Electropermeabilization of Isolated Cancer Stem Cells with a Novel and Versatile Nanosecond Pulse Generator

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***Abstract*— This paper presents the use of a novel electroporation generator with an artificial 50 Ω buffer for possible real-time neutralization of cancer stem cells. The results from an initial bench study investigates the development of an electroporation generator capable of delivering non-thermal treatment with an original cuvette housing unit and its effects on isolated cancer stem cell. Initial permeabilization investigation of cancer stem cells were conducted, indicating that the developed protocols and devices have a strong potential future use in achieving electro-manipulation of cancer stem cells.**

Keywords— electroporation, electro-manipulation, pulsed electric field, cancer stem cells, nanosecond pulses, high-voltage.

I. Introduction

As part of European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program, the SUMCASTEC project explores a new approach for real time isolation and neutralization of Cancer Stem Cells (CSCs), as Glioblastoma Multiforme (GBM) and Medulloblastoma (MB) via a novel micro-optofluidic lab-onchip (LOC) platform [1]. An element of the deliverables is to develop an off-chip pulsed electric-field (EF) or Electroporation (EP) or Irreversible Electroporation (IEP) generator [1]. GBM and MB are vicious primary brain tumors, occurring in adults and children respectively. Brain cancer result in more death per person than any other cancer, with round 11,000 people diagnosed with a brain tumor in the UK in 2014, with a median survival rate of ~15 months; 5-year survival rate of ~4% [2].

IEP is relatively novel physical technique of ablation that has been successfully performed intraoperatively, laparoscopically and percutaneously[4]-[8]. The technique uses precisely controlled electric pulsed fields of short duration and highvoltage (HV) to alter a cell's transmembrane potential. This results in permeabilizing the cell's plasma membrane and disturbing intercellular homeostasis. The resultant permeabilization of cell plasma membrane can be reversible or irreversible leading in this case to cell death [3]-[5].

The EF based neutralization of CSCs could be mediated by cell electropermeabilization, but CSCs differentiation in the absence of electroporation seems another interesting possibility. The EP pulse duration and repetition frequency are low enough to ensure that the energy delivery into the biological system is non-thermal. Non-thermal HV EP approach seems a preferred method for neutralizing CSCs. This method allows targeted neutralization without heating the CSCs above body temperature. The non-thermal approach predominantly spares normal extracellular matrix, nearby vessels and structures, while allowing tissue regrowth and preventing unwanted damage to the patient's brain tissue and matrix [3]-[5].

II. Instrumentation

One of SUMCSTEC's technical milestones was to deliver a generator capable of pulse amplitude in excess of 1 kV, with pulse widths of 100 ns. Its modular design is based on a pushpull switching of HV, fast switching MOSFETs that are directly driven by opto-isolators with suitable switching times.

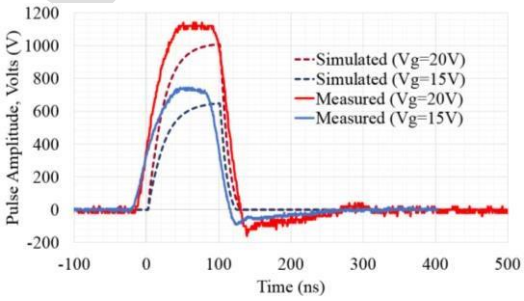

Fig. 1. Measured vs Simulated results on a 50 Ω resistor load.

The ability of the modular design to generate the required pulses is dependent upon the switching times and maximum drain-source voltage of the MOSFET. The MOSFET gate driver must also provide enough current to charge the gatesource and gate-drain capacitance (1). Fig. 1 illustrates that an increase of gate voltage from 15 V to 20 V results in increased pulse amplitude experienced across a load. It also demonstrates that the developed EP generator performance exceeds the LTSpice simulation results across a purely 50 Ω resistor load.

$$i = C\frac{dV}{dt} \tag{1}$$

In addition to producing 1 kV, 100 ns pulses, the EP generator control and programing allow for a wide range of pulse profiles to be generated (Table 1). Fig. 2 indicates that

the pulse amplitude is unaffected throughout its operating repetition frequencies (1-50 Hz). Furthermore, it suggests that the SPG performance is optimized in the pulse width range of 100 ns to 300 ns, for pulse amplitudes in excess of 1 kV.

