Operative treatment of intraarticular calcaneal fractures: Anatomical and functional outcome of three different operative techniques

N. Gusic a,1, I. Fedel a,2, N. Darabos b,3, Z. Lovric c,4,*, N. Bukvic d,5, B. Bakota e,6, D. Lemac c,4

A R T I C L E   I N F O

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Operative treatment
Bone graft
Functional outcome

A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Management of the intraarticular calcaneal fracture is a challenge. The optimal method of treatment remains controversial. This study evaluates the anatomical and functional postoperative outcomes of displaced intraarticular calcaneal fractures that have been treated using three different techniques of ORIF.

Patients and methods: Between 2004 and 2011 we treated 143 patients with calcaneal fractures, 40 of these patients (28%) were treated conservatively. This is a retrospective study of the remaining 103 patients (72%) who were operated on consecutively, mainly by one surgeon (NG). Calcaneal fractures were classified according to the Sanders classification. Three types of osteosynthesis were used: standard anatomical plate (SP), locking anatomical plate (LCP) and standard anatomical plate with autologous bone graft (SP + ABG). Clinical outcome was assessed one year after the operation: anatomical reduction was evaluated according to the analysis of Bohler’s angle at final follow-up, and functional assessment was conducted using the Maryland Foot Score (MFS).

Results: The fractures were classified as follows: 35 (34%) Sanders type II, 47 (45.6%) Sanders type III and 21 (20.4%) Sanders type IV. The SP was used in 67 (65%) fractures, LCP in 16 (15.5%) and SP + ABG in 20 (19.4%). The correlation test showed a weak association between the Sanders fracture type and the operation technique (Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.26). The non-parametric tests showed that the fracture type did not significantly influence the postoperative Bohler’s angle outcome (p = 0.132), or the type of operation (p = 0.664). Excellent or good reduction of the posterior calcaneal facet was achieved in all operated fractures. One year after the operation, the distribution of Bohler’s angle was normal with a mean 31.9° (SD 4.84) in all three groups. There was no significant difference in the functional postoperative outcome in terms of MFS in the three groups (p = 0.601), but the Sanders fracture type had significant influence on the functional postoperative outcome in terms of MFS (p = 0.001).

Conclusion: In the representative sample of 103 operatively treated intraarticular calcaneal fractures, anatomical and functional postoperative efficacy outcomes appeared to be similar in all three treatment groups. High-grade displaced intraarticular calcaneal fractures (Sanders IV) had worse functional results irrespective of the type of operation. The optimal method for management of intraarticular calcaneal fracture is operative, using the standard anatomic calcaneal plate. Autologous bone grafting is not required. Large sample comparative studies are still needed.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 1 290 3581.
E-mail addresses: ngusic@obpula.hr (N. Gusic), ifedel@obpula.hr (I. Fedel), darabos.dr@vz.t-com.hr (N. Darabos), zlovric@kbd.hr (Z. Lovric), bukvincnado@gmail.com (N. Bukvic), bovebakota@yahoo.com (B. Bakota), demac@kbd.hr (D. Lemac).
1 Tel.: +358 52 376300; fax: +358 52 376301.
2 Tel.: +385 91 3760011; fax: +385 52 376301.
3 Tel.: +385 98 297970.
4 Tel.: +385 1 290 3581; fax: +385 1 290 3582.
5 Tel.: +385 91 4592203.
6 Tel.: +385 914658377.

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Introduction

Calcaneal fractures represent 1–2% of all fractures in humans. In most cases these fractures are the result of a fall from a great height. The question of treatment choice still remains open [1–8]. The operative treatment used varies on a case-by-case basis and is influenced by surgeon preference [3–7,10–14,16–18,21,22]. Several other factors also influence the choice of operative treatment: fracture factors (joint elements incongruence, deformity); patient factors (compliance, comorbidities, angiopathy, neuropathy, age, polytrauma); local factors (skin, osteoporosis); and surgeon factors (knowledge, skills, equipment) [2,9]. The radiological assessment is of crucial importance: the analysis of fracture line and comparing with AO classification, 2wipp classification or, even more useful, Sanders classification [2,7,8,10]. Usual indications for ORIF are: fragment displacement, articular step >1 mm, varus >5°, valgus >10° and Bohler’s angle <15°. There is a wide spectrum of contraindications for open surgery: age, diabetes, peripheral vascular disease, cortisone therapy, AIDS, osteoporosis, smoking, soft tissue infection and non-compliance [9]. The risk of postoperative wound complications can influence the decision [5,6,9,12,13].

