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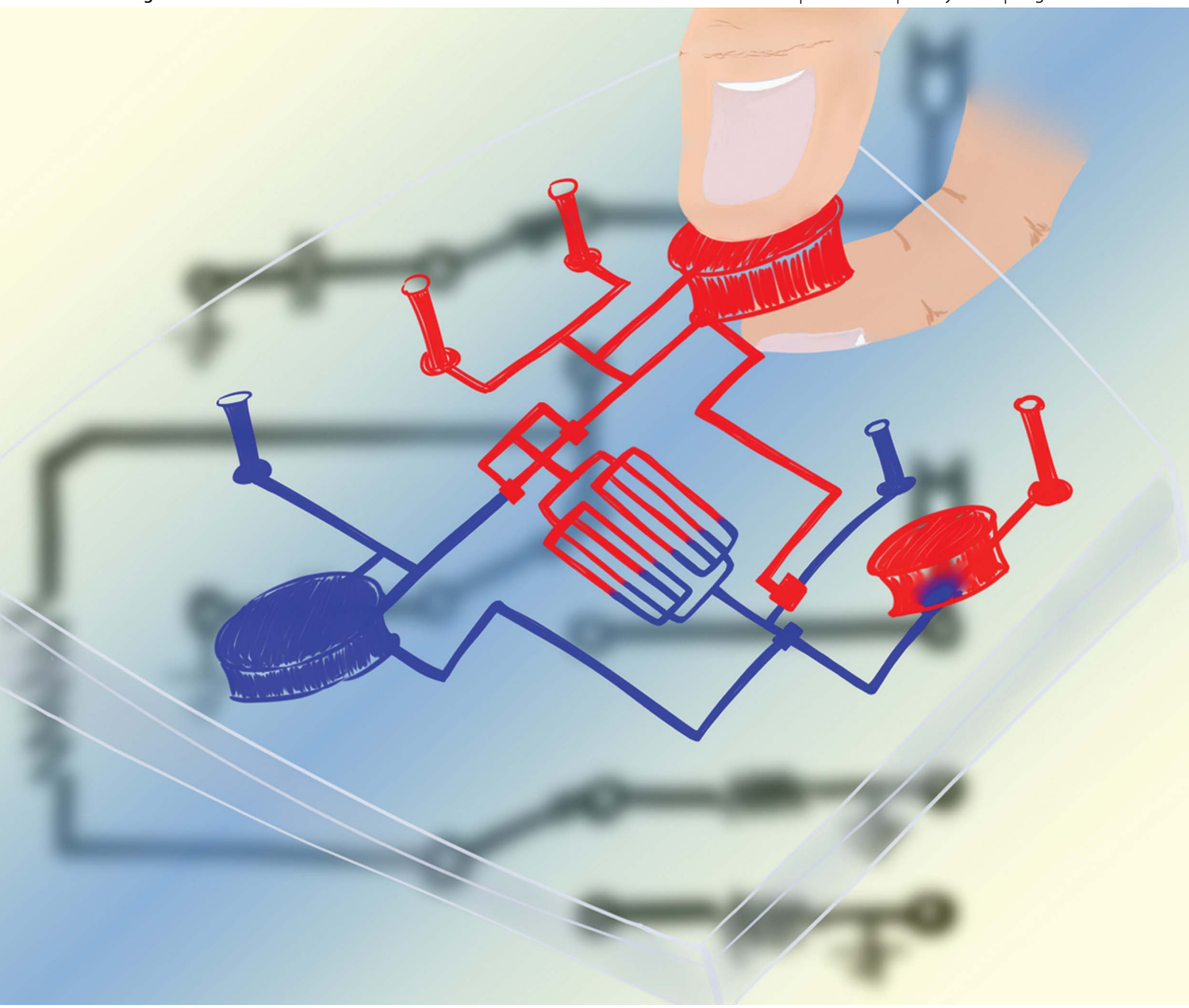

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COMMUNICATION

Squeeze-chip: a finger-controlled microfluidic flow network device and its application to biochemical assays†

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We designed and fabricated a novel microfluidic device that can be operated through simple finger squeezing. On-chip microfluidic flow control is enabled through an optimized network of check-valves and squeeze-pumps. The sophisticated flow system can be easily constructed by combining a few key elements. We implemented this device to perform quantitative biochemical assays with no requirement for precision instruments.

