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- (71) Applicant: **GENCELL BIOSYSTEMS LTD.** [IE/IE];
Ballycummin Avenue, Raheen Business Park, Limerick (IE).
- (72) Inventors: **CURRAN, Kieran**; Lisnalty, Ballyclough, County Limerick (IE). **MCGUIRE, David**; 189 Shingan Milehouse, Enniscorthy, County Wexford (IE). **CHAWKE, Brian**; Milltown, Askeaton, County Limerick (IE). **FLEMING, Paul**; 32 Cois Ghrude, Kilbane, Castleroy, County Limerick (IE). **BARRETT, Brian**; 5 Limeroy Grove, Dualla Road, Cashel, County Tipperary (IE). **SIRR, Noel**; Lisageeragh, Ballymoe, County Galway (IE).
- (74) Agent: **RUSSELL, Hathaway, P.**; Foley Hoag LLP, Seaport West, 155 Seaport Blvd., Boston, MA 02210-2600 (US).

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(54) Title: HANDLING LIQUID SAMPLES

(57) Abstract: Devices, systems and methods for making and handling liquid samples are disclosed.

HANDLING LIQUID SAMPLES

RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application Serial No. 61/730,336 filed 27 November 2012, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Currently the processing of biological samples has a number of key drawbacks. These include the requirement for relatively large volume reaction volumes — resulting in high reagent costs; high consumable costs; and labour-intensive protocols and processes, which are highly susceptible to cross-contamination. For these reasons complete control and isolation of each individual sample within the biochemistry process cannot currently be ensured.

[0003] For a number of biochemistry process applications — cell screening, immunoassays, nucleic/ribonucleic acid sample extractions, nucleic acid isolation/purifications, nucleic acid amplifications, nucleic acid library preparation for sequencing— and not limited to these, the limitations of volume size, chemistry cost, consumable cost, labour cost, and the reaction efficiency are evident.

[0004] In pharmaceutical research and development, compound screening can be used evaluate the effect of target drugs on cell populations. Cells are combined in solution with the target compound-of-interest with the option to include a chemical stimulus to acceleration interaction. Cells are typically exposed to the compound for up to 48hrs and then analysed to test for certain cell protein expressions (eg. Cytokine measurement) and/or profiled for gene expression via RT-PCR. Currently, this type of testing typically takes place in 96/384 well plate types requiring up to 1.5 millilitres of cells in suspension.

[0005] Nucleic acid sample extraction and purification/isolation are steps that are typically required to liberate and isolate genetic material from cellular content (e.g. a blood or tissue sample). This requires cells to be suspended in an excess of buffer to perform lysis that breaks down cell walls to expose nucleic acid. Depending on sample type/origin, nucleic acid may be required to be purified to reduce/eliminate interfering compounds that affect further analysis. Typical approaches to performing nucleic acid purification involve centrifuging through membranes/columns to promote DNA binding followed by re-suspension in suitable buffer for further analysis. Another common method is to introduce magnetic bead suspensions to which nuclei acid may bind. The action of a magnetic field can then be used to immobilize beads while inhibiting content is removed. A suitable buffer is then typically used to re-suspend nucleic acid of interest to yield analysis-ready sample without inhibiting compounds. This process is typically performed in 96-well or 384-well plates requiring tens of microliters of starting sample.

[0006] Library preparation is a process by which genomic nucleic acid is prepared for analysis via next generation sequencing. At present, next-generation platforms use slightly different methodologies such as pyrosequencing, sequencing by synthesis or sequencing by ligation. Most platforms, however, require nucleic acid preparations prior to sequencing. Typical steps include fragmentation (sonication, nebulization or shearing), followed by DNA repair and end polishing (blunt end or A overhang) and, finally, platform-specific adaptor ligation. Even for today's state-of-the-art sequencers a relatively high local concentration of the target molecule is required to sequence accurately. To streamline a particular workflow, automated machinery must overcome the challenges associated with automating and miniaturizing a series of processes aimed at modifying and amplifying nucleic acid content. This biochemistry process is generally performed in 96 or 384 static well plates with typical volumes ranging from 10 microlitres to 200 microlitres.

[0007] Another biochemistry process, pyrosequencing, mixes a relatively high concentration of nucleic acid with primer-coated beads. The nucleic acids attach and form a clonal colony on the beads. This is then amplified using emulsion-based PCR. The sequencing machine contains a large number of picolitre-volume wells that are large enough for a single bead along with the relevant enzymes required for sequencing. Pyrosequencing uses the luciferase enzyme to generate light as read-out, and the sequencing machine takes a picture of the wells for every added nucleotide. One of the key difficulties in this process is the efficient coating of the beads with primers. A percentage of beads using current technologies are not properly coated with primer chemistry, resulting in poorer reaction efficiencies. Using today's technologies to improve the coating efficiencies of the beads would require an unsustainable increase in reagent cost.

[0008] Within nucleic acid ligation similar biochemistry processing issues arise. Nucleic acid ligation has become an important tool in modern molecular biology research for generating recombinant nucleic acid sequences. For example, nucleic acid ligases are used with restriction enzymes to insert nucleic acid fragments, often genes, into plasmids for use in genetic engineering. Nucleic acid ligation is a relatively common technique in molecular biology wherein short strands of DNA may be joined together by the action of an enzyme, ligase, at a specific temperature, commonly 16 – 25°C depending on the protocol used. To join more than two sequences of short DNA strands together, for example, in the construction of a synthetic genetic sequence, it is impossible to combine all the DNA strands and then perform the ligation. This would result in random sequences in which the end of one strand would be joined to the start of an incorrect strand. This incorrect sequence, or orientation, would not be desirable in a synthetically-constructed gene where the order of the genetic code is crucial. To perform the technique correctly pairwise combinations of neighbouring sequences must first be ligated to yield the correct orientation. These paired synthetic constructs may then be ligated in the correct orientation to yield even longer

synthetic constructs. The process involves a large and intricate amount of chemistry processing and manipulation. This can be quite a labour intensive process or if performed using today's liquid handling and results in large consumable costs and suffers from the known dead volume losses of the static well plates and pipette aspirations. Also using today's liquid handling technologies the mixing and control of small volumes is limited by the ability to aspirate and manipulate relatively small volumes. Typical volumes used in nucleic acid ligation are 10 – 200 microlitres with nucleic acid strand lengths between 50 – 200 base pairs.

[0009] Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) has been used extensively to amplify targeted DNA and cDNA for many applications in molecular biology. The PCR technique amplifies a single or a few copies of a piece of DNA, generating thousands to billions of copies of a particular DNA sequence. Modern PCR instruments carry out the PCR process in reaction volumes ranging from 5 – 200 micro-litres. One of the largest obstacles to carrying out PCR in small volumes is the difficulty in manipulating small volumes of the constituent reagents with manual pipettes. The large volume size is a direct result of the poor capability of existing technologies to dispense and mix sub-microlitre volumes. Furthermore, for the next generation microfluidic technologies based on flowing systems, these are still limited by the starting volume dispensed versus the actual amount of sample required for the biochemistry process. These microfluidic systems are also limited during the biochemistry process to a defined protocol control of the samples. These systems typically rely on micro-scale fluid channel networks to transport and mix sub-microlitre volumes. Some of the major drawbacks of these technologies include: (1) the single use or limited use of the microfluidic consumable to prevent contamination; (2) the lack of dynamic control of the each individual sample, that is, the inability to transport and/or mix any individual sample at any point in the biochemistry process; and (3) the closed architecture of the system resulting in instrumentation being incapable of dealing with an occurrence of a bubble degassing from a reaction.

