**TITLE:**

Nondestructive Monitoring of Degradable Scaffold-Based Tissue-Engineered Blood Vessel Development Using Optical Coherence Tomography

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Bioengineering, optical coherence tomography, vascular tissue engineering, polyglycolic acid, biodegradation, mechanical conditions

**SUMMARY:**

A stepwise protocol for nondestructive and long-period monitoring of vascular remodeling and scaffold degradation in a real-time culture of biodegradable polymeric scaffold-based tissue-engineered blood vessels with pulsatile stimulation is presented, using optical coherence tomography.

**ABSTRACT:**

Engineered vascular grafts with structural and mechanical properties similar to natural blood vessels are expected to meet the growing demand for arterial bypass. The characterization of the growth dynamics and remodeling process of degradable polymer scaffold-based tissue-engineered blood vessels (TEBVs) with pulsatile stimulation is crucial for vascular tissue engineering. Optical imaging techniques stand out as powerful tools for monitoring the vascularization of engineered tissue, enabling high-resolution imaging in real-time culture. This paper demonstrates a nondestructive and fast real-time imaging strategy to monitor the growth and remodeling of TEBVs in long-term culture by using optical coherence tomography (OCT). The geometric morphology is evaluated, including the vascular remodeling process, the wall thickness, and a comparison of TEBV thickness at different culture time points and in the presence of pulsatile stimulation. Finally, OCT provides practical possibilities for the real-time observation of the degradation of polymer in reconstructing tissues under pulsatile stimulation or not and in each vessel segment, compared with the assessment of polymer degradation using a scanning electron microscope (SEM) and a polarized microscope.

**INTRODUCTION:**

TEBVs are of the most promising material as an ideal vascular graft1. In order to develop grafts that are clinically useful, with structural and functional properties that are similar to those of native vessels, multiple techniques have been designed to maintain vascular function2,3. Although there have been engineered vessels with acceptable patency rates during implantation and in phase III clinical study4, long-term culture and high costs also show the necessity of monitoring the development of TEBVs*.* Trying the understand extracellular matrix (ECM) growth, remodeling, and adaptation processes in TEBVs in the biomimetic chemo-mechanical environment can provide crucial information for the development of vascular tissue engineering.

The ideal strategy to track the development of small-diameter engineered vessels5 should be nondestructive, sterile, longitudinal, three-dimensional, and quantitative. TEBVs under different culture conditions could be assessed by this imaging modality, even including changes before and after vascular transplantation. Strategies to describe features of living engineered vessels are needed. Optical imaging techniques allow the visualization and quantification of tissue deposition and biomaterials. Other advantages are the possibility to enable deep-tissue and label-free imaging with high resolution6,7. However, image-specific molecules and less easily accessible optical equipment for real-time monitoring are significant practical obstacles, which have limited the extensive application of nonlinear optical microscopy. OCT is an optical approach with intravascular imaging modality as a widely-used clinical tool to guide cardiac interventional therapy8. In the literature, the method of OCT has been reported as a way to assess the wall thickness of TEBVs9,10, coupled with affirmative imaging modalities for vascular tissue-engineering research, whereas the dynamics of engineered vascular growth and remodeling has not been observed.

In this manuscript, we detail the preparation of biodegradable polymeric scaffold-based TEBVs for a four-weeks culture. Human umbilical arteries vascular smooth muscle cells (HUASMCs) are expanded and seeded into porous degradable polyglycolic acid (PGA) scaffolds in the bioreactor. Biodegradable polymers play the role of a temporary substrate for the tissue engineering and have a certain degradation rate11. In order to ensure an appropriate match between scaffold degradation and neo-tissue formation, ECM and PGA scaffolds are crucial factors for effective vascular remodeling. The perfusion system simulates the biomechanical microenvironment of native vessels and maintains a consistent deformation under pressure stimulation.

The aim of the presented protocol is to describe a relatively simple and nondestructive strategy for TEBVs imaging and the long-term monitoring of culture. This protocol can be utilized for the visualization of morphological changes and thickness measurements of engineered vessels under different culture conditions. Additionally, the analyses of polymer-based materials degradation in the tissue-engineering scaffolds can be performed for the identification. By combining the use of an SEM and a polarized microscope in this protocol, a correlation and quantification of ECM distribution and PGA degradation can be made, which can facilitate assessing scaffold degradation combined with OCT imaging.

