Scalable large-area mesh-structured microfluidic gradient generator for drug testing applications

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Abstract

The present work aims to develop a microfluidic device from a square mesh template. The template is fabricated using a recently proposed non-conventional lithography-less method of shaping ceramic suspension fluid by controlling Saffman Taylor instability in a Multiport Lifted Hele-Shaw Cell (MLHSC). The microfluidic concentration gradient generator (μCGG) was prepared by soft lithography from fabricated template. The optimum flow rates were determined by COMSOL simulations and validated by creating fluorescein dye (Fluorescein isothiocanate, FITC) gradient in the fabricated μCGG. We then demonstrated the use of this device for drug testing. We created various concentration of an anticancer drug – curcumin - using the device and then determined inhibitory concentration of curcumin on the viability of cervical cancer cell-line (HeLa). The result matched well with the conventional drug testing using 96 well plates. Further, shaping of fluid allows change in the number of outlets, which can be utilised to achieve broad range of concentration gradient. Therefore, this method is time efficient, cost effective, uniquely suitable to scale microstructures over a large area, and saves personnel time and can be used as a gradient generator for various biological and non-biological applications.

Keywords: Microfluidics, concentration gradient generator, drug screening, lifted Hele-Shaw cell

1. Introduction

Microfluidics-based concentration gradient generators (µCGG) are widely used for various chemical and biological studies including chemical synthesis (Hu *et al* 2020), serial dilution (Ahrar *et al* 2013, Kim *et al* 2008), sensors (Kim *et al* 2015, Gao *et al* 2020), clinical diagnostics (Campbell *et al* 2018), chemotaxis (Kim and Wu 2012), drug screening (Chi *et al* 2016), biochemical assays, etc. µCGG provides precise control over concentration of the active molecule in space and time (Wang *et al* 2017). In such flow-based systems, mostly two fluid streams are combined and allowed to mix or diffuse, in 'T' or 'Y' shaped channels (Lin and Levchenko 2015). Christmas tree design is another widely used flow-based device where gradient is generated by continuous splitting and recombining fluid streams (Lin and Levchenko 2015). The well controlled shapes of µCGG are commonly fabricated using lithography-based techniques including photolithography, soft lithography, e-beam lithography, etc. These methods comprise of multi-step process and need sophisticated instruments, thereby increasing processing cost and limits industrial scale-up (Khadpekar *et al* 2019). Recently, in order to overcome these limitations, non-conventional methods have also been reported including paper-based (Hong *et al* 2016, Glavan *et al* 2013) or thread-based (Ramesan *et al* 2016) gradient generation. However, in both, paper and thread-based µCGG, it is difficult to collect outlet stream as fluid is absorbed in the device.

In this work, we report the fabrication, optimization, and validation of a flow-based µCGG for drug screening application. The device was made with poly-dimethyl siloxane (PDMS) based soft-lithography technique using a template which was fabricated using a non-conventional method of shaping ceramic fluid in a lifted Hele-Shaw cell as reported earlier (Islam and Gandhi 2017). Controlled shaping of fluid allows customising number of outlets and area of pattern, thereby controlling gradient strength in µCGG. The optimum operating conditions to generate a concentration gradient was determined using COSMOL simulations and validated by experiment with fluorescent dye – FITC. Further, inhibitory concentration (IC50) of curcumin drug on cervical cancer cells (HeLa) was estimated using the fabricated µCGG. The result matched well with the conventional drug testing platforms using multi-well plates. We propose that this easy-to-fabricate and scalable µCGG can be used for generation of concentration gradient for various biological and non-biological applications.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Fabrication of square mesh microfluidic device

Fabrication is carried out in a parallel lifting Hele Shaw cell custom-built at Suman Mashruwala Advanced Microengineering Laboratory, IIT Bombay. The details of the setup can be found in (Islam and Gandhi 2017). The cell plates of the setup are modified to suit the proposed application.

2.1.1. Controlling source-holes.

Using a CNC-micro drilling machine source-holes were drilled on one of the cell plates for fabricating the proposed µCGG structures. Diameter of source-holes in the present study is kept equal to 0.5 mm for all the experiments. Locations of these holes were based on the guidelines given in (Islam and Gandhi 2016) such that we would evolve a square mesh structure after the process is done. The square mesh with several sizes and pitch dimensions are proposed to be prepared.

