



Full Length Article

Modelling ocular ageing in adults with well-controlled type I diabetes

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To develop a paraxial eye model based on a previously collected cohort of adults with well-controlled type 1 diabetes mellitus (DM1) and a limited range of refractive errors.

Methods: The study used the previously published biometric data of 72 participants (Age: 41.5 ± 12.4 years) with DM1. Measurements included objective refraction, anterior and posterior corneal radii of curvatures, and internal distances. Moreover, phakometry was used to determine the lens radii of curvature and lens equivalent indices, from which the lens powers were calculated. A multivariate linear regression was performed for each biometric parameter with respect to current age (Age), the time since the onset of diabetes (T_{db}), and current levels of glycated hemoglobin (HbA1c). The vitreous chamber depth was determined from other distances, and lens equivalent index was chosen to balance the models. These were compared with an existing model for non-diabetic eyes.

Results: Some dependent parameters were not affected by the independent variables (spherical equivalent, anterior corneal radius of curvature, central corneal thickness), some were affected by time since onset (the lens radii of curvatures, anterior chamber depth) and others were affected by both age and time since onset (posterior corneal radius of curvature, lens thickness, axial length). None of the dependent parameters were affected by current levels of HbA1c.

Conclusions: The proposed model accurately describes the age-related changes in the eyes of people with DM1. In this description the age of diabetes onset plays an important role, especially if the diabetes onset occurred during childhood.

1. Introduction

Diabetes mellitus is a group of metabolic diseases that is characterized by chronic hyperglycemia and comes in two main types. The first type (DM1) has an auto-immune destruction of pancreatic beta-cells that leads to loss of insulin secretion, while the second type (DM2) is characterized by insulin resistance and impaired insulin secretion.

The condition is well known to cause diabetic retinopathy,¹ but may also alter the ocular shape. For example, authors have reported that people with diabetes have thicker corneas²⁻⁷ (although others have not⁸⁻¹²), smaller posterior corneal radii of curvature,¹¹ shallower anterior chambers, smaller pupil sizes (especially in low light levels),¹³⁻¹⁸ and lenses that are thicker,¹⁹ more curved, smaller in diameter and with a lower equivalent refractive index than non-diabetic controls.^{8,20-30}

Moreover, the normal age-related decrease in short wavelength transmission within the eye is greater in people with diabetes than controls,³¹⁻³³ and DM1 is associated with higher levels of straylight.^{31,34} Based on these considerable and consistent biometric differences, it should come as no surprise that diabetes affects refractive error significantly, with DM1 leading to significantly more myopia,^{35,36} and DM2 leading to significantly more hypermetropia.^{8,37} These differences are also reflected in the higher order wavefront aberrations, with some studies,^{38,39} but not all,³¹ showing significant differences between people with diabetes and non-diabetic controls.

Based on these observations it has been suggested that the eyes of people with diabetes age more rapidly than those of healthy controls of the same age,^{8,30,31,40} and which has been associated with having poorly controlled blood sugar levels.^{35,41} Moreover, it is conceivable that

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individuals diagnosed with *DM1* before the age of 15 years will see even more dramatic differences as disease would disrupt their normal eye growth,²⁷ complicating matters even further. To this end, the current paper aims to develop a paraxial eye model based on a previously collected cohort of well-controlled *DM1* participants with a limited range of refractive errors.^{8,30} This model includes the influence of age, duration of the disease, and the level of glycosylated hemoglobin (*HbA1c*), a well-known blood test used to diagnose and monitor diabetes. These parameters will also account for the influence of diabetes onset on normal eye growth.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data

The participants and procedures have been described elsewhere,⁸ and only brief descriptions are given here. Some measurements were taken with more than one instrument, but only the ones used for the modelling are mentioned. At least three measurements were taken with each technique and subsequently averaged. The study adhered to the tenets of the declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Queensland University of Technology (ethics clearance 1100001182) before the commencement of the study, and all participants provided written informed consent.