**PROTOCOL:**

1. **Degradable PGA Scaffold-based Tissue-engineered Vessels Culture**

* 1. **PGA scaffold fabrication**
     1. Sew PGA mesh (19 mm in diameter and 1 mm thick) around silicone tubing sterilized by ethylene oxide (17 cm in length, 5.0 mm in diameter, and 0.3 mm thick) using a 5-0 suture.
     2. Sew polytetrafluoroethylene (ePTFE, 1 cm in length) with a 4-0 suture onto each end of the PGA mesh, overlapped by 2 mm.
     3. Dip PGA scaffolds in 1 mol/L NaOH for 1 min to adjust the spatial structure of the mesh and soak it with tissue culture grade water 3x for 2 min each. Each time, gently pat dry the scaffold with a tissue paper. Then, dry up the scaffolds in a hood with a blower for 1 h.
  2. **Assembly of the bioreactor and the Y-junction for OCT imaging**
     1. Soak the self-developed glass cylindrical bioreactor (10 cm in diameter and 11.7 cm in height, with four lips inside and four side-arms outside the reactor as shown in **Figure 1**), PGA scaffolds, silicone tube (with an external diameter of 5 mm and a thickness of 0.3 mm), biocompatible tubes, and connectors in a 95% ethanol tank for 2 h.
     2. Pull the PGA scaffold through the side-arms of the bioreactor connected to one side with a connector, as well as to another side with the Y-junction used to deliver OCT guidewire. Assemble another PGA scaffold in the bioreactor in the same way. Please refer to **Figure 1**.
     3. Fit ePTFE to the bioreactor lips by tightening it with 5-0 sutures.
     4. Put the bioreactor in the ethanol tank again for 1 h and dry up overnight in a hood with the blower on.
  3. **Seeding of HUASMCs and static bioreactor conditioning**
     1. Isolate HUASMCs from human umbilical arteries by standard explant techniques.
     2. Expand and maintain the cells in smooth muscle cell growth medium composed of DMEM medium, 20% fetal bovine serum, 2.36 mg/mL HEPES, 100 U/mL penicillin G, 50 μg/mL proline, 20 μg/mL alanine, 50 μg/mL glycine, 1.5 μg/mL CuSO4, 50 μg/mL ascorbic acid, 10 ng/mL basic fibroblast growth factor, and 10 ng/mL platelet-derived growth factor.
     3. Seed HUASMCs at a concentration of 5 x 106 cells/mL in the above culture medium onto the PGA scaffolds.
     4. Insert one feeding tube (5 mm in diameter, 15 cm in length) and three short tubing segments (5 mm in diameter, 7 cm in length) for gas exchange through the silicone stopper lid. Attach PTFE 0.22-μm filters to each air change tube and one heparin cap to the feeding tube.
     5. Put a stir bar (1.5 cm in length) in the bioreactor with a stirring speed of 13 rounds/min. Assemble the glass bioreactor, silicone stopper lid, and PGA scaffold into the culture system.
     6. Allow HUASMCs to adhere for 45 min by leaning the bioreactor every 15 min with stand, to the left and right. The reactor ports and joints are all sealed with paraffin film.
     7. Fill the culture chamber with 450 mL of the HUASMCs culture medium. Place the overall bioreactor in a humidified incubator with 5% CO2 at 37 °C.
     8. Connect the Luo-Ye pump, phosphate buffered saline (PBS) bag, and driver with the biocompatible tubes to create the perfusion system. Open the driver to fill the tubes with PBS.
     9. Press the stop button and turn off the power of the drive device. Grow the seeded scaffolds under static culture for one week.
     10. Change the culture medium every 3 - 4 d by aspirating half of the old medium through the feeding tube and refilling the reactor with an equivalent amount of fresh culture medium.
  4. **Preparation of the perfusion system for OCT imaging**
     1. Pump fluids in the PBS bag to circulate them through the biocompatible tubes and back to the bag.
     2. Open the power of the driver and regulate the pump setting with a frequency of 60 beats/min and an output systolic pressure of 120 mmHg. Adjust the mechanical parameters according to the needs of the tissue-engineering vascular culture.
     3. Click the run button to make the perfusion system work. Provide the above fixed pulsatile stimulation to the vessels for 3 weeks by iteratively pressurizing the biocompatible tubes10,12 after 1 week of static culture.

