Model of an Interdigitated Microsensor to Detect and Quantify Cells Flowing in a Test Chamber.

Elena Bianchi *1,3, Federica Boschetti1, Gabriele. Dubini1 and Carlotta Guiducci2
1LABS, Laboratory of Biological Structure Mechanics, Structural Engineering Department, Politecnico di Milano, MI, Italy
2CLSE - Laboratory of Life Science Electronics - IBI, Institute of Bioengineering, IEL, Institute for Electrical Engineering, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, EPFL, Lausanne, Switzerland
3Bioengineering Department, Politecnico di Milano, MI, Italy
*Corresponding author: elena3.bianchi@mail.polimi.it, LaBS – Politecnico di Milano, piazza Leonardo da Vinci 32, Milano, ITALY.

Abstract: A finite elements model of an interdigitated microsensor has been used to investigate the sensitivity of the sensor to the detection and the quantification of cells flowing in a test chamber. In particular the sensitivity of the sensor towards the geometry of sensors and the presence of a cell flowing through the channels was evaluated; several sensors topologies were considered in order to define proper guide-lines for the design of the microsensor.

Keywords: impedance spectrometry, cell counting, interdigitated electrodes

1. Introduction

Microfabricated electrodes can detect and analyze cells or particles giving a multi-frequency impedance-based characterization. The detection and/or the characterization are based on the dielectric properties of the cells coming from their membrane capacitance and conductivity, that allow to discriminate cells from their buffer solution. These properties can be also correlated to physiological differences between cells or pathological changes in cell over time. [1]

This method presents several advantages: real-time detection, label-free analysis, non-invasive sensing, easiness of integration and high-throughput screening [2]. An impedance based sensor detects the impedance change \( \Delta Z \) due to the particle passing through an opening placed between two planar or facing electrodes [3,4,5,6].

Hydrodynamic techniques for focusing can be conveniently introduced to direct line of cells to the most sensitive area of the sensor [3,4,6]. In this paper we describe a numerical model of an impedance sensor, designed to quantify in real time the number of cells flowing in a micro-test adhesion chamber with a flow-section of 1.5 mm x 50 \( \mu \)m. Flow-rates requested in the camera can not be carried by a single sensor channel, whose dimensions should be proportional to the cells (12-17 \( \mu \)m), due to the high shear-stress applied on the cells in such condition of flow.

The modeling of a multiple impedance sensor combining an interdigitated design [5,7] and a vertical electrode approach [1,4] is presented in this paper. This microsensor is conceived to be integrated in a high-throughput microdevice, containing several chambers: a multiple control for each array of sensors has to be evaluated in order to achieve the simultaneous reading multiple chambers. The numerical model is designed to evaluate the performances of an array of impedance facing electrode sensors in detecting flowing cells.

2. Materials and Method

A microfabrication process to implement an array of interdigitated vertical sensors was defined: 3D structure of Si should be etched, passivated with a 200nm SiO\(_2\) insulating layer and then selectively deposited with a metal layer (Pt – 200nm) to give rise to vertical electrodes walls. Wiring metal surfaces were passivated with a second SiO\(_2\) deposition Hydrodynamic structures in PDMS (Polydymetilsiloxane) are located before and after the array of sensors, in order to canalize the flowing cells through the sensor gates (Fig.1). Cell population of interest are RBL (RBL-2H3 rat basophilic leucemia cells) that were represented as spheres with \( \varnothing \) 15 \( \mu \)m, characterized by a resistive interior bulk and
a capacitive membrane, hanged in a low conductive buffer solution.

Several micro-sensor topologies and geometries (Fig.1) were investigated in order to evaluate the sensitivity of the structure to the presence of cells: \( W_c \) (width of the sensor channel), \( W_p \) (width of the pillars were the electrodes are deposed), \( L_c \) (length of the sensor channel).

Single channel structures were compared to double channel structures in order to evaluate the feasibility of a single control on a multiple channel sensor.

An AC voltage input signal of 50 [mV] was set at several frequencies values, from \( 10^5 \) to \( 10^9 \) Hz, in order to evaluate the impedance of the system as a function of input frequencies. Impedance [\( \Omega \)] of the system, measured by the electrodes immersed in buffer solution, was extracted as the inverse value of admittance [S], and compared to the impedance of the system if one cell is positioned in the sensitive areas.

The consequent electrical model is showed in Fig.2. Electrical properties of materials are listed in Table 1.

