* and increased *TLP*) to an augmented risk of glaucoma. In this context, present modeling findings suggest a possible mechanistic link between AF-induced hemodynamic alterations and the increased risk of glaucoma development.

Keywords: atrial fibrillation, intraocular pressure, computational hemodynamics, glaucoma, cardiovascular multiscale modeling, ocular perfusion pressure, translaminal pressure

1. Introduction

Atrial fibrillation (AF), characterized by a faster and irregular heart beating, is the most common cardiac arrhythmia and currently affects about 60 million subjects worldwide [1]. Due to the increasing life expectancy in Western countries, its incidence is expected to more than double within the next forty years [2]. Beside disabling symptoms - such as palpitations, chest discomfort and reduced exercise tolerance - there is growing evidence that AF is associated to cognitive decline, independently from clinical strokes [3, 4]. The alteration of cerebral hemodynamics during AF is extremely promising, though one of the least investigated mechanisms possibly relating AF and cognitive decline [4, 5]. Driven by the recent attention regarding the AF impact on the cerebral hemodynamics and considering that cerebral and ocular hemodynamics are intrinsically related through the retrobulbar subarachnoid space which is governed by the intracranial pressure (*ICP*), we here aim at investigating the acute response of ocular hemodynamics to AF events. In particular, we inquire into the role that AF-induced hemodynamics may play in the development of glaucoma.

Glaucoma is the leading cause of blindness due to the damage of the optic nerve, with 80 million people affected worldwide [6]. Although an increased intraocular pressure (*IOP*) is believed to be a major risk factor and the main trigger mechanism for glaucoma [6, 7], the underlying mechanisms are

22 debated. According to the vascular theory, two parameters defined through
23 IOP - namely the ocular perfusion pressure, $OPP = Pa_{eye} - IOP$ (where
24 Pa_{eye} is the arterial pressure at the eye level), and the translaminar pressure,
25 $TLP = IOP - ICP$ - play a key role. In particular, a decreased OPP and
26 an increased TLP are potential markers associated with the increased risk of
27 glaucoma development [7–9]. However, existing literature investigating the
28 link between OPP and glaucoma is divided, as in subjects with glaucoma
29 mean OPP is found to increase [10–12], remain equal [13–15], and reduce
30 [16–18], with respect to the control population. Thus, definitive findings
31 either confirming or refuting vascular theory are still missing.

32 *In vivo* measurements investigating the role of AF on the ocular hemo-
33 dynamics and the development of glaucoma are even more contrasting, also
34 considering the very few number of studies. A significant association between
35 AF and glaucoma development was found [19, 20], even if results on IOP
36 are not definitive, showing a modest increase [21], but also a reduction [22].
37 In this context of lack of clinical data, the adoption of a cardiovascular mod-
38 eling framework can be greatly valuable to shed light on the hemodynamic
39 mechanisms induced by AF able to alter IOP . Although not focused on
40 the AF-ocular hemodynamics link, a number of computational approaches
41 have been in fact successfully proposed to investigate the cardiovascular re-
42 sponse in presence of cardiac arrhythmias, by focusing on the cerebral [23–28],
43 cardiac-coronary [29–32], valvular [33, 34], and arterial [35–37] hemodynam-
44 ics, as well as the thromboembolic risk in the left atrial appendage [38–40].

45 We here propose a 0D-1D multiscale cardiovascular model - previously
46 exploited and validated in different pathological [29, 30, 35, 41] and altered
47 gravity [42–46] conditions - to study the AF effects on the ocular hemo-
48 dynamics and thus contribute to understand the possible vascular link between
49 AF and glaucoma. The model combines a 1D description of the arterial tree
50 and coronary circulation, with a 0D representation of the distal circulation,
51 venous return, cardiopulmonary and cerebro-ocular circulations. The overall
52 model is equipped with baroreflex and cardiopulmonary regulation mecha-
53 nisms, as well as cerebral autoregulation, and explicitly accounts for posture
54 and gravity changes. Through a stochastic modeling, we aim at investigating
55 the impact of acute AF on the ocular hemodynamics variables with respect
56 to the sinus rhythm (SR). We considered two representative configurations
57 of SR and AF rhythms imposed on a generic healthy young patient in supine
58 posture, by simulating for each condition 2000 beats to guarantee the statis-
59 tical significance of the outcomes. SR was simulated at the typical resting

60 HR (mean 70 bpm) with Gaussian distributed and time-correlated regular
61 beats. AF configuration instead accounted for the most important AF fea-
62 tures: (i) accelerated, variable and uncorrelated beating (mean 90 bpm),
63 extracted from an exponentially-modified Gaussian distribution; (ii) absence
64 of atrial kick; (iii) ventricular systolic dysfunction (i. e., reduced left and
65 right ventricular contraction) [31, 32, 36]. After validating the model by
66 means of typical central cardiovascular parameters - such as stroke volume,
67 cardiac output and mean arterial pressure - we focused on significant ocu-
68 lar circulation parameters, IOP , OPP and TLP . The comparison between
69 SR and AF allowed us to quantify the net hemodynamic impact of AF on
70 the ocular compartment and inquire into its possible mechanistic role in the
71 development of glaucoma.

72 2. Methods

73 The present study was conducted exploiting a 0D-1D multiscale closed-
74 loop model of the cardiovascular system. The model has been recently and
75 extensively validated against posture [43, 46, 47] and gravity [42, 44, 45]
76 changes, as well as in AF conditions [29, 30, 35]. The present modeling ap-
77 proach allowed to obtain a reliable description of several characteristics of
78 the cardiovascular system and currently comprises a 1D representation of
79 the systemic arterial and coronary circulations linked to several 0D lumped
80 parameter compartments that describe the peripheral, venous, cardiopul-
81 monary, and cerebral-ocular circulations. In the next sections, we will recall
82 the most relevant features of the whole model, by focusing on the ocular
83 compartment. Complete modeling details are offered in the Supplementary
84 Material. Then, the stochastic approach to simulate SR and AF is presented,
85 paying attention to the hemodynamic features characterizing AF rhythm.

86 2.1. Cardiovascular modeling

87 The 1D model consists of 63 main large arteries, which are described as
88 straight tapered vessels, with a circular cross-sectional shape. The blood
89 motion is described by one-dimensional mass and momentum conservation
90 equations, where the cross-section area $A(x, t)$ and the flow $Q(x, t)$ are the
91 dependent variables, being x and t the axial space coordinate and the time,
92 respectively. At each inlet/outlet, mass and momentum conservation are set
93 as boundary condition. A constitutive equation, linking $P(x, t)$ and $A(x, t)$,
94 is introduced to describe the non-linear mechanical behavior of the large

95 arteries. The blood is modeled as a Newtonian fluid with density $\rho = 1050$
96 kg/m^3 .

97 The 1D model is connected to the 0D peripheral circulation compart-
98 ments, each described by an electric analog circuit. The terminal branches
99 of the main arteries interface with the arteriolar vessels, which are modelled
100 using characteristic impedances, Z_c . Downstream the arteriolar compart-
101 ments, the terminal of the coronary arteries is connected to a lumped model
102 of the coronary microcirculation bed, which provides a distinctive identifica-
103 tion of the vasculature perfusing each myocardial layer - from the subepicar-
104 dial, through the intermediate midwall, up to the subendocardial circulation
105 - each described into arterial, intermediate, and venous subcompartments.
106 The internal carotid and the vertebral arteries are linked to a 0D cerebro-
107 ocular model, which starts with a lumped representation of the main large
108 cerebral arteries of the circle of Willis. Then, six branches extend from the
109 circle of Willis to supply the right and left pial circulation. The pial circu-
110 lation is followed by the intracerebral arteriolar circulation, which is further
111 subdivided into anterior, middle, and posterior circulation, interconnected
112 through collateral vessels. Ultimately, the intracerebral arteriolar circulation
113 merges into one capillary-venous compartment that, along with the ocular
114 circulation, connects to the superior vena cava.

