

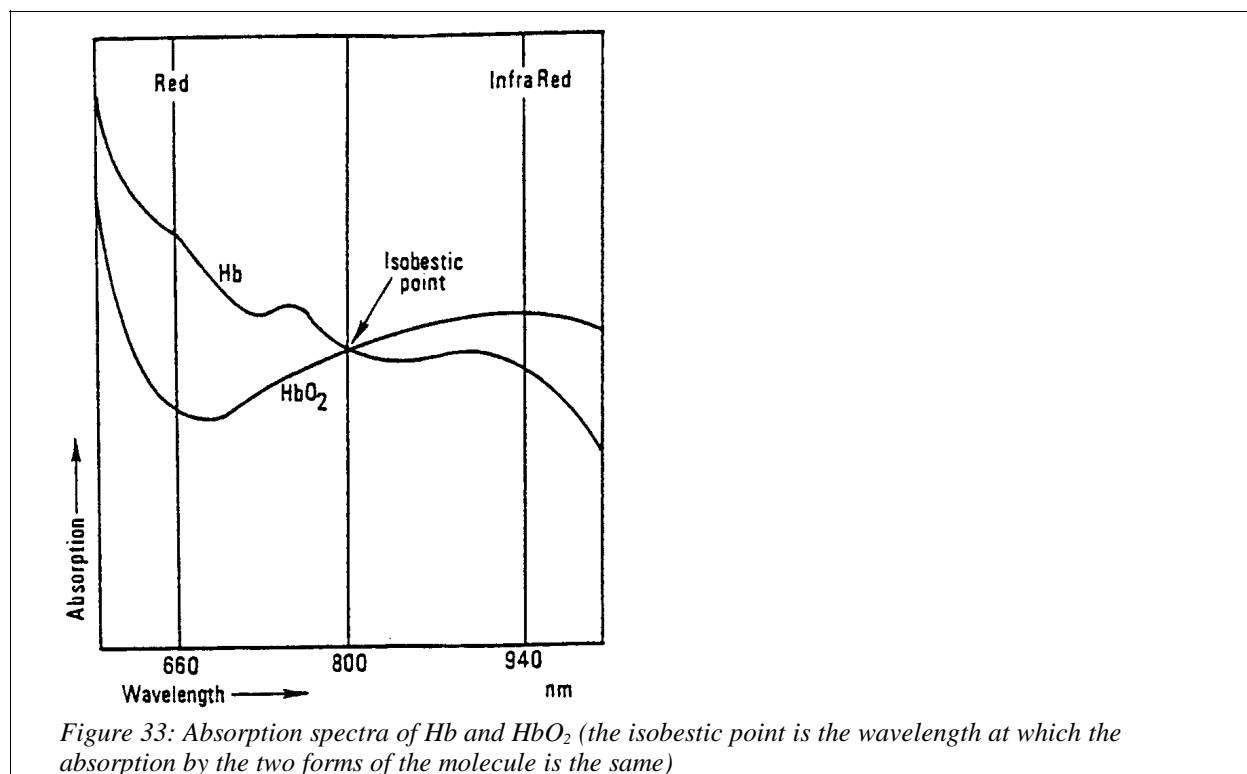
Pulse Oximetry

The principal advantage of optical sensors for medical applications is their intrinsic safety since there is no electrical contact between the patient and the equipment. (An added bonus is that they are also less suspect to electromagnetic interference). This has given rise to a variety of optical techniques to monitor physiological parameters: for example, the technique of Laser Doppler velocimetry to measure red blood cell velocity. However, in this lecture course we will concentrate on the technique of pulse oximetry for the non-invasive measurement of arterial oxygen saturation in the blood (although a second use of the technology will be discussed right at the end of the course).

For patients at risk of respiratory failure, it is important to monitor the efficiency of gas exchange in the lungs, *ie* how well the arterial blood is oxygenated (as opposed to whether or not air is going in and out of the lungs). Preferably, such information should be available to clinicians on a continuous basis (rather than every few hours). Both of these requirements can be met non-invasively² with the technology of *pulse oximetry*. The technique is now well established and is in regular clinical use during anaesthesia and intensive care (especially *neonatal* intensive care since many premature infants undergo some form of ventilator therapy). Pulse oximetry is also being used in the monitoring of pulmonary disease in adults and in the investigation of sleep disorders.

Principles of oximetry

It was discovered in the 1860's that the coloured substance in blood, *haemoglobin*, was also its carrier of oxygen. (Haemoglobin is a protein which is bound to the red blood cells.) At the same time, it was noticed that the absorption of visible light by a haemoglobin solution varied with oxygenation. This is because the two common forms of the molecule, oxidised haemoglobin (HbO_2) and reduced haemoglobin (Hb), have significantly different optical spectra in the wavelength range from 500nm to 1000nm, as shown in Figure 33.