[0010] In particular, current methods of Digital Polymerase Chain Reaction (dPCR) are performed through the division of an initial sample into multiple smaller volumes samples until one DNA template remains in each subvolume. Counting the number of positive subvolumes which contain DNA, the starting copy number in the original volume can be calculated. Typically, this involves multiple serial dilution steps to generate a sample volume with statistically one DNA target per reaction volume. Statistically a subset of the total volume may be tested to determine the initial copy number, allowing for a reduction in the total number of PCR reactions. However, for rare target detection, a larger subset of volumes need to be tested to improve the statistical accuracy. This results in a larger number of blank volumes and a larger test volume – resulting in the use of more chemistry, time, instrumentation, sample handling, and processing steps.

[0011] Another method of dPCR is whereby an emulsion of the test volume is generated in an oil-based carrier. This method is an effort to reduce the number of instruments required and time required for a result. First, the target sample is diluted and emulsified into small enough volumes with a statistical distribution of less than one copy per droplet, within the carrier oil. This larger volume can then be treated as a single sample volume and processed using PCR protocols. However this method is generally limited to end point detection. Further instrumentation is required in the form of a flow cytometer, thereby being able to detect the target presence per droplet flowing past a sensor. Flow cytometers are typically expensive; can require specific fluid mediums and only allow for endpoint detection. The limitations of endpoint detection include the requirement of a post processing step; longer time to result; specificity and requirement for more instrumentation. A further challenge for emulsion based PCR methods is the stability required and control of each droplet. Droplet merging or splitting introduces further statistical errors into the processing.

[0012] Today's pipetting and liquid handling systems are unable to process 100% of the given starting volume for each of the applications discussed above. For pipettes both the liquid storage system – static plastic well plates - and the mechanical actuation within the system prevent complete aspiration of the sample. This loss or dead volume in static plates can be accounted for by the surface wetting characteristics and the geometry, neither of which current technologies can account for.

[0013] In flowing systems the collection of individual biological samples during - or at the end of the biochemistry process - is proving to be very challenging for existing technologies. Typical continuous flowing systems comprise of pumps and reservoirs which generally make the easy retrieval of critical fluids, particularly at the microscale, technically difficult. Also, within flowing systems initial priming of the system is time consuming, costly and if done incorrectly leads to a catastrophic failure of the test requiring a retest of the biological sample.

[0014] Another drawback to existing biochemistry processing is the inability to automate the biochemistry process for nano-litre and sub-nano-litre volumes. The transport, mixing or retrieval of each individual sample cannot be performed by existing automated technologies.

[0015] In more general chemistry processing, such as generic microchemistry, where the manipulation of small amounts of fluid is necessary, one can clearly see the limitations of current technology in the volume of waste fluid remaining in the static well plates or within the system. This is a result of current technology's lack of capability to dispense and control smaller volumes demanded by evermore sophisticated molecular biology techniques, and the call for improved efficiencies.

[0016] Genotyping is a widely used process for determining genetic variation between members of a species. Single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) are a particular type of DNA sequence variation

and the determination of SNPs can give an insight into the cause of a variety of diseases. SNPs are also useful for predicting phenotypic differences. SNP genotyping is a powerful tool in targeting specific subsets of SNPs which have been identified to give relevant phenotypic information. A variety of methods such as PCR and flap endonuclease assays are useful for the high throughput genotyping of SNPs but suffer from the limitations associated with standard liquid handling practices such as large reaction volumes and their associated cost and time required to thermal cycle, the dead volumes inherent with using SBS well plates, and consumable costs through using large amounts of well plates and tips.

[0017] The invention is, therefore, directed towards providing improved sample handling to overcome at least some of the above problems.

SUMMARY

[0018] Devices, systems and methods for making and handling liquid samples are disclosed. In particular, the invention addresses many of the problems described above by, for example, providing automation for library preparation; volume recoverability at each step; reduced sample handling volumes; reduced sample handling processes, i.e., reduced movement between plates for process steps; reduced usage of protocol reagents; a non-disposable, no-contamination platform for processing; a continuous flow of independent processing plates or chip; flexible protocol for each thermal chip or plate, i.e., the ability to independently program the thermal cycling and reagent protocol for different chips; easily scalable chip/plate technology to allow for high throughput; and the potential for a normalization step to standardize the number of nucleotide sequence copies in each sample.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0019] FIG. 1 schematically shows a capillary system.

[0020] FIG. 2 is a photograph of a capillary system including an air sheath.

[0021] FIG. 3 schematically shows one embodiment of a reusable plate.

[0022] FIG. 4 is a photograph of an example of a full system.

[0023] FIG. 5 schematically shows a particular protocol implemented on a full system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Capillary Metering System

[0024] A system for dispensing an aqueous liquid can be based on capillary action. Such a capillary system can include a capillary tube having an inner surface that defines the capillary, or lumen. The tube can also have an outer surface. The outer surface may be generally cylindrical, including the side, top and bottom. The inner surface can include two regions, a distal metering region and a proximal limiting region. The metering region of the inner surface may be

substantially hydrophilic while the limiting region of the inner surface may be substantially hydrophobic. The entire outer surface may also be hydrophobic.

[0025] When an end, herein labelled the distal end, of the capillary tube is brought into contact with an aqueous sample, the sample is drawn by capillary action into the lumen. But the capillary action will only work to the extent that the aqueous sample is contained within a hydrophilic, i.e., wettable, section of the lumen. When enough aqueous sample has been drawn into the lumen that the metering region is entirely filled, capillary action will cease to draw in additional sample liquid, because no further wettable surface is available to the aqueous sample. In this way, the capillary action can be exploited to precisely meter a desired quantity of aqueous liquid. For a lumen of constant cross-sectional area, the volume of liquid drawn in by capillary action will be equal to the length of the metering section times the cross-sectional area of the lumen.

[0026] In some embodiments, the metering region and limiting region can be constructed as follows. A length of capillary tubing can be coated with, or formed entirely from, a hydrophobic polymer, for example a fluorocarbon polymer such as polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE). An etching solution is then passed through the interior lumen of the tube, stripping the PTFE coating of fluorine atoms near the surface of the PTFE. Fluorine atoms are typically stripped down to a depth a few Ångströms by this process. The resulting etched PTFE surface is hydrophilic. The tube is then cleaned and cut to length to form a metering region having a desired internal volume. That internally etched, internally hydrophilic section of tubing is then attached to a section of hydrophobic tubing to form the entire capillary tube. In some embodiments polymers, such as polyimide, can be used to form the capillary tube.