The timing of open surgery might be urgent in cases of open fracture or compartment syndrome; otherwise surgery may be early (within 6 h) or delayed (7–10 days). The incision may be lateral or medial. There are recommendations for bone grafting in calcaneal reconstruction [12,14–16]. Therefore, we also tried to analyse the contributions and benefits of bone grafting in our study.

This article presents calcaneal fractures treated operatively at the General Hospital of Pula between 2004 and 2011. The aim of the study was to analyse whether there is a difference in postoperative outcome between three different operative techniques.

Patients and methods

Between 2004 and 2011, 143 patients with a fracture of the calcaneus were admitted to the Trauma and Orthopaedic Department of the General Hospital of Pula; 40 of these patients (28%) were treated conservatively and are excluded from this study. The remaining 103 patients (72%) were treated operatively and had a mean age of 45.8 years (range 19–62 years), and 82 patients (79.6%) were male. Concomitant injuries were present in 18 patients (17.5%): contralateral foot fractures in two patients (1.9%), spinal fractures in 12 patients (11.6%) and soft tissue damage in four patients (3.9%).

Calcaneal fractures were classified according to the Sanders classification. X-rays in three planes and axial plus coronal or three-dimensional CT were used regularly for accurate assessment. According to the Sanders classification, 35 fractures (34%) were Sanders II, 47 (46%) were Sanders III and 21 (20%) were Sanders IV.

The patients in this study were assigned to one of three groups according to the type of osteosynthesis applied: 1. standard anatomical plate (SP), 2. locking anatomical plate (LCP) and 3. standard anatomical plate with autologous bone graft (SP + ABG) (Table 1).

Twenty patients (19%) underwent surgery involving bone grafting. The other 83 patients (81%) were operated on without bone grafting and of these, 67 patients received SP and the remaining 16 received LCP.

The operation was performed on day 7 on average after the trauma (range day 5 to day 15) via the 2wipp extended lateral approach. The return of skin wrinkles to the lateral foot at the surgical incision site was used as a guide for timing surgery. Tourniquet (200–300 mmHg, 45–90 min) was allowed in all operations to enable improved precision, safety and speed. The reduction technique is a step-by-step process for reduction manoeuvres from anteromedial to posterolateral in relation to the “constant” sustentacular fragment. Particular care was taken to protect the soft tissue flap throughout the exposure and reduction (Fig. 1). Surgical incisions were always closed in two layers without wound drainage. Care was taken for the deep layer that incorporates the peristeum to ensure adequate reappraisal.

Antibiotic prophylaxis and thrombophrophylaxis were administered to all patients. Range of motion exercises started from the second postoperative day. Partial weight bearing was delayed for 6–8 weeks, depending on the degree of comminution and the adequacy of the fixation. Activity progressed depending on the symptoms. Full weight-bearing was mainly achieved after four months.

Study follow-up was one year. The results were measured for each patient one year after the operation by two expert trauma surgeons who used the radiographic analysis of Bohler’s angle at the final follow-up for anatomical reduction, and Maryland Foot Score (MFS) for functional assessment (Table 2). Statistical analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Age Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Bohler’s angle Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Maryland pain score Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Maryland functional score Mean (SD)</th>
<th>MFS Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>44.81 (8.31)</td>
<td>32.06 (4.99)</td>
<td>39.55 (7.11)</td>
<td>45.13 (7.05)</td>
<td>84.6 (12.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCP</td>
<td>51.44 (9.79)</td>
<td>32.50 (5.19)</td>
<td>41.56 (3.01)</td>
<td>45.03 (5.95)</td>
<td>86.63 (7.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP + ABG</td>
<td>44.65 (6.08)</td>
<td>31.30 (4.16)</td>
<td>37.75 (7.86)</td>
<td>45.45 (6.84)</td>
<td>83.20 (11.70)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SP—standard anatomical plate.
LCP—locking anatomical plate.
SP + ABG—standard anatomical plate + autologous bone graft.

[Note to production: It would improve clarity if patient numbers were added to this table].

Fig. 1. Sanders III: Surgical exposure of the calcaneal lateral surface and subtalar joint after application of a standard anatomical plate.
was conducted using the IBM SPSS statistic v.20 programme. The non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test with p value of less than 0.05 and Pearson correlation test with p value of less than 0.01 were considered to be significant.

## Results

The SP was used in 67 patients (65%), LCP in 16 (15.5%) and SP + ABH in 20 (19.4%) (Table 1). The correlation test showed a weak association between Sanders fracture type and operation technique (Pearson correlation coefficient \( r = 0.26 \)).

