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System and method for determining a force applied to or generated by a cell or tissue culture

Abstract

Technologies and implementations for a system and method for determining a force applied to a cell or tissue culture is disclosed. The system and method may include an elastic element mounted in or suitable for mounting in a culture chamber. The elastic element may be adapted to be coupled with the cell or the tissue culture such that a force applied to the cell or the tissue culture leads to a deflection of the elastic element against a restoring force. A magnetic field sensor may be mounted outside said culture chamber. The magnetic field sensor may be adapted to detect a change of magnetic field attributable to a corresponding movement of a magnetic element upon deflection.

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Background/Summary

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

(1) The present invention is in the field of biomedical technology. In particular, the present invention relates to the measurement of a force applied to or generated by a cell or tissue culture arranged in a culture chamber of a bioreactor.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

(2) Living cells are capable of sensing forces and strains, allowing them to adapt to their natural environment. When cultivating cells or tissue in a cell culture, it is therefore desirable to apply similar forces to the cells or tissue, such that the cultivated cells or tissue will acquire their natural functionality.

(3) An important example of cell or tissue cultivation is the engineering of bioartificial cardiac tissue, which can be transplanted as an artificial patch to a patient, or which could be used in the examination of the effects of drugs on cardiac tissue. It has been found that by simulating natural mechanical stretch and strain, in combination with stimulated contraction, the cultivated cells or tissue can acquire the natural function and a similar behavior as in a living organism. For this purpose incubation chambers have been proposed for stimulating the natural cell mechanics, as for example described in Govoni, M, Muscari, C., Guarnieri, C., Giodano, E., 2013.

Mechanostimulation protocols for cardiac Tissue engineering. BioMed Res. Int., ID918640 and in

Rangarajan, S., Madden, L. & Bursac, N., 2014, *Use of flow, electrical, and mechanical stimulation to promote engineering of striated muscles*. *Annals of Biomedical Engineering*, 42(7), pp. 1391-1405 and US 2006/105357 A1.

(4) Properly stimulating the cell mechanics, however, requires an appropriate control of the forces applied to the cell or tissue culture, which in turn requires a measurement of the forces applied. In addition, in many instances it will be advantageous or even necessary to measure the force generated or produced by the tissue itself, such as cardiac tissue, upon electrical stimulation thereof. For measuring these forces, conventional force sensors, load cells or the like can in principle be used. However, the cultivation of the cells or tissue requires a humid, sterile and biocompatible environment, under which conventional force sensors or load cells are usually not operable. In particular, the electronics of such force sensors or load cells are usually incompatible with the humid or wet environment inside the culture chambers.

(5) For this reason, in Kensah, G. et al., 2011, *A novel miniaturized multimodal bioreactor for continuous in situ assessment of bioartificial cardiac tissue during stimulation and maturation*. *Tissue Engineering. Part C, Methods*, 17(4), pp. 463-473, in Lu, L. et al., 2013. *Design and validation of a bioreactor for simulating the cardiac niche: a system incorporating cyclic stretch, electrical stimulation, and constant perfusion*. *Tissue Engineering. Part A*, 19(3-4), pp. 403-414 and in US 2003/091,979 A1, it has been proposed to arrange the force sensors outside the culture chamber, and to mechanically transfer the force to the outside of the culture chamber using levers or rods. However, this adds to the complexity of the system, is prone to generate measurement errors and makes it more difficult to ensure sterile environments inside the culture chamber.

(6) In view of these difficulties, in some applications the direct measurement of the applied forces has been dispensed with completely, and has been replaced by an analysis of the deformation of the tissue, for example by optically monitoring the tissue and employing a suitable image analysis, as for example described in Mathur, A. et al., 2015, *Human iPSC-based cardiac microphysiological system for drug screening applications*. *Scientific Reports*, 5, p. 8883. However, this indirect assessment of the force is not truly equivalent to a direct measurement of the force, because the morphology of the tissue and hence its elasticity changes over time, so that any assumed relationship between the deformation of the tissue and the underlying force changes with time but can hardly be accounted for.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

(7) The problem underlying the invention is to provide a means and a method for determining a force applied to or generated by a cell or tissue culture arranged in a culture chamber that provides for a simple and cheap construction and at the same time allows for precise force measurement results. This problem is solved by a system according to claim 1 and a method according to claim 23.

(8) The system of the invention comprises an elastic element mounted in or suitable for mounting in said culture chamber. The elastic element is adapted to be coupled with the cell or tissue culture such that a force applied to or generated by said cell or tissue culture leads to a deflection of said elastic element against a restoring force thereof. Herein, the term “deflection” is understood to have a broad meaning and covers any deformation of the elastic element from a rest configuration, and includes for example an elongation as known from a spring and a bending known from a rod or beam. The elastic element comprises a magnetic element arranged such as to be moved upon deflection of said elastic element. It is also possible that the elastic element itself is a magnetic object, in which case the elastic element itself forms the magnetic element of the invention, which is likewise moved upon deflection of the elastic element. When in the following reference is made to the magnetic element, it shall be understood without further mention that this magnetic element could in some embodiments be the same as the elastic element.

(9) In addition, the system of the invention comprises a magnetic field sensor which is separated from said elastic element by a separating wall, or by a space for providing a separating wall in

between. Said magnetic field sensor is adapted to detect a change of magnetic field attributable to a corresponding movement of said magnet element upon deflection of said elastic element.