[0027] In some embodiments, the capillary tube is formed of a glass substrate. Glass is naturally hydrophilic, so where the substrate is glass, instead of, for example, a naturally hydrophobic polymer, no surface treatment is necessary to form the metering region. The outer surface and limiting region may be formed by coating the glass with a hydrophobic material, such as the polymers mentioned above.

[0028] One benefit of making the outer surface of the tube, especially the distal end of the tube, hydrophobic is that the aqueous sample will not cling to such material. Thus the hydrophobic outer surface protects the system from contaminating one aqueous liquid sample with droplets from a different aqueous sample. Inserting the distal end of the tube into an aqueous sample will result in liquid drawn into the hydrophilic metering region, but not clinging to the hydrophobic region.

[0029] In addition to a capillary tube, a capillary system can also include a pressure source in fluid communication with the proximal end of the tube. The pressure source can provide positive air pressure, or could use another gas or liquid, but air is preferred. Application of the positive pressure can be used to drive an aqueous sample out of the capillary. The lowest positive air pressure is

found at which the aqueous is completely driven out of the capillary and there after must be accurately and precisely controlled. The positive pressure must be evenly distributed when there are multiple capillaries used in parallel. The shortest time is found for the positive pressure to be applied to the capillary to allow all the aqueous sample to be driven out and the pressure neutralised immediately to prevent air being blown out through the capillary once the aqueous has been driven out of the capillary. The positive pressure and time applied must then be used to carry out sample dispense testing where the sample volume accuracy and precision, sample breakup and disturbance to the CLC are investigated. The positive pressure and time are then adjusted to obtain the optimum sample dispense to CLC within these parameters. The system can also include a capillary controller programmed to apply the positive pressure at a desired time so that the aqueous sample is dispensed at a predetermined location. The location could be, for example, a stabilization site for a composite liquid cell, where an aliquot of encapsulating fluid could be ready to receive the aqueous sample. It should be noted that, while positive pressure can be used to drive the aqueous liquid out of the lumen, no negative pressure is needed to draw the liquid into the lumen because the liquid is drawn in by capillary action.

[0030] In one embodiment following a post aqueous sample dispense a procedure to ensure all remaining sample is removed from the capillary tube and the capillary is washed and dried ready for the next aqueous sample aspirate and dispense cycle. The capillary is moved from the dispense location and lowered into a negative pressure air flow where a high positive pressure is blown through the capillary to ensure complete evacuation of aqueous from the internal cavity of the capillary. The negative air flow captures any remaining aqueous sample being blown out and also dries the outer surfaces of the capillary. The negative air flow is then filtered to contain any contaminants which could otherwise become airborne. Wash solutions are then aspirated by the capillary from a reservoir and dispensed into the negative pressure air flow to ensure decontamination of the capillary.

[0031] FIGS. 1 and 2 show exemplary embodiments of such a system.

[0032] The capillary system can also include an air sheath, which consists of an externally applied air flow to the capillary tube. The externally applied air flow reduces the likelihood that an aqueous sample will attach to any external hydrophilic region.

[0033] The capillary system can also include an actuator to move the capillary tube between locations. The actuator can be controlled by the capillary controller, which can be programmed to cause the actuator to move the tube. A typical program might first move the distal end of the tube into contact with an aqueous sample so as to draw the aqueous sample into the tube, then move the capillary tube so that the distal end is adjacent to a dispensing location such as a stabilizing feature

or an existing composite liquid cell (hereinafter “CLC”), and finally apply sufficient positive pressure to the proximal end of the tube to eject the aqueous sample from the distal end of the tube.

[0034] In one particular embodiment, the internal diameter of the capillary tube is about 200 to 250 μm , preferably 221 or 230 μm , and the outer diameter is about 800 μm . Any volume of aqueous solution can be chosen to be drawn into the system. Particular capillary tubes may be designed to draw in from about 10 nanoliters to about 10000 nanoliters, an in particular about 500 nanoliters.

[0035] In another embodiment, for multiple capillary metering from a single controller - multiple capillary tubes with the inner surface consisting of a single distal metering region are arranged within a cavity, thereby providing a limiting region.

[0036] In another embodiment the pressure controller variably controls the capillary metering volume. The treated tube is cut to a given length and based on the radius of that tube this then gives a set maximum volume. The volume within distal metering region is controlled using air pressure within the assembly. The air pressure is used to dispense however in this embodiment a controlled constant pressure is maintained within the capillary tube – thereby providing a volume control within the hydrophilic distal metering region. This is achieved by balancing the pressure force against the capillary force for a given volume. The fluid will capillary to a height that is matched by pressure force. Change the pressure and the volume is changed. This is all within the total capillary height for a given fluid and tube radius.

[0037] In another embodiment, a capillary metering system can include a plurality of capillary tubes. The proximal ends of all the capillaries can be in fluid communication with a single pressure conduit, and the pressure conduit in fluid communication with the pressure source. In this way, a single pressure source can be used to apply a single positive pressure to simultaneously dispense liquid from all of the plurality of capillary tubes. Similarly, a single pressure source can apply a single positive pressure to balance the capillary force in all of the plurality of capillary tubes.

Reusable CLC Plate

[0038] As explained previously, CLCs are useful environments for carrying out biological sample processing, such as fragmentation and bar-coding, nucleic acid amplification, and detection of target nucleic acids. Such processing, whether carried out in a CLC, or in a well in a disposable tray, typically requires precise thermal control of the sample, as well as the ability to add and remove liquids such as reagents. Whether a disposable tray is used or not, the system must include some mechanism for altering the environment of the sample as the sample progresses through the process. Historically, this has sometimes involved transferring samples from one container to another with the attendant risk of contamination, or moving a closed container from one place to another in order to expose the sample to activities associated with a particular location with the attendant mechanical

complications. Such systems typically use disposable plates to reduce contamination. But disposable plates have drawbacks, for example, every disposable used has a cost to the consumer. A reusable plate that does not introduce contamination problems can address these concerns.

[0039] A device such as a reusable plate can be used in a system for processing a sample contained in a CLC. The plate/device can include a base or vessel portion, sized and shaped to contain a bath of carrier liquid. The carrier liquid may have a free surface on which CLCs may be formed. The vessel can be highly thermally conductive, e.g., composites, ceramics, and metals, in particular, aluminium, so that heat applied to the vessel will be spread evenly through the carrier liquid and into the CLCs. The plate can include a cooling region configured to be operably attached to either a thermoelectric module, a fluidic cooling system or a forced convection cooling system. The plate can also include a heating element in thermal contact with the vessel. The heating element could be, for example, an etched foil heater electrically connected to a controller, the controller being programmed to activate the heating element to generate a desired thermocycle in the CLCs. The plate can also include a tray with stabilization features configured to stabilize a CLC on the free surface of the carrier liquid. In some embodiments, the plate can include an inlet for supplying carrier fluid to the vessel in order to replenish carrier liquid that may have evaporated during use.