1. **Performing Optical Imaging with OCT** 
   1. Use a light source to ensure the axial resolution of 15 - 20 µm and the image depth of 1 - 2 mm to identify the structure of the TEBVs based on the frequency-domain OCT intravascular imaging system9.
   2. Turn on the power switch and open the image capture software.
   3. Connect the fiber optic imaging catheter to the drive-motor and optical controller (DOC) with the catheter automatic retreat function.
   4. Set the parameters of the image acquisition rate to 50 frames/s with an automatic pullback speed of 10 mm/s.
   5. Attach the imaging catheter to the Y-junction *via* the heparin cap with an 18-G needle.
   6. Place the catheter into the silicone tube and identify the suture tightness of the PGA mesh before loading the PGA scaffold onto the bioreactor.
   7. Place the catheter tip over the region of interest. Adjust the pullback device and check for the image quality8.
   8. Acquire images at 1, 4, 7, 10, 14, 17, 21, and 28 days in culture for each individual TEBV and save them sequentially with a real-time observation of the TEBV microstructure, including surface morphology, internal structure, and composition.
   9. Repeat the measurement 3x to get a reliable measurement of the engineered vessels each time. Capture a series of images throughout testing using the image capture software.
2. **Imaging Analysis**
   1. Use image analysis software to measure the TEBV wall thickness. Select the image to be analyzed. Click the tracking tool to automatically identify the inner side of the TEBV with the software and manually sketch the outer side. A diagram of thickness will appear on the screen.
   2. Repeat the measurement for 5x to get a reliable measurement of the constructs. The OCT analysis was performed by two independent investigators blinded to the obtained information.
3. **Harvest of the TEBVs and Tissue Processing**
   1. Open the silicone stopper lid placed over the bioreactor when the culture is finished and discard the culture medium. Lose the ePTFE from the bioreactor lips and cut the silicone tubes from the outer side of the ePTFE with scissors. Harvest TEBVs from the bioreactor and cut them into sections for a scanning electron microscopy examination.
   2. Take out the rest of the TEBVs and cut them into 4-μm thick sections. Pull out the supporting silicone tube and fix the sections with 1% paraformaldehyde. Perform routine histological staining with Masson’s trichrome and Sirius red to examine the morphology of collagen and PGA10,13,14.
   3. To assess the PGA content and collagen component, observe histologic samples with Sirius red staining through a polarized microscope. PGA remnants are clearly demarcated through birefringence and the remnant area can be quantified based on the cross-sectional area10.

**REPRESENTATIVE RESULTS:**

The three-dimensional culture system consists of a culture chamber in the bioreactor and a perfusion system with a closed fluid cycle10,13 (**Figure 1**). The OCT imaging catheter was inserted into the distal end of the Y-junction and pulled back into the silicone tube for imaging. OCT imaging was first used to delineate the structural characterization of biodegradable polymeric scaffold-based TEBVs during bioreactor cultivation.

**Figure 2** shows the process of engineered vascular remodeling through this cross-sectional imaging of tissue microstructure in real-time. Geometric morphology was evaluated, including wall thickness, degradable PGA content, and a comparison of the TEBV thickness at different culture time points, as well as in the presence of pulsatile stimulation. A trend of decreasing thickness of, and dramatic changes in, the engineered tissue within the first two weeks of culture was seen, suggesting signal-rich PGA gradual degradation and a transition of the structure of new tissue from loose to tight. At 21 days in culture, the vasculature had formed a smooth structure, with an extracellular matrix evenly distributed and high signal components mostly dissipated. The wall thickness of TEBVs with an even signal increased gradually after three weeks of culture. This remodeling occurred earlier and the morphological changes manifested more obviously in the dynamic group (**Figure 3**). Thereby, OCT enables the imaging of engineered vascular morphology to be visualized *in situ* and in real-time in the course of long-running culture.

**Figure 4** compares OCT images with histopathological finds of TEBVs after 4 weeks of culture. Masson’s trichrome staining demonstrates collagen fibers distributed in a certain direction along with PGA remnants in the media layer of the engineered vessels (**Figure 4B**). Sirius red staining revealed PGA remnants and a collagen component by using a polarized microscope (**Figure 4C**). Scanning electron micrographs of engineered vessels with a compact microstructure were compared with the histological assessment (**Figure 4D**). Taken together, the OCT images showed PGA with different sizes and a porous network structure. The structure of the PGA scaffold had no obvious change and was swollen because it came into direct contact with the culture medium in an early stage of the culture. However, the signal intensity of the PGA was reduced. PGA components were disintegrated and replaced with cells and extracellular matrix. Fewer fragments were seen over a four-week period. SEM images of cross-sectional engineered vessels demonstrated fiber rupture to the extension of the incubation time. The material and extracellular matrix composites had a honeycomb-like structure with less transparency and were more compact.