(10) According to the invention, forces are hence measured with a two-part arrangement, comprising said elastic element and said magnetic field sensor, wherein the elastic element and the magnetic field sensor are devoid of direct mechanical coupling. This allows for separating the elastic element and the magnetic field sensor by a space sufficient for accommodating a separating wall in between. In particular, this construction allows for an arrangement where said elastic element is exposed to the environment inside said culture chamber and said magnetic field sensor is separated from the environment inside said culture chamber. The rationale behind this is that exposing the elastic element to the wet environment inside the culture chamber is of little concern, because elastic elements of various embodiments of the invention can easily withstand such conditions. Note in this regard that the cell or tissue culture will typically be immersed in a nutrition solution or the like, and that the elastic element will hence be exposed to either the vapor of such solution or to the solution itself. The magnetic field sensor, on the other hand, is an electric component which typically needs to be protected from the nutrition solution or from the humid atmosphere associated therewith. According to the construction of the invention, this can be readily achieved because the magnetic field sensor is sufficiently separated from the elastic element such that a separating wall may be provided in between.

(11) Herein, the “separating wall” can be any type of wall casing, encapsulation, coating or the like which is suitable for separating the magnetic field sensor from the atmosphere within the culture chamber. In a particularly preferred embodiment, however, said magnetic field sensor is mounted or suitable for mounting outside said culture chamber. In this case, the aforementioned “separating wall” may be formed by a wall of the culture chamber.

(12) Note that the system of the invention may or may not include the culture chamber itself. In other words, in some embodiments the system is formed by a culture chamber with the elastic element mounted on the inside and the magnetic field sensor mounted on the outside. However, in other embodiments, the system may only include the elastic element and the magnetic field sensor and could be combined with a culture chamber obtainable from different sources. Note further that in the present disclosure, the term “outside the culture chamber” shall have a broad meaning and shall cover any instance where the magnetic field sensor is separated from the environment to which the cell or tissue culture is exposed by a separator wall of the culture chamber.

(13) As explained above, according to preferred embodiments of the invention, only the elastic element is exposed to the environment within the culture chamber, and hence, only the elastic element needs to be biocompatible, sterile and capable of withstanding the wet environment within the culture chamber, while the magnetic field sensor may be separated from this environment and hence does not need to meet these requirements. As the inventor has confirmed, even with the magnetic field sensor and the magnetic element on the elastic element being arranged on different sides of the separator wall of the culture chamber, the amount of deflection of the elastic element can be quantitatively assessed with high precision using the magnetic element and the magnetic field sensor, and in this way, the force applied to or generated by the cell or tissue culture can be assessed to high precision with very simple means. In particular, contrary to the prior art discussed above, a direct measurement of the force can be carried out without the need to transfer any mechanical forces from inside the culture chamber to the outside, and without the need to provide any electrical load cell or the like inside the culture chamber.

(14) In a preferred embodiment, said magnetic field sensor is suitable for measuring a magnetic field component in a direction perpendicular to the direction of motion of said magnetic element upon said deflection of said elastic element. As will be demonstrated with reference to a specific embodiment below, this allows for a magnetic field strength or magnetic flux density that is nearly proportional to the deflection over a certain range of deflections, which allows for a simple and precise assessment of the degree of deflection based on the measured magnetic field strength. In

addition or alternatively, the magnetic field sensor may be suitable for measuring a magnetic field component in a direction parallel to the direction of motion of said magnetic element upon said deflection of said elastic element.

(15) Preferably, said magnetic field sensor is suitable for measuring at least two, preferably at least three linearly independent magnetic field components. By accounting for two or even three linearly independent magnetic field components, the actual deflection can be reconstructed from the measurement of the magnetic field sensor to even higher precision, and also over a larger range of deflections.

(16) In a preferred embodiment, the system further comprises a logic element suitable for translating a measurement result of said magnetic field sensor into a parameter representing the deflection of said elastic element and/or a force applied to or generated by said cell or tissue culture. Herein, said measurement result to be translated by said logic element preferably represents at least two linearly independent magnetic field components. For example, the measurement result could be a set of magnetic field strength values corresponding to said at least two linearly independent magnetic field components. Alternatively, the measurement result could be a predetermined mathematical combination of such field strength values, as long as it depends on these two linearly independent magnetic field components.

(17) Said logic element may comprise one or both of an integrated circuit, in particular an FPGA or an ASIC, and a micro processor.

(18) In a preferred embodiment, said elastic element comprises a rod or beam, and said deflection amounts to a bending of said rod or beam. In the present disclosure, the expression “comprises a rod or beam” shall also include the special case where the elastic element consists of said rod or beam. Employing a rod or beam as the elastic element for the purposes of the invention has a number of special technical advantages. One advantage is that due to its elongate shape, it allows for coupling with the cell or tissue culture close to the center of the culture chamber, but at the same time for arranging the magnetic element close to the wall of the culture chamber, thereby allowing the magnetic element to be arranged close to the magnetic field sensor disposed outside this culture chamber wall. A further advantage is that a rod or beam can be easily produced from inert, biocompatible materials, and that its manufacture is comparatively cheap, so that it can e.g. be provided as a disposable product at favorable costs.