115 The remaining terminal branches other than coronary and cerebral arterioles
116 merge into five macro-regions that describe the microcirculation of legs, lower
117 abdomen, upper abdomen, arms, and head. Each of the five macro-regions is
118 divided into three compartments, representing the capillary, venule, and vein
119 circulations. The leg and arm venous compartments include a model of the
120 venous valve that prevents the reversal flow. Finally, three compartments
121 conclude the venous return with the abdominal, inferior, and superior venae
122 cavae, the latter including a venous collapse mechanism. Additional lumped
123 parametrizations are adopted for the four cardiac chambers and valves, and
124 the pulmonary circulation. The cardiac contractility is modeled employing
125 time-varying elastances, one specific for the atria and one for the ventricles.
126 The four cardiac valves are represented by four non-ideal diodes, accounting
127 for various factors affecting the valve leaflets such as tissue friction, pressure
128 and inertial forces, and the influence of downstream vortexes.

129 The model is equipped with short-term regulation mechanisms, account-
130 ing for the baroreceptors, the cardiopulmonary reflex, the cerebral autoreg-
131 ulation and the CO_2 reactivity regulation. The baroreceptor modeling rules
132 the chronotropic effect, the inotropic effect of both the ventricles, and the

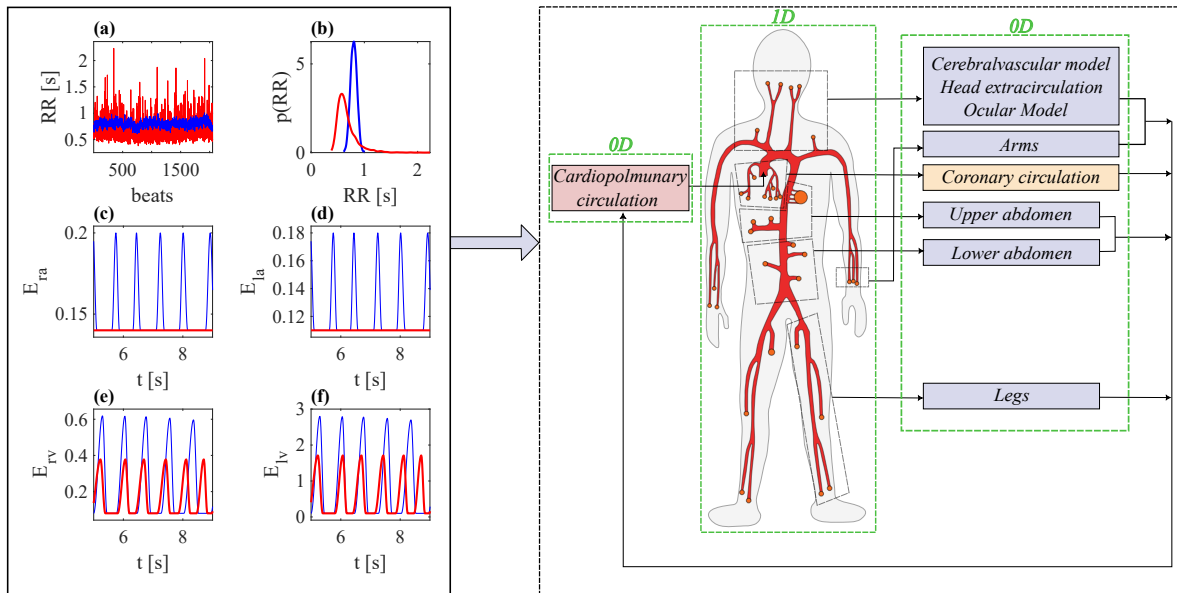


Figure 1: Scheme of the stochastic modeling approach. Left: hemodynamic features of AF (red) versus SR (blue) beating. (a)-(b) RR time-series and probability density functions (pdfs); (c)-(d) right and left atrial elastances, (e)-(f) right and left ventricular elastances (all the elastances are expressed in mmHg/ml). Right: scheme of the 0D-1D cardiovascular model.

133 regulation of systemic vascular resistances, venous compliances, and venous
 134 unstressed volumes. The cardiopulmonary reflex plays the same role as the
 135 baroreceptors, except for the inotropic and chronotropic effects. The cere-
 136 bral autoregulation and CO₂ reactivity regulation control the resistances and
 137 compliances of the pial circulation.

138 A schematic picture of the overall model is shown in the right box of Fig.
 139 1, while details and governing equations are reported in the Supplementary
 140 Material.

141 2.1.1. Ocular Model

142 The 0D ocular model consists of 6 compartments, each describing a fun-
 143 damental feature of the ocular circulation. The first compartment is the
 144 retrobulbar arachnoid space (rSAS), anatomically located on the posterior
 145 eye. While this compartment does not exchange fluids with other compart-
 146 ments, it affects the total ocular volume by employing *ICP*-driven defor-
 147 mations described by the compliance C_{rg} . The aqueous humor compartment
 148 presents an aqueous humor inflow $Q_{aq,in}$, and outflow $Q_{aq,out}$, both connected
 149 to the capillary-venous section of the cerebral model. An additional passive
 150 compartment accounts for all the eye structures that do not change in vol-
 151 ume, such as the lens and vitreous humor. Finally, the eye blood circulation
 152 is modeled by employing three compartments connected in series that ac-
 153 count for the arterial, capillary, and venous circulation. The circulations
 154 of the choroid and retina, which collectively encompass all the eye blood
 155 circulation, are lumped together in the three blood compartments.

156 The equations governing the intraocular pressure (*IOP*) and the globe
 157 volume (V_g) are:

$$\frac{dIOP}{dt} = \frac{1}{C_g} \left(C_{rg} \frac{dICP}{dt} + C_{ag} \frac{dPa_{eye}}{dt} + C_{vg} \frac{dPv_{eye}}{dt} + Q_{aq,in} - Q_{aq,out} \right) \quad (1)$$

$$\frac{dV_g}{dt} = C_{ag} \frac{d(Pa_{eye} - IOP)}{dt} + C_{vg} \frac{d(Pv_{eye} - IOP)}{dt} + Q_{aq,in} - Q_{aq,out} \quad (2)$$

158 The ocular arterial pressure Pa_{eye} is defined as the average pressure be-
 159 tween the right and left internal carotids. The ocular venous pressure Pv_{eye}
 160 is assimilated to the maximum value between the central venous pressure
 161 (*CVP*) and the episcleral venous pressure (*EVP*):

$$Pa_{eye} = 0.5 (P_{ICA_l} + P_{ICA_r}) - L_{f-b} \rho g \cos \alpha \quad (3)$$

$$EVP = P_{svc} - \rho g \left(\frac{L_H}{2} + \frac{L_{svc}}{2} \right) \sin \alpha - L_{f-b} \rho g \cos \alpha \quad (4)$$

$$Pv_{eye} = \max[CVP, EVP] \quad (5)$$

162 where $L_{f-b} = 0.03$ m is the perpendicular distance between the globe and
 163 the mid-coronal plane; $L_H = 0.15$ m is the vertical anatomical length of the
 164 head.