### Table 1 Model parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>C [S/m]</th>
<th>( \varepsilon_r ) [-]</th>
<th>d [( \mu m )]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Si ([*,\dagger]]</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SiO(_2) ([*,\dagger]]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pt ([\dagger]]</td>
<td>9.9 (10^6)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffer fluid ([\dagger]]</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDMS ([\dagger]]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell membrane ([k,9]]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell Interior ([9]]</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electr./solut interface ([10]]</td>
<td>(2.710^{-9})</td>
<td>(3.39\ \times10^{-2})</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Comsol Material Library

† Datasheet

Figure 1 (a). Sketch of the sensor geometry: \( W_p, W_c, L_c \) are the three geometrical parameters that define the shape and the position of the pillars to determine the sensor channel. (b) Single and double channel structures tested and compared in the numerical model.

**Figure 2.** Electrical model of a single couple of electrodes in absence and in presence of a cell.

- \( R_{sol} \): resistance of the buffer solution
- \( C_g \): geometrical capacitance
- \( R_{int} \): metal/solution interface resistance
- \( C_{int} \): metal/solution interface capacitance
- \( R_{Pt} \): Platinum resistance
- \( C_{SiO_2} \): Silicon dioxide capacitance
- \( R_{Si} \): silicon resistance
- \( C_{Si} \): silicon capacitance
- \( R_{in} \): cell cytoplasm resistance
- \( C_{m} \): cellular membrane capacitance
3. Use of COMSOL Multiphysics

The model was built on Comsol platform, referring to the EC Electric Current model (1)

\[-\nabla \cdot ((\sigma + j \omega \varepsilon_0 \varepsilon_r) \nabla V - J^e) = 0\]  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where \(\sigma\) is the conductivity [S/m], \(\omega\) is the frequency [Hz], \(\varepsilon_0\) is the vacuum permittivity [8.85 \times 10^{-12}], \(\varepsilon_r\) the relative permittivity of the material, \(V\) the potential [V] and \(J^e\) is an external generated current density [A/m²], defining the electric field by the constitutive law (2)

\[D = \varepsilon_0 \varepsilon_r E\]  \hspace{1cm} (2)

where \(D\) is the electric displacement field and \(E\) the electric field [V].

Interface impedance, the SiO₂ thin layer and the cell membrane were represented as contact resistances:

\[n \cdot j_i = \frac{1}{Z_C} (V_i - V_2)\]  \hspace{1cm} (3)

defined by a thickness \(d\) [m] and an conductivity complex relation (4)

\[\sigma = \sigma + j \omega \varepsilon_0 \varepsilon_r\]  \hspace{1cm} (4)

Analyses were solved in the frequency domain, setting the parametric solver to evaluate the response of the system at several working frequencies. Input signal was given by means of a Voltage Terminal, and the impedance \(Z_C\) as function of frequency, was evaluated as written out as inverse of the admittance \(Y\).

4. Results

Impedance spectroscopy simulations were performed, in order to evaluate several geometries of single and double sensor channels, full of buffer solution. Fig. 4 shows the dependence of input frequencies on \(R\) [Ohm] (in the definition of impedance \(Z = R+jX\), \(R\) is the real term and \(X\) is the imaginary term).

Due to the presence of several capacitive contributions, two plateaus can be identified in that plot (Fig. 3): according to preliminary analytical estimations the low frequency plateau represents the high resistance of the electrodes/solution interfaces; on the other hand the high frequencies resistance plateau refers to the impedance of the solution interposed the electrodes.

In the same condition of absence of cells a Nyquist plot (Fig. 4) shows the increase of impedance as a function of the sensors geometry.
structures show smaller perturbations caused by the cell, due to the non-negligible contribution of the second sensor channel.

Some effects were not considered in the present simulation such as the contribution of fluid flow inside the microchannel, and the electrical coupling of the system to the silicon platform where the micro-sensor is built on.

6. Conclusions

The problem of designing a cell counter to quantify in real-time the number of cells flowing in an adhesion microchamber with a large flow-section (1.5 mm) is approached by a numerical model built on Comsol platform.

The electrical model for the wires, passivations, electrode/solution interfaces, bulk solution and cell was defined. Simulations of impedance spectroscopy were able to highlight the contribution of the different elements depending on the frequency.

It was possible to verify that a single channel is more performant with respect to a double channel in the detection of a single cell, though the change in impedance in the latter case is not negligible.

It was also possible to identify the most suitable range of frequencies for the cell detection by impedance spectroscopy.

Four different geometries of the vertical electrodes were investigated. The best results were obtained for smallest volume of the fluid between the two facing electrodes, however, this is limited by the height of the chamber employed for cell adhesion tests.

Moreover, in order to find the minimal dimension of the channel, it is necessary to verify that the cell does not undergo any damaging mechanical stress due to the fluid dynamic conditions inside the channel.

8. References