(19) Preferably, said rod or beam has a fixed end mounted or adapted for mounting on said culture chamber, and a free end opposite to said fixed end, wherein said magnetic element is arranged closer to the free end than to the fixed end, and in particular within less than 20%, preferably within less than 10% of the length of said rod or beam from said free end. This way, even moderate deflections due to comparatively small forces applied to or generated by the cell or tissue culture will lead to a fairly large movement of the magnetic element, which can be measured with good relative precision.

(20) In a preferred embodiment, said rod or beam is made from stainless steel, and in particular from surgical stainless steel, and preferably from austenitic 316 stainless steel, martensitic 440 or 420 steel, from biocompatible metals such as tungsten or titanium, or from carbon fiber-reinforced or solid plastic material.

(21) Preferably, the system comprises a set of elastic elements with different spring constants to choose from, or an elastic element with an adjustable spring constant. This way, by choosing an elastic element of appropriate spring constant, or by adjusting the spring constant, it can be ensured that for different ranges of forces to be applied or to be generated, the deflection will still be in a certain range for which the detection of the deflection by means of the magnet element and the magnetic field sensor operates with high precision. Also, by choosing an elastic element from a set of elastic elements with different spring constants, various physiological conditions can be mimicked. For example, choosing an elastic element with a comparatively high spring constant for conditioning of cardiovascular tissue could mimic a situation similar to that encountered by cardiac

tissue in the real environment when the person suffers from high blood pressure or situations where the person is exercising. Conversely, an elastic element with a lower spring constant could resemble a situation where the patient is at rest. Note in this regard that the expression “spring constant” shall generally reflect a ratio of the applied force and the deflection caused thereby, but shall not imply that this “spring constant” is necessarily a constant in the sense that this ratio is independent of the degree of deflection. Instead, the term “spring constant” shall also cover cases where this ratio is determined by a characteristic force-deflection-curve.

(22) Please note that in prior art setups, forces generated by a cell or tissue culture are typically measured under “isometric conditions”, that is without a significant change in length. This may appear attractive for some reasons, since for example a muscle develops the highest contraction force under these conditions, and the force sensors employed only need to allow for minimum movement. However, the contraction of a muscle against a very stiff resistance does not correspond to the natural physiological conditions. In normal tissue, there is a characteristic relationship between force and contraction of cells. This relationship is referred to as the tissue elasticity, which is also referred to as Young's modulus in the art. It has been observed that muscle cells detect this elasticity and adapt their functional features to it. For example, in Chopra A, Tabdanov E, Patel H, Janmey P A, Kresh J Y: *Cardiac myocyte remodeling mediated by N-cadherin-dependent mechanosensing*. *Am J Physiol Heart Circ Physiol*. 2011; 300(4):H1252-66, it could be shown that isolated heart muscle cells develop an entirely different cell structure, depending on whether they have been cultivated on a stiff or an elastic surface. According to the invention, the elastic element to be coupled with the cell or tissue culture allows for simulating the elasticity of the surrounding tissue in the natural environment.

(23) In particular, by choosing an elastic element of appropriate spring constant, or by adjusting the spring constant, a desired elasticity of surrounding tissue can be simulated. In many applications, the simulated or mimicked elasticity of surrounding tissue will correspond to the elasticity of healthy tissue, but advantageous uses of the invention are not limited to this. Instead, the system and method of the invention can also be used to simulate pathophysiological conditions which lead to an increased stiffness (for example in case of fibrosis), or a decreased stiffness (for example in case of myopathy). In some preferred uses of the system and method of the invention, one may wish to expose the cell or tissue culture to such pathological conditions, for example to study the effects of certain medications or the like. The change of tissue elasticity under pathological conditions in case of myocardium or the muscle layer of a vessel wall have for example been studied in Chaturvedi R R, Herron T, Simmons R, Shore D, Kumar P, Sethia B, Chua F, Vassiliadis E, Kentish J C. *Passive stiffness of myocardium from congenital heart disease and implications for diastole*. *Circulation*. 2010; 121(8):979-88, and Kim S A, Park S H, Jo S H, Park K H, Kim H S, Han S J, Park W J, Ha J W.: *Alterations of carotid arterial mechanics preceding the wall thickening in patients with hypertension*. *Atherosclerosis*. 2016; 248:84-90.

(24) In prior art, the usual way of exposing cultivated cells or tissues to specific elasticities involve the use of elastic adhesion substrates. However, at least for heart muscle tissue, this does not correspond to the true physiological conditions in vivo, because muscle cells are predominantly mechanically coupled with each other rather than with the surrounding matrix. The elastic element of the system and apparatus of the invention, however, allows for simulating the tissue elasticity by the elastic suspension and thereby also defines the direction of the developed force. If this direction is parallel or nearly parallel to the contracting elements of the muscle cells, this corresponds to the true physiological conditions and is of great advantage for the cultivation and examination of muscle tissue.

(25) In a preferred embodiment, said magnetic element is arranged on said elastic element such that a dipole moment of said magnetic element is arranged at an angle of less than 30°, preferably less than 20°, and most preferably of less than 12° with regard to the direction of motion of said magnetic element upon deflection of said elastic element. Simply put, in this embodiment, the

magnetic dipole moment of the magnetic element is parallel, or nearly parallel within the above defined limits, with the direction of motion of the magnetic element in operation. As will be demonstrated with reference to a specific embodiment below, this arrangement allows for a particularly precise assessment of the deflection via the measurement of the magnetic field sensor. In an alternative embodiment, said magnetic element is arranged on said elastic element such that a dipole moment of said magnetic element is arranged at an angle that is perpendicular to said direction of motion of said magnetic element, or deviates from this perpendicular direction by less than 30°, preferably less than 20° and most preferably less than 12°.