2.2.2 Square mesh preparation

Measured quantity of shear thinning suspension consisting of ceramic (Alumina) particles suspended in photo-resist (HDDA) [as reported in (Islam and Gandhi 2016)] (fig 1.a.i), is squeezed between two cell plates to the required thickness and radius (fig 1.a.ii). Array of source holes on one of the cell plates are decided as mentioned in 2.2.1. During the squeezing step, all the source holes are properly sealed. Squeezing is followed by a small delay to neutralise the normal stresses within the fluid. Then cell plates are separated with unsealed holes (fig 1.a.iii). As the two plates start separating, air moves inside from the source holes, creating the air finger. Each air finger growth is shielded by adjacent air finger which finally gives square mesh pattern due to pre-designed source hole locations (Kanhurkar *et al* 2022). Saffman-Taylor instability (viscous fingering) phenomenon is controlled by conducting fabrication with proper capillary number and aspect ratio (Islam and Gandhi 2017). Once plate separation is completed, we get square mesh pattern on each plate. Channels for inlet and outlet streams are created by wiping selected areas. Presence of photo-initiator in the ceramic suspension allows it to UV cure (fig 1.a.iv) and finally we get cross-linked square mesh pattern. Figure 1.a.v shows digital image of 9X9 square mesh template used as template for the study. Changing distance between drilled holes and number of holes can be utilised to customise the pattern and patterned area.

2.1.3 Preparation of microfluidic device

PDMS (Sylgard 184 from Dow Corning) is mixed in 10:1 (w/w) with crosslinker and then degassed under vacuum. This uncured PDMS was then poured onto square mesh pattern prepared (fig 1.b.i) and cured at 60 ^{0}C for 12hrs. The casted cured PDMS is then peeled off from template (fig 1.b.ii) and is referred as negative replica. In order to make channels, this negative replica is plasma oxidised and bonded glass slide by bringing two surfaces in conformal contact. For flow-device, the inlets and outlets were made using biopsy punches as shown in fig 1.b.iii, before bonding with the glass. Figure 1.b.iv shows photo of fabricated microfluidic device for CGG.

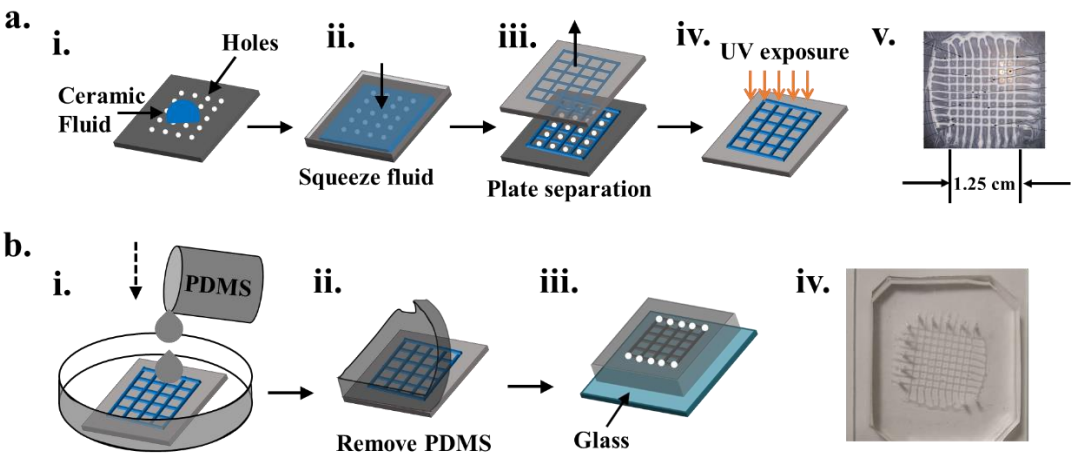

Figure 1: Schematic of preparation of (a) template and (b) microfluidic device

2.2 Template characterisation

The height and width of the channels and nodes were measured by using white light interferometry (WLI). WLI results in 3D profile of area scanned.

2. 3. Flow setup

The square mesh-shaped microfluidic device can be customised in terms on inlet-outlet number and position. In this work, fabricated µCGG have two inlet ports and 10 outlet ports – alternate channels (fig 2.a). Capillary tubes of diameter 1 mm were used to connect the syringe and the inlet ports of the device. Outlets were collected in 200 µl microtips (fig 2.b). Syringe pump (Era's NE-1000) was used for the experiment, programmed for the desired flow rate.