Microfluidic chips provide a unique approach to integrating multiple conventional laboratory works into a single device.[1,2] Recently, microfluidic technology has become a powerful tool for investigating various chemistry and biochemistry problems that are usually difficult, if at all possible, to be studied using conventional methods.[3–6] These devices are also highly valuable for medical diagnostics.[7,8] Polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS), an elastic polymer, greatly facilitates the development of microfluidics through soft lithography.[9–11] The chips are usually compact, aiming to acquire accurate results for analyzing minute amounts of samples and reducing reagent use. Precise fluid manipulation is one of the most important functions of microfluidic systems to achieve accurate results.[4,12] However, microfluidic devices have long suffered from the complex off-chip apparatus, which is usually bulky, expensive, and energy consuming. Commonly, although a microfluidic chip looks tiny and simple by itself, the whole system still requires well-trained personnel to operate, making it inconvenient to implement in remote areas, less-industrialized countries, or emergency situations.[7,13–15]

In microfluidic devices, micro-valves and pumps are critical components for the control of fluidic transportation, especially for multi-step chemical reactions or quantitative analysis. The methods of making valves and pumps have greatly facilitated the development of microfluidic technologies.[16–23] Check-valves, which not only prevent back-flow of the liquid but also provide possibilities to build the logic network of fluid, are able to simplify the whole system with fewer components needed on- and off-chip.[16,19–22,24] These check-valves, especially those using PDMS as the material for the deformable membranes, can be embedded into the device as a monolithic component, and can be linked together to perform complex logic operations.

Here, we present a finger-controlled microfluidic logic network, based on cascading embedded check-valves. We built a general-purpose colorimetric mixing chip for quantitative chemical analysis. We used this microfluidic device to demonstrate two quantitative biochemical assays for glucose and uric acid measurement. The whole experiment is conducted through finger squeezing without the need for other equipment or extra power supplies, making it a good candidate for point-of-care applications.[12]

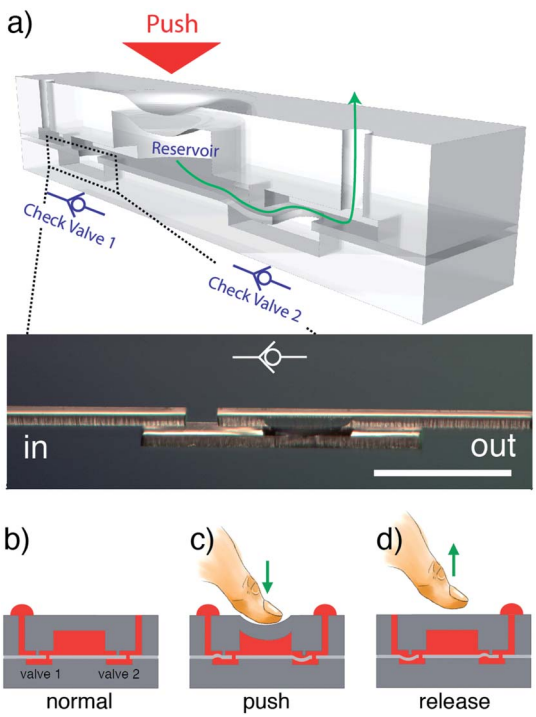

Fig. 1 The structure of a squeeze-pump. (a) The structure of a squeeze-pump that was constructed with two check-valves and a reservoir in between. The detailed structure of a single check-valve is shown in the microphotograph. Scale bar is 1 mm. (b–d) show the operation cycle of a squeeze-pump. When the reservoir is pushed, liquid will be squeezed out of the right port through valve 2. During pressure release, the reservoir is refilled through valve 1.

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Fig. 1 shows the structure of a squeeze-pump, the key component of the squeeze chips. The pump consists of two check-valves in series, and a fluid reservoir between them. Check-valves, acting as the flow diodes, only allow unidirectional liquid flow.[16,20,21,25,26] We developed a patterned surface deactivation method to help construct the check-valves in multilayer PDMS microfluidic structures (Fig. S1, ESI†). The PDMS surface became non-reactive after long-term air–plasma treatment[27–29] (Fig. S3†). Patterning is done with shadow masks made of PDMS slabs. A check-valve, similar to the design reported previous by Mosadegh *et al.*,[20] has three parts: a thin PDMS membrane layer with a hole, a top layer that contains a discontinuous channel, and a bottom layer that contains a short segment of a channel. The device was formed by bonding these three layers together but the defection membrane in the valve, whose top layer had been treated with air–plasma, could not bond to the layer above. The picture of a single check-valve is presented in Fig. 1b.