(26) In a preferred embodiment, the system further comprises a culture chamber, wherein in said culture chamber, the elastic element is mounted, or an adapter is provided for mounting said elastic element in said culture chamber in a predetermined position, and outside of said culture chamber, said magnetic field sensor is arranged, or an adapter is provided for mounting said magnetic field sensor in a predetermined position.

(27) Note that in operation of the system, the elastic element is mounted in the culture chamber, and the magnetic field sensor is arranged outside the culture chamber, and the relative positions of the two components have to be adjusted appropriately such as to allow for a precise assessment of the deflection of the elastic element by the corresponding change of magnetic field detected by said magnetic field sensor. One way to achieve this is to have the elastic element be preinstalled in the culture chamber and to have the magnetic field sensor be prearranged outside the culture chamber, but the invention is not limited to this. Instead, it is also possible to provide corresponding adapters for mounting or arranging the elastic element and/or the magnetic field sensor at the predetermined positions. In a particularly advantageous embodiment, the elastic element would be preinstalled in the culture chamber, while the magnetic field sensor is only mounted by the user using the aforementioned adapter. In this scenario, the culture chamber and the elastic element could be part of a disposable product, because these are the cheap components and the components that become contaminated during use, while the magnetic fields sensor, that will not be exposed to the environment within the culture chamber, can be easily reused.

(28) As referred to herein, the term “adapter” shall have a broad meaning and shall cover any device or means assisting the user in attaching the respective component precisely at a predetermined position, and could for example be resembled by a receptacle for receiving the magnetic field sensor, pre-fabricated bores or internal threads for receiving screws for attaching the magnetic field sensor in place or the like.

(29) When said elastic element and said magnetic field sensor are mounted inside and outside said culture chamber, respectively, and said elastic element is in an un-deflected state, in a preferred embodiment said magnetic field sensor and said magnetic element are separated by 1 cm or less, preferably by 5 mm or less, more preferably by 4 mm or less and most preferably by 3 mm or less, and/or by 0.5 mm or more, preferably by 0.9 mm or more, more preferably by 1.3 mm or more, and most preferably by 1.5 mm or more. This way, sufficient space is provided for accommodating a separator wall of the culture chamber between the magnetic field sensor and the magnetic element, while at the same time the distance is sufficiently small that a precise assessment of the motion of the magnetic element, and hence the deflection state of the elastic element, can be achieved.

(30) In a preferred embodiment, the system further comprises a first holding element, said first holding element comprising a holding section for holding said cell or tissue culture, and a coupling section for coupling with said elastic element.

(31) Preferably, the system further comprises a drive mechanism for applying a force, in particular a tensile force to said cell or tissue culture. Herein, the system may further comprise a second holding element, said second holding element comprising a holding section for holding said cell or tissue culture and a coupling section for coupling with said drive mechanism.

(32) In a preferred embodiment, said holding section of said first and/or second holding elements comprises a clamping device for clamping said cell or tissue culture, a holder that is attached with

or attachable with adhesive to native or artificially generated tissues, or a fixation to be integrally cast with a cell/matrix mixture.

(33) In a particularly preferred embodiment, the system further comprises a control unit, said control unit being connected to receive signals representing magnetic field information obtained with said magnetic field sensor, and connected with said drive mechanism to control the force applied to said cell or tissue culture at least in part in response to said signal representing magnetic field information.

(34) Herein, the “signals representing magnetic field information” could e.g. be the raw data obtained with the magnetic field sensor, based on which the control unit could calculate the degree of deflection of the elastic element or even the force associated therewith, based on an underlying spring constant or characteristic spring constant curve. However, the “signals representing magnetic field information” could also be information already derived from the processed raw data, such as the degree of deflection, or the force, or any intermediate parameter, as long as it is derived from the magnetic field information.

(35) In response to the signal representing magnetic field information, the control unit can then control the force applied to said cell or tissue culture, such as to achieve a desired mechanical stimulation thereof. Preferably, the system further comprises one or more electrodes for applying electrical stimuli to said cell or tissue culture, wherein said stimuli are likewise controlled by said control unit. This way, the mechanical and electrical stimulation can be coordinated under the control of the same control unit.

(36) A further aspect of the invention relates to a method for determining a force applied to or generated by a cell or tissue culture arranged in a culture chamber comprising the following steps: providing said culture chamber, coupling an elastic element mounted in said culture chamber with said cell or tissue culture such that a force applied to or generated by said cell or tissue culture leads to a deflection of said elastic element against a restoring force thereof, said elastic element forming or comprising a magnetic element arranged such as to be moved upon deflection of said elastic element, and detecting a change of magnetic field attributable to a corresponding movement of said magnetic element upon deflection of said elastic element using a magnetic field sensor that is separated from said elastic element by a separating wall.

(37) In a preferred embodiment, the method comprises a step of selectively choosing an elastic element of appropriate spring constant, or adjusting the spring constant of an elastic element, such that an assumed elasticity of surrounding tissue, which the cell or tissue culture would experience *in vivo*, is simulated.