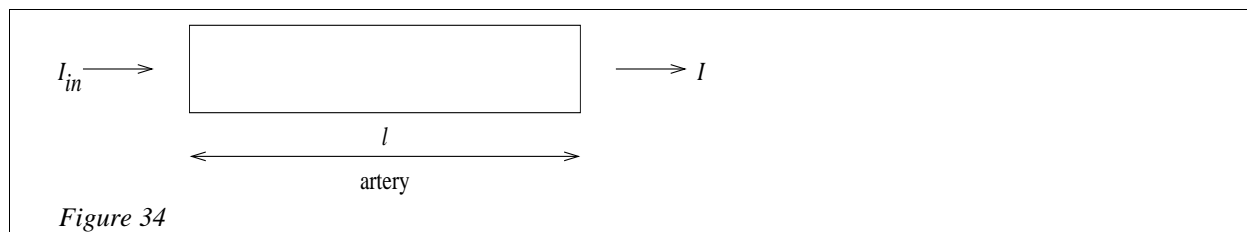
² *ie* using instrumentation which does not require surgery

The oxygen chemically combined with haemoglobin inside the red blood cells makes up nearly all of the oxygen present in the blood (there is also a very small amount which is dissolved in the plasma). Oxygen saturation, which is often referred to as SaO_2 or SpO_2 , is defined as the ratio of oxyhaemoglobin (HbO_2) to the total concentration of haemoglobin present in the blood (*ie* oxyhaemoglobin + reduced haemoglobin):

$$\text{SaO}_2 = \frac{[\text{HbO}_2]}{[\text{Total haemoglobin}]}$$

Arterial SaO_2 is a parameter measured with oximetry and is normally expressed as a percentage. Under normal physiological conditions arterial blood is 97% saturated, whilst venous blood is 75% saturated.

It is possible to use the difference in absorption spectra of HbO_2 and Hb for the measurement of arterial oxygen saturation *in vivo* because the wavelength range between 600 nm and 1000 nm is also the range for which there is least attenuation of light by body tissues (tissue and pigmentation absorb blue, green and yellow light and water absorbs the longer infra-red wavelength).



By measuring the light transmitted through the fingertip (or the earlobe) at *two* different wavelengths, one in the red and the other in the near infra-red part of the spectrum, the oxygen saturation of the arterial blood in the finger (or ear) can be determined. If we assume initially that the transmission of light through the arterial bed is influenced only by the relative concentrations of HbO_2 and Hb and their absorption coefficients at the two measurement wavelengths, then the light intensity will decrease logarithmically with path length according to the well-known Beer-Lambert law. If we consider, as shown in Figure 34, an artery of length l through which light, initially of intensity I_{in} is passed this law tells us that:

At wavelength λ_1 , $I_1 = I_{in1} 10^{-(\alpha_{o1} C_o + \alpha_{r1} C_r)l}$

At wavelength λ_2 , $I_2 = I_{in2} 10^{-(\alpha_{o2} C_o + \alpha_{r2} C_r)l}$

where

- C_o is the concentration of oxyhaemoglobin (HbO_2)
- C_r is the concentration of reduced haemoglobin (Hb)
- α_{on} is the absorption coefficient of HbO_2 at wavelength λ_n
- α_{rn} is the absorption coefficient of Hb at wavelength λ_n

If we let

$$R = \frac{\log_{10}(I_1/I_{in1})}{\log_{10}(I_2/I_{in2})}$$

then it is simple enough to show:

$$\text{SaO}_2 = \frac{C_o}{C_o + C_r} = \frac{\alpha_{r2}R - \alpha_{r1}}{(\alpha_{r2} - \alpha_{o2})R - (\alpha_{r1} - \alpha_{o1})} \quad (1)$$

A brief history of oximetry

The first devices to measure oxygen saturation in human blood by transilluminating it with coloured light were built in the 1930's. These devices were incapable of distinguishing between arterial and venous (and capillary) blood. An attempt to include venous and capillary blood was then made by using one of two methods: zeroing the oximeter by taking a 'bloodless' reading from an earlobe compressed between two fingers or arterialising the blood by heating it to 43°C (this method was developed during the Second World War as part of a project to investigate the problem of the loss of consciousness by R.A.F. pilots during dog-fights). However, the light transmitted through the ear (or finger) is not only attenuated by the arterial, venous and capillary blood but also by the skin (whose pigmentation and hence absorption properties will vary from person to person) and by other tissues such as muscle, bone, etc ...

