DIGITAL MICROFLUIDIC PLATFORM FOR THE CREATION, MAINTENANCE AND ASSAY OF LIVER-LIKE ORGANOIDS

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ABSTRACT
The liver is a vital organ responsible for metabolism, protein synthesis, bile production, detoxification, and drug clearance. We present a platform for creating and assaying artificial liver models consisting of three-dimensional co-cultures of liver-like organoids in vitro using digital microfluidics to provide precise control over the organoid sizes and local microenvironments. Findings include: (a) cultured fibroblasts actively contracted the hydrogel matrix in a collagen-concentration dependent manner, and (b) hepatocytes secrete more albumin in three-dimensional organoids relative to their two-dimensional counterparts.

KEYWORDS: Digital microfluidics, liver model, organoids, hepatocytes, albumin

INTRODUCTION
Despite the fact that three-dimensional (3D) cell cultures are known to support cell densities [1] and phenotypes [2] that are more similar to in vivo tissues than analogous two-dimensional (2D) culture systems, the vast majority of in vitro cells are cultured in the latter format because they are far easier to culture and assay. Building on recent work in which single cell-types were encapsulated in hydrogels and assayed using digital microfluidics (DMF) [3-4], we have developed a system to co-culture cells in liver-like “organoids” – microscale collagen constructs seeded with NIH-3T3 fibroblasts and HepG2 hepatocytes. As far as we are aware, this is the first digital microfluidic system for the co-culture of cells in three dimensions. In contrast to previous hepatocyte-stromal microfluidic models [5-6] which are limited in their abilities to specifically control the microenvironment of individual tissue constructs, DMF facilitates the straightforward addressing of experimental conditions to individual constructs in real-time. Furthermore, the platform enables the creation, maintenance, and visualization of organoids over days-weeks.

EXPERIMENTAL
DMF Devices featuring multiple reagent reservoirs capable of dispensing 10 different reagents (Figure 1A) were fabricated in the University of Toronto Emerging Communications Technology Institute (ECTI) fabrication facility using photolithography and wet etching. To confine cells to an organoid culture region, 70 micron high SU-8 retention barriers were fabricated on top of parylene dielectric and
Figure 3: Organoids containing NIH-3T3 fibroblasts after 7 days in brightfield (A) and live-cell stained with calcein-AM (B). Cells were seeded at a density of $2 \times 10^6$ cell/mL in constructs of 2.9, 2.0, 1.5 or 0.9 mg/mL collagen with identical starting volumes. Scale bar represents 50 microns.

Figure 2: Pictures (top) and schematics (bottom) of organoid feeding procedure on digital microfluidic device. A) An assisting droplet containing fresh media or wash buffer is brought to the barrier. B) The assisting droplet is merged with the droplet containing the organoid. C) The merged droplet is driven away for disposal while the organoid is unable to cross the barrier. D) A small volume ~10% of residual liquid is retained with the organoid. Fresh media or buffer is then brought to the organoid as required.

Subsequently coated with Teflon-AF® to render the barriers hydrophobic (Figure 1B/C). Devices were assembled with an ITO–glass top plate separated by a spacer formed from two pieces of double-sided tape (total spacer thickness 140 µm). Liver organoids were generated by mixing neutralized rat tail collagen I at collagen concentrations of 2.9, 2.0, 1.5 or 0.9 mg/mL with $2 \times 10^6$ cell/mL of HepG2 hepatocytes and $2 \times 10^6$ cell/mL of NIH-3t3 fibroblasts for albumin secretion studies or with $2 \times 10^6$ cell/mL of fibroblasts for contraction studies and incubated in a humidified chamber at 37°C for 45-60 minutes to allow the collagen to gel. For comparison, two-dimensional (2D) cultures were generated by allowing neutralized collagen I to air dry on devices for 30 minutes before seeding with cells. Organoids were fed daily with DMEM/F12 (50:50) containing 8% fetal bovine serum and 2% calf serum supplemented with 0.6% (wt/v) pluronic F88 by driving an assisting droplet to the retention barrier where it is merged with the original droplet bearing the organoid (Figure 2A), after which the merged droplet was driven away (Figure 2B/C). Approximately 10% of original droplet volume was retained (Figure 2D), ensuring that organoids remained hydrated. This process (i.e., using the assisting droplet) was developed to overcome the challenge inherent in moving an unassisted droplet through the hydrophobic retention barrier. For imaging, organoids were gently transferred to an electrode-free portion of the DMF devices using a micropipette, live-dead stained with 4 µM calcein-AM and 2 µM ethidium homodimer-1 in phosphate buffered saline for 30 minutes at room temperature, and then imaged with a Leica DM2000 upright microscope. Albumin secretion was quantified using a Human Albumin Elisa Kit (Abnova Corporation).
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
To demonstrate the capacity to generate constructs in situ, cells in droplets of neutralized collagen I were seeded and then gelled. Because the stiffness of extracellular matrix is known to affect cellular processes such as growth, spreading, and morphology [7], we evaluated the effects of changing the stiffness of the extracellular matrix by varying the concentration of collagen in solution from 0.9-2.9 mg/mL (Figure 3). The organoids actively contracted and remodeled in a collagen-concentration-dependent manner. The least concentrated gel (0.9 mg/mL) contracted to less than half the diameter of the most concentrated (2.9 mg/mL) gel. The vast majority of cells remained viable after a week as determined by calcein-AM staining.

Albumin secretion (an important function in liver tissue) was monitored as a test for in vivo-like phenotype. As shown in Figure 4, 1:1 HepG2:NIH-3T3 organoids generated and cultured on the DMF system secreted nearly twice as much albumin per cell per day than cells cultured in two dimensions on collagen-coated substrates after 2 days.

CONCLUSION
We have developed a microscale system for the creation, manipulation, and addressing of individual co-cultured 3-D tissue constructs capable of supporting high cell densities and in-vivo-like phenotypes. We propose that similar systems may be eventually make 3D culture an attractive alternative to traditional 2D techniques.

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