Designing synthetic materials to control stem cell phenotype
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The micro-environment in which stem cells reside regulates their fate, and synthetic materials have recently been designed to emulate these regulatory processes for various medical applications. Ligands inspired by the natural extracellular matrix, cell-cell contacts, and growth factors have been incorporated into synthetic materials with precisely engineered density and presentation. Furthermore, material architecture and mechanical properties are material design parameters that provide a context for receptor-ligand interactions and thereby contribute to fate determination of uncommitted stem cells. Although significant progress has been made in biomaterials development for cellular control, the design of more sophisticated and robust synthetic materials can address future challenges in achieving spatiotemporal control of cellular phenotype and in implementing histocompatible clinical therapies.

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Introduction
Stem cells are defined by their capacities for self-renewal and differentiation into one or more cell lineages [1,2]. Without tight regulation or control of these properties, any derivative cell population, will exhibit a range of heterogeneous phenotypes, yielding artifacts that may complicate the development of cell therapies and pharmaceuticals. Recent work demonstrates that biomaterials (i.e. matrices, scaffolds, culture substrates) can present key regulatory signals that combine with other environmental and genetic influences to create synthetic micro-environments that control stem cell fate (Box 1). It can be argued that many of the promising therapeutic applications of stem cells will require instructive materials that exert active control over stem cell phenotype. Such materials may be designed for stem cell expansion and differentiation ex vivo, tissue regeneration via implantation with stem cells, or implantation alone to direct endogenous stem cell behavior. This review will discuss fundamental material properties that will be required to control stem cell function for any of these applications (Box 2).

Natural versus synthetic materials
Natural niches direct stem cell behavior in vivo to orchestrate the processes of tissue development, homeostasis, and physiological remodeling as well as injury recovery throughout life [3]. Components of native stem cell niches [e.g. extracellular matrix (ECM) proteins such as collagen and laminin, as well as proteoglycans such as heparan sulfate] can be isolated and used to create micro-environments that direct stem cell behavior in vitro, typically in combination with a cocktail of exogenous soluble factors in the culture media [4–6]. Like the in vivo niche, these natural materials engage cell surface receptors as well as provide a physical environment to regulate cell function. However, natural materials suffer from high lot-to-lot variability [7], high contamination potential [7], and xenogeneic protein components that may elicit an immune response upon implantation [8,9].

Synthetic material systems can be specifically designed to interact with cells on different length scales (e.g. molecular, cellular, and macroscopic) and thereby mimic the elements of natural stem cell niches [10–12]. By contrast with their natural counterparts, synthetic materials offer the potential for improved control, repeatability, safety, and scalability.

A broad variety of synthetic materials has been designed and created to direct stem cell phenotype. Natural polymers, typically elements of mammalian ECM or structural components from other organisms (e.g. alginate or chitosan), can be chemically, thermally, or physically processed to alter their chemistry, mechanics, degradation, and biological performance [13,14]. However, these modified materials suffer from many of the same problems of repeatability, safety, and scalability of their natural polymer parents. Synthetic polymers offer a wide
range of controlled chemistries and mechanical properties because of the variety of available monomers and copolymer structures [15**,16 **,17]. Popular synthetic polymer types include polyacrylamides, polyacrylates, polyethers, polyesters, polyhydroxy acids, polyfumarates, and polyphosphazenes. Self-assembling peptides, peptide-amphiphiles, and genetically engineered proteins allow incorporation of specific cell-Engaging motifs into rationally designed chemical biology assemblies [18,19,20]. Inorganic materials have been used to mimic the osteogenic niche [21–23], whereas hybrids and composites combine the aforementioned classes to create unique, application-specific matrices [21,24,25].

Synthetic micro-environment design parameters

Regardless of which class is utilized, materials must be processed and functionalized for specific therapeutic applications. In particular, material properties important for controlling stem cell behavior include ligand identity, presentation, and density, as well as material architecture and mechanical properties (Figure 1). Effectively engineering these design parameters will yield materials that create an architecture that resembles their native environment, have controlled mechanical properties that enable adhesion and the development of contractility in the cellular cytoskeleton, and present ligands that direct intracellular signaling and gene expression (Table 1).

Ligand identity, presentation, and density

Ligands modulate stem cell phenotype in a manner dependent on their identity (i.e. specificity), mode of presentation, and density [20,26,27,28–31]. Self-renewal and differentiation mechanisms have been shown to be sensitive to numerous ligands and combinations of ligands: adhesion ligands from the ECM [26,32,33,35**], ligands presented from neighboring cells [27**], and immobilized growth factors [28,34]. Synthetic peptide ligands are often used in place of large proteins or protein fragments because of their stability and ease of synthesis, isolation, and conjugation to materials [16**,20**,35**]. For example, Gelain et al. used self-assembling amphiphilic peptides to determine the effect of a variety of peptide ligand sequences on mouse adult neural stem cell differentiation.