[0040] Alternatively, the heating element could be an electrical wire, activated by passing an electrical current through the wire. The wire can be electrically insulated with a material, for example, PTFE, that can also be used to form the stabilization features. In this embodiment, the heating element need not be in direct thermal contact with the vessel; the heat will be more directly transferred to the CLCs through the electrically insulating stabilization features. The stabilization features can be integral with the wire's insulation, and can be formed of the same material. Alternatively, the stabilization features can be attached to the wire, and/or possibly made of a different material than the insulation. Such an embodiment may or may not also include a tray comprising the stabilization features. The heating element can be incorporated into the tray or can be provided as a separate element of the plate.

[0041] CLCs can be formed on such a reusable plate, after which processing of the sample liquid in the CLCs can take place without ever moving the CLC from its location on the plate. In some embodiments, such a plate is moved through a larger sample processing system without ever displacing the CLC or exposing the sample liquid from inside the encapsulating liquid. This has obvious benefits for reducing contamination when compared to any process that allows the sample liquid to be exposed. The encapsulation of the composite liquid cells avoids contact of the sample with the plate, allowing the plate to be reused without fear of contamination and without the cost of replacing the plate after every run. Incorporation of the heating element into the plate allows for

precise control of the temperature in the sample liquid. This particular combination of elements has a wide variety of benefits.

[0042] One example of such a plate is schematically shown in FIG. 3. Other arrangements of the elements are possible as well. In some cases it may be beneficial to locate the heating element as close as possible to the stabilization features where the CLCs are typically located. Since it is the temperature of the samples within the CLCs that should be controlled, locating the heating element as close to the CLCs as possible can reduce energy consumption and increase efficiency, while also reducing evaporation of the carrier liquid.

[0043] The plate can also be arranged to allow direct line of sight inspection of fluorescence emanating from the vicinity of each stabilization feature. Where the processing of the CLCs includes inferring the presence of a target nucleotide sequence based on detection of fluorescence or some other electromagnetic observation or interrogation, it can be useful to maintain a clear line of sight from a detector to each stabilization feature where a CLC may be housed.

[0044] The plate can be configured to allow for through CLC optical interrogation, wherein a line of sight from a detector to a CLC is maintained through the plate. Optical detection methods include but are not limited to fluorescence, absorbance, Raman, interferometry and shadow-graphy.

[0045] The plate can also include a lid sized and shaped to mate with the vessel so as to enclose the CLCs and stabilization features with the plate. The lid may be openable and closeable by an automatic actuator, or may be manually operated. The lid can seal the carrier liquid into the vessel in order to inhibit evaporation of the carrier liquid. The lid can partially seal against the vessel, or it can be substantially airtight, maintaining a pressure seal. The lid can be transparent to any particularly desired wavelength of light, to allow for electromagnetic interrogation of the CLCs. A heating element can be included in the lid.

[0046] The plate can be used to handle samples in CLCs as follows. A carrier liquid bath may be deposited in the vessel to create a free surface for the creation or movement of CLCs. A CLC can then be created on or moved to the free surface and stabilized at a stabilization feature. The CLC can have the previously disclosed form in which a sample liquid is covered by an encapsulating liquid on the free surface of the carrier liquid, the three liquids all being mutually immiscible. The samples within the CLCs can then be processed by heating and/or cooling, i.e., thermocycling, the samples in a predetermined pattern, while possibly adding one or more reagents at a predetermined time or times in order to carry out a particular processing protocol. The plate, and consequently the CLCs, can be heated by activating the heating element or cooled by passing a cooling fluid through a cooling conduit. A cooling conduit can include both inlets and outlets for supplying and returning coolant. The entire process can be done without moving the CLCs from their stabilization features, and without removing sample liquid from any of the CLCs. Alternatively, the sample liquid may be

removed from a CLC, or the entire CLC may be removed from the plate, during the procedure for some kind of off-plate processing. Off-plate processing could include, for example, isolating biomolecules in the sample liquid, for example, by use of magnetic beads. In general, the processing of the CLCs could include, for example, fragmentation and bar-coding, nucleic acid amplification by PCR or other methods, and/or observing electromagnetic radiation from a CLC in the vicinity of a stabilization feature to infer the presence of a target nucleic acid in the CLC's sample liquid.

[0047] As mentioned previously, the plate can be reusable, minimizing costly disposable elements. One method of reusing the plate involves removing the sample liquid and encapsulating liquid from any CLCs on the tray after processing. New CLCs can be formed by introducing new samples and encapsulating liquid on the free surface of the carrier liquid. The whole process can then be repeated with the new CLCs, processing the CLCs in place on their own stabilization features by heating, cooling and adding one or more reagents. The new CLCs need not be processed in the same manner as the first CLCs.

[0048] In another embodiment, the reusable plate is in the form of a PTFE disk containing 1440 CLC stabilizing features. The disk is mounted to a rotary actuator that allows it to rotate in increments of 2 degrees and sits in an aluminium bath containing carrier fluid. The period for each rotation increment can be modified for different incubation times required. The bath has an etched foil heater mounted to the underside of the aluminium. The heater is electrically connected to a controller, the controller being programmed to activate the heating element to generate a desired isothermal condition in the CLCs. Above the PTFE disk is an air layer approximately 10mm thick. This air layer is insulated with a plastic cover over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the disk. The uncovered section is the operation zone where the CLCs are created and fluorescent detection occurs.

[0049] In another embodiment, the CLC stabilizing features in the plate include a region for the purpose of providing a relief path for any expanding air droplets trapped in the CLC. Without these features air droplets trapped at the oil interface may expand during thermal cycling and dispel the CLC out of the stabilizing feature. The air droplets will preferentially move into these relief paths instead of dispelling the CLC.

Integrated CLC Handling System

[0050] A system for making and processing CLCs can include both the previously described capillary system, the reusable plate, and also a CLC forming system like the one described in detail in U.S. utility application Ser. No. 13/147,679, filed August 3, 2011. As described in that earlier application which has been incorporated herein by reference, a CLC-forming system can include a sample-liquid input, an encapsulating-liquid input, a liquid-handling system, and a cell-forming controller operably connected to the liquid-handling system. The cell-forming controller can be

programmed to cause the liquid handling system to (1) draw an encapsulating liquid from the encapsulating-liquid input, (2) discharge the drawn encapsulating liquid (a) onto a free surface of a carrier liquid in the vessel and (b) proximate to the stabilisation feature, the encapsulating liquid being immiscible with the carrier liquid, so that the discharged encapsulating liquid does not mix with the carrier liquid, floats on top of the carrier liquid, and is immobilised by the stabilisation feature, (3) draw a sample liquid from the sample-liquid input, and (4) discharge the drawn sample liquid, the sample liquid being immiscible with the encapsulating liquid and with the carrier liquid, so that the sample liquid does not mix with the encapsulating liquid or with the carrier liquid. In such a system, the capillary system and reusable plate can be located relative to one another so that the actuator is capable of moving the capillary tube to a dispensing location coincident with a stabilization feature. This will allow the capillary tube to dispense, for example, a reagent into an existing CLC, or to deposit sample material at a stabilization feature to create a CLC. Relatedly, the capillary system could simultaneously be the liquid handling system of the CLC-forming system. Likewise, the cell-forming controller and the capillary controller can be a single controller. An example can be seen in FIG. 4.