The non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test showed that fracture type had no significant influence on postoperative anatomical Bohler's angle outcome \( (p = 0.132) \) or type of operation \( (p = 0.664) \). Excellent or good reduction of the posterior calcaneal facet was achieved in all operated fractures. One year after the operation, the distribution of Bohler's angle was normal with a mean of 31.9° (SD 4.84). Moreover, one year after the operation there was no significant difference in functional postoperative outcome calculated using MFS in the three different operative groups \( (p = 0.601) \) (Table 2). The Sanders fracture type had a significant influence on the functional postoperative outcome according to the MFS \( (p = 0.001) \).

The anatomical and functional results were the same in all three groups. Joint congruence was achieved in 86% of patients. According to the MFS, the functional result was excellent or good in 73% of all operated patients (80–97 points) with no difference between the groups (Table 2).

There were four reported complications in the study: marginal wound necrosis occurred in four patients and wound infection developed in two patients. Wound healing was similar in all three groups. Full weight-bearing was achieved mainly after four months in all three groups.

The only difference between treatment groups was in the occurrence of postoperative pain, which was greater in the patients who underwent bone grafting as there was extended pain at the site of bone grafting.

## Discussion

The management of displaced intra-articular calcaneal fractures remains controversial [1–8]. Non-operative management may be indicated in patients with contraindications to operative treatment and in patients with minimal intraarticular displacement. Buckley et al. suggest that the functional results of displaced intra-articular calcaneus fractures are better after ORIF than after non-operative treatment [2]. We have never had any dilemma about whether the displaced intra-articular calcaneal fractures can be treated operatively or non-operatively. The decision is based upon radiological imaging assessment of the fracture type. We believe that for fractures classified as Sanders II or above, stable ORIF is indicated [7,8,10,19–21]. The loss of Bohler's angle, posterior facet comminution and depression are critical factors in assessment.

Operative treatment of calcaneal fractures should meet the following principal aims: restoration of height, length and width of the calcaneus, and anatomical reconstruction of the subtalar and calcaneocuboid joint surfaces. Minimal fixation has been reported in recent comparative studies to be associated with a substantial collapse of Bohler's angle [6,7,17,18]; therefore, we believe that the stable ORIF with application of plates and screws, with or without bone grafting, will produce better anatomical and functional results.

In our study, an excellent or good anatomical result was achieved in all operated fractures. One year after the operation the mean Bohler's angle was 31.9° (SD 4.84) in all three groups. The functional result also relates to the anatomical result and was excellent or good in 73% of all operated patients (80–97 points) according to the MFS, with no difference between groups [13,19,22]. The LCP enables fixation of all observed calcaneal fractures, but is not mechanically stronger than fixation with a standard non-locking plate [21]. Our study showed the same conclusion: the distribution of postoperative Bohler's angle and MFS is the same across all three types of operation.

The efficacy of cancellous autologous bone grafting and internal plate fixation is a matter of discussion [12,14]. There is no proof that bone grafting will facilitate earlier functional exercise or weight-bearing (part and full) [14,19]. Yang Y. et al. [22] in a systematic review of the literature found that operative treatment of intraarticular calcaneal fractures with bone grafts could better restore the Bohler's angle and that patients could return to full weight-bearing earlier compared with patients who underwent operative treatment without bone grafts. However, the functional and efficacy outcomes appear to be similar between the two treatment groups [19]. In our study, there was no difference in outcome with or without bone grafting. The reason for similar anatomical and functional outcomes could be higher healing potential in cancellous bone. This has been attributed to the tremendous angiogenic potential of trabecular bone. The only difference between the grafting and non-grafting group was the significantly extended pain in the site of bone grafting in those who underwent this procedure [2,5,19,22,23].

This study presents a very low incidence of wound complications after ORIF of closed fractures of calcaneus Sanders type II, III and IV. This low incidence may be related to the correct timing of surgery, respecting the local soft tissue conditions, careful preoperative planning and meticulous surgical technique.

## Conclusion

Based on the representative sample of 103 operatively treated intraarticular calcaneal fractures we found that anatomical and functional postoperative efficacy outcomes appear to be similar in all three treatment groups. High-grade displaced intraarticular calcaneal fractures (Sanders IV), irrespective of the type of operation, had worse functional results.

The optimal method for displaced intraarticular calcaneal fracture management is operative, using the standard calcaneal anatomical plate. Autologous bone grafting is not required. Large sample comparative studies are still needed.

## Conflict of interest

None declared.

## References


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