Dielectric Analysis of Epithelial Monolayers Grown on Gelatin Balls

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MDCK cells derived from the dog kidney were cultured on gelatin balls (1–2 mm in diameter) to form a monolayer covering the whole surface of each ball. Spherical monolayers thus formed were subjected to dielectric measurements over a frequency range 100 Hz to 10 MHz. The dielectric behavior was found to be sensitive to the monolayer formation and the results are as follows. A dielectric dispersion, not detectable immediately after cell plating, appeared when the entire spherical surface had been covered with a monolayer. The magnitude of dielectric dispersion increased, in the subsequent culture, with an increasing tightness of intercellular junctions in the monolayer, and reached a final value after 1–2 day culture. The dielectric dispersion obtained at the final stage was analyzed based on a single shell model that a conducting core (a gelatin ball in this case) is covered with a thin shell (a monolayer) less able to conduct. The mean value of the monolayer capacity (1.6 μFcm⁻²) is in agreement with that obtained for the monolayers cultured on planar supports.

KEY WORDS: Dielectric dispersion/ Interfacial polarization/ Epithelial monolayer/ Cultured cell/ Monolayer capacity/ MDCK

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have been reported on the dielectric behavior of animal organs at radio and microwave frequency ranges [1, 2]. However, none of these have been successful in estimating the electrical parameters of the constituent cells from the observed dielectric parameters because of morphological complexity. Even simple organs, such as the gall bladder, are made up of three primary tissues, i.e., epithelium, connective tissue and muscle cell layer, each of which further contains different kinds of cells interacting in various manners. It thus seems clear that in order to establish the electrical models for such organs we must have a knowledge of the dielectric properties of isolated primary tissues.

It is, however, difficult to completely separate each primary tissue from an organ by dissection. Our strategy is, therefore, to use cell culture techniques which can construct a simple “tissue” from a homogeneous population of cells. In this paper, we study the dielectric properties of an epithelial cell monolayer cultured on gelatin balls.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cell culture

MDCK cells, derived from the dog kidney, were cultured in Dulbecco’s modified...
Eagle medium (DMEM) supplemented with 5% fetal bovine serum and 100 mg/l kanamycin at 37°C.

Preparation of gelatin balls

Stable gelatin balls 1–2 mm in diameter were prepared by the method described in a previous paper [3]. A tuberculin syringe fitted with a needle with a 90° cut tip was filled with a warm 10% gelatin solution. A careful discharge of the content into air formed a gelatin droplet, which was held in situ for 2–3 min until gelation completed. The droplet was cut off the needle and then transferred into a test tube containing a 2.5% glutaraldehyde solution to reinforce the droplet's mechanical stability. The gelatin balls thus obtained were thoroughly washed with deionized water and stored at 4°C.

Formation of spherical monolayers

The gelatin balls sterilized in 70% ethanol for 1–2 hr were equilibrated with culture medium for 30 min, followed by incubation in a cell suspension (10^5–10^6 cells/ml) for 1 hr at 37°C to allow the cells to settle down on the gelatin surface. These balls were transferred into a siliconized petri dish containing a culture medium and were incubated at 37°C until the monolayer formation was completed.

Dielectric measurements

The dielectric behavior of a single gelatin ball with or without a cell monolayer in suspension was studied with an experimental apparatus described in a previous paper [3]. Briefly, the apparatus (Fig. 1) comprises two flow-through type cells that are interconnected by polyethylene tubing for circulating medium. The specimen was loaded in

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![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 1.** Experimental arrangement for permittivity measurements. Two permittivity cells, one for sample suspension and the other for medium, are interconnected with polyethylene tubing for circulating medium.
Epithelial Monolayer Grown on Gelatin Ball

Fig. 2. Diagram of the permittivity cell used for one-ball suspension. (1) sample cavity, (2) sample, (3) platinized Pt-disc electrodes, (4) lucite spacer, (5) stainless steel tubing, (6) lucite block, (7) conduit for circulation of medium, and (8) connecting leads to the impedance analyzer. The cell is separable into two parts along the dotted line for loading a sample into the cell cavity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Formation of monolayers on gelatin balls