[0051] Alternatively, instead of the capillary dispensing system, any other metering system could be used instead. As an example, such a metering system could include a dispensing element, an actuator and a controller. The actuator can be configured to move the dispensing element to a desired location. The controller can be programmed to cause (1) the actuator to so move the dispensing element, (2) the dispensing element to draw liquid from a liquid input, and (3) the dispensing element to dispense liquid.

[0052] For example, such a system could be used to prepare DNA libraries for sequencing. Using the Ion Torrent Ampliseq chemistry as an exemplar, the process could proceed as follows:

[0053] (A) 10 96-node CLC chips are arrayed in a linear fashion and transported along a horizontal central axis of the system.

[0054] (B) Along the central axis, addition/removal of reagents, thermal processing and DNA purification are carried out at a number of different stages. In this example, 10 stages are numbered 1-10 in FIG. 5. A stage where thermal processing occurs is denoted with a red background.

[0055] (C) CLC chip 1 is presented to stage 1, on the extreme left of the schematic. Here the chip remains stationary while DNA is transferred from microtitre source plates. Once the DNA has been transferred a reagent dispensing system (RDS) will dispense the primer pool and master mix according to the Ampliseq protocol.

[0056] (D) Once these three addition steps are completed CLC chip 1 will clock on to stage 2. Simultaneously CLC chip 2 is presented to stage 1.

[0057] (E) The stage 1 actions described above are now performed in CLC chip 2. Simultaneously, CLC chip 1 begins thermal process 1.

[0058] (F) Once the operations have completed at stages 1 & 2 the CLC chips clock on to the next station. CLC chip 1 is in stage 3, CLC chip 2 is in stage 2, CLC chip 3 is in stage 1.

[0059] (G) The remaining CLC chips are continually processed through the system where various operations are performed in parallel until all chips have passed through stage 10 on the extreme right of the schematic. At this point 960 unique DNA libraries have been created and pooled in pairs (1 pool = 2 CLC chips = 192 samples).

[0060] (H) The CLC chips are now reset and returned to the starting point of the instrument for the processing of further samples.

[0061] A further example is that of genotyping. In this protocol, the reusable plate is contained in a vessel or bath of carrier liquid. An etched foil heater electrically connected to a controller, the controller being programmed to activate the heating element to generate a desired isothermal condition in the CLCs. The plate containing mechanical stabilising features configured to stabilize a CLC on the free surface of the carrier liquid. The plate is of disk shape and is rotated in increments of 2 degrees. A CLC forming controller dispenses encapsulating liquid onto a free surface of the carrier liquid in the vessel. Following this, 7.5ul of temperature specific chemistry is discharged into the CLC. Finally, 7.5ul of the nucleic acid sample is added. The complete CLC undergoes incubation at the set temperature before undergoing fluorescent detection. Finally the sample is removed and the mechanical stabilisation feature is filled again with a CLC.

[0062] U.S. provisional applications Ser. Nos. 61/344,434, filed July 22, 2010, 61/470,515, filed April 1, 2011, 61/470,520, filed April 1, 2011, and 61/590,499, filed January 25, 2012, and U.S. utility application Ser. No. 13/147,679, filed August 3, 2011, are hereby incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

CLAIMS

We claim:

1. A capillary system comprising:
 - at least one capillary tube having an inner surface and an outer surface, the outer surface including an exterior wall of the capillary tube, a proximal end of the capillary tube and a distal end of the capillary tube, wherein:
 - the outer surface of the capillary tube is substantially hydrophobic; and
 - the inner surface of the capillary tube includes a metering region that is substantially hydrophilic and adjacent to the distal end of the tube;
 - a pressure source in fluid communication with the proximal end of the capillary tube; and
 - a capillary controller operably connected to the pressure source, the capillary controller programmed to cause the pressure source to apply sufficient positive pressure to the proximal end of the capillary tube to drive an aqueous solution out of the distal end of the capillary tube.
2. The capillary system of claim 1 wherein the inner surface of the capillary tube includes a limiting region that is substantially hydrophobic, the limiting region being proximally adjacent to the metering region.
3. The capillary system of claim 2 wherein the metering region comprises a substantially hydrophilic etched fluoropolymer and the limiting region and outer surface both comprise a substantially hydrophobic fluoropolymer.
4. The capillary system of any of claims 1-3 wherein the length and cross-sectional area of the metering region define a predetermined volume.
5. The capillary system of any of claims 1, 2 or 4 wherein the capillary tube comprises a glass substrate.
6. The capillary system of claim 5 wherein the metering region comprises an exposed hydrophilic surface of the glass substrate.
7. The capillary system of claim 2 wherein:
 - the capillary tube comprises a glass substrate;
 - the metering region comprises an exposed hydrophilic surface of the glass substrate; and
 - the limiting region comprises a coated hydrophobic surface of the glass substrate.
8. The capillary system of any of claims 1-7 further comprising an actuator configured to move the capillary tube between locations, the actuator being operably connected to the capillary controller; and wherein the capillary controller is programmed to:

- cause the actuator to move the capillary tube so that the distal end is in contact with an aqueous sample so that the aqueous sample is drawn into the metering region by capillary action;
- cause the actuator to move the capillary tube to a dispensing location; and
- cause the pressure source to apply sufficient positive pressure to the proximal end of the capillary tube to eject the aqueous sample from the distal end of the capillary tube.
9. The capillary system of any of claims 1-8 further wherein the capillary controller is further programmed to apply sufficient positive pressure to the proximal end of the capillary tube to stop capillary action in the metering region by balancing the capillary force with the force of the positive pressure.
10. The capillary system of any of claims 1-9 wherein the volume of the metering region is in the range of about 10 nanoliters to about 10000 nanoliters.
11. The capillary system of any of claims 1-10 further comprising a plurality of capillary tubes and a pressure conduit, wherein:
- each of the plurality of capillary tubes has a distal end;
 - each distal end is in fluid communication with the pressure conduit; and
 - the pressure conduit is in fluid communication with the pressure source so that pressure applied from the pressure source is applied to all of the plurality of capillary tubes.
12. A reusable device comprising:
- a highly thermally conductive vessel sized and shaped to contain a bath of carrier liquid to be in thermal contact with the vessel;
 - a tray comprising at least one stabilization feature configured to stabilize a composite liquid cell on a free surface of the carrier liquid, the tray being affixed to the vessel; and
 - a heating element in thermal contact with the stabilization feature, the heating element being affixed to both the vessel and the tray.
13. The reusable device of claim 12 wherein the vessel is configured to be operably attached to a cooling system.
14. The reusable device of either of claims 12 or 13 wherein the reusable device is configured to allow direct line of sight electromagnetic observation of the vicinity of each stabilization feature.
15. The reusable device of any of claims 12-14 further comprising a lid sized and shaped so that, when mated with the vessel, the lid substantially encloses the tray within the vessel.
16. The reusable device of any of claims 12-15 wherein:
- the heating element is a wire coated with an electrical insulator;

the heating element is activated by passing an electrical current through the insulated wire;
and
the stabilization features are integral with the insulator and formed from the same material
as the insulator.