165 The aqueous humor inflow is set $Q_{aq,in} = 0.048 \cdot 10^{-6}$ l/s, while the aqueous
 166 humor outflow rate $Q_{aq,out}$ is defined as:

$$Q_{aq,out} = C_{tm} (IOP - EVP) + Q_{uv} \quad (6)$$

167 where $C_{tm} = 0.0035 \cdot 10^{-6}$ l/(s·mmHg) is the aqueous outflow facility, and
 168 Q_{uv} is the uveoscleral outflow. The C_g is the globe compliance, while C_{ag}
 169 and C_{vg} are the arterial-globe and venous-globe compliances, respectively,
 170 defined as:

$$C_g = V_g \left(\frac{C_1}{IOP} + C_2 \right) \quad (7)$$

$$C_{ag} = 0.3V_g \left(\frac{C_1}{IOP} + C_2 - \frac{1}{k_g IOP} \right) \quad (8)$$

$$C_{vg} = 0.7V_g \left(\frac{C_1}{IOP} + C_2 - \frac{1}{k_g IOP} \right) \quad (9)$$

171 where $C_1 = 4.87 \cdot 10^{-3}$ 1/mmHg, $C_2 = 3.90 \cdot 10^{-5}$ 1/mmHg and $k_g = 312$
 172 [46].

173 To integrate the ocular model with the global cardiovascular model, ar-
 174 terial eye input ($Q_{a_{eye}}$) and venous eye output ($Q_{v_{eye}}$) flow are estimated
 175 as:

$$Q_{a_{eye}} = C_{ag} \left(\frac{d(Pa_{eye} - IOP)}{dt} \right) + Q_{eye} \quad (10)$$

$$Q_{v_{eye}} = Q_{eye} - C_{vg} \left(\frac{d(Pv_{eye} - IOP)}{dt} \right) \quad (11)$$

176 where Q_{eye} is the eye flow rate and is determined by the equation $Q_{eye} =$
 177 $(Pa_{eye} - Pv_{eye})/R_{eye}$, being R_{eye} the resistance of the capillary bed (repre-
 178 sented as a rigid compartment) and set to 4676 mmHg·s/ml. More details on
 179 governing equations and parameter setting are offered in the Supplementary
 180 Material.

181 2.2. SR and AF features

182 The model was employed to inquire into ocular hemodynamics during
 183 physiological SR and AF, by simulating the cardiovascular response of a
 184 generic healthy young patient in supine posture. To avoid the patient-specific
 185 details (e.g., sex, age, weight, and cardiovascular diseases) inherited by real
 186 RR beating, we exploited artificially built RR intervals - RR [s] is the cardiac
 187 beating period, with the heart rate, $HR = 60/RR$, expressed in [bpm] - in
 188 both rhythms, as done in previous studies [29, 31, 33–35].

189 RR_{SR} intervals in SR configuration were extracted from a correlated pink
 190 Gaussian distribution with mean value $\mu_{SR} = 0.857s$ ($HR = 70$ bpm) and
 191 a coefficient of variation $cv_{SR} = 0.07$ (see [29, 31, 35, 48] and therein ref-
 192 erences). The RR_{SR} time-series and the corresponding probability density
 193 functions (pdfs) are reported in blue in the left box of Fig. 1, panels (a, b).

194 Concerning AF, three typical features were included: (i) faster, irregular,
 195 and uncorrelated RR beating; (ii) absence of atrial kick; (iii) left and right
 196 ventricular systolic dysfunction [31, 32, 35, 36]. The AF beating (RR_{AF})
 197 was obtained by superposing two statistically independent times: the first
 198 obtained from a correlated pink Gaussian distribution and the second from
 199 an uncorrelated exponential distribution. The RR_{AF} (Figure 1a, red curve)
 200 was extracted from the resulting uncorrelated exponentially-modified Gaus-
 201 sian distribution (Figure 1b, red curve), with $\mu_{AF} = 0.67s$ ($HR = 90$ bpm)
 202 - as a faster HR is commonly found in AF - $cv_{AF} = 0.26$ [48], and $\gamma = 6$ Hz
 203 (see [31, 49, 50] and therein references). The absence of atrial kick, which
 204 characterizes the loss of atrial contraction during AF [51, 52], was simulated
 205 by imposing a constant left and right atrial elastance (Figure 1, panels c and
 206 d, red curves) [31, 32, 35, 36]. In this way, the atria contribution of the ven-
 207 tricles filling (atrial kick) is impaired. Finally, reduced left [53–55] and right
 208 [56] ventricular systolic function is generally observed during AF and this
 209 aspect was modeled by decreasing both left and right maximum left ventric-
 210 ular elastances by 40 % with respect to their baseline values (Figure 1, panels
 211 e and f, red curves). A moderate ventricular impairment was here chosen,
 212 given the heterogeneity of clinical [53–56] and modeling [31, 32, 36] literature

213 in this regard and the difficulty in translating ventricular dysfunction into
214 elastance terms [51].

215 After the modeling system exceeds the numerical transient (first 50 beats),
216 a total of 2000 beats for each SR and AF condition in supine posture were
217 simulated to guarantee the results reach a statistical stationarity state. For
218 the central hemodynamics validation (see Section 3.1), we considered the fol-
219 lowing parameters: stroke volume $SV = V_{lved} - V_{lves}$ (where V_{lved} and V_{lves}
220 are left ventricular end-diastolic and end-systolic volumes, respectively), ejec-
221 tion fraction $EF = SV/V_{lved}$, cardiac output $CO = SV \cdot HR$, mean systemic
222 (MAP) and pulmonary (MPAP) arterial pressures. For the ocular hemody-
223 namics (see Section 3.2), we focused on primary ocular variables: the in-
224 traocular pressure, IOP , the ocular perfusion pressure, $OPP = Pa_{eye} - IOP$,
225 and the ocular translaminar pressure, $TLP = IOP - ICP$. Such primary
226 variables involve in their definition some auxiliary variables: arterial and
227 venous pressures at the level of the eye, Pa_{eye} and Pv_{eye} (here in supine pos-
228 ture taken as the internal carotid pressure and the central venous pressure,
229 respectively), and intracranial pressure, ICP .

230 3. Results

231 To validate our modeling approach, we will first present a comparison on
232 the central hemodynamics between our model findings and available litera-
233 ture regarding SR and AF, see Section 3.1. Then, after an overview of the
234 time-series of ocular variables in SR and AF (Section 3.2.1), we will focus
235 on a beat-to-beat analysis on the ocular hemodynamic alterations induced
236 by AF (Section 3.2.2). The few hemodynamic ocular measures in AF will be
237 discussed in comparison with modeling outcomes in the next sections. We
238 recall that the present model has been recently and extensively validated
239 against posture [43, 46, 47] and gravity [42, 44, 45] changes, as well as in AF
240 conditions [29, 30, 35].

241 3.1. Model validation with literature data: central hemodynamics

242 Table 1 compares the present numerical simulations (left columns) with
243 clinical data measured in literature (right columns), in terms of common cen-
244 tral hemodynamic parameters. For validation purposes, we choose to show
245 only the parameters that are extensively and reliably measured in the litera-
246 ture. However, it should be recalled that the model can provide many other

	Present simulations						Clinical literature				
	Mean			cv			SR		AF		
	SR	AF	$\Delta\%$	SR	AF	$\frac{cv_{AF}}{cv_{SR}}$	Mean	Std	Mean	Std	$\Delta\%$
HR [bpm]	70	90	28.57	0.07	0.26	3.78	66.84	11.91	81.83	23.44	22.42
SV [ml]	76.31	50.74	-33.51	0.03	0.08	3.23	77.48	25.57	52.13	15.98	-32.72
EF [%]	61.61	42.06	-31.74	0.02	0.07	3.56	63.63	6.90	53.08	12.42	-16.58
CO [l/min]	5.36	4.78	-10.84	0.06	0.21	3.66	5.35	2.28	4.29	1.46	-19.83
MAP [mmHg]	90.74	86.73	-4.42	0.03	0.05	1.92	89.59	12.14	93.90	12.31	4.81
MPAP[mmHg]	15.49	15.48	-0.12	0.02	0.05	2.47	19.06	8.51	21.51	7.25	12.87

Table 1: Central hemodynamics: present numerical simulations (left) against clinical literature (right). Heart rate (HR), stroke volume (SV), ejection fraction (EF), cardiac output (CO), mean arterial pressure (MAP), and mean pulmonary arterial pressure ($MPAP$) are listed. The simulations column reports the mean and the coefficient of variation (cv) of each signal, along with the percentage differences between the SR and AF mean values and the cv ratios in AF and SR conditions. Statistically significant differences were found between SR and AF values for all signals by means of the Wilcoxon test ($p < 0.01$). The clinical literature column provides the mean and standard deviation (Std) of the available data in literature, and the percentage differences between the SR and AF mean values.