The MDCK cells were cultured on a gelatin ball 1–2 mm in diameter, and the process of the cell-monolayer formation was examined by phase contrast microscopy (see Fig. 3). One hour after cell-plating (stage B), the cells were still spherical and no sign of monolayer formation was observed. After 7–8 hr culture, the ball was covered with the cells leaving no free surface, but the intercellular junctions did not appear to be tight enough at this stage (stage C). After 1–2 day culture, the monolayer was almost confluent and the cell contour became unclear (stage D), indicating a formation of tight junction between cells. The monolayer-covered gelatin ball at this final stage is termed the MDCK/gelatin ball.
Fig. 3. Development of MDCK cell monolayer cultured on a gelatin ball, as revealed by phase-contrast microscopy. A gelatin ball prior to cell-plating (a), 1 hr after cell-plating (b), after 7-8 hr culture (c), and after 5 day culture (d). Scale bars: 0.5 mm for (a); 100 μm for (b)-(d).
Dielectric monitoring of monolayer formation

The dielectric behavior of a cell-plated gelatin ball drastically changed during the development of cell monolayers. Figure 4 shows the dielectric dispersion profiles obtained from a ball at several stages corresponding to those in Fig. 3. No dielectric dispersion, except for electrode polarization, was found at stages A and B (prior to and immediately after cell-plating, respectively). At stage C (after 7-8 hr culture), a dielectric dispersion appeared around 50 kHz. Dispersion magnitude increased in the subsequent cultures and finally reached about $10^5$ dielectric unit at stage D (after 1 day culture).

This result indicates that the dielectric behavior is sensitive to the degree of monolayer formation, i.e., the surface occupancy of the ball by the cells and the tightness of the intercellular junctions.

Volume fraction dependence of dielectric dispersion

We examined volume fraction dependence of the dielectric dispersion to establish an electrical model for the MDCK/gelatin balls (of stage D). Figure 5 shows dielectric dispersion profiles obtained with MDCK/gelatin balls of various sizes, and their complex plane plots are illustrated in Fig. 6. The dielectric parameters, extracted from the

![Graph showing dielectric dispersion profiles and complex plane plots.](image)

**Fig. 4.** Developmental changes of the dielectric dispersion profile of one cell-plated gelatin ball. Curves a–d represent the stages referred in Fig. 3. Broken lines indicate data for medium alone; dotted lines uncorrected; solid line for corrected for electrode polarization.
complex plane plots, changed systematically with increasing volume fraction (or ball volume); i.e., an increase in the limiting permittivity at low frequencies ($\varepsilon_l$) and concomitant decreases in the limiting conductivities at both high and low frequencies ($\kappa_h$ and $\kappa_l$).

In Fig. 7, the ratio of $\kappa_h$ to $\kappa_a$ (the conductivity of medium) is plotted as a function of the volume fraction $\Phi$ obtained by morphometry. An approximately linear relationship was found between $\kappa_h/\kappa_a$ and $\Phi$. This relationship is very similar to that obtained with gelatin balls without cell monolayers (naked gelatin balls). For naked gelatin balls, the conductivity $\kappa$ of the suspension, which is independent of frequency, is expressed as

$$\kappa/\kappa_a = \frac{2(1-\Phi)+(1+2\Phi) \varepsilon/\kappa_a}{(2+\Phi)+(1-\Phi) \kappa/\kappa_a},$$

(1)

where $\varepsilon$ is the conductivity of gelatin balls.

On the other hand, the volume fraction dependence of $\kappa/\kappa_a$ coincided with that of

Fig. 5. Volume fraction dependence of the dielectric dispersion. Volume fractions are (a) 0.10, (b) 0.17, (c) 0.25 and (d) 0.32. Broken line indicates medium alone; dotted lines, uncorrected; solid lines, corrected for electrode polarization.
Fig. 6. Complex permittivity and conductivity plane plots of the data in Fig. 5. The vertical bars indicate characteristic frequencies. Number on each point refers to marker frequency in kHz.