17. A method of handling a sample using the reusable device of any of claims 12-16, the method comprising:
depositing a bath of carrier liquid in the vessel;
depositing a first composite liquid cell at one of the stabilization features, the first composite liquid cell comprising a first sample liquid and a first encapsulating liquid, the first sample liquid, first encapsulating liquid and carrier liquid all being mutually immiscible; and
processing the first sample liquid by at least:
heating the first sample liquid by activating the heating element; and
adding at least one reagent to the first sample liquid.
18. The method of claim 17 wherein during processing, (a) the first sample liquid is not removed from the first composite liquid cell and (b) the first composite liquid cell is not removed from the stabilization feature.
19. The method of claim 17 wherein processing the first sample liquid includes removing the first sample liquid from the first composite liquid cell.
20. The method of claim 19 wherein processing the first sample liquid includes isolating biomolecules in the removed first sample liquid.
21. The method of any of claims 17-20 wherein the vessel of the reusable device is operably attached to a cooling system, the method further comprising cooling the sample liquid by passing a cooling fluid through the at least one cooling conduit.
22. The method of any of claims 17-21 wherein processing the first sample liquid comprises fragmentation and bar-coding.
23. The method of any of claims 17-21 wherein processing the first sample liquid comprises nucleic acid amplification.
24. The method of any of claims 17-21 wherein processing the first sample liquid comprises inferring the presence of a target nucleic acid in the first sample liquid by electromagnetic observation of the vicinity of each stabilization feature.
25. The method of any of claims 17-24 further comprising:
removing the first sample liquid and first encapsulating liquid after processing the first sample liquid;

- depositing a second composite liquid cell at one of the stabilization features, the second composite liquid cell comprising a second sample liquid and second encapsulating liquid; and
- processing the second sample liquid by at least:
- heating the second sample liquid by activating the heating element; and
 - adding at least one reagent to the second sample liquid.
26. The method of claim 25 wherein during processing of the second sample liquid, (a) the second sample liquid is not removed from the second composite liquid cell and (b) the second composite liquid cell is not removed from the stabilization feature.
27. The method of claim 25 wherein processing the second sample liquid includes removing the second sample liquid from the second composite liquid cell.
28. The method of claim 27 wherein processing the second sample liquid includes isolating biomolecules in the removed second sample liquid.
29. A system comprising:
- a liquid metering system having:
 - a dispensing element;
 - an actuator operably connected to the dispensing element and configured to move the dispensing element to a range of locations;
 - and a metering controller programmed to:
 - instruct the actuator to move the dispensing element;
 - instruct the dispensing element to draw liquid from a liquid input; and
 - instruct the dispensing element to dispense liquid;
 - the reusable device of any of claims 12-16; and
 - a composite-liquid-cell-forming system comprising:
 - a sample-liquid input;
 - an encapsulating-liquid input;
 - a liquid-handling system; and
 - a cell-forming controller operably connected to the liquid-handling system;wherein the cell-forming controller is programmed to cause the liquid-handling system to:
 - (1) draw an encapsulating liquid from the encapsulating-liquid input;
 - (2) discharge the drawn encapsulating liquid (a) onto a free surface of a carrier liquid in the vessel and (b) proximate to the stabilisation feature, the encapsulating liquid being immiscible with the carrier liquid, so that the discharged encapsulating liquid does not mix

with the carrier liquid, floats on top of the carrier liquid, and is immobilised by the stabilisation feature;

- (3) draw a sample liquid from the sample-liquid input; and
- (4) discharge the drawn sample liquid, the sample liquid being immiscible with the encapsulating liquid and with the carrier liquid, so that the sample liquid does not mix with the encapsulating liquid or with the carrier liquid;

wherein the liquid metering system and reusable device are located relative to one another so that the actuator is capable of moving the dispensing element to a dispensing location coincident with a stabilization feature.

30. The system of claim 29 wherein the metering controller and the cell-forming controller are a single controller.
31. The system of either of claims 29 or 30 wherein the liquid meter system is the liquid-handling system of the composite-liquid-cell-forming system.
32. The system of any of claims 29-31 wherein the liquid metering system is the capillary metering system of any of claims 1-7.