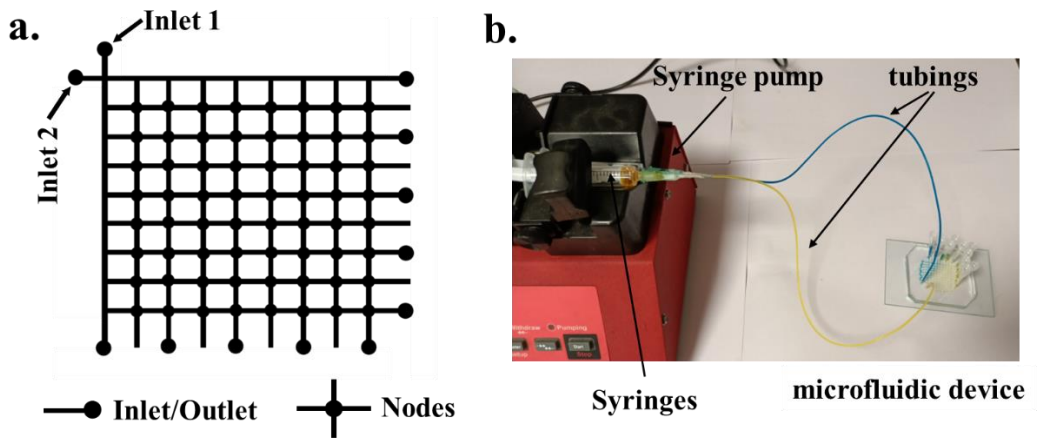

Figure 2: Schematic of (a) inlet-outlet positions and (b) experimental set-up for µCGG

2.4 Characterisation of concentration gradient

2.4.1. COMSOL simulation

The 2D geometry of the device is made in COMSOL Multiphysics geometry module. The meshing is done to discretize the domains into small elements, as done in finite element method. Concentration at the outlets was simulated using COMSOL (version 5.2) assuming laminar flow conditions. Other COMSOL parameters are mentioned in table 1.

Table 1: COMSOL simulation parameters

Software	COMSOL Multiphysics 4.4
Physics type (In COMSOL)	Laminar flow
Material	Water
Viscosity	0.001 Pa s
Density	1000 kg m−3
Material	FITC
FITC diffusivity in water	4.5X 10^{-10} m^2/s
Boundary conditions	
Inlet condition	Constant flow rate (50, 100, 500, 1000 µl/min)
Outlet condition	Constant pressure
Walls	No slip condition

2.4.2. Fluorescein dye gradient

Fluorescein dye (FITC- 368 Da) was used to generate gradient in MilliQ water at different flow rates in the fabricated microfluidic device. The collected outlet is imaged in fluorescence microscope (EVOS FL-Auto). The concentration was determined by comparing fluorescence intensities of known concentration i.e., standard curve of intensity vs concentration, (supplementary figure S1) with intensities from outlets from device.

2.4.3. Curcumin gradient

The concentration gradient of model drug- Curcumin (389 Da), was generated in cell growth media at flow rate 50µl/min. The absorbance of outlet solution was measured at 425nm using a SpectraMax M2^{e} Microplate reader. To estimate outlet concentration, standard curve with absorbance or known concentration was plotted (supplementary figure S2) and outlet concentration of curcumin from device was determined.

2.5 Cell culture

The cervical cancer cells (HeLa) were cultured in High glucose Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) supplemented with 1% Anti-Anti, 1% L-glutamine and 20% Fetal Bovine Serum (Himedia). Cells are trypsinized with 0.05 % trypsin - EDTA(1X) (Gibco), incubated for 5 mins at 37 ^{0}C. To get pellet of cells it was centrifuged (1000rpm, 5min). After centrifugation, cells are resuspended with fresh medium and counted using haemocytometer and seeded in 96 well plate.

2.6 MTT assay

HeLa cells were seeded in 96 well cell culture plate at 5000 cells per well. After 24 hrs, cells were exposed to different concentration of curcumin drug (in growth media) prepared by (i) µCGG and (ii) manual dilution. Cells were allowed to proliferate for 24 hrs and cell viability was quantifying reduction of tetrazolium dye – MTT (3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide) by monitoring absorbance at 590 nm using a SpectraMax M2^{e} Microplate reader. IC_{50} value i.e., 50% inhibition of cell viability – indicate cytotoxicity of drug on cells, was determined by nonlinear regression fitting of the concentration-dependent proliferation inhibitory data (Mundhara *et al* 2019).