The study had 72 participants (mean ± SD, 41.5 ± 12.4 years, see Table 1) with *DM1*. The majority were recruited from the Longitudinal Assessment of Neuropathy in Diabetes using novel ophthalmic Markers (LandMark) study⁴² at Queensland University of Technology, for which *DM1* participants tended to have low levels of neuropathy, retinopathy and nephropathy, as is common in this population. Duration of diabetes was recorded. Blood was collected and analyzed for *HbA1c* levels in the laboratory, and capillary blood glucose was measured with an Accu-Chek glucometer. The LandMark used study hand dominance to select the opposite eye to be tested, provided it met the inclusion criteria. If it did not, the other eye was tested at a later time and used for analysis if it fulfilled the criteria.⁸ For the eight participants recruited outside the LandMark Study the right eye was selected if it met the criteria. A total of 46/72 eyes tested were right eyes. The inclusion and exclusion criteria described fully by Adnan et al. Inclusion criteria included corrected visual acuities ≤ 0.1 log minutes of angle resolution (logMAR), Pelli-Robson contrast sensitivity scores ≥ 1.65, spherical equivalent refraction ≤ ±3.5 D, and normal color vision. Exclusion criteria included signs of more than mild diabetic retinopathy (e.g., soft exudates, venous bleeding and/or severe retinal hemorrhage), other ocular diseases or surgery, epilepsy, other endocrine disorders, hypertension, neurological or psychiatric disorders, anemia, and grades of cataract higher than 1 on the LOCS III scale.⁴³

Objective refraction was obtained from the COAS-HD wavefront aberrometer (Wavefront Sciences, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA) using 2nd and 4th order Zernike polynomial coefficients for a 4 mm pupil. Anterior and posterior corneal radii of curvatures were obtained with the Pentacam (Oculus, Wetzlar, Germany), a two-dimensional Scheimpflug camera system. The internal distance measurements of corneal central thickness, anterior chamber depth, lens thickness and axial length were obtained with a partial coherence interferometer, the

Lenstar LS 900 (Haag–Streit, Köniz, Switzerland). The instrument gives a default axial length by subtracting 200 μm from the length measured to the retinal pigment epithelium; this 200 μm was reinstated because the photoreceptor position rather than the internal limiting membrane is relevant for refraction. The vitreous depth was determined from the other lengths.

Lens radii of curvature and equivalent indices were obtained from a customized phakometer. It determined Purkinje image heights of a semi-circular ring of thirteen 890 nm LEDs positioned 75 mm from the anterior cornea. Using these heights, the distances obtained with the Lenstar, and the corneal radii of curvature obtained with the Pentacam, a raytracing program minimized a merit function of height and vitreous length errors by manipulating the lens radii of curvature and equivalent index. It used corneal, aqueous, and vitreous refractive indices of the Gullstrand No. 1 eye. As appropriate, conversions were made between refractions and between refractive indices at 890 nm and 555 nm.⁴⁴ An estimation of equivalent lens power at 555 nm was made using the thick lens equation.

2.2. Modelling and statistics

Using the biometry values of the 72 participants a multivariate linear regression was performed for each parameter *P* with respect to their current age (*Age*), the time since the onset of diabetes (*T_{db}*) and current levels of *HbA1c* using the following function:

$$P = a_0 + a_1 \cdot Age + a_2 \cdot T_{db} + a_3 \cdot HbA1c \tag{1}$$

Here coefficients *a*₀ – *a*₃ were determined by a stepwise linear procedure, which consisted of first performing a linear regression of the biometry parameter using all three independent variables and determining the fit coefficient with the least significance (i.e., the highest P-value). Next, this procedure was repeated, each time omitting the least significant variable, until all coefficients were significant at the 0.05 level. The remaining terms were included in the model. There may have been significant correlations between *Age*, *T_{db}*, and *HbA1c* since older patients are more like to have their diabetes for a longer period than younger ones, and this lack of collinearity was verified first using the Variation Inflation Factor (VIF).

