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Vascularized Tissue Engineering: Progress and Promise

Jonathan Reed *

Division of Regenerative Biology, Harbor University of Medical Engineering, Boston, USA

Introduction

The critical challenge of creating functional and viable engineered tissues for regenerative medicine and disease modeling hinges on overcoming the hurdle of establishing robust vascular networks. This area, known as vascularized tissue engineering, is a dynamic field that sees continuous advancements across multiple fronts. A fundamental aspect involves prevascularization strategies, which are designed to ensure the survival and seamless integration of engineered tissues post-implantation [1]. These strategies are diverse, encompassing sophisticated methods like precise angiogenic factor delivery, the utilization of advanced co-culture systems, and the application of cutting-edge microfabrication techniques [1]. The overarching consensus in this area is the undeniable necessity of developing and integrating functional vascular networks directly within tissue constructs well before their intended implantation, a factor paramount for the overall success and efficacy of engineered tissues [1].

Revolutionary strides are being made through the application of microfluidic technologies, which are fundamentally transforming the fabrication processes for complex vascularized tissue constructs [2]. These innovative approaches provide unparalleled precision, enabling meticulous control over intricate vessel architecture, efficient nutrient supply, and effective waste removal [2]. Such precise control is not only crucial for developing highly physiologically relevant in vitro models but also for creating viable implantable tissues that can sustain long-term function [2]. Complementing these microfluidic innovations, the realm of 3D bioprinting offers immense potential for the de novo creation of vascularized tissues for regenerative medicine applications [3]. This technology allows for the direct incorporation of vascular networks into bioprinted constructs, addressing a major bottleneck in tissue engineering [3]. Despite its promise, the field continues to navigate significant hurdles, including achieving higher resolution in printed structures, ensuring scalability for larger tissue constructs, and maintaining long-term patency of the engineered vessels [3].

Furthering the capabilities of bioprinting, the development of optimized bio-ink formulations and strategic bioprinting techniques is paramount for achieving functional vascular networks within engineered tissues [6]. Research in this area focuses on understanding how specific bio-ink properties and precise printing parameters can be tuned to enhance vascularization outcomes [6]. Beyond fabrication methodologies, the selection and engineering of scaffold materials play a pivotal role. Decellularized Extracellular Matrix (dECM) based scaffolds have emerged as highly promising materials [8]. These scaffolds uniquely offer a natural, biologically relevant microenvironment that actively promotes essential cellular processes such as adhesion and proliferation, and critically, stimulates neovascularization within the engineered constructs, leading to more integrated and functional tissues [8]. In parallel, injectable hydrogels are being extensively explored for their versatility in creating vascularized tissue constructs [9]. Various strategies, including the controlled incorporation of growth factors and specific cell types, are being developed to engineer hydrogel systems that can robustly support the formation of complex vascular networks, thus expanding their applications in regenerative medicine [9].

These foundational advancements in materials and fabrication techniques are directly translating into progress across specialized applications. For instance, the development of vascularized organ-on-a-chip systems represents a significant leap forward in creating more physiologically accurate in vitro environments [4]. These sophisticated models, incorporating perfusable microvascular networks, are proving invaluable for advanced drug testing, personalized medicine, and more precise disease modeling, by closely mimicking in vivo physiological conditions [4]. Similarly, in the critical area of cardiac tissue engineering, ongoing research is dedicated to developing functional myocardial tissues for both regeneration and disease modeling [7]. A key focus here is integrating a perfusable vascular system directly within cardiac constructs, which is essential for the long-term viability and function of these highly metabolic tissues [7]. Moreover, intelligent vascularized scaffolds are making substantial contributions to bone tissue engineering [5]. By embedding vascular structures into these scaffolds, researchers are achieving significant improvements in nutrient transport, waste removal, and ultimately, enhancing the integration and regeneration processes of bone tissue [5]. This comprehensive exploration across diverse materials, fabrication methods, and biological cues is collectively driving the field of vascularized tissue engineering towards unprecedented levels of functionality and clinical relevance, continuously pushing the boundaries of what is achievable in tissue repair and replacement [10].

Description

The success of engineered tissues, whether for regenerative medicine or disease modeling, profoundly depends on the integration of functional vascular networks. This area of vascularized tissue engineering is a rapidly evolving field, tackling the complex challenge of nutrient delivery and waste removal to ensure tissue viability [1]. Critical advancements in prevascularization strategies are being made, focusing on methods such as angiogenic factor delivery, co-culture systems, and microfabrication techniques to foster the necessary vascularization before implantation [1]. This proactive approach to creating functional vascular networks within constructs is identified as a fundamental requirement for the successful integration and long-term survival of engineered tissues [1]. Moreover, the overarching field is seeing significant progress in both materials and techniques, highlighting novel biomaterials, sophisticated fabrication methods, and biological cues essential for constructing functional vascular networks within complex tissue architectures [10].