(38) In a preferred embodiment, the assumed elasticity of surrounding tissue corresponds to the elasticity of healthy tissue. In alternative embodiments, the assumed elasticity of surrounding tissue corresponds to pathologic physiological conditions. In various embodiments, the pathophysiological conditions correspond to conditions with increased stiffness as compared to healthy tissue, and in particular to the presence of fibrosis. In other embodiments, the pathological physiological conditions correspond to conditions with decreased stiffness as compared to healthy tissue, and in particular to the presence of myopathy. In some preferred embodiments, the method comprises the steps of exposing the cell or tissue culture to an assumed elasticity corresponding to such pathological conditions and a step of studying the effects of certain medications on the cell or tissue culture under these conditions.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

(1) FIG. 1 is a schematic view of a system according to an embodiment of the invention.

(2) FIG. 2 is a close up view of the magnetic element and the magnetic field sensor of the system of

FIG. 1, further showing the magnetic field generated by the magnetic element.

(3) FIG. 3 shows the magnetic flux density in two directions measured by the magnetic field sensor, as a function of the deflection of the elastic rod of the system of FIG. 1.

(4) FIG. 4 shows similar flux densities as FIG. 3, but with a smaller distance between the magnetic field sensor and the magnetic element.

(5) FIG. 5 shows a combined parameter derived from the flux densities of FIG. 4, as a function of the deflection of the elastic rod of the system of FIG. 1.

(6) FIG. 6 shows an elastic element with an adjustable spring constant.

(7) FIG. 7 shows the magnetic field distribution in an embodiment in which the elastic element itself is magnetic.

(8) FIG. 8 shows the magnetic field component parallel to the direction of motion of the tip of the elastic element of FIG. 7 upon deflection.

(9) FIG. 9 shows the magnetic field distribution for an embodiment in which the magnetic element is formed by two anti-parallel permanent magnets.

(10) FIG. 10 shows the magnetic field component perpendicular to the direction of motion of the tip of the elastic element.

(11) FIG. 11 is a diagram showing the relative twitch force versus cultivation time for samples of adult human myocardium cultivated in a system according to FIG. 1.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

(12) For the purposes of promoting an understanding of the principles of the invention, reference will now be made to a preferred embodiment illustrated in the drawings, and specific language will be used to describe the same. It will nevertheless be understood that no limitation of the scope of the invention is thereby intended, such alterations and further modifications in the illustrated apparatus and such further applications of the principles of the invention as illustrated therein being contemplated as would normally occur now or in the future to one skilled in the art to which the invention relates.

(13) FIG. 1 shows a schematic representation of a system 10 according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention. As seen therein, the system 10 comprises a culture chamber 12 in which a cell or tissue culture schematically shown at 14 is arranged. The cell or tissue culture 14 could for example be a piece of functional bioartificial cardiac tissue that could serve as an artificial patch for transplantation. While not shown in FIG. 1, the culture chamber 12 further includes a nutrition solution which is kept at physiologic temperatures, such that warm and humid conditions are present inside the culture chamber 12.

(14) As is explained for example in Kensah, G. et al., an optimal tissue replacement should be able to exert contractile forces comparable to that of native cardiac tissue. By mechanically stretching the cell or tissue culture, the tissue formation and contractility of the bioartificial cardiac graft can be improved. For this purpose, a linear drive 16 is provided for applying a force, more precisely a tensile force to the cell or tissue culture 14. More precisely, the cell or tissue culture 14 is held by a first and a second holding element 18, 24, respectively. Herein, the second holding element 24 has a holding section 26 for holding said cell or tissue culture 14, and a coupling section 28 for coupling with the linear drive 16. The first holding element 18 likewise has a holding section 24 for holding the opposite end of the cell or tissue culture 14, and a coupling section 22 for coupling with a rod 30, which rod 30 resembles an example of the “elastic element” referred to in the introductory portion of the description.

(15) While not shown in detail in FIG. 1, the holding sections 20 and 26 of said first and second holding element 18, 24 could each be a rod that is integrally cast with a cell/matrix mixture in a similar way as disclosed in Kensah, G. et al. Alternatively, the holding sections 20 and 26 of said first and second holding elements 18, 24 could include a clamping device for clamping the cell or tissue culture 14. Instead of using a clamping device, native or bioartificial tissue, or matrix prepared for cell seeding can be attached to the holding elements 18, 24 by cyanoacrylate or

(16) With further reference to FIG. 1, the rod **30** is made from surgical grade steel. In some embodiments, the rod **30** may additionally be coated with a biocompatible material, such as Teflon or Parylene. The rod **30** has a fixed end **30a** that is attached to a wall of the culture chamber **12** using a fastener **32**. Opposite to the fixed end **30a**, the rod **30** has a free end **30b** at which a magnetic element **34** is disposed. In the embodiment shown, the magnetic element **34** is a permanent magnet that is coated with a biocompatible material. More precisely, the magnetic element **34** is a permanent magnet made from an AlNiCo alloy that is goldplated and that is further coated with Parylene or Teflon. When a tensile force is applied to the cell or tissue culture **14** by means of the linear drive **16**, this force leads to a deflection of the rod **30**, and consequently to a movement of the magnetic element **34**, wherein the direction of the movement of the magnetic element **34** is indicated by the arrow **36** in FIG. 1. Moreover, the magnetic element **34** is arranged such that its magnetic dipole moment is parallel to this direction of motion, or at most tilted with regard to this direction of motion by 30° , preferably by less than 20° and most preferably by less than 12° .