Two check-valves in each squeeze-pump ensure that the liquid can only enter the reservoir through one valve, and leave the reservoir through the other (Fig. S2†). Due to the elasticity of PDMS, when we squeeze the chip the top layer of the reservoir will deform and push the liquid out through check-valve 2 (Fig. 1a, c). When pressure is released, the liquid will be sucked in through check-valve 1 (Fig. 1a,d) to refill the reservoir. This embedded pump structure, similar to previous reported devices that transfer liquid *via* squeezes,[30–33] enables liquid sample delivery ranging from nanoliters to microliters.

We tested the correlation between the performance of a check-valve and the dimension of the valve components: the length of the gap (L), and the width (W) of the channels (Fig. S4a†). We found that the threshold to initiate the forward flow through the valve was usually lower than 1 psi for all designs. The flow resistance of the valve is relatively small, thus the flow rate heavily depends on the driving pressure. We then tested the performance of the squeeze-pumps through repetitive pushing on the reservoir using a post with controllable displacement (Fig. S5†). The flow rate is clearly related to the frequency and displacement of squeezing actions. Larger squeezing depth results in larger pumping capacity. The pump shows obvious hysteresis due to the flux limit of the valves. A proper dwell time between the adjacent squeezes greatly facilitates the pump efficiency (Fig. S4b†). The pump could deliver liquid from one nanoliter to several microliters at a time, with a CV of precision of less than 6% at 1 μL per stroke actuation. The pump is robust; it was repetitively actuated over 10^4 times without degradation of performance, and the devices were still fully functional after storage in a normal laboratory environment for 3 months.

Our check-valve-based pumping scheme allows the pressure balance tunnel to be placed remotely from the valve location. As shown in Fig. 2a, design 1 is the common structure of a check-valve that allows liquid flow from left to right. We can move the balance tunnel away from the valve area by extending the channel at the lower layer, shown as design 2. The flow direction is from left to right since the balance tunnel is connected with right part of the broken channel. Furthermore, the balance tunnel does not need to be placed on the main channel but on any branch that connects to the main channel, as shown in design 3.

We are able to create complex flow networks by rearranging the placement of valves and balance tunnels. Fig. 2b depicts an example of a pump design in which the reservoir is not between the two check-valves. The reservoir also acts as a balance tunnel, connecting the two layers of channels for the valve on the left side. When the reservoir is

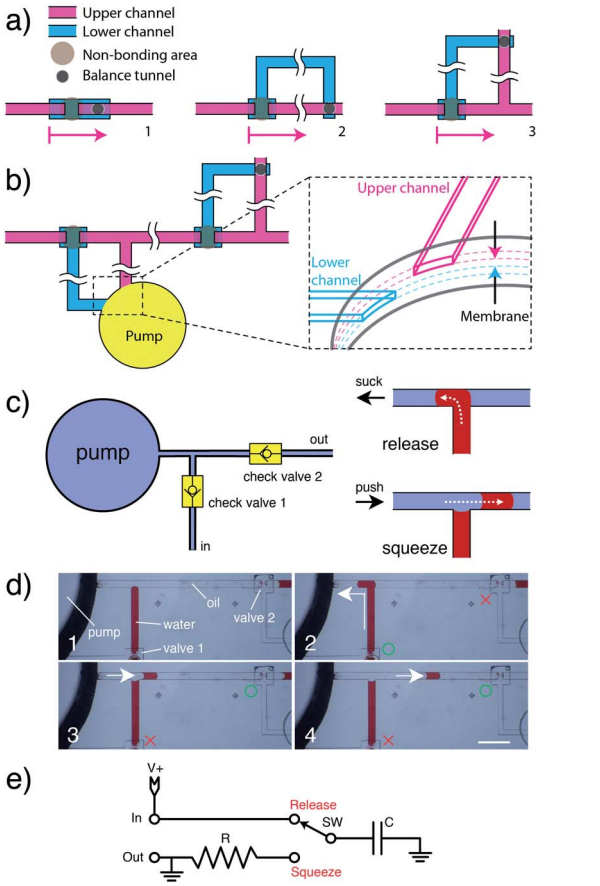

Fig. 2 The design of the squeeze-pump. (a) Various design of the check-valves. (b) A squeeze-pump that has two check-valves with remotely placed balance tunnel. (c) The design layout of a two-phase squeeze-pump for transferring small liquid plugs. (d) Microphotographs of transferring a 10 nL aqueous plug with oil as carrier. Scale bar is 1 mm. e) The electric circuit analogy of a squeeze-pump.

squeezed the liquid will be pumped out through the valve in the right side, and when it is released, it refills from the left valve. This design has the same function as the original design (Fig. 1a), but with more flexibility to arrange the channels, valves, and reservoirs.