This method was used to obtain regressions for spherical equivalent refractive error (*SE*), anterior and posterior radii of curvature of the cornea (*R_{ca}*, *R_{cp}*) and the lens (*R_{la}*, *R_{lp}*), central corneal thickness (*CCT*), anterior chamber depth from the corneal endothelium until the anterior lens vertex (*ACD*), lens thickness (*LT*) and axial length (*AL*). From these regressions the eye model was subsequently created, assuming a refractive index of 1.376 for the cornea and 1.336 for the aqueous and vitreous humors.

Note that, since it is unlikely that a set of regressions derived from measured data will combine into a perfectly balanced model, two free parameters had to be chosen to balance the model. These were the vitreous chamber depth (*VCD*), calculated as:

$$VCD = AL - CCT - ACD - LT \tag{2}$$

To balance the positions of the ocular surfaces, and the lens equivalent index (*n_l*) to balance the regression of the refractive error *SE* with the

Table 1
Overview of the study population.

Age range	Men			Women			All		
	N	Age	HbA1c	N	Age	HbA1c	N	Age	HbA1c
20 – 29 years	9	24.0	7.50	8	26.3	7.93	17	25.1	7.69
30 – 39 years	7	36.0	7.57	5	35.2	7.37	12	35.7	7.48
40 – 49 years	13	44.6	7.91	8	45.9	8.04	21	45.1	7.96
50 – 59 years	10	55.6	8.07	6	54.2	8.03	16	55.1	8.06
60 – 69 years	3	62.1	7.37	0			4	62.0	7.28
All	42	42.6	7.80	27	41.7	7.83	70	42.2	7.82

calculated refractive error of the model. Given that the regressions of the other lens parameters are functions of Age and T_{db} , it is reasonable to assume that n_l has similar dependencies.

All analyses were performed with SPSS 25 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) and Excel 365 (Microsoft, Seattle, WA, USA), using the Atchison ageing emmetropic eye model⁴⁵ as a normal reference.

3. Results

3.1. Independence of age and diabetes parameters

The Pearson correlation r between Age and T_{db} was significant ($r = 0.440$; $P < 0.001$). Since this correlation may lead to collinearity issues between both parameters during the multivariate linear regression, the VIF had to be considered. This factor was found to have a value of 1, indicating that the correlation between Age and T_{db} is of no consequence, and both parameters may be considered as non-collinear and independent.

Hemoglobin level $HbA1c$ was neither correlated with Age ($r = -0.012$; $P = 0.922$) nor with T_{db} ($r = 0.160$, $P = 0.178$). Here too, both VIF values were equal to 1, meaning that these parameters should also be considered as sufficiently independent to warrant inclusion in the model.

3.2. Regression analysis

Using this procedure, three parameters (SE , R_{ca} , CCT) were constant, 3 depended only on T_{db} (R_{la} , R_{lp} , ACD), 3 parameters depended on both Age and T_{db} (R_{cp} , LT , and AL), and none depended on $HbA1c$ (see Table 2). From this, $HbA1c$ had relatively little influence on these biometry parameters compared to Age or T_{db} and was not considered further.

3.3. Eye model

The model for diabetic eyes was constructed by combining the regressions in Table 1 with equation (3) and the following expression for the equivalent lens index:

$$n_l = 1.4368 - 0.00032 \cdot \text{Age} - 0.00002 \cdot T_{db} \quad (3)$$

This function provided the optimal match between the regression of SE and the values calculated from the model, keeping the differences within a narrow range of $[-0.12, 0.04] D$ for an age range of 20–60 years and a T_{db} range of 0 – 40 years (Fig. 1). These differences varied depending on the age of diabetes onset, calculated as $\text{Age} - T_{db}$.