(17) Finally, stimulating electrodes **38** are provided inside the culture chamber **12**, which are devised for applying electrical stimuli to the cell or tissue culture **14**. Each of the cell or tissue culture **14**, the first and second holding elements **18**, **24**, the rod **30** and the stimulating electrodes **38** are arranged inside the culture chamber **12**, and are hence exposed to the humid atmosphere kept at physiological conditions therein.

(18) Outside the culture chamber **12**, a sensor module **40** is provided, which includes a magnetic field sensor **42**. The sensor module **40** is removably attached to the culture chamber **12** by means of a receptacle **44** schematically shown in FIG. 1. The receptacle **44** is an example of the “adapter” referred to in the introductory portion of the specification. The magnetic field sensor **42** is capable of measuring the magnetic field strength, more precisely the magnetic flux density in three dimensions X, Y and Z, wherein the dimensions X and Y are indicated by the coordinate system shown in FIG. 1, and wherein the dimension Z is perpendicular to the paper plane.

(19) Finally, the system **10** comprises a control unit **46**, which is operatively connected with the linear drive **16** and the stimulation electrodes **38** for controlling the same, and which is connected to receive signals representing magnetic field information obtained with said magnetic field sensor **42** from the sensor module **40**.

(20) Next, the function of the system **10** shown in FIG. 1 is explained with reference to FIGS. 2 to 5.

(21) FIG. 2 is a close up view of the magnetic field sensor **42**, the magnetic element **34**, the wall of the culture chamber **12** separating the magnetic field sensor **42** from the magnetic element **34** as well as the magnetic field generated by the magnetic element **34**. When the magnetic element **34** is moved downwards in FIG. 2, upon deflection of the rod **30** in response to a tensile force applied by said linear drive **16**, the magnetic flux density both for the X and the Y component measured by the magnetic field sensor **42** will change, as demonstrated in FIGS. 3 and 4. FIG. 3 shows the magnetic flux densities $B_{\text{sub.X}}$ and $B_{\text{sub.Y}}$ measured by the magnetic field sensor **42** in X and Y direction as a function of deflection of the free end **30b** of the rod **30**, or in other words, as a function of the movement of the magnetic element **34**, provided that the magnetic element **34** and the magnetic field sensor **42** are arranged at a distance of 2.5 mm apart.

(22) FIG. 4 shows the same parameters in a situation where the magnetic element **34** and the magnetic field sensor **42** are arranged at a distance of only 1.5 mm. Both of these distances are sufficient to accommodate a wall of a culture chamber **12** in between, or in other words, to arrange the magnetic element **34** inside and the magnetic field sensor **42** outside the culture chamber **12**.

(23) As can be discerned from FIG. 3, at a distance of 2.5 mm, the magnetic flux density in X direction is an approximately linear function of the dislocation of the magnetic element **34** within a

range of -0.9 mm to $+0.9$ mm with respect to a rest position. It was found that from the measured flux density in X direction alone, the dislocation of the magnetic element **34** due to deflection of the rod **30** could be measured with a resolution of $3\text{ }\mu\text{m}$.

(24) When the distance between the magnetic element **34** and the magnetic field sensor **42** is decreased to 1.5 mm, the relative resolution of the magnetic flux density becomes expectedly higher, but the linear region becomes more narrow, as indicated by the shaded area in FIG. **4**, and in fact decreases to a range from -0.6 mm to $+0.6$ mm.

(25) FIG. **5** shows an example, where a combined parameter is calculated from $B_{\text{sub.X}}$ and $B_{\text{sub.Y}}$ according to the formula $B_{\text{sub.X}}/(B_{\text{sub.Y}}+2\times B_{\text{sub.Ymin}})$, where $B_{\text{sub.Ymin}}$ corresponds to the minimum value of $B_{\text{sub.Y}}$ in FIG. **5**. As seen from FIG. **5**, this combined parameter, even when measured at a distance of only 1.5 mm between the magnetic element **34** and the magnetic field sensor **42**, shows a linear behavior in a much larger range of dislocations from about -2.0 mm to $+2.0$ mm.

(26) In the embodiment shown, the magnetic field components $B_{\text{sub.X}}$ and $B_{\text{sub.Y}}$ are digitized within the sensor module **40** and transferred to the control unit **46**, where the combined parameter of FIG. is calculated therefrom. Accordingly, in this embodiment the control unit **46** resembles an example of the aforementioned logic element suitable for translating the measurement result of the magnetic field sensor **42** into a parameter representing the deflection of the “elastic element”. The control unit **46** can then, based on a known force-deflection-curve of the rod **30** likewise calculate the force applied to the cell or tissue culture **14**.

(27) Based on the thus determined force applied to the cell or tissue culture **14**, the control unit **46** can then provide for a desired mechanical stimulation, which can be accompanied by a suitable electrical stimulation using the stimulating electrodes **38**.

(28) As is seen from FIGS. **3** to **5**, the detection of the deflection by means of the magnetic field sensor **42** works well within a certain range of deflections. In order to provide for a wide range of forces that can be measured, in one embodiment of the invention, a set of elastic rods **30** can be provided with different spring constants to choose from, so that depending on the desired force to be applied to the cell or tissue culture **14**, a rod **30** can be chosen that will largely exhaust, but not exceed the range of deflection corresponding to the shaded area in FIG. **5**.