247 cardiovascular details (such as cardiac-coronary hemodynamics, cerebral cir-
248 culation, arterial patterns and venous return), here not displayed because
249 out of the validation scope. The mean and coefficient of variation (cv) values
250 obtained with the model are computed over 2000 beats in SR and AF (cv is
251 the ratio between standard deviation and mean values). For literature data
252 reported in Table 1, the mean value is computed as the average value among
253 the cited studies and weighted over the sample size of each, while standard
254 deviation (Std) is computed as referred to the weighted mean value. Table
255 SM11 in the Supplementary Material reports detailed values and references
256 for each literature study here exploited for validation. In order to better dis-
257 play the range of variability of the clinical data, Fig. 2 shows the variations
258 from SR to AF of the parameters measured in the literature (Mean \pm Std)
259 and simulated (mean) by the model, as reported in Table 1.

260 Although HR is an input parameter imposed in our analysis (and not
261 directly exploitable for validation), a first preliminary comment is due. Lit-
262 erature results show an overall mean increase in HR around +22%, when
263 passing from SR to AF. Thus, the here modelled HR mean increase from 70
264 to 90 bpm (about +29%) when passing from SR to AF realistically mimics
265 the well-known feature of accelerated beating, which is generally found in
266 AF and documented in literature.

267 Figure 2 makes evident that, for both SR and AF configurations and
 268 all the parameters analyzed, the mean values predicted by the model (red
 269 crosses) fall within the measurement range [Mean - Std, Mean + Std] given
 270 by the clinical literature (black lines). More in details, in clinical literature
 271 both stroke volume, SV , and ejection fraction, EF , exhibit a remarkable
 272 decrease (-33% and -17%, respectively). In good agreement with measure-
 273 ments, our model predicts a relevant decrease in AF: -34% and -32% for
 274 SV and EF , respectively. SV (and consequently EF) reduction is due to
 275 three main mechanisms all implemented in our model to simulate AF: (i)
 276 HR increase, which reduces the necessary time to adequate ventricular emp-
 277 tying and filling; (ii) absence of atrial kick, responsible of the ventricular
 278 filling for about 20%; and (iii) reduced ventricular contractility (i.e., ventric-
 279 ular systolic dysfunction). The fact that EF decreases more in the model
 280 (-32%) than in literature (-17%) is due to the interplay between increased
 281 HR (which decreases V_{lved}) and ventricular systolic dysfunction (which in-
 282 creases V_{lved} [36]), resulting in a slight change of V_{lved} in AF, thus inducing
 283 a marked EF reduction in AF. Cardiac output, CO , is measured to reduce
 284 by about 20% on average during AF, in front of a mean reduction in AF of
 285 about 11% predicted by the modeling approach. A smaller reduction in CO
 286 (-11%) compared to the literature (-20%), can be due to a greater increase
 287 of HR during AF in our model (+29%) compared to the measurements in
 288 the literature (+22%). In fact, given a similar SV reduction (-34% model,
 289 -33% clinical literature), a higher HR mitigates the CO reduction.

290 Mean systemic (MAP) and pulmonary ($MPAP$) arterial pressure values
 291 per beat are perhaps the most controversial hemodynamics variables in AF,
 292 since the heart rate variability causes problems to oscillometric instruments
 293 and noninvasive blood pressure measurements [31]. MAP slightly increases
 294 during measured AF (+5%), while the model predicts a quite negligible re-
 295 duction (-4%). As for $MPAP$, the mean value is observed to mildly increase
 296 in AF measurements (+13%), while no variation emerges from our numer-
 297 ical results. The overall picture is that the marginal variations for MAP
 298 and $MPAP$ observed by the model are due to the action of baroreceptors
 299 and cardiopulmonary receptors, which maintain in AF the levels of central
 300 mean pressures close to the physiological values of the SR. These modest
 301 variations highlighted by the model fall within the range of variability of the
 302 data measured in the literature, as shown in Fig. 2.

303 In addition to the mean values of the hemodynamic parameters evaluated
 304 over 2000 simulated beats and compared with the literature, Table 1 also

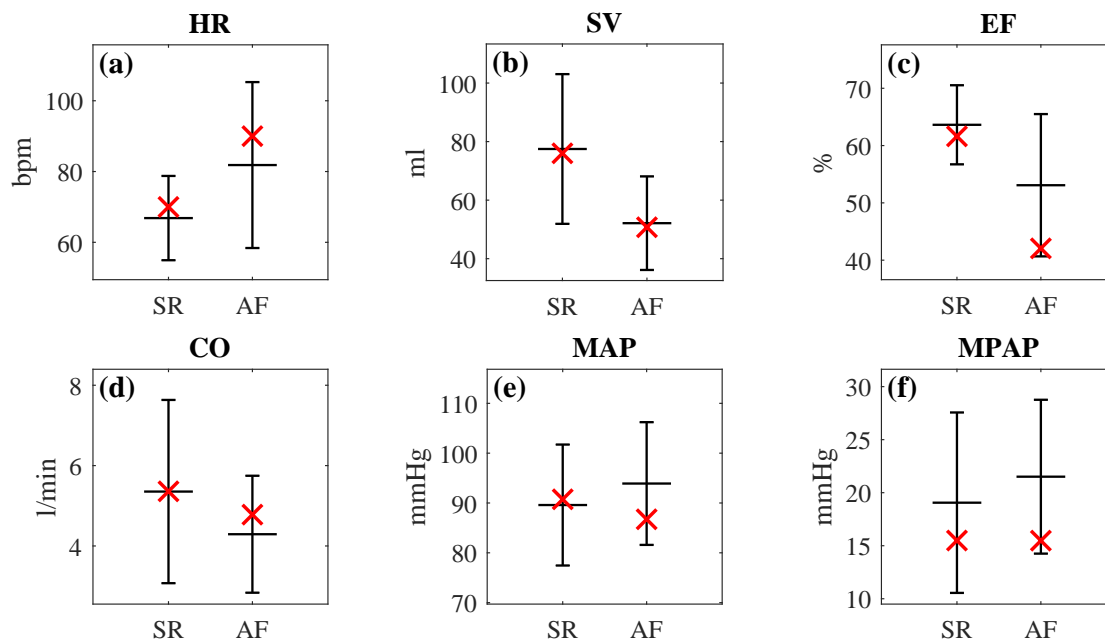


Figure 2: Central hemodynamics in SR and AF: present numerical simulations (red crosses) against the range of variability [Mean - Std, Mean + Std] given by the clinical literature (black lines). (a) Heart rate, HR; (b) stroke volume, SV; (c) ejection fraction, EF; (d) cardiac output, CO; (e) mean systemic arterial pressure, MAP; (f) mean pulmonary arterial pressure, MPAP.

305 reports the cv values obtained from these simulations. All the parameters
 306 show a more marked variability in AF than SR. It can be observed that the
 307 higher *RR* variability imposed (cv=0.07 in SR, cv=0.26 in AF) result in cv
 308 values in AF about 1.9-3.8 times higher than SR. The lowest cv_{AF}/cv_{SR} ratios
 309 are found for *MAP* (1.9) and *MPAP* (2.5), again confirming the ability of
 310 short-term autoregulation mechanisms to counteract AF-induced alterations
 311 at central (systemic and pulmonary) pressures level.