This design also allows for applications using two immiscible liquids, as shown in Fig. 2c. The two check-valves are brought closer when the reservoir is placed on the side with a T-junction. The reservoir has been pre-filled with oil and the aqueous phase was connected to the inlet. This aqueous solution can be transferred from inlet to outlet without passing through the reservoir. The phase separation also helps to transfer small plugs with nanoliter volume. Fig. 2d shows the transfer of a 10 nL plug of dye solution by releasing (panel 2) and pushing (panel 3, 4) the squeeze-pump.

All of the above configurations of the squeeze-pump can be summarized by an electric circuit analogy, shown in Fig. 2e. In this analogy, the reservoir is a capacitor that will be charged upon releasing until full, and then discharged by squeezing. We use a simple change-over switch (single-pole double-throw) to simulate the squeeze–release actions. Flow channels, with specific flow resistance, can also be simulated as resistors in the circuit. The check-valve itself doesn't appear as an independent element in the circuit with our analogy. It has to be noticed that although this electric circuit analogy

is useful to illustrate the function of the squeeze-pump, there are a few fundamental differences between the fluidic and electric circuits. First, the polarity in the electric circuit doesn't apply to the fluidic network. Second, the ground connections are not necessary in a fluidic network. Third, the liquids can be different in the fluidic channels while the electrons are the same in electronics.

Our check-valve design, which places the balance tunnel in the downstream network of the valve, also provides great flexibility to control the fluidic routes. Downstream branches can respond selectively to the upstream pressures. The valves connected to the squeeze-pump will be closed upon the squeeze action, and hence allows the liquid to flow through certain pre-designed routes. This function produces more logical control approaches for microfluidic flow, and simplifies the design for microfluidic networks. In addition, when the valves are rationally connected to perform a specific experiment, many pressure balance tunnels can be combined together, which also reduces the complexity of chip fabrication.

Based on this concept we have fabricated a chip with 6 valves and only 3 balance tunnels for quantitative biochemical analysis (Fig. 3). In this device, valves 1 and 5 share a common tunnel, as do valves 2 and 3, and 4 and 6. This chip demonstrates the application of squeeze-pumps for liquid delivery, and control of fluid flow in and out of the device through specific routes from multiple inlets and outlets. These check-valves also serve as the route selecting elements, as explained using electric circuit analogy in Fig. 3c. The three pairs of valves, with the two reservoirs and one balance tunnel, can be simplified as a triple-pole double-throw switch in the circuit. As expected, although functions of the chip are well explained using this circuit, the circuit analogy cannot identify the difference between the liquid that is introduced from different inlets. When pump A (SW1 in the circuit) is squeezed, we drive the liquid from inlet 1 to outlet 1 through R3, a commonly connected route. Squeezing pump B (SW2 in the circuit) will drive liquid from inlet 2 to outlet 2 through R3. SW3, the analogue of the combination of valves 2, 3 and the balance tunnel between them, is one of the poles in the switch and it is passively co-operated with SW1 and SW2.

Operation of the squeeze chip for quantitative mixing of two liquids is shown in Fig. 3d. All the valves are closed in the beginning (panel 1). We can actuate (squeeze and release) pump A to fill the specific channels with one solution (red, in panel 2), and pump B with the other solution (blue, in panel 3). Both valves 1 and 5 are blocked by squeezing pump A so the red solution will flow through the metering channels and the readout chamber, to outlet 1. After the readout chamber is filled with red solution, we squeeze the pump B, which forces both valves 4 and 6 to close, to replace the solution inside the metering channels with blue solution, and the extra fluid will drip out of outlet 2. The switch between these different routes of liquid flow does not require extra control of the device. We then activate pump A to carry the blue solution in the metering channels into the readout chamber (panel 4). Although the displaced volume of each squeeze is not necessarily equal, the volume of the metering channels precisely predetermines the amount of blue solution in the readout chamber. The ratio of reactants is hence quantitatively determined by the metering channels, while the total reaction volume is set by the readout chamber. The air bubble was not a problem during the experiment since after a few firm squeezes any pre-existing bubbles were pushed out of the metering channels.