(29) Instead of providing a set of rods with different spring constants, it is also possible to provide a rod **30** with an adjustable spring constant. For example, the rod **30** may be provided with a rigid sleeve **48** that can be slipped on the rod **30** to locally stiffen the same and hence increase the spring constant of the rod **30**, as shown in FIG. **6**. The spring constant can be further adjusted by the position of the sleeve **48** on the rod **30** by means of a threaded connection between a threaded element **50** and the sleeve **48**. By turning a knob **52** connected with said threaded element **50**, the position of the sleeve **48** can be adjusted along a direction indicated by arrows **54**.

(30) In the embodiment shown, the culture chamber **12** with the rod **30** pre-mounted therein is a disposable product, that is not to be reused. However, using the fastener **32**, it is easy for the manufacturer to pre-assemble the culture chamber **12** with rods **30** of different strengths and correspondingly different spring constants. The sensor module **40**, on the other hand, is reused and can be easily combined with any fresh culture chamber **12**, by simply inserting the same into the receptacle **44** shown in FIG. **1**. Importantly, the receptacle **44** is arranged such that when the sensor module **40** is received therein, the magnetic field sensor **42** included in the sensor module **40** will be appropriately arranged with regard to the magnetic element **34** provided at the free end **30b** of the rod **30**.

(31) As mentioned in the introductory portion of the specification, in some embodiments the elastic element **30** itself may be magnetic, such that no additional magnetic element needs to be provided. Instead, in such an embodiment, the elastic element itself forms the “magnetic element” referred to herein.

(32) FIG. **7** shows the magnetic field distribution of a magnetic elastic rod **30** and a magnetic field

sensor **42** arranged in said magnetic field. FIG. **8** shows the magnetic field component parallel to the direction of motion of the tip **30b** of the elastic element **30** upon deflection of the elastic element as measured by the magnetic field sensor **42**. From the geometry of the magnetic field shown in FIG. **7**, it will be appreciated that without deflection, i.e. for vanishing magnet displacement, the magnetic field strength is zero. As further shown in FIG. **8**, if the tip **30b** of the magnetic elastic element **30** is displaced within a range of ± 0.9 mm, the magnetic field strength varies approximately proportionally with the displacement of the tip **30b** (referred to as “magnet displacement” in FIG. **8**).

(33) FIG. **9** shows the magnetic field distribution for a further embodiment, in which the magnetic element **34** is formed by two anti-parallel permanent magnets **56**, and the magnetic field sensor **42** is arranged in the corresponding magnetic field.

(34) FIG. **10** shows the magnetic field component perpendicular to the direction of motion of the magnetic element **34** as measured by the magnetic field sensor **42** upon deflection of the corresponding elastic element **30** (not shown). In FIG. **9**, this direction of motion corresponds to a vertical movement. From the geometry of the magnetic field shown in FIG. **9**, it will be appreciated that in the rest position shown in the figure (i.e. without deflection), the magnetic field strength perpendicular to the direction of motion is zero. As is further seen from FIG. **10**, in the vicinity of the rest position shown in FIG. **9**, the magnetic field strength varies approximately proportionately with the displacement of the magnetic element **34** in the vertical direction.

(35) The ability of the described tissue culture system **10** to maintain vitality and functionality of myocardium in vitro was tested with a typical application. Samples of adult human myocardium **14** were obtained from explanted failing hearts of consenting patients receiving a heart transplant.

(36) The tissue was cut into thin slices according to an established procedure as described in Brandenburger M, Wenzel J, Bogdan R, Richardt D, Nguemo F, Reppel M, Hescheler J, Terlau H, Dendorfer A. *Organotypic slice culture from human adult ventricular myocardium*. *Cardiovasc Res*, 93(1), 50-59, 2012. Vital tissue specimen were glued to triangle tissue holders **18**, **24**, and were mounted in culture chambers **12**, as exemplified in FIG. **1**. By means of the described technique, a passive strain could be applied that resembled physiological diastolic stress of the cardiac wall. Under continuous electrical stimulation (0.2 Hz, 1 ms pulse duration, bipolar), active contractions were recorded over a culture period of up to 10 days. In comparison to the force development of hypertrophic human myocardium subjected to a previously established technique of tissue cultivation in a quiescent state (square symbols in FIG. **11**), contractile performance was better preserved under biomimetic conditions (round symbols in FIG. **11**). It is hence seen that the system **10** of FIG. **1** allows for: well controlled biomechanic conditions and relevant readouts, long-term functional preservation, thus enabling chronic manipulation and the investigation of protracted alterations, and continuous measurement of contractility, thus e.g. enabling assessment of drug effects in a single tissue specimen.

(37) In general, it is expected that the culture technique described for adult myocardial tissues will also improve the maturation of artificial tissues engineered from differentiated stem cells and a biocompatible matrix. Furthermore, its application to any kind of mechanosensitive tissue (e.g. skeletal muscle, smooth muscle from vessel, gut, bronchi, etc., connective tissue, tendon, cartilage, bone etc.) can be envisaged.

(38) As was explained above, an important advantage of the system and method of the invention is that the spring constant of the elastic element **30** allows for simulating in vitro the elasticity of the surrounding tissues with the cell or tissue culture would experience in its natural physiological environment, i.e. in vivo.