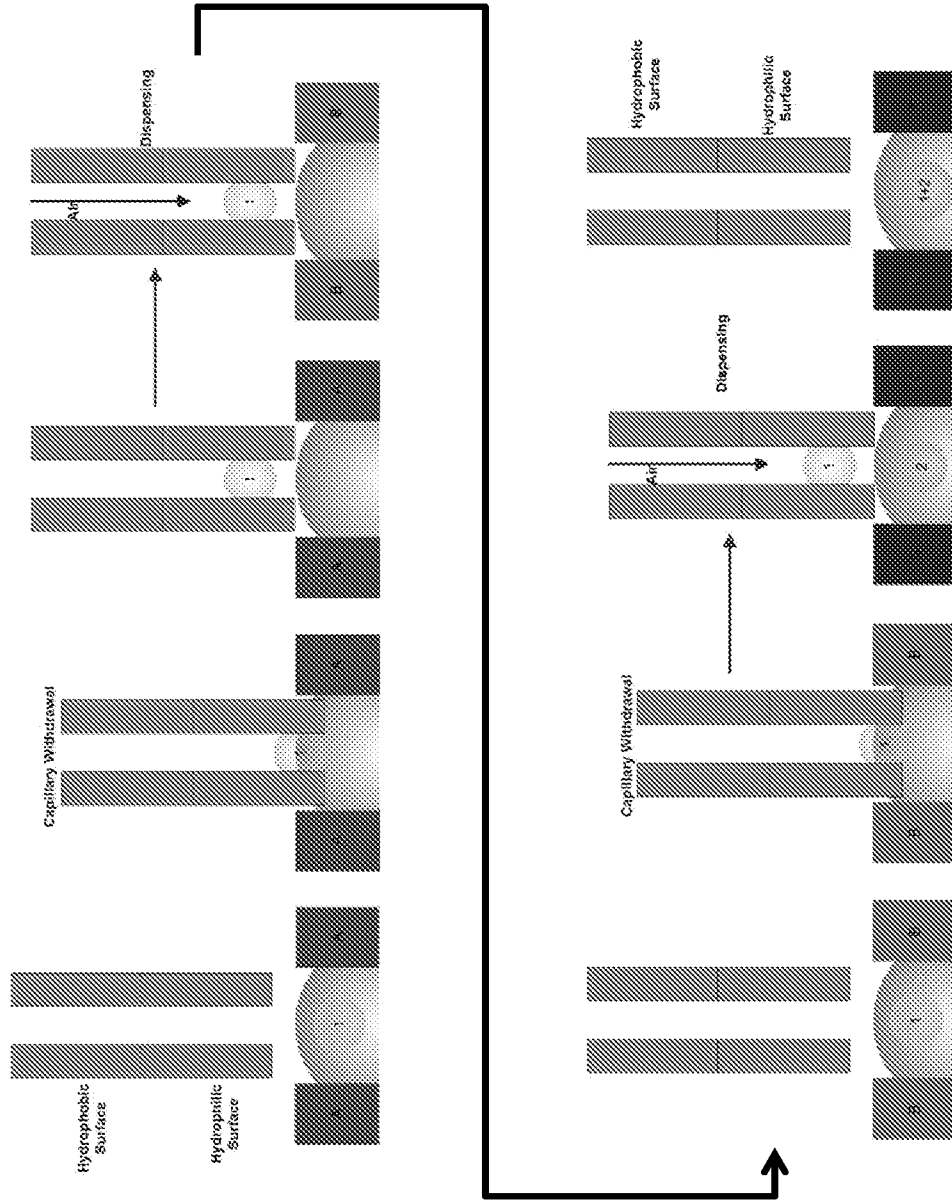


Figure 1

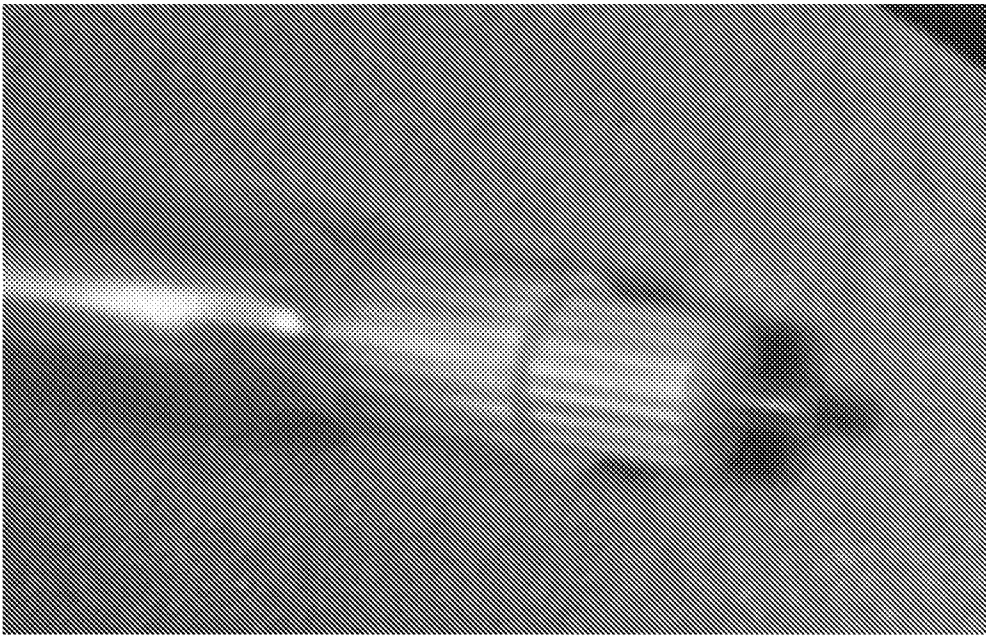


Figure 2

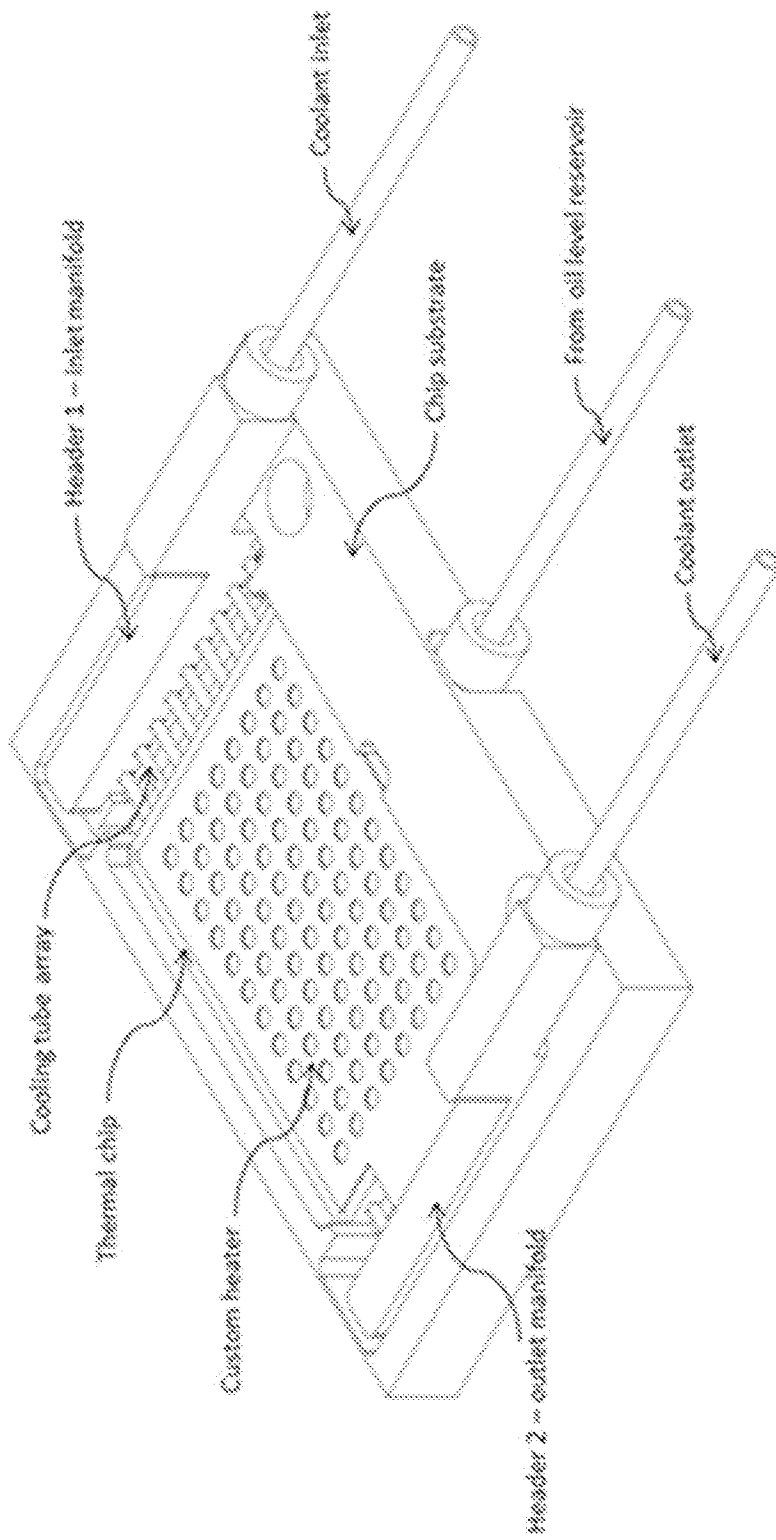