3. Results

3.1 Square mesh dimension

The dimensions of square mesh can be varied by changing the initial fluid film thickness and pitch distance of the source holes in the plate (Islam and Gandhi 2017). The optimised parameters for the preparation of square mesh are selected from source hole characterization graph (Islam and Gandhi 2017, 2016). The intersection of branches in the mesh is referred as nodes. Shape of channel and nodes is as shown on figure 3.a-b respectively. The template used in this study has an average channel height of 58.9 ± 5.75 µm and width of 650.7 ± 38.14 µm. The average height of node is 109.2 ± 22 µm as measured by white light interferometer (WLI).

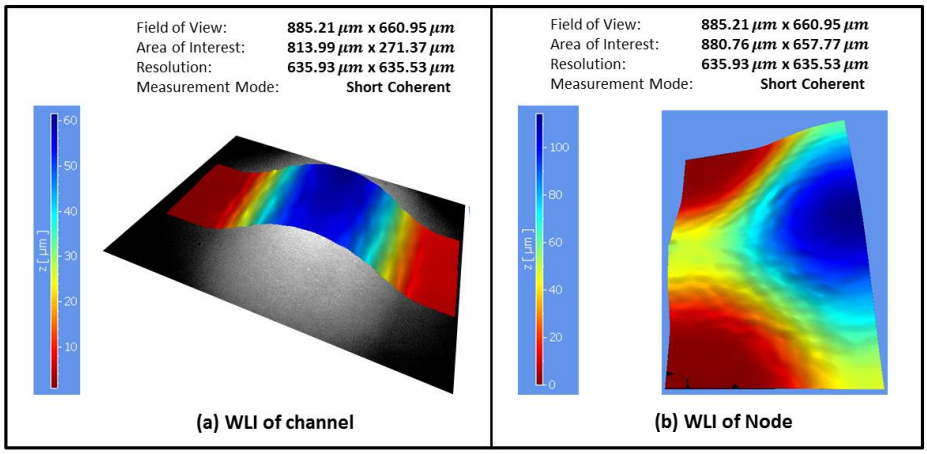

Figure 3: WLI image of the (a) channel and (b) node

3.2 Concentration gradient characterisation

Using COMSOL simulation (fig 4.a), we analysed the concentration at the outlet streams in the COMSOL design at various flow rates for square mesh varying from 50, 100, 500 and 1000 µl/min as plotted in figure 4.b. Experiment with 50 µM FITC (fluorescein dye) in water as one inlet and water as other inlet streams was performed. Figure 4.c shows the comparison between simulation and experiment values at flow rate of 50µl/min. Fig 4.d shows fluorescence variation across the device outlets.