**FIGURE AND TABLE LEGENDS:**

**Figure 1: Schematic of the tissue-engineering vascular culture system, consisting of a culture chamber in the bioreactor and a perfusion system for OCT imaging.** The pulsatile pump provided a stable fluid flow simulating the biomechanical microenvironment. The OCT imaging catheter was pulled back into the silicone tube in the culture chamber.

**Figure 2: The microstructure of tissue-engineered blood vessels during culture.** Over culture-time, signal-rich PGA gradually degraded, and the structure of new tissue went from loose to tight. The TEBVs had a smooth surface and an abundant extracellular matrix evenly distributed after four weeks of culture. It showed the process of engineered vascular remodeling through cross-sectional images in real-time. This figure has been modified from Chen *et al*.10.

**Figure 3: Comparison of TEBV wall thickness change during vascular remodeling in dynamic and static groups obtained from OCT measurements**. The error bars indicate standard error. This figure has been modified from Chen *et al*.10.

**Figure 4: Imaging of biodegradable polymer-based tissue-engineered blood vessels.** (**A**) This panel shows an OCT image of a TEBV after four weeks of culture. M = culture medium, S = silicone tube, and the white arrow indicates the TEBV. The red arrow indicates a PGA fragment. (**B**) Masson’s trichrome staining demonstrated well-organized collagen fibers along with the residual content of PGA in the media layer of engineered vessels. The scale bar = 100 μm. (**C**) Sirius red staining revealed PGA remnants by using a polarized microscope. The green arrow indicates the PGA fragment. The scale bar = 100 μm. (**D**) Scanning electron micrographs of engineered vessels with a compact microstructure are shown for a comparison with the histological assessment. The scale bar = 50 μm.

**DISCUSSION:**

To generate engineered vessels with structural and mechanical properties similar to those of native blood vessels can shorten the time for clinical use and is the ultimate goal of vascular engineering. Optical imaging techniques permit the visualization of tissue-engineered vascular-specific components, which cannot monitor individual constructs throughout culture and expose grafts to a culture environment without compromising sterility7. In this article, the culture chamber is separated from the perfusion system. The relatively independent perfusion system guarantees a decrease in the risk of pollution during culture and the placement of OCT guidewire. Meanwhile, this intraluminal imaging modality adopted the easy and safety monitoring of TEBVs *in situ* with a high resolution approaching that of histopathology, which makes the assessment of the TEBV growth status more practical and is even expected to be used before or after implant placement.

The current protocol indicates a readily available, fast real-time and nondestructive imaging strategy to evaluate degradable polymer-based engineered vessel development using catheter-based OCT. Through the observation of the dynamic process, some main factors affecting vascular engineering, such as contamination or unmatched cell-material interaction leading to tissue loss, can be detected early on. Critical steps to ensure the efficacy of the protocol include the fabrication of a NaOH-modified PGA scaffold, the successful seeding of HUASMCs in the scaffold, the separation of the sterile culture system from the monitoring system, and a fast catheter operation process.

This technique can be utilized to assess degradation states and the complex structure of PGA scaffolds blended in with new tissue. The polymeric scaffold with a porous network structure degrades gradually and dominates the process of vascular remodeling in the first three weeks, which are important for cell adhesion and extracellular matrix deposition with a three-dimensioned structure for nutrient exchange and as a signal carrier15,16. For the quantification of PGA remnants in engineered vessels clearly identified by Sirius red-stained images, the use of polarized microscopes17 in degradable scaffold-based vascular engineering has the potential to become the standard evaluation after cultivation. Hence, OCT imaging combined with a polarized microscope might serve as a qualitative and quantitative method for assessing PGA degradation in vascular engineering.

A limitation of this technique is the resolution limit to assess cell proliferation, distribution, and cell-cell and cell-ECM interaction during engineered vascular remodeling. We hope to find suitable methods to investigate the TEBV microstructure at a cellular or subcellular level18 and quantify growth kinetics. With a quantitative analysis of average optical signals of OCT imaging, we might be more aware of the mechanism of material degradation in vascular engineering. Such experiments are being considered for our future studies.

Overall, the results presented here show that OCT is a readily available, fast real-time, and nondestructive imaging strategy to monitor the growth and remodeling of TEBVs. It is utilized to characterize structural architectural features and the long-term remodeling process of engineered vessels. The application of a polarized microscope, which provided supplementary evidence for the quantification of polymeric remnants in engineered vessels, might be useful for assessing scaffold degradation combined with OCT imaging. Taken together, the current protocol holds promising value for the application of OCT in vascular tissue engineering.

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**DISCLOSURES:**

The authors have nothing to disclose.

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