312 3.2. Ocular hemodynamics in SR and AF

313 3.2.1. Overview of the ocular variables

314 To introduce the ocular hemodynamic response to AF, Fig. 3 shows rep-
 315 resentative time-series of primary (*IOP*, *OPP*, *TLP*) and auxiliary (Pa_{eye} ,
 316 Pv_{eye} , *ICP*) variables, as simulated in SR and AF. We will first explain the
 317 behavior of the primary variables as a function of the auxiliary ones, and
 318 then we will compare the trends in AF (red curves) with those in SR (blue
 319 curves).

320 As displayed in Eq. (1), *IOP* in supine posture depends on Pa_{eye} , Pv_{eye} ,
 321 and *ICP*. Since the retrobulbar subarachnoid space-to-globe compliance,
 322 C_{rg} , is two orders of magnitude lower than the arterial, C_{ag} , and venous,
 323 C_{vg} , blood-to-globe compliances, time derivatives of Pa_{eye} and Pv_{eye} terms
 324 basically rule the *IOP* dynamics. Between these two differential terms, given
 325 the much higher arterial wave amplitude with respect to the venous one
 326 (see panels a and b of Fig. 3), *IOP* is mainly governed by Pa_{eye} . The
 327 significant dependence of *IOP* on Pa_{eye} was already observed considering
 328 posture changes [46]. To this end, a law linking *IOP* variations only to
 329 changes of blood pressure at the level of the eye has been proposed, which
 330 is consistent with the understanding that acute *IOP* changes result from
 331 gravitationally driven blood pressure changes [57]. The strong *IOP*(Pa_{eye})
 332 link is here confirmed also in supine condition, as can be observed comparing
 333 panels (a) and (e) of Fig. 3, and considering that the Pearson correlation
 334 coefficient between Pa_{eye} and *IOP* time-series is 0.99 in both SR and AF.

335 As *IOP* time-series is strongly correlated to Pa_{eye} , *OPP* due to its defi-
 336 nition ($Pa_{eye} - IOP$) is in turn strictly linked to Pa_{eye} . Panels (a), (e), and
 337 (c) clearly show very similar trends for Pa_{eye} , *IOP*, and *OPP* times-series,
 338 respectively. We recall that *OPP*, being a pressure difference, is a measure
 339 of the ocular perfusion and its decrease has been associated to an augmented
 340 risk for glaucoma according to the vascular theory [7].

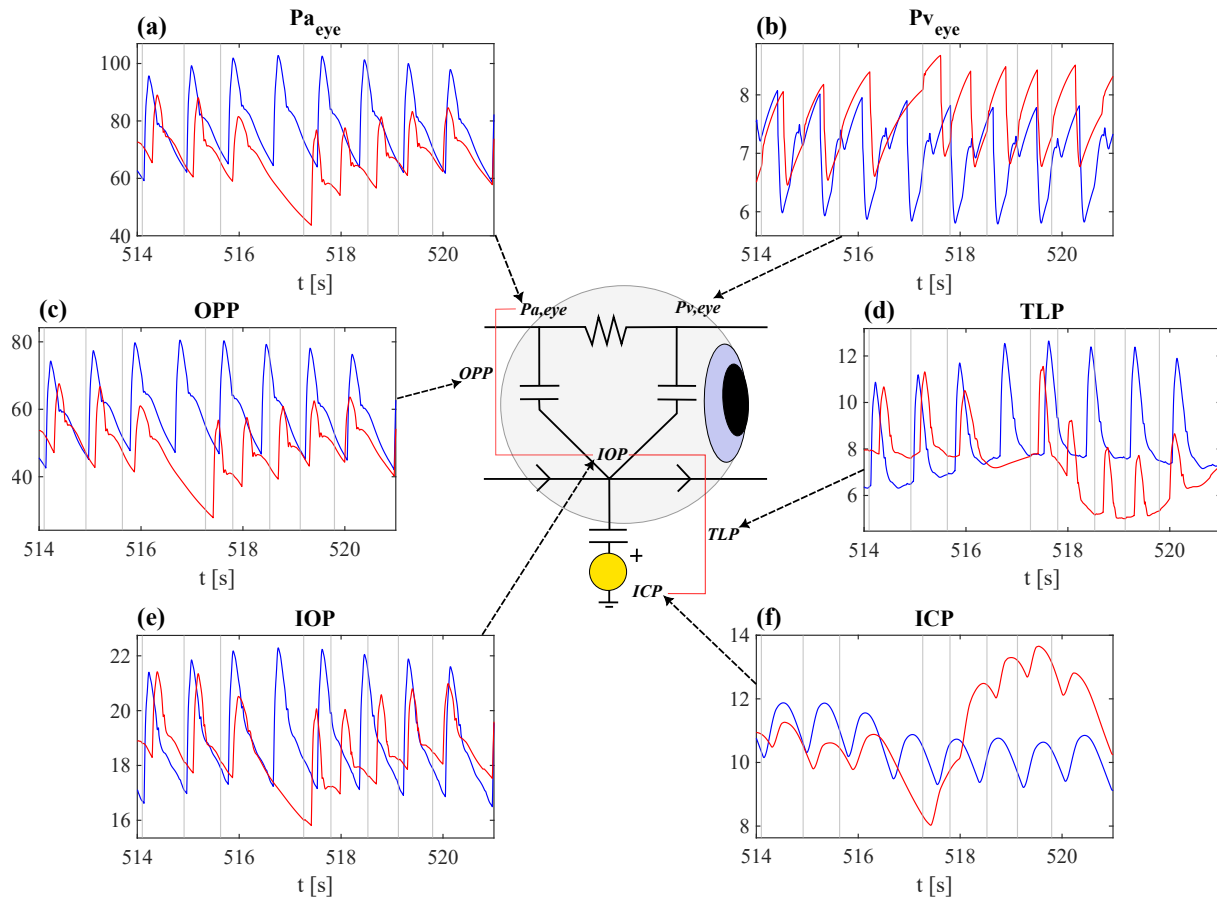


Figure 3: Representative time-series of primary and auxiliary ocular variables in SR (blue curves) and AF (red curves): (a) $P_{a,eye}$, (b) $P_{v,eye}$, (c) OPP , (d) TLP , (e) IOP , (f) ICP . All variables are expressed in mmHg.

341 In the end, the ocular translaminar pressure TLP is driven mainly by IOP
342 - especially regarding the pulsatile waveform pattern in SR (please, compare
343 blue curves in panels (e) and (d) of Fig. 3) - as confirmed by the Pearson
344 correlation coefficient between TLP and IOP , that results $\rho=0.93$ in SR,
345 $\rho=0.81$ in AF. However, ICP has a non-negligible effect on TLP (Pearson
346 correlation coefficient between TLP and ICP , $\rho=-0.34$ in SR, $\rho=-0.49$ in
347 AF), which is more evident in the increasing/decreasing wave patterns over
348 several beats occurring in AF (please, compare red curves in panels (d) and
349 (f) of Fig. 3). Notice that TLP is a marker for increased glaucoma risk,
350 being TLP higher in glaucoma patients [8, 9].