Once a ligand or set of ligands is selected for a specific biomaterials application, it must be conjugated to the material for proper presentation (e.g. surface immobilization, polymer modification, or creation of ligand macromers); the subject of many investigations with
Design parameters for engineering synthetic stem cell materials. (a) Ligand identity, density, and presentation from the material surface dictate interactions with cell surface receptors to alter cytoskeletal linkages and intracellular signaling pathways. (b) Receptor–ligand interactions are further modulated by material architectures, which provide a two-dimensional (e.g. flat surfaces, microporous solids) or three-dimensional (e.g. nanofibers, hydrogels) micro-environment for cellular engagement. (c) Also, the elastic and viscoelastic properties of the material determine the interplay between cell and material mechanics. Collectively, these parameters define the context for stem cell self-renewal and differentiation in a similar fashion to their native niches. Graphs schematically depict mechanical properties: elastic properties via a stress (σ)–strain (ε) plot and viscoelastic properties via a complex modulus (G*)–frequency (f) plot.

### Table 1: Engineered synthetic stem cell materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Stem cell</th>
<th>Synthetic material</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ligand identity</td>
<td>Mouse adult neural stem cells</td>
<td>RADA16 self-assembling peptide nanofibers</td>
<td>[20]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human mesenchymal stem cells</td>
<td>Polyethylene glycol phosphate hydrogel</td>
<td>[29]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rat esophageal epithelial stem cells</td>
<td>Polyhydroxyethyl methacrylate hydrogel</td>
<td>[27]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human embryonic stem cells</td>
<td>Polycellulose acetate microfibers</td>
<td>[28]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ligand density</td>
<td>Rat mesenchymal stem cells</td>
<td>Oligo polyethylene glycol fumarate hydrogel</td>
<td>[26]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rat adult neural stem cells</td>
<td>Polyacrylamide-co-polyethylene glycol/ acrylic acid hydrogel</td>
<td>[35]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material architecture</td>
<td>Mouse embryonic stem cells</td>
<td>RADA16 self-assembling peptide nanofibers</td>
<td>[48]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human embryonic stem cells</td>
<td>Polydimethylsioxane microwells</td>
<td>[47]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and mouse embryonic fibroblasts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rat mesenchymal stem cells</td>
<td>Peptide-amphiphile nanofibers</td>
<td>[48]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rat preadipocytes</td>
<td>Polyethylene glycol hydrogel</td>
<td>[44]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mouse mesenchymal stem cells</td>
<td>Polyamide electrospun nanofibers</td>
<td>[45]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Material mechanics</td>
<td>Human mesenchymal stem cells</td>
<td>Polyacrylamide hydrogel</td>
<td>[52]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human embryonic stem cells</td>
<td>Poly N-isopropylacrylamide-co-acrylic acid/polyacrylic acid hydrogel</td>
<td>[16]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
non-stem-cell types [36,37]. Peptide and protein ligands are typically conjugated to materials or material building blocks via primary amines (the amino terminus of lysines) or sulfhydryl groups (cysteines). In addition, spacer arm length and chemistry can in general be tuned to alter ligand availability and activity. Furthermore, the secondary and tertiary structures of native macromolecules frequently present ligands in a specific spatial conformation that promotes binding to receptors, and it is thus desirable to mimic such conformations in synthetic materials by using cyclic peptides or other ligand structures [37]. Recent work has shown that the density of the selected ligand strongly influences the downstream stem cell response [26,33,35]. For example, Saha et al. demonstrated the effect of peptide and mixed peptide densities on neural stem cells using modular biomimetic interpenetrating network (IPN) hydrogels. IPNs presenting >5.3 pmol/cm² of an integrin-binding RGD-containing peptide sequence from bone sialoprotein supported both self-renewal and differentiation similar to laminin, whereas an IKVAV-containing peptide from laminin did not support attachment or influence differentiation.

Material architecture
The manner in which a material is organized and structured on the microscale and nanoscale, or ‘material architecture,’ is known to modulate cell signaling and organization. At the cellular scale, ligand engagement, molecular diffusion, and force transmission are dictated by the geometry of the cellular interface with the material, the neighboring cells, and the surrounding aqueous micro-environment [38,39]. In addition, at larger scales (>10 μm), material architecture determines bulk mechanical properties, possible cell seeding methods, cell migration, and nutrient and waste exchange.