Fig. 7. Plots of $\kappa/\kappa_d$ as a function of volume fraction, for MDCK/gelatin balls (○), and naked gelatin balls (▲). The volume fraction was calculated from the ball volume obtained by morphometry. The solid line was calculated from eq. 1 with $\kappa/\kappa_d=0.66$. 
the $\kappa/\kappa_a$ obtained with non-conducting glass balls (see Fig. 8). In this case the relationship is given by eq. 2 that is derived from eq. 1 for $\kappa/\kappa_a \ll 1$.

$$\frac{\kappa}{\kappa_a} = \frac{2(1-\Phi)}{2+\Phi}. \quad (2)$$

On the basis of these results, the cell monolayer can be regarded as a poorly conducting thin layer, which is short-circuited at high frequencies. Therefore, the single-shell model shown in Fig. 9 is a plausible electrical model for the MDCK/gelatin balls. This model has been used for membrane-bounded spheres, such as spherical bilayer lipid membranes [5], microcapsules [6], and biological cells [7].

**Analysis based on the single-shell model**

In the single-shell model (Fig. 9), the homogeneous shell (of complex permittivity $\varepsilon^*$) of thickness $d$ and the core phase (of $\varepsilon^*$) of radius $R$ correspond to the monolayer and the gelatin ball, respectively. Here, complex permittivities are defined as: $\varepsilon^* = \varepsilon - j\kappa/\omega \varepsilon_r$; $\varepsilon$ is relative permittivity, $\kappa$ is conductivity, $j = -1$, $\omega = 2\pi f$, $f$ is frequen-

![Fig. 9. A dielectric model for the MDCK/gelatin ball. $\varepsilon$, relative permittivity; $\kappa$, conductivity; $R$, inner radius; $d$, shell thickness. Subscripts $a$, $s$, and $i$ denote suspending medium, shell phase (or monolayer) and core phase (gelatin ball), respectively.](image)
Table 1. Phase parameters estimated for MDCK-covered and naked gelatin balls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. Exp.</th>
<th>C_i/µFcm^{-2}</th>
<th>κ_i/κ_a</th>
<th>Φ_i/Φ_n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MDCK/gelatin ball</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.6±0.05</td>
<td>0.68±0.01</td>
<td>0.99±0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naked gelatin ball</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.66±0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are expressed as mean ± S.E. The parameter κ_i/κ_a of naked gelatin balls was calculated from eq. 1. Φ_i is the volume fraction calculated from eq. 12. Φ_n is morphometric volume fraction defined by Φ_n = 4/3πR^3/V, where V is the cavity volume of the measurement cell and R is ball radius.

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Using eqs. 11, 12 and 13, we can calculate $C_i$, $\Phi$ and $\kappa_i$ from the observed dielectric parameters $\varepsilon_i$, $\kappa_i$, and $\kappa_a$.

The results of the calculation are summarized in Table 1. The mean value of the monolayer capacity was $1.6 \mu$Fcm$^{-2}$, being in agreement with that of planar monolayers cultured on a porous support ($1.8 \mu$Fcm$^{-2}$ obtained from ac measurements by Asami et al. [8], $1.4 \mu$Fcm$^{-2}$ from dc transient measurements by Cereijido et al. [9]). The value of $\kappa_a/\kappa_a (= 0.68)$ is consistent with that of naked gelatin balls. The value of $\Phi_\ast$ calculated from eq. 12 is very close to the value of morphometric volume fraction $\Phi_\ast$, which supports the assumptions that $\kappa_a/\kappa_a << 1$ and $\kappa_a/\kappa_i << 1$.

CONCLUSION

The present results with the MDCK/gelatin ball demonstrate that the MDCK monolayer is regarded as a thin layer less able to conduct. This model may be applicable to many epithelial cell layers covering animal organs. Similar dielectric analyses coupled with cell culture techniques are underway at present to establish the electrical models of muscle cell layers and connective tissues.

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REFERENCES