351 Comparing AF with respect to SR, all signals exhibit a higher variability
352 in AF, by reaching lower diastolic values (and greater wave amplitude) after
353 long beats and higher systolic values (and smaller wave amplitude) after short
354 beats. This is especially true for cardiac (Pv_{eye}) and proximal (Pa_{eye}) signals,
355 as well as signals ruled by central hemodynamics, that is IOP and OPP . For
356 these four signals (panels (a), (b), (c), (e)), the alteration induced by one
357 (short or long) beat is almost completely absorbed within the subsequent
358 1-2 beats. Differently, in the case of TLP , where the influence of the distal
359 ICP signal is not negligible, the AF-induced variability is not recovered on a
360 single beat scale, but gives rise to ascending/descending patterns over several
361 beats (see panels (d) and (f)). This behavior is entirely attributable to the
362 distal cerebral hemodynamics, on which ICP strongly depends. Due to the
363 complex temporal interplay of distal resistances and compliances acting like
364 springs in series and parallel, it has been observed that during AF in the
365 cerebral microcirculation the latency in recovering the equilibrium state is
366 much higher than at proximal level [24, 26]. As a consequence, when the AF
367 irregularity propagates towards the distal regions, ICP and related variables
368 remain altered for longer, as clearly visible in panels (d) and (f) of Fig. 3.

369 3.2.2. Beat-to-beat analysis: mean and pulse values

370 To quantify the AF-induced variability qualitatively described in the pre-
371 vious section, we here propose a beat-to-beat analysis on the primary and
372 auxiliary ocular variables in which we investigate the mean and pulsatile
373 (defined as maximum minus minimum) values calculated over the beat.

374 Table 2 reports mean and cv values of beat-averaged ocular variables,
375 together with percentage variations of mean values and cv ratios between
376 AF and SR. Mean values of all primary and auxiliary variables show modest
377 (within 8%) variations between SR and AF, while cv ratios between AF and

	Mean			cv		
	SR	AF	$\Delta\%$	SR	AF	$\frac{cv_{AF}}{cv_{SR}}$
$P_{a_{eye}}[mmHg]$	77.16	72.94	-5.47	0.03	0.06	1.91
$P_{v_{eye}}[mmHg]$	6.99	7.38	5.52	0.01	0.03	2.23
ICP[mmHg]	10.50	10.88	3.60	0.03	0.07	2.32
IOP[mmHg]	18.81	19.20	2.04	0.02	0.03	1.71
OPP[mmHg]	58.34	53.74	-7.89	0.03	0.07	1.97
TLP[mmHg]	8.31	8.32	0.07	0.05	0.09	2.00

Table 2: Mean and coefficient of variation (cv) values of beat-averaged ocular variables in SR and AF conditions. Percentage variations between the mean values in SR and AF conditions and ratios between cv values in AF and SR are reported. All variables show a statistical significant difference (Wilcoxon test) between SR and AF with p-value < 0.01, with the only exception of *TLP* (p-value=0.025).

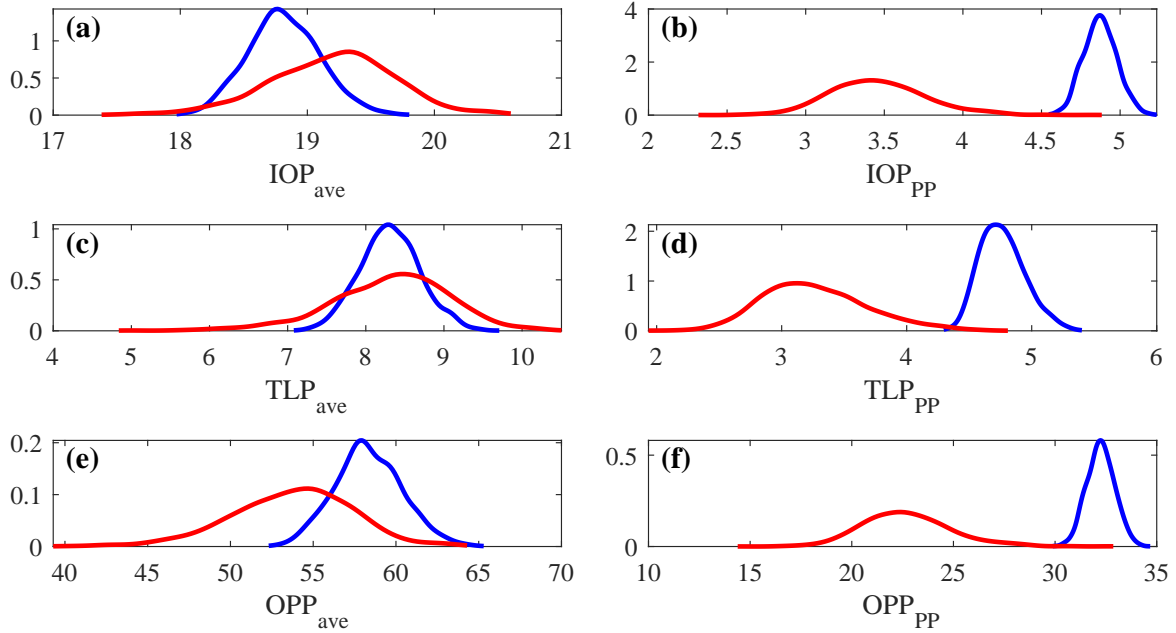


Figure 4: Probability density functions of beat-averaged (left panels) and pulse (right panels) values of primary ocular variables (IOP, TLP, OPP), in SR (blue curves) and AF (red curves). All variables are expressed in mmHg.

	Mean			cv		
	SR	AF	$\Delta\%$	SR	AF	$\frac{cv_{AF}}{cv_{SR}}$
$Pa_{eye}[\text{mmHg}]$	37.12	26.16	-29.53	0.02	0.10	4.50
$Pv_{eye}[\text{mmHg}]$	2.02	1.59	-21.23	0.03	0.08	3.27
$ICP[\text{mmHg}]$	1.51	0.84	-44.29	0.12	0.32	2.72
$IOP[\text{mmHg}]$	4.87	3.46	-29.00	0.02	0.09	4.14
$OPP[\text{mmHg}]$	32.24	22.70	-29.60	0.02	0.10	4.55
$TLP[\text{mmHg}]$	4.77	3.27	-31.48	0.04	0.13	3.40

Table 3: Mean and coefficient of variation (cv) values for the pulsatile pressures of the ocular variables in SR and AF conditions. Percentage variations between the mean values in SR and AF conditions and ratios between cv values in AF and SR are reported. All variables show a statistical significant difference (Wilcoxon test) between SR and AF with p-value < 0.01.

378 SR vary from 1.7 to 2.3. The slight mean variation and the much more
379 marked variability of beat-averaged values in AF is also observable in the
380 probability density functions of Fig. 4, where in the left panels distributions
381 of beat-averaged values of primary ocular variables (IOP , TLP , OPP) are
382 displayed in SR (blue) and AF (red) conditions. In fact, although SR and
383 AF distributions are centered around comparable mean values (the highest
384 variation around 8% is found for OPP , which reduces as a combination of
385 Pa_{eye} decrease and IOP increase), the probability of reaching very high/low
386 beat-averaged values substantially increases in AF.