Both two-dimensional (2D) and three-dimensional (3D) material architectures have been used for stem cell culture. In traditional 2D culture systems, signaling and diffusion are inherently asymmetric. Still, such culturing platforms can effectively present ligands to stem cells [4,34,35,40]. For example, recent work used microwell architectures to grow and contain small clusters of stem cells, which were found to be less prone to differentiation [47]. Other work suggests that material architecture can be designed to operate in conjunction with biological ligands to determine their ultimate effect on stem cell phenotype [48,49]. Garreta et al. used mouse embryonic stem cell engagement with a 3D nanofibrous architecture to alter cell surface receptor and cytoskeletal spatial arrangement and, in turn, ligand signaling. In addition, techniques that can spatially pattern ligands have recently been applied to create ‘niches’ with regiospecific chemistry for stem cell adhesion and engagement, in both 2D [40] and 3D [50]. The former study organized cellular adhesion at the 1–100 μm² length scale and thereby demonstrated that cell spreading regulates mesenchymal stem cell differentiation.

Material mechanical properties
The mechanics of a material, determined primarily by its composition, water content, and structure, affect intermolecular and intramolecular forces and stress distributions. Common methods of altering the mechanical properties of biomaterials include modulating molecular composition and connectivity, thermal processing, and creating reinforced and porous composites. Previous studies using differentiated cell types have demonstrated that the mechanical properties of a material affect cell behaviors such as proliferation and migration. In particular, adhesion ligands, which bind to integrins and other cell surface receptors, serve as mechanical transducers between the external material and the internal cytoskeleton of the cell, allowing cells to sense and respond to the stiffness of their substrates. Tensile homeostasis with the micro-environment thereby induces cellular cytoskeletal organization [51] and contraction [49] and alters gene regulatory pathways [51,52].

Recent work with human stem cells indicates that the elastic modulus of a culture material can alter or maintain stem cell phenotype [16,52]. Engler et al. suggest that contractile forces in the cytoskeleton must be developed by actin–myosin molecular motor action for phenotypic differentiation. They further indicate that human mesenchymal stem cells differentiate into cells of the tissue type that matches the stiffness of the environment in which they are cultured. In the work on human embryonic stem cells, Li et al. propose that the soft mechanical properties of their hydrogels establish a cellular context to promote stem cell self-renewal.

A less considered aspect of cell material mechanics is viscoelasticity. Natural tissues and cells themselves are viscoelastic [53], and cells may probe their environments...
at several physiologically relevant frequencies [54]. Further work is needed to characterize the effect of material mechanics, in particular substrate viscoelasticity, on stem cell self-renewal and differentiation mechanisms.

Conclusions and future directions

Stem cells respond with exquisite sensitivity to cell-extrinsic signals, many of which can be engineered into synthetic materials. Emerging work in this field indicates that five key design parameters influence stem cell behavior in a biomaterial: ligand identity, presentation, and density, material architecture, and material mechanical properties. Together, these material properties coordinate the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic determinants of stem cell fate to produce a desired phenotype.

However, progress is still required to improve the static and dynamic properties of materials. Materials’ design will benefit from new methods to independently tune the parameters of multifunctional scaffolds and matrices. In addition, 3D in vitro culture will likely be used to further mimic and study in vivo physiological phenomena. Spatial patterning of 3D materials [50] and cells [55] will facilitate such studies. Because signaling dynamics affect phenotype commitment of stem cells [1,2], further control over the spatiotemporal properties of materials will be required. Controlled release methods with programmed material degradation, to engineer ligand release kinetics for example, are beginning to be used in conjunction with stem cells [29]. Cellular architecture and matrix infiltration can also be dynamically controlled by enzymatic material degradation [16**,44,56–58].

Even with significant progress in these directions, particular challenges exist when applying these materials to practical stem cell applications. In regenerative medicine applications, materials will need to be designed to modulate or elude the immune response in vivo beyond the current passive nonfouling approaches, as well as direct stem cells to do the same. Finally, even low frequency culturing artifacts from genetic and epigenetic instability or material fluctuations could be amplified in scaling from bench-top to industrial culture systems. Massively produced culture substrates and micro-environments will need to be uniform and could be engineered to select for cells with proper genomes and epigenetic patterning. Overcoming these challenges in the large-scale production of cell substrates and culture systems will be required before the clinical potential of stem cells can be realized.

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References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the two-year period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest


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This article reports the use of self-assembling peptide-amphiphiles that present the laminin-derived IKVAV peptide epitope at high density; the synthetic material in both two-dimension and three-dimension encouraged rapid differentiation of precommitted neural progenitor cells into neurons.


This article reports the use of self-assembling amphiphilic peptides to determine the effect of various peptide ligand sequences on mouse adult neural stem cells differentiation and demonstrates that bone-homing peptides promoted differentiation without additional growth or neurotrophic factors.


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