Innovative fabrication technologies are transforming the landscape of vascularized tissue construction. Microfluidic technologies, for instance, offer precise control over vessel architecture, nutrient supply, and waste removal [2]. These capabilities are pivotal for developing physiologically relevant in vitro models and implantable tissues that accurately mimic natural biological environments [2]. Parallel to this, 3D bioprinting presents a powerful avenue for creating vascularized tissues for regenerative medicine [3]. This technique allows for the direct incorporation of vascular networks into bioprinted constructs, addressing limitations faced by traditional tissue engineering methods [3]. However, challenges remain in achieving optimal resolution, scaling up production, and ensuring the long-term patency of bioprinted vessels [3]. The efficacy of bioprinting heavily relies on the appropriate selection and design of bio-ink formulations and the meticulous tuning of bioprinting parameters [6]. Research into these aspects is continuously refining techniques to successfully create intricate vascular networks within engineered tissues [6].

The development of advanced biomaterials is central to supporting vascularization. Decellularized Extracellular Matrix (dECM) scaffolds are proving to be highly effective due to their natural, biologically relevant composition [8]. These scaffolds actively promote cell adhesion, proliferation, and importantly, stimulate neovascularization within engineered constructs, providing a more integrated and functional tissue outcome [8]. Another promising class of materials is injectable hydrogels, which offer versatility in creating vascularized tissue constructs [9]. Strategies employed with hydrogels include the incorporation of growth factors and specific cell types to develop systems that can robustly support vascular network formation, expanding their utility in various regenerative medicine applications [9]. These material innovations are crucial for creating scaffolds that not only provide structural support but also actively participate in directing vascular development.

The integration of vascular networks is crucial across a spectrum of specialized applications. Vascularized organ-on-a-chip systems are advancing in vitro models by providing more physiologically accurate environments for drug testing and disease modeling [4]. These systems depend on perfusable microvascular networks to closely mimic in vivo conditions, thereby enhancing the predictive power of experimental results [4]. Similarly, in cardiac tissue engineering, efforts are focused on developing functional myocardial tissues for regeneration and disease modeling that incorporate perfusable vascular systems within cardiac constructs [7]. The high metabolic demand of cardiac tissue makes robust vascularization an indispensable component for its survival and function [7].

Beyond general applications, intelligent vascularized scaffolds are specifically improving bone tissue engineering outcomes [5]. By integrating vascular structures, these scaffolds significantly enhance crucial processes like nutrient transport and waste removal, which are critical for bone tissue integration and regeneration [5]. This targeted approach demonstrates how vascularization strategies can be tailored to meet the unique physiological demands of different tissue types, ultimately leading to more effective regenerative therapies [5]. The continuous progress in designing these advanced scaffolds underscores the potential for highly specialized and effective tissue engineering solutions across various physiological contexts.

Conclusion

The field of vascularized tissue engineering is rapidly advancing, focusing on developing strategies to integrate functional blood vessel networks into engineered tissues. This is crucial for the survival, integration, and performance of constructs used in regenerative medicine and disease modeling. Key progress involves diverse prevascularization techniques, including the delivery of angiogenic factors, sophisticated co-culture systems, and microfabrication methods, all aimed at creating viable vascular structures before implantation. Innovations in fabrication are highlighted by microfluidic technologies, which enable precise control over vessel architecture, and 3D bioprinting, a powerful tool for incorporating vascular networks, though challenges like resolution and scalability remain. The development of specialized bio-inks and optimized printing strategies is critical for successful bioprinting outcomes. Material science contributes significantly with advanced scaffolds, such as decellularized Extracellular Matrix (dECM) for promoting neovascularization and injectable hydrogels designed to support robust vascular formation through incorporated growth factors and cells.

These advancements are applied across various specialized contexts, including the creation of vascularized organ-on-a-chip systems for accurate drug testing and disease modeling, and the engineering of vascularized cardiac and bone tissues to support regeneration. The collective research emphasizes the integration of novel biomaterials, advanced fabrication methods, and biological cues to overcome the complex challenges of vascularizing engineered tissues, paving the way for more functional and clinically relevant regenerative therapies.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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Address for Correspondence: Jonathan, Reed , Division of Regenerative Biology, Harbor University of Medical Engineering, Boston, USA, E-mail: j.reed@harborbio.edu

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