387 Table 3 shows mean and cv values of pulsatile pressure for ocular vari-
388 ables, as well as percentage variations and ratios between AF and SR. Pul-
389 satile pressure mean values overall decrease in AF for all the variables ob-
390 served and this is mainly induced by the reduction of SV (about - 33%) and
391 central aortic pulse pressure (about -31%). More in details, primary ocular
392 variables (and also Pa_{eye} , which is an important determinant of them) ex-
393 perience mean pulse pressure reduction around 30%, which is close to those
394 observed by SV and central aortic pulse pressure. Pv_{eye} shows smaller mean
395 pulse pressure variations in AF (about -21%), probably due to the nature
396 of retrograde pulsatility characterizing venous signals more similarly in SR
397 and AF. ICP is instead the variable with the greatest pulsatility reduction
398 in AF (over -44%) as a consequence of the same mechanism - explained in

399 the previous section - of the greater latency of the cerebral microcircula-
400 tion in recovering the equilibrium state, which therefore further amplifies the
401 signal alteration (i.e., pulse pressure reduction) compared to what happens
402 in the proximal region (Pa_{eye}) [24, 26]. We recall that pulsatile pressure
403 yields important information, and it is difficult to be *in vivo* monitored for
404 such cerebro-ocular variables. Indeed, current techniques assessing the ocular
405 blood flow - such as laser Doppler flowmeter and optical coherence tomog-
406 raphy angiography - present limited temporal resolution which allows only
407 mean blood flow to be computed. Laser speckle contrast imaging - providing
408 diastole-to-systole perfusion - is a promising technique, however the manage-
409 ment of filtering movement artifacts and the choice of exposure time make
410 it still not entirely suitable for large-scale use. Thus, clinical literature typi-
411 cally reports only beat-averaged values. The overall mean pulsatile pressure
412 reduction in AF is itself an index of reduced variability, as the hemodynamic
413 signals damp their maximum-to-minimum range. This outcome is enriched
414 by the cv value of pulsatile pressures per beat. The ratio cv_{AF}/cv_{SR} , spread-
415 ing between 2.7 and 4.5, evidences a high pulsatile pressure variability in AF.
416 This means that the probability of having very high or low pulsatile values
417 markedly increases in AF with respect to SR.

418 Right panels of Fig. 4 display probability density functions of pulsatile
419 values for primary ocular variables (IOP , TLP , OPP) in SR (blue) and AF
420 (red) conditions. By graphically highlighting the statistics of Table 3, the
421 distributions show that in AF the probability of having spread and reduced
422 pulsatile values significantly increases for the three variables, so that reaching
423 physiological values of pulsatile pressures in AF is extremely rare (right tails
424 in AF barely reach SR mean values).

425 4. Discussion

426 Let us focus on the two ocular parameters OPP and TLP , by means of
427 beat-averaged and pulsatile values. Our simulations show that mean values
428 of beat-averaged OPP and TLP slightly differ in AF and SR, while cv values
429 markedly increase in AF. This implies that mean perfusion and tensile level
430 are maintained in AF at an adequate level similar to SR. However, the in-
431 creased variability in AF results in a higher probability of possible transient
432 hypoperfusions (low OPP) and hypertensive events (high TLP), which are
433 potential sources of ocular stress. Although some studies observed that high

434 pulsatile variability could be detrimental at ocular level [58–61], literature is
435 still debated so that no clear clinical implications can be drawn.

436 Pulsatile values decrease on average by about 30% for both *OPP* and
437 *TLP* in AF, thus signals amplitude is damped with respect to SR. The main
438 driver of this mechanism is the reduced central pressure pulsatility, which in
439 turn is induced by the *SV* reduction (recall that *SV* is proportional to the
440 central pulsatile pressure [62]). The pulsatility damping at ocular level is
441 found with the same magnitude as present at central level (the pulsatility of
442 both *OPP* and *TLP* reduces around -30% similarly to *SV*), and alteration
443 or dysfunction of short-term regulatory mechanisms (such as dysautonomia)
444 can further enhance these changes. The reduction of mean pulsatile values
445 for *OPP* and *TLP*, being itself a marker of reduced variability, should be ac-
446 counted for together with the strong increase of *cv* values by 3.5 to 4.5 times
447 in AF. The combination of these two mechanisms (mean value decrease and
448 *cv* value increase of beat pulsatility) decreases the probability of having phys-
449 iological pulsatile *OPP* and *TLP* values in AF, as evidenced by the pdfs in
450 right panels of Fig. 4. Pulsatile pressure - which can be easily deduced by
451 the modeling approach but hardly measured *in vivo* - is a crucial parameter
452 to enrich the description of the hemodynamic variability induced by AF. Al-
453 though there is no clear threshold level of pulsatility reduction beyond which
454 ocular damage can occur, we recall that myocardial contractility reduction
455 is considered clinically relevant when EF drops 20% or more [62]. Thus, we
456 can assume that ocular pulsatility reduction of 20% or more, as happens for
457 *OPP* and *TLP*, can be as well clinically relevant.

458 To further understand the link between ocular hemodynamics and heart-
459 beating - which is a fundamental aspect in AF as *RR* beats are accelerated,
460 uncorrelated and much more disperse - Fig. 5 shows scatterplots of beat-
461 averaged (left panels) and pulsatile (right panels) values of *TLP* and *OPP*
462 as function of the previous *RRs* (i.e., the *RR* value of the current beat and
463 the *TLP* and *OPP* value of the next beat are the coordinates of each point
464 in the scatterplots). It can be noted that: (i) beat-averaged and pulsatile
465 values for both *TLP* and *OPP* are quite sparse in SR, as the coefficient of
466 variation, R^2 , does not exceed 0.3; (ii) for pulsatile values (right panels) the
467 correlation with the previous *RR* increases in AF, as R^2 is beyond 0.5 for
468 both *OPP* and *TLP*.

469 By combining the analysis beat-averaged and pulsatile values (Tables
470 2 and 3, respectively, and Figure 4) together with scatterplots, the overall
471 picture emerging in AF with respect to SR for *TLP* and *OPP* is the following:

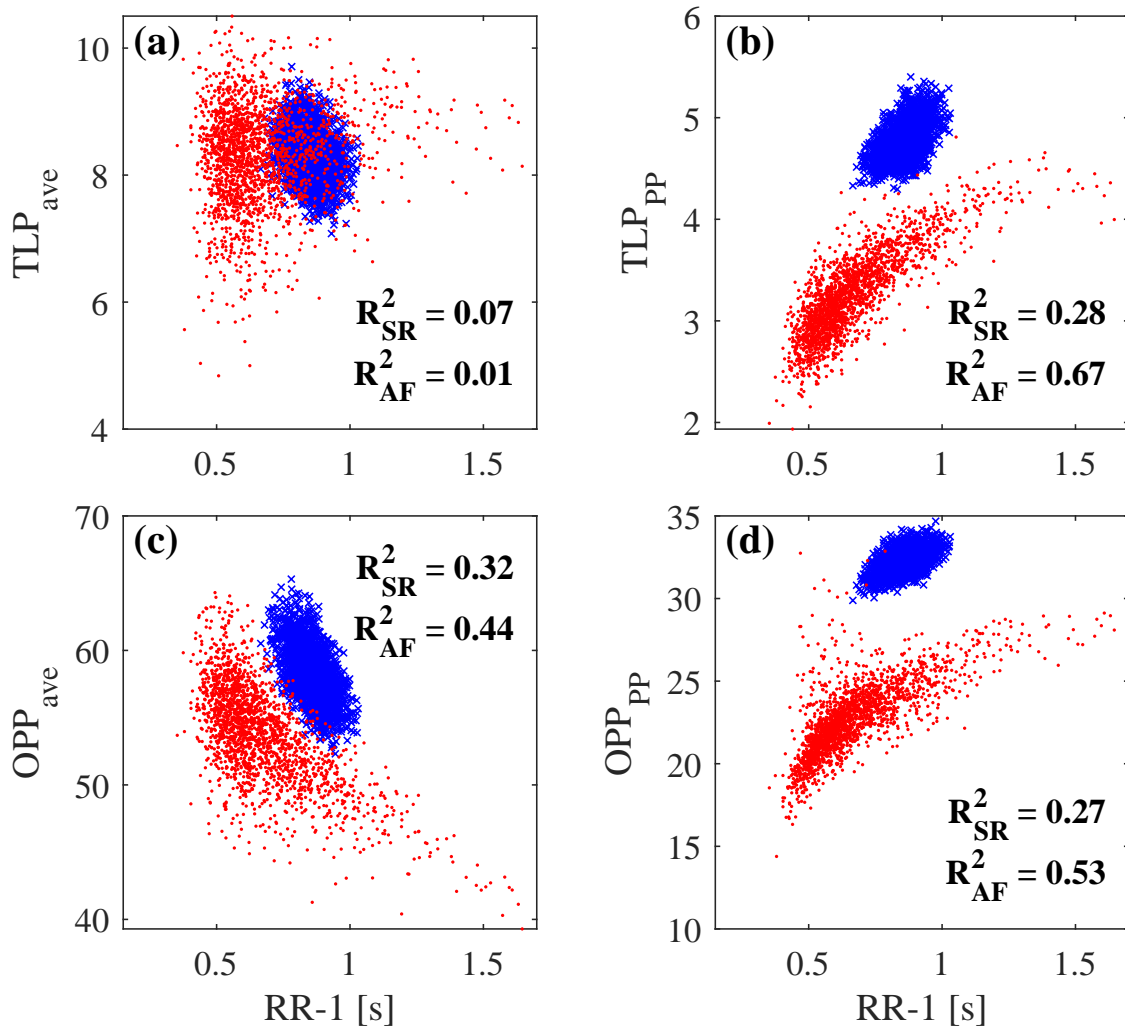


Figure 5: Scatterplots of beat-averaged values and RR (left panels), pulsatile values and RR (right panels), with the corresponding coefficients of determination, R^2 , in SR (blue curves) and AF (red curves). Top panels: TLP . Bottom panels: OPP .

- 472 • *TLP*. Beat-averaged values show no correlation with *RR* ($R^2=0.01$)
473 and their mean value remains constant, even if the distribution is more
474 spread enhancing the probability of very high or low values. Instead,
475 mean pulsatile value decreases significantly. In particular, given the
476 positive correlation ($R^2=0.67$) between pulsatile values and *RR*, short
477 beats (which are the majority in the distribution) give rise to an ade-
478 quate beat-averaged value (see panel 5a), though are not able to tem-
479 porarily guarantee a physiological perfusion due to the extremely re-
480 duced pulsatility (see panel 5b). On the other hand, only very long
481 beats (although AF-induced and out-of-range with respect to SR) pro-
482 vide a nearly physiological *TLP* response for both beat-averaged and
483 pulsatile values.
- 484 • *OPP*. Beat-averaged values evidence a negative correlation with *RR*
485 ($R^2=0.44$) and their mean value slightly decreases. Mean pulsatile
486 values markedly decrease and (similarly to *TLP*) pulsatile values are
487 correlated with *RR* ($R^2=0.53$). This framework induces possible tran-
488 sient ocular hypoperfusions and hypo-pulsatility events triggered by
489 two mechanisms (see panels (see panel 5c-d)): (i) for long beats, pul-
490 satile value is almost in the physiological range, but beat-averaged per-
491 fusion is lower than normal; (ii) for short beats, beat-averaged level is
492 adequate, but pulsatility is too damped to guarantee a physiological
493 excursion range.

494 In short, from a hypoperfusion viewpoint, short beats are the most haz-
495 ardous for *TLP*, while both short and long beats are risky for *OPP*. We
496 recall that, according to the vascular theory [7], an *OPP* decrease has been
497 associated to an augmented risk for glaucoma. However, clinical literature
498 investigating the link between *OPP* and glaucoma is debated, as in subjects
499 with glaucoma *OPP* is found to increase [10–12], remain equal [13–15], and
500 reduce [16–18], with respect to the control population. Thus, definitive find-
501 ings either confirming or refuting the vascular theory are not available to
502 date.

503 *In vivo* measurements investigating the role of AF on the ocular hemodynam-
504 ics are very few and for these reaching a clear overall picture is even more
505 difficult. Some studies concluded that a significant association between AF
506 and glaucoma development exists [19, 20], even if results on *IOP* are con-
507 trasting, showing a modest increase [21], but also a reduction [22]. In this

508 clinical picture, the present model reveals a very modest mean *IOP* increase
509 which, combined to a more consistent Pa_{eye} reduction, leads to an average
510 *OPP* decrease by 8%. However, our model unveils that reduced ocular per-
511 fusion can also be achieved by a waveform damping mechanism related to the
512 reduction of the signal pulsatility, which to the best of our knowledge is not
513 reported in literature as hardly measurable. The *OPP* amplitude decrease
514 captured by the model can yield, especially for short beats, hypo-pulsatility
515 events due to the non-physiological excursion range. If the overall emerging
516 picture is interpreted in view of the vascular theory, present modeling find-
517 ings suggest that AF-induced hemodynamic changes can increase the risk
518 of glaucoma development. Finally, the marked pulsatility variability (i.e.,
519 the alternation of hypo/hyper-tensive or hypo/hyer-perfusive events on the
520 single-beat scale), although not clinically investigated due to experimental
521 difficulties, could *per se* abnormally stimulate the ocular hemodynamics. If
522 the link between AF and glaucoma is confirmed, detection of optimal (rate or
523 rhythm control) strategies in AF management - with their subsequent early
524 adoption - can in turn reduce AF-related risk of glaucoma or minimize ocular
525 hemodynamic changes, with an important impact on the burden of health
526 care costs and quality of life.

527 The present work has some limiting aspects. First, we focused on the
528 most frequent and typical AF configuration, chosen as representative after
529 a detailed literature review of the most common AF features. More specific
530 cases - such as, for example, bimodal *RR* probability distributions or much
531 higher ventricular rates - were not accounted here. As we are interested in
532 the net and specific role of AF on the ocular hemodynamics which - without
533 a computational approach - would be hardly identifiable, we accounted for
534 a generic healthy subject experiencing an episode of paroxysmal AF and
535 we evaluated the acute hemodynamic response. Long-term hemodynamic
536 remodeling effects (e.g., atrial enlargement) and concomitant pathologies -
537 such as hypertension, diabetes, mitral stenosis/regurgitation - which usually
538 accompany chronic AF were not considered here and can be included in
539 future works, together with subject-specific features and higher ventricular
540 rates.

541 5. Conclusions

542 Through a validated cardiovascular multiscale modeling approach, we ob-
543 served that during AF ocular perfusion and pressure remain on average quite

544 adequate, guaranteeing physiological mean values with respect to SR. How-
545 ever, transient relevant hypoperfusions (for *OPP*) and hypertensive events
546 (for *TLP*) can occur, due to the high cv value of beat-averaged variables.
547 According to the vascular theory, decreased *OPP* and increased *TLP* are
548 potential markers associated to the increased risk of glaucoma development.
549 Moreover, ocular hemodynamic signals modify their waveforms in AF, by sig-
550 nificantly reducing their amplitude. This, in addition to the high variability
551 of pulsatile pressure, may lead to episodes of *OPP* transient hypo-pulsatility
552 due to the inadequate signal amplitude. Awaiting necessary clinical data
553 which are to date lacking, the present study can boost clinical measurement
554 of specific and more targeted parameters (e.g., ocular pulsatility indexes) and
555 at the same time enrich - through mechanistic and hemodynamic-driven hints
556 in the AF framework - the vascular theory relating reduced ocular perfusion
557 and increased risk of glaucoma. In this context, present findings suggest that
558 AF may play a role in augmenting the development of glaucoma.

559 **Declaration of competing interest**

560 The authors declare that they have no known competing financial inter-
561 ests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work
562 reported in this paper.

563 **Acknowledgments**

564 This study was carried out within the 2022EAN2BB "Cerebral fluid dy-
565 namics: investigating the association between atrial fibrillation and dementia
566 through an integrated in silico-in vivo framework" project – funded by the
567 Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca – within the PRIN 2022 program
568 (D.D.104 - 02/02/2022). This manuscript reflects only the authors' views
569 and opinions and the Ministry cannot be considered responsible for them.

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