The model matched the values and trends of the original data (Fig. 2). Disregarding the age of diabetes onset, the anterior chamber depth ACD and lens thickness LT showed the same trends as the normal ageing eye model,⁴⁵ albeit with considerably higher rates. Other parameters, such as the anterior radius of curvature of the lens R_{la} and the lens equivalent index n_l , followed the same trend and slope as the emmetropic model, but at higher values. However, there were also parameters that followed

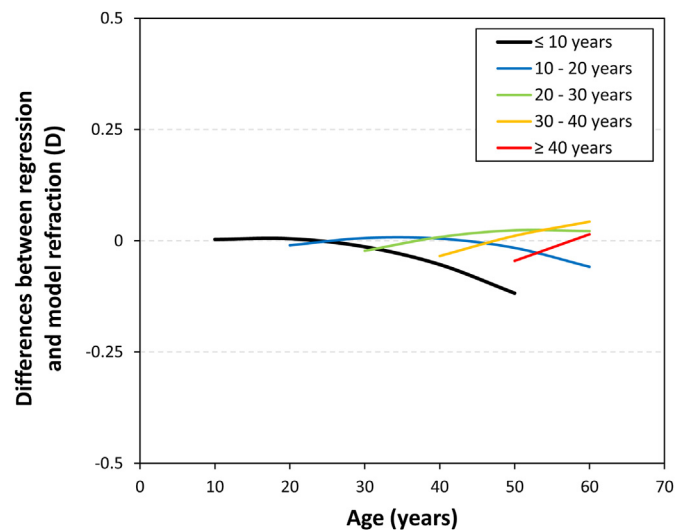


Fig. 1. Differences between the refractive error of the regressions and the eye model for different ages at diabetes onset (colors).

a course different from that of normal ageing, the most important of which was the lens power P_L . While for the normal eye model a gradual decrease of $-0.0425D/yr$ was seen, the lens power in the diabetes model showed no significant change. Meanwhile, the vitreous chamber depth VCD decreased with age at a rate of $-0.021 mm/yr$, while in the normal ageing model it decreased by $-0.013 mm/yr$. This rate was half the LT increase ($+0.043 mm/yr$), while the other half of the lens increase matched the decrease in ACD ($-0.022 mm/yr$). Finally, both the normal ageing model and the diabetes model showed a constant axial length AL .

The model showed clearly that the age of the diabetes onset and the duration T_{db} affect most non-constant parameters. For ACD , LT , VCD , and R_{la} and R_{lp}) an early onset led to earlier growth changes (Fig. 2). Meanwhile R_{cp} , AL and P_L had values that were constant with age but that depended on the age of onset.

4. Discussion

From the literature, it is clear that ocular biometry in individuals with diabetes differs considerably from that of healthy controls. These differences have been described as an accelerated ageing of the eye.^{8,30,31,40} To ascertain the validity of this idea, we developed an optical model for the eyes of individuals with Type I diabetes that attempted to integrate all these previous observations.

The observations in Fig. 2 closely match those in earlier reports,^{8,11,13–30} but show too many discrepancies with normal growth to support the idea that the influence of diabetes may simply be considered as accelerated ageing. For example, diabetic lenses tend to be thicker and more curved than those of normal eyes,^{8,19–30} and their rate of increase for these parameters is higher as well. Although such changes

Table 2
Regression coefficients at 0.05 significance level.

Parameter	Symbol (Unit)	Const. (a_0)	Age (yr; a_1)	T_{db} (yr; a_2)	$HbA1c$ (%; a_3)	r^2
Spherical equivalent	SE (D)	-0.253	-	-	-	
Corneal RoC (Ant)	R_{ca} (mm)	7.751	-	-	-	
Corneal RoC (Post)	R_{cp} (mm)	6.268	0.006	-0.006	-	0.080
Lens RoC (Ant)	R_{la} (mm)	10.510	-	-0.048	-	0.217
Lens RoC (Post)	R_{lp} (mm)	-6.368	-	0.024	-	0.108
Central corneal thickness	CCT (mm)	0.544	-	-	-	
Anterior chamber depth	ACD (mm)	3.201	-	-0.022	-	0.391
Lens thickness	LT (mm)	3.052	0.019	0.024	-	0.732
Axial length	AL (mm)	23.52	0.024	-0.024	-	0.094

RoC: Radius of Curvature; Vars: variables; yr: years.