(39) To give a specific example, it shall be assumed that for the culture of a heart muscle, the Young's modulus of the heart muscle in systole shall be simulated. As can be taken from Hassaballah A I, Hassan M A, Mardi A N, Hamdi M. *An inverse finite element method for determining the tissue compressibility of human left ventricular wall during the cardiac cycle*.

PLoS One. 2013; 8(12):e82703, this Young's modulus may amount to about 500 kPa. It follows that for a sample size of $5 \times 5 \times 0.3$ mm.³ (length \times width \times thickness), and for a contraction of 0.5 mm, a force of 500 mN/mm.² $\times 5$ mm $\times 0.3$ mm $\times 0.5$ mm/5 mm=75 mN is generated. In order to simulate the elasticity of the surrounding tissue, an elastic element **30** with a spring constant of 150 mN/mm is therefore needed. This can be for example achieved in the setup shown above with a rod **30** formed by steel wire having an effective length of 10 mm and a diameter of 0.28 mm. Namely, the spring constant of a bending rod is defined as $3 \times E \times I_y / L$.³ with E (elastic modulus)=180 GPa for V2A steel and I_y (second moment of inertia)= r .⁴ $\times \pi / 4$ for a cylindrical rod. With these values, a spring constant $3 \times E \times r$.⁴ $\times \pi / 4 / L$.³ of 150 mN/mm is obtained.

(40) Although a preferred exemplary embodiment is shown and specified in detail in the drawings and the preceding specification, these should be viewed as purely exemplary and not as limiting the invention. It is noted in this regard that only the preferred exemplary embodiment is shown and specified, and all variations and modifications should be protected that presently or in the future lie within the scope of protection of the invention as defined in the claims.

REFERENCE SIGN LIST

(41) **10** system **12** culture chamber **14** cell or tissue culture **16** linear drive **18** first holding element **20** holding section **22** coupling section **24** second holding element **26** holding section **28** coupling section **30** rod **30a** fixed end **30b** free end **32** fastener **34** magnetic element **36** arrows **38** stimulating electrodes **40** sensor module **42** magnetic field sensor **44** receptacle **46** control unit **48** sleeve **50** threaded element **52** knob **54** arrows **56** permanent magnet

Claims

1. A system for maintaining a cell or tissue culture, the system comprising: a culture chamber in which said cell or tissue culture is to be arranged; an elastic element adapted to be coupled with said cell or tissue culture such that a force applied to or generated by said cell or tissue culture leads to a deflection of said elastic element against a restoring force thereof; a sensor unit adapted to determine a signal representing at least one of an amount of said deflection of said elastic element and a force corresponding to said deflection, wherein the sensor unit comprises at least one magnetic field sensor; and a drive mechanism adapted for applying a force to said cell or tissue culture.
2. The system of claim 1 further comprising a control unit operatively connected with the drive mechanism, wherein said control unit includes logic elements configured to control the force applied by the drive mechanism to said cell or tissue culture at least in part in response to said signal determined by said sensor unit.
3. The system of claim 2, wherein said system further comprises one or more electrodes adapted for applying electrical stimuli to said cell or tissue culture.
4. The system of claim 3, wherein said control unit is adapted to control said electrical stimuli.
5. The system of claim 4, wherein said control unit is further adapted to control the force applied by the drive mechanism to said cell or tissue culture at least in part in response to said signal determined by said sensor unit, thus coordinating the mechanical and electrical stimulation.
6. The system of claim 5, wherein said coordinating the mechanical and electrical stimulation comprises simulating a force-length relationship which muscle tissue would generate in its natural physiological environment.
7. The system of claim 1, wherein said force applied by said drive mechanism is a tensile force.
8. The system of claim 1, wherein the sensor unit is adapted to determine the amount of said deflection of said elastic element by measuring a change in a magnetic field, said change being caused by a deflection or displacement of said elastic element.
9. The system of claim 1, wherein said drive mechanism is a linear drive mechanism.
10. The system of claim 1, wherein said drive mechanism is adapted to generate the force applied

to said cell or tissue culture by linearly moving an attachment structure for the cell or tissue culture.

11. The system of claim 1 further comprising a first holding element, said first holding element comprising a first holding section for holding said cell or tissue culture and a first coupling section for coupling with said drive mechanism.

12. The system of claim 11 further comprising a control unit operatively connected with the drive mechanism, wherein said control unit includes logic elements configured to determine a position of said first holding element.

13. The system of claim 11 further comprising a second holding element, wherein said holding element comprises a second holding section for holding said cell or tissue culture and a second coupling section for coupling with said elastic element.

14. The system of claim 13, wherein said first holding element and said second holding element are each triangular in shape.

15. A method for applying a controlled force to a cell or tissue culture arranged in a culture chamber, comprising: providing said culture chamber; coupling an elastic element mounted in said culture chamber with said cell or tissue culture such that a force applied to or generated by said cell or tissue culture leads to a deflection of said elastic element against a restoring force thereof; determining an amount of deflection of said elastic element, wherein the amount of deflection is determined by a sensor unit comprising at least one magnetic field sensor; applying, by a drive mechanism, a force to said cell or tissue culture.

16. The method of claim 15 further comprising: controlling the force applied by the drive mechanism to said cell or tissue culture at least in part in response to said determined amount of deflection of said elastic element.