Table 1. SPG performance characteristics

Parameters	Range	Comment
Frequency	1Hz – 50Hz	Pulse repetition frequency
Pulse Width	80ns- 1000ns	Increments of 10ns (between 80ns-400ns) and 20ns (between 400ns-1us)
Burst	1-1000	Number of pulses generated successively

Exposing the CSCs to HV, 100 ns - 300 ns pulses were delivered via a cuvette housing unit designed by ENEA. This unit allows *Bio-rads* commercially available 0.1cm gap, 100µL EP cuvettes (1mm x 55mm^2), with the CSCs suspended in a specific 50Ω buffer (phosphate buffer saline and distilled water in a suitable dilution [6]), to be exposed to pulsed EF. The housing unit allows an easy connection with the generator (standard N connector) with the possibility of pulse monitoring on an oscilloscope during pulse delivery. An optimized transition between the coaxial connector and the planar electrode of the EP cuvette was realized (Fig. 3). An artificial 50Ω buffer, of 0.3 S/m conductivity, to suspend the CSCs was initially used to optimize impedance matching between the SPG and the CSCs load. The buffer consists of 20 mL of phosphate saline buffer, 80 mL of distilled water and 8.2 g of sucrose [6]. The sucrose counteracts the occurrence of osmosis.

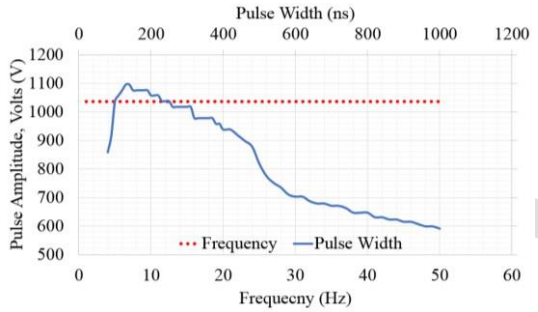

Fig. 2. SPG measured performance characteristic. How the pulse voltage amplitude generated at various operating frequency (at 100 ns pulse width) and pulse width (at 50 Hz)

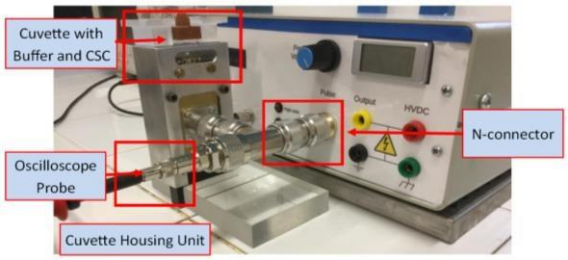

Fig. 3. Cuvette housing unit and SPG experiment set-up

Prior to the CSCs exposure to pulse EF from SPG, YOPRO-1 dye (3 µM) was added to the CSCs solution. If EP of the CSCs was successful, nanometer-sized pores in the cell's membrane would be created. The permeabilization of cells membranes allows the dye to enter the CSCs cytoplasm and bind with nucleic acids (DNA RNA), thus the permeabilized CSCs will become fluorescent. YOPRO-1 emission at 510 nm has been detected using florescence microscopy. The percentage of cell population that becomes florescent indicates the success of EP on the CSCs. The complete protocol for CSCs preparation can be followed here [6].

III. Result and Analysis

The previously mentioned artificial buffer was prepared to represent a 50 Ω load to aid impedance matching between the load and the generator. Fig. 4 suggests that the buffer load is 50 Ω, as the waveform measured with the buffer is comparable to the waveform measured with a 50 Ω resistor. Fig. 4 depicts the 100 ns, 200 ns and 300 ns pulse waveforms that were measured across the EP cuvette containing CSCs suspended with the 50 Ω, 0.3 S/m solution. These waveforms, shown in Fig. 4, illustrate the pulsed EF, per pulse, delivered to the CSCs during the primary permeabilization rate investigation. Table 2 illustrates the selected performance characteristic of SPG (pulse width, frequency, number of pulses) which resulted in various permeabilization rate of the populated CSCs within the sample.

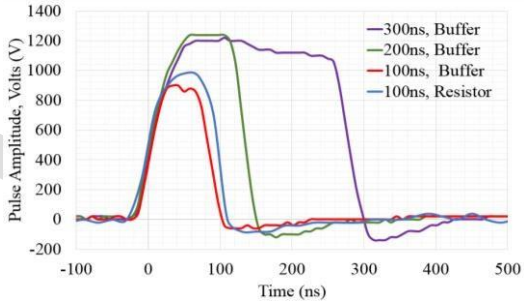

Fig. 4. 100 ns, 50 Hz, 20 burst waveform with 50 Ω resistor as SPG load (blue). And 100 ns (red), 200ns (green) and 300 ns (purple) pulse, 50 Hz, 20 bursts waveform measured with CSCs in the 50 Ω buffer load.