The ability of the squeeze-chips to perform quantitative reactions without using precision instruments makes this method highly suitable for point-of-care diagnostics, which usually require a simple way to handle the device. To demonstrate this ability, we carried out two colorimetric analyses on the squeeze chips to measure the concentration of glucose[34] and uric acid[35] in solutions. We set the concentration range of both analytes in clinically relevant ranges, 0–10 mM for glucose and 0–1.5 mM for uric acid. The reactions required two freshly mixed reagents (Fig. 3a, Input 1a and 1b) to react with

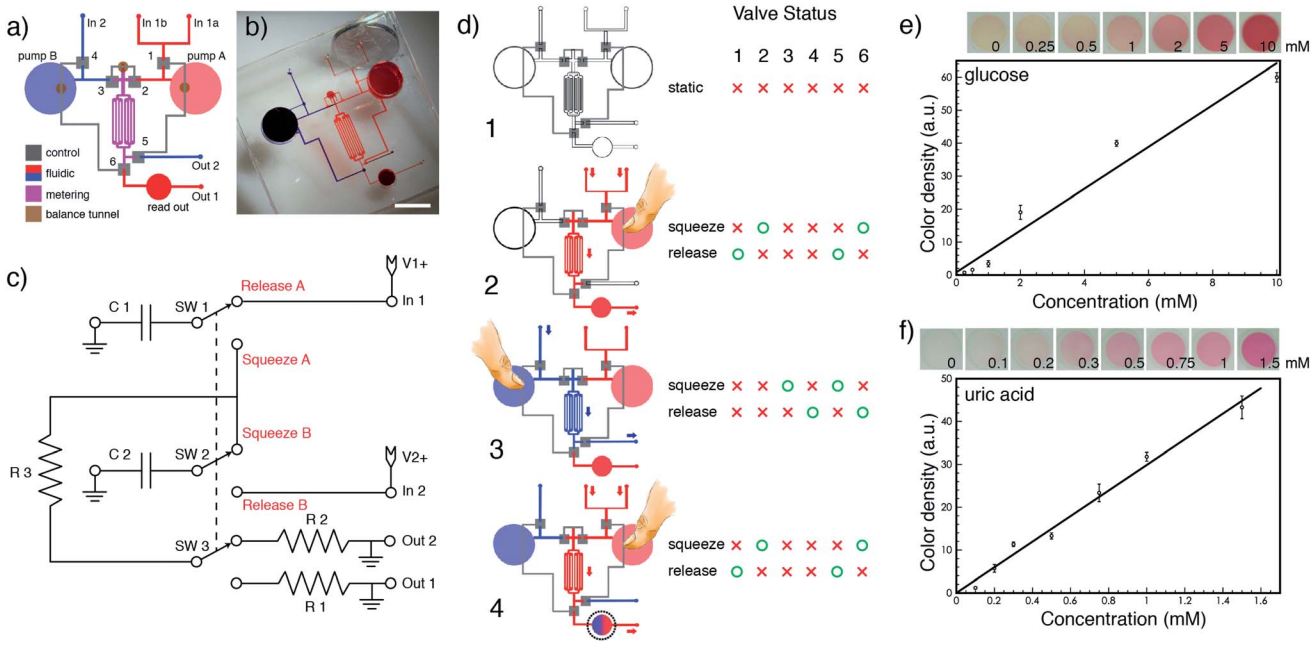

Fig. 3 The squeeze-chip for quantitative bioanalysis. (a) The design layout of the squeeze-chip with six check-valves and three balance tunnels. b) A real squeeze chip made of PDMS. Scale bar is 1 cm. (c) The electric circuit analogy of the squeeze chip. (d) The operation of squeeze-chip. the status of each valve during each squeeze-release cycle is also listed. (e) and (f) are solution-based colorimetric tests for glucose and uric acid using squeeze-chips.

samples (Fig. 3a, Input 2). The 4 mm thick readout chamber could hold liquid up to 50 μL, making it appropriate to observe the color change from the reactions by the naked eye. In our experiments we were able to detect glucose as low as 1 mM and uric acid as low as 100 μM with sample consumption less than 5 μL per test (Fig. 3e, 3f), which met the need of practical use for medical screening and quantitative diagnosis. The chips showed great tolerance for finger operation without any requirements of precision instruments. The typical operation CV is about 10∼20% in the middle of the test dynamic range for both reactions. Moreover, the colorimetric observation could be further improved by increasing the height of the readout chamber to extend the light path for absorption. This method can be applied to many other liquid phase reactions with the readout suitable for the naked eye, such as the changes in color, opacity, luminescence, and the formation of precipitation or gas bubbles. The liquid transfer mechanism can also be employed for many applications with biological samples including complex human body fluids such as whole blood.

In conclusion, we developed a technique to construct microfluidic devices with pre-determined re-configurable fluid flow networks by cascading check-valves and balance tunnels between two layers of micro-channels. These devices can be driven by simple finger-squeeze-based actuation and they perform quantitative biochemical analyses with a wide volume range from a few nanoliters to several microliters. Squeeze-chips offer a new approach to performing well-controlled micro-scale chemical and biochemical reactions, especially for point-of-care applications.

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