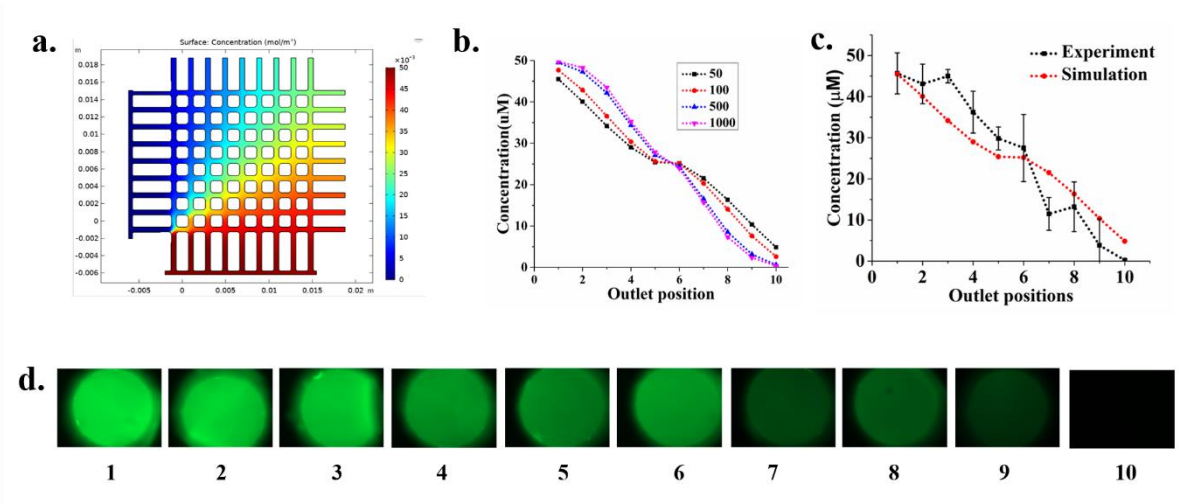

Figure 4: Gradient characterisation (a-b) using COMSOL and (c) comparison of experiment and simulation data at flow rate of 50µl/min; (d) fluorescence intensity of FITC gradient from experiment

3.4. Drug gradient and its effect on cell metabolic activity

The potential application of concentration gradient is in determining the effect of various drugs/biomolecules on cells. We selected curcumin as model drug to study its cytotoxic effect on HeLa cells, a commonly used model cell lines for cervical cancer. First, the concentration gradient of curcumin in growth media was generated in the fabricated device. The concentration of curcumin at each outlet was determined using absorbance of solution at 425nm (fig 5.a). Using MTT assay we then tested the cytotoxicity of curcumin on HeLa cells by measuring the percent inhibition w.r.to drug collected from the device outlets (Fig. 5b). As the graph shows, drug concentration coming from outlet 5 gives the IC_{50} i.e. inhibitory concentration at which 50% cell are viable/dead. Comparing with figure 5.a, the concentration of solution from outlet number 5 is found to be ~32 µM. Therefore, IC_{50} of curcumin on HeLa cells is ~32 µM. To note, our COMSOL simulation estimated the concentration at outlet 5 is 28 µM which matches well with the experimental measurement (fig 4.c). Hence, drug concentration at different outlets can be estimated using COMSOL simulation by providing molecular weight and diffusivity of drug as input and thus eliminating the need of experimental measurement of drug concentration every time. Further, to validate the device, IC_{50} of curcumin on Hela was estimated using a conventional 96 well plate in which concentration gradient was generated manually by serial dilution. - Using this conventional method, IC_{50} was found to be ~35 µM (figure 5.c) which matched well with IC50 estimated from our µCGG

device (32 µM). This result indicates that the µCGG can be potentially used for concentration generation in drug testing and drug screening replacing the time consuming, labour intensive, and error-prone method of creating concentration gradients manually.

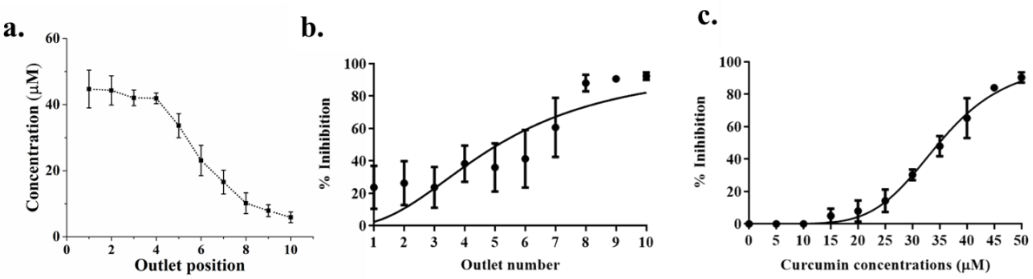

Figure 5: (a) Curcumin concentration wrt outlet position; Determination of IC50 using (b) fabricated µCGG and (c) conventional 96-well plate

3.5. Scalability of the Fabrication Process

Fabrication process used for the mesh pattern generation is spontaneous and scalable. As the shaping of fluid is created by varying air entrance pathways, changing the initial experimental parameter like initial fluid volume, initial fluid film thickness, initial squeezed fluid film radius and pitch distance of the array of source holes, can change the micro-meso scale structure of template. Figure 6 shows shaped ceramic fluid with variations in number of channels, area of patterning and dimensions of structure (see Fig.6). As the number of channels/outlets can be varied, broader or narrower drug concentration gradient can be generated. Therefore, this multiscale fabricated mesh pattern based microfluidic device can also get scale-up or scale-down for concentration gradient generation.