Table 2. CSCs permeabilization rate following EP exposure by SPG

Pulse Width (ns)	E-field Strength (MV/m)	# of Pulses	Frequency (Hz)	Permeabilization Rate (%)
100	~0.9	1	50	0
100	~0.9	5	50	30
100	~0.9	10	50	27
100	~0.9	20	50	35
100	~0.9	20	1	5
200	~1.2	1	50	4
200	~1.2	5	50	74
200	~1.2	10	50	80
200	~1.2	20	50	83
200	~1.2	20	1	73
300	~1.2	1	50	18
300	~1.2	5	50	80
300	~1.2	10	50	81
300	~1.2	20	50	80
300	~1.2	20	1	90
Control	0	0	0	8

Table 2. indicates that exposing CSCs to 200 ns and 300 ns with 5 or more consecutive pulses results in >70% of the CSCs becoming permeabilized (green fluorescence in Fig. 5). Fig. 5. indicates that 90% of the CSCs population is fluorescent and

permeabilized when 20 consecutive 1.2 kV pulses, of 300 ns duration are delivered though the cuvette.

Fig. 5. Bright-field (visible light) superimposed on fluorescence microscope image indicating 90% of CSC population permeabilized at 300 ns, ~1.2 MV/m, 20 pulses, 1Hz.

Table 3. Heating of the CSCs/buffer

PW(ns)	V(kV)	R (Ω)	P(kW)	*f* (HZ)	E (mJ)	ΔT(μ^0C)
100	1.0	50	20.0	1	2.00	4.8
100	1.0	50	20.0	50	100.00	239.2
200	1.2	50	28.8	1	5.76	13.8
200	1.2	50	28.8	50	288.00	689.0
300	1.2	50	28.8	1	8.64	20.7
300	1.2	50	28.8	50	432.00	1033.0

A principle of EP is its non-thermal effect on the living organism. Table 3. demonstrates the heating effect of the EF applied on the CSCs buffer load with various SPG parameters. Equation (2) can be used to calculate the heating effect on the biological load. It highlights that the EP effect was nonthermal, with an increase of 0.1x10-3 ^{0}C (100 μ^0C) the highest increase in the 100 mL load solution [7]. In (2), P is Power (*W*), V is pulse amplitude (*Volts, V*), Z is load resistance (*50 Ω),* P_w is pulse width (*seconds, s*), D is duty cycle (*ratio*), C is heat coefficient (4.*18 J/g/0C as buffer consists mainly of water*), L (*indicating volume*) in milliliters and ΔT is the change in buffer temperature (*degree Celsius, ^{0}C*).

$$\Delta T = \frac{\left(\frac{V^2}{Z}\right).P_w.D}{C.L} \quad (2)$$

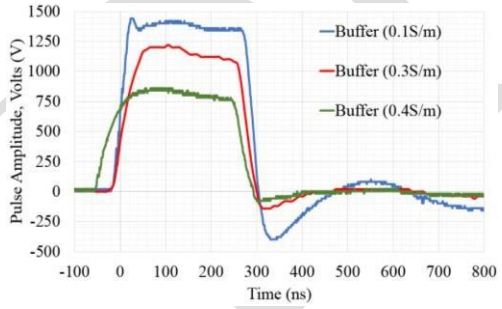

Fig. 6. 300 ns, 50 Hz, 20 burst pulse measured with various buffer solution at load. Solution conductivity of 0.1 S/m, 0.3 S/m and 0.4 S/m are reported.

Following initial investigation that exposed CSCs to EF, other buffer solutions of various conductivities where investigated (0.1 S/m, and 0.4 S/m) with pulse widths of 100 ns, 200 ns and 300 ns. Fig. 6 shows that the SPG performance is insensitive of the load impedance, in the range between 10 Ω (0.4 S/m) to 60 Ω (0.1 S/m), demonstrating broadband matching performance as far as the pulse waveform widths are considered. This effect shows good transition times preservation overall. However, the delivered pulse amplitude does change with the buffer impedance, $V_{amplitud}e \propto R_{Load}$.

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, the overall system developed: the SPG, the cuvette housing unit, and the buffer resulted in successful permeabilization of the CSCs with the possibility of real-time pulse visualization via non-thermal EP. Promising results were obtained in terms of matching strategy and cell permeabilization to YOPRO-1 dye with various pulse durations.

The gathered results do not reflect whether the CSCs are dead or alive after EP. Therefore, it is unknown whether they underwent reversible or irreversible EP. Additionally, it is important to state that this does not mean that the CSCs exposed to 100 ns pulses, which resulted in a lower fluorescence, are not affected even if only poorly permeabilized. Viability studies are required to complement these preliminary experiments in the future. Further work will focus on the assessment of the optimized and suitable EF pulse parameters to maximally sensitize CSCs to standard oncological treatment, such as X-rays used in radiotherapy.

The generator developed early stage evaluation of its instrumentation suggests it is well matched to the application and has low sensitivity to various types of solution filling the cuvette. The low sensitivity and range of programmable pulse regimes in the SPG is advantageous to the user which performs well in comparison to more generic, commercial nanosecond generators such as Schanffer NSG 504 HV pulse generator which is impedance sensitive.

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