Figure 3

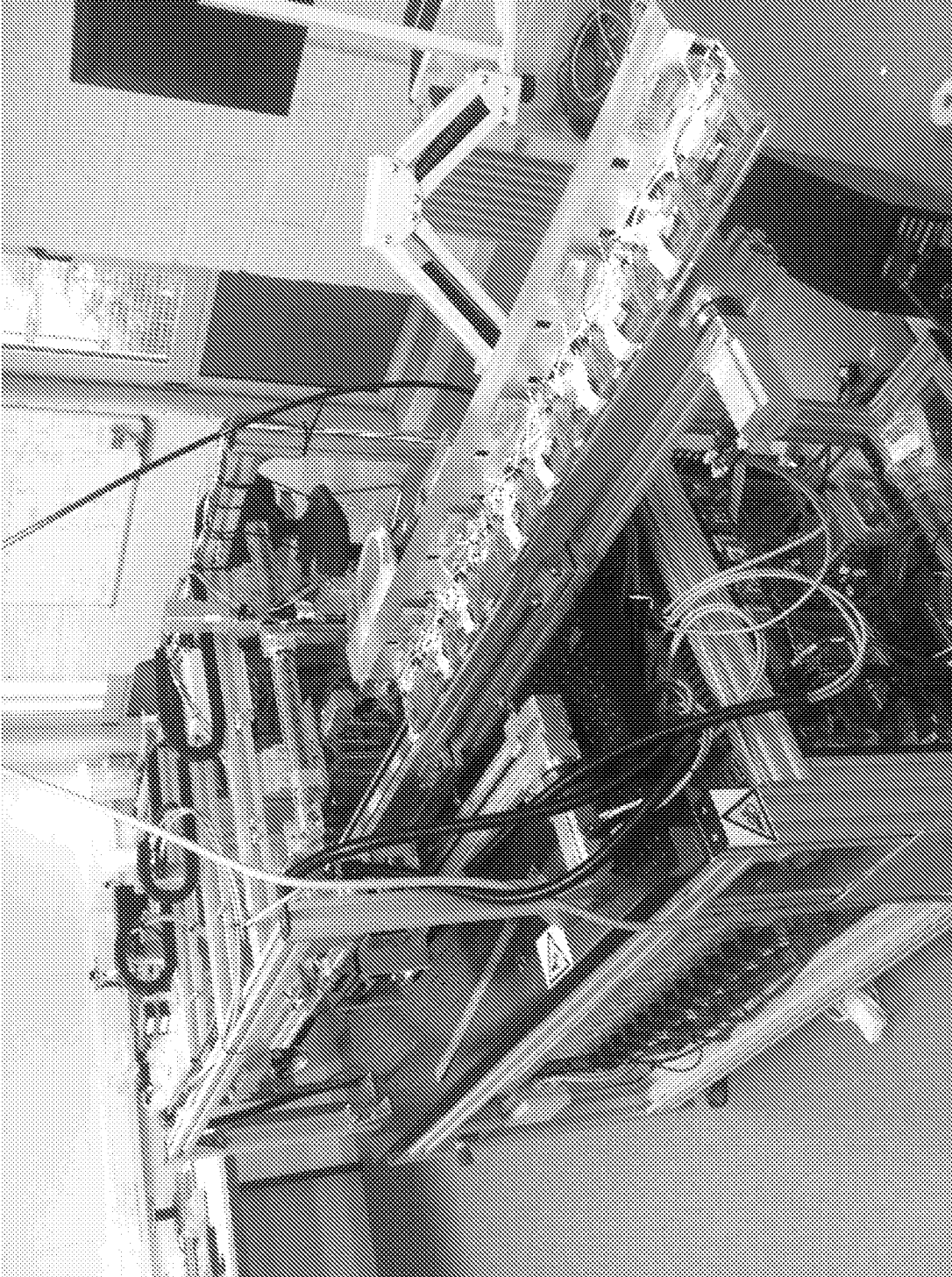


Figure 4

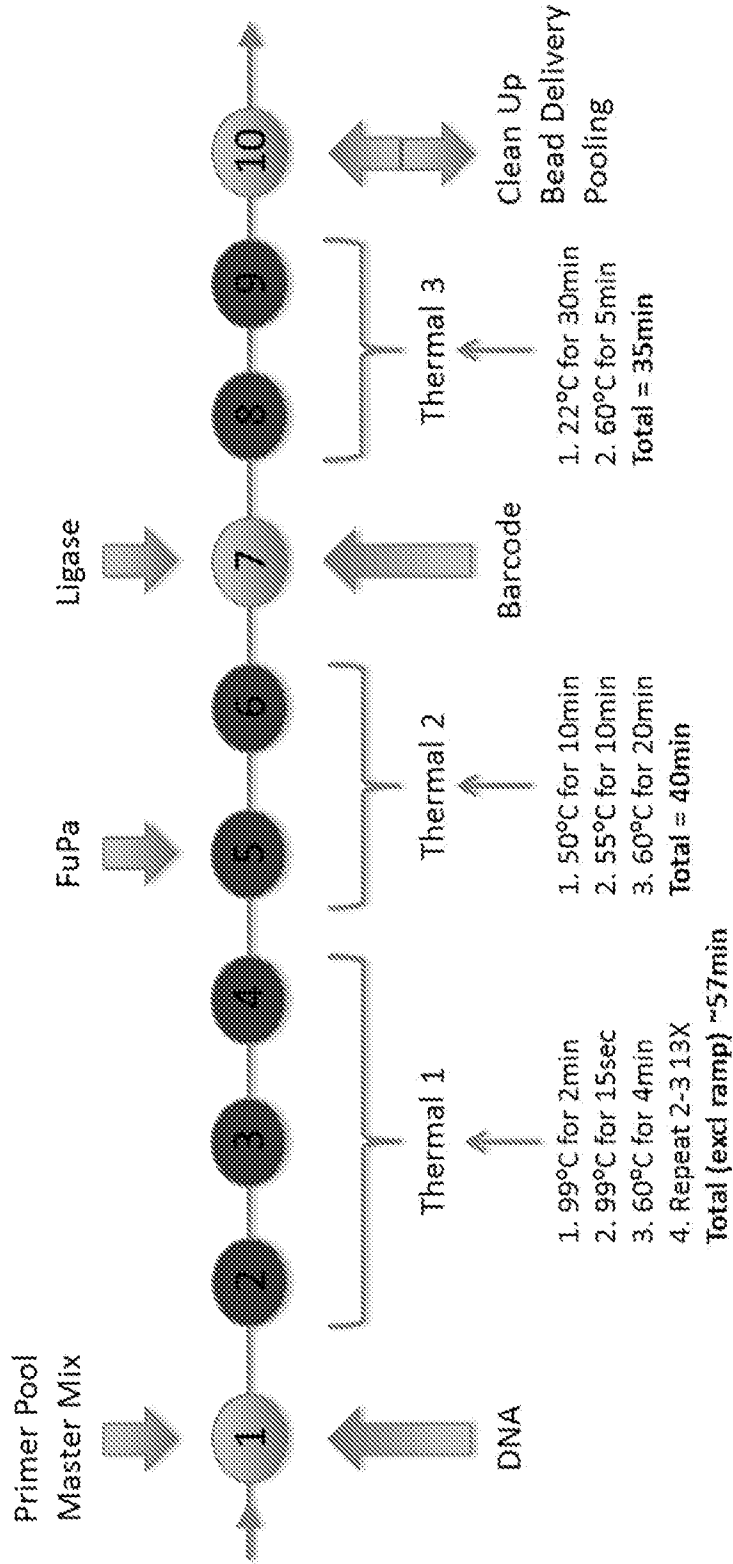


Figure 5