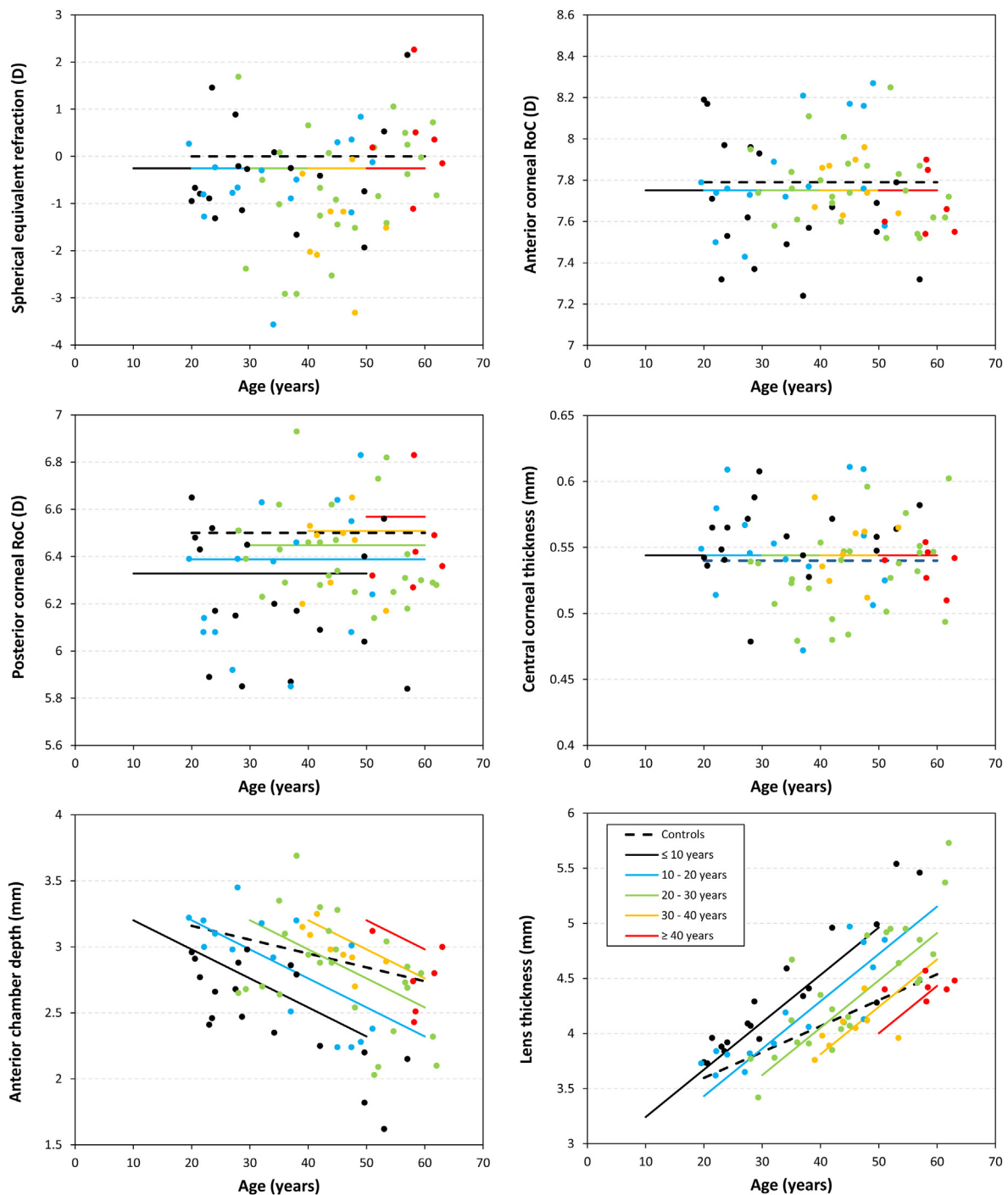


Fig. 2. Overview of agreement between the model (solid lines) and the measured parameters for different ages at diabetes onset (colors). Dashed line corresponds with normal age-appropriate emmetropic values taken from .⁴⁵