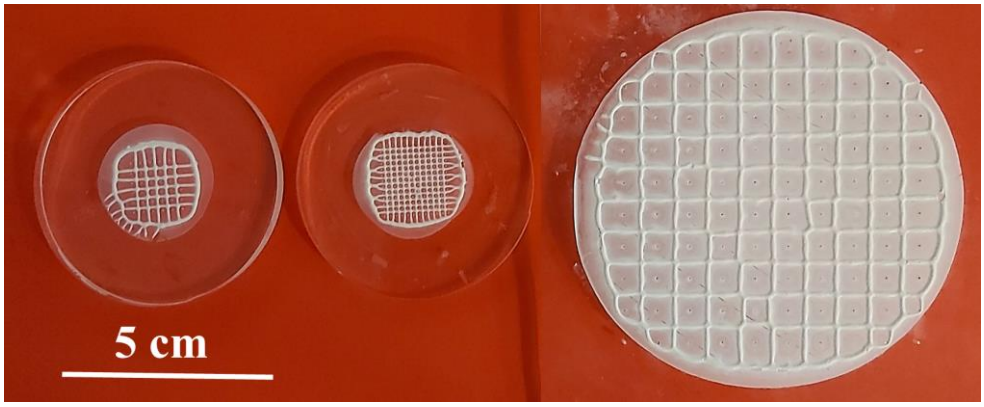

Figure 6: Scalability of fabrication process

4. Discussion

In this study, we used mesh like template generated by shaping ceramic fluid controlled via lifted Hele-Shaw for developing microfluidic concentration gradient generator (µCGG). The outlet concentration w.r.t flow rate was determined using COMSOL simulations and validated using experiments with fluorescein dye-FITC. Next, the gradient of curcumin in growth media was estimated using absorbance of curcumin. The drug testing application in fabricated µCGG was successfully demonstrated by measuring IC_{50} of curcumin on model cell line – HeLa (cervical cancer cells). Further, consistent IC50 value from both - conventional well-plate assay and microfluidic devices- depicts potential use of device in concentration dependant studies.

For generation of complex concentration gradient profile, "Christmas-tree" based designs (Zhou *et al* 2009, Dertinger *et al* 2001) are widely used. It has been used for biological studies including cellular migration (Walker *et al* 2005), proliferation and neuronal differentiation (Chung *et al* 2005) and non-biological studies such as chemical synthesis (Hu *et al* 2020), serial dilution (Ahrar *et al* 2013, Kim *et al* 2008), sensors (Kim *et al* 2015, Gao *et al* 2020) etc. However, most of the lithography-based templates and respective µCGG are complex and involves multi-step fabrication (Khadpekar *et al* 2019), thereby increasing cost and time of fabrication. To overcome these limitation, some non-conventional methods have been reported such as paper based high-throughput devices (Hong *et al* 2016), thread based microfluidics (Ramesan *et al* 2016, Nilghaz *et al* 2013) etc were reported. However, collection of solution is difficult and studies are majorly conducted inside the device. These shortcomings are addressed in the proposed microfluidic device. We have demonstrated microfluidic device with 10 outlets; however, number of channels/outlets can be easily changed by varying number and position of drilled holes, thereby controlling gradient strength and resolution. Therefore, fabrication of lithography-less template using lifted Hele-Shaw cell is advantageous in terms of scalability, cost of fabrication and customisable inlet and outlet of fabricated µCGG. This study highlights the potential of lifted Hele-Shaw cell in fabrication of microfluidic device for drug testing application and can be further explored for other biological and non-biological applications.(Toh *et al* 2014)

5. Conclusion

Our work demonstrates that mesh-like shaping of ceramic fluids can be utilised to fabricate microfluidic devices for microfluidic concentration gradient generation. The application of

fabricated µCGG was demonstrated by testing curcumin-drug gradient on cervical cancer cells (HeLa). We believe that this simple, customised number of outlets, cost effective and scalable µCGG can be used for investigating various concentration gradient-based biological and non-biological studies.

Author contribution:

SY, KB, MR fabricated template for the study. MR did the template characterization on WLI. SY, PT performed COMSOL simulations and initial experiments. SY, KB performed drug testing experiments and analyzed data. AM and PG designed experiments, methodology and supervised the project. AM, PG, SY, PT, KB and MR contributed to the manuscript writing. The equal contributing authors can interchange the position in their respective CVs.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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