are typically associated with increases in lens power, normal eyes would show a gradual decrease instead. Diabetic eyes, on the other hand, show no age-related changes in lens power (Fig. 2).²⁹ This ‘lens paradox’⁴⁶ can be resolved by considering the changes in the equivalent lens index, but is obvious that these changes occur differently in diabetes. Consequently, diabetic eyes seem to present their own unique form of refractive development not found in healthy controls of any age.

One new observation is the importance of the age at onset, especially in patients with an onset during childhood. In the first years after birth the eye typically undergoes a period of rapid growth that then slows until it ends around the age of 15–17 years. To ensure good vision, the optical elements of the eye will first fine-tune themselves to provide the best

possible unaided vision (*emmetropization*), after which the axial length and the optical elements will coordinate their growth rates to preserve this best unaided vision (*homeostasis*).⁴⁷ Sudden disruptions to this homeostasis, such as changes in the child’s behavior or environment (e.g., more reading, less exposure to outdoors light) may lead to the development of myopia, with early disruptions being associated with the highest degrees of myopia.^{48,49} Slow disruptions like the diabetic changes in the lens found in children,^{50–52} on the other hand, allow the eye growth to adapt accordingly, possibly leading to the high lens powers and shorter axial lengths observed in those with an early onset (Fig. 2). This process was confirmed experimentally by Herse,⁵³ who confirmed that hyperglycemia significantly altered eye growth in young

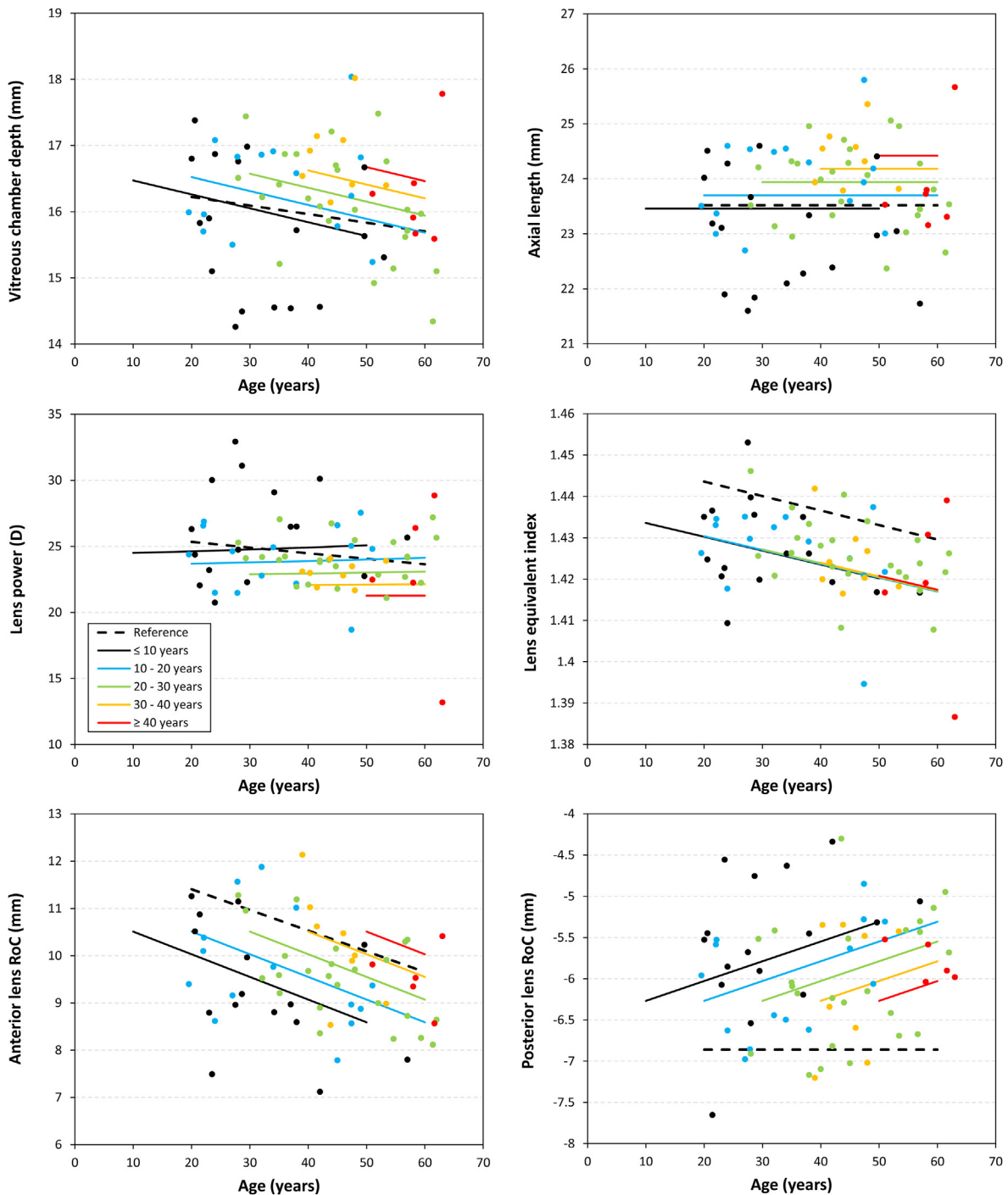


Fig. 2. (continued).

rabbits. The effect of hyperglycemia was different in these animals that in humans, as their lenses grew thinner than healthy controls, their anterior chamber depth increased faster, and their axial length stopped increasing too early, leading to excessively short eyes.

A matter of interest is that *DM1* reduces the ability to accommodate.^{40,54} Since a diminished accommodative response has been associated with myopia development,⁵⁵ this could account for the reports of a higher myopia prevalence in individuals with *DM1*,^{22,36} especially in those who are poorly controlled.^{35,41} Periods of increased hyperglycemia have been associated with transient hypermetropia⁵⁶ due to rapid changes in refractive indices of the eye, especially of the lens,⁵⁷ but without noticeable changes in the intraocular curvatures and distances.^{58,59} Since periods of hypermetropia are also drivers for

myopization,⁶⁰ this too may be a factor in the increased myopia prevalence. Even so, no correlations between the ocular biometry and *HbA1c* were found in this (well-controlled) cohort, nor in the pediatric cohorts of Xiao et al.,⁵⁰ Uzel et al.⁵¹ and Öztürk et al.⁵²

The model produced several minor discrepancies with our earlier work using the same data,^{8,30} especially regarding the age-related changes in posterior corneal curvature and lens power. These changes occurred due to an alternative, more holistic modelling approach that no longer includes the influence of axial length. Consequently, the current model is likely more accurate than our earlier results, while also better matching the reports by Wiemer et al.^{11,29}

The main limitation of the current work is that the source data consisted of well-controlled individuals with diabetes that had only a

limited range of refractive errors and no ocular pathologies typically associated with diabetes. As such, the model may not be reliable in the presence of the more deleterious effects of hyperglycemia, such as diabetic retinopathy or early cataracts. Even so, the unique combination of biometric parameters found in these patients, along with the importance of the age of diabetes onset, may give important new insights into the robustness of eye growth during refractive development. It would therefore be interesting to develop a longitudinal study that follows the eye growth in children with *DM1* compared to normal controls.

Study Approval

The study adhered to the tenets of the declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Queensland University of Technology (ethics clearance 1100001182) before the commencement of the study, and all participants provided written informed consent.

Author Contributions

Conception and design of study: JR, DAA, AK; Data collection: AK; Analysis and interpretation of results: JR; Drafting the manuscript: JR, DAA; All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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