In the early 1970's, the Hewlett-Packard company (the medical division of which is now known as Agilent) developed an instrument which attempted to circumvent these problems by measuring the transmission of light across the earlobe at more than two wavelengths. A multi-component model of the ear was set, composed of m light-absorbing substances (skin, tissues, Hb and HbO₂, etc ...). The model further assumed that each light absorber acted independently of the others. A set of simultaneous equations were then written for the total absorbance of light by the m substances at each of the measurement wavelengths. Empirical calibration coefficients were derived from a number of studies on a sample of volunteers. However, the high cost of the instrumentation together with the need for measurements at *eight* different wavelengths meant that it never found regular clinical use.

Principles of pulse oximetry

It is the recent development of *pulse* oximetry which has led to oximetry being accepted as a useful non-invasive technique for the measurement of arterial SaO₂. With pulse oximetry, only that part of the signal directly related to the inflow of arterial blood into the body segment is used for the calculation of oxygen saturation. The intensity of light transmitted across the fingertip, for example, varies as shown in Figure 35. A pulsatile signal, which varies in time with the heart beat, is superimposed on a d.c. level. (The amplitude of this cardiac-synchronous pulsatile signal is approximately 1% of the d.c. level.

Pulse oximetry assumes that the attenuation of light by the body segment can be split into the three independent components shown in Figure 35(a): arterial blood, venous blood and tissues.

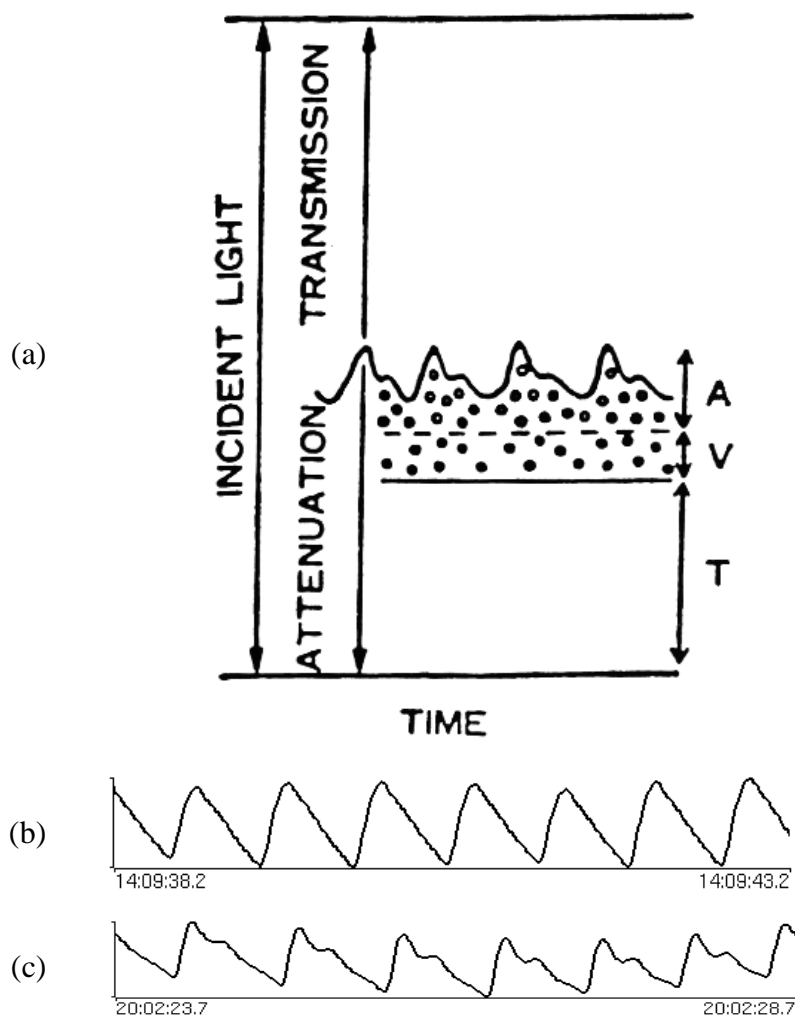


Figure 35: (a) Transmission of light through the finger when the attenuation of light is caused by arterial blood (A), venous blood (V) and tissues (T). (b) and (c) show typical pulsatile signals detected in the intensity of detected light when light is shone through a finger.

If we assume that the *increase* in attenuation of light is caused only by the inflow of arterial blood into the fingertip, we can calculate the oxygen saturation of the arterial blood by subtracting the d.c. component of the attenuation from the total attenuation, leaving only the cardiac-synchronous pulsatile component for the dual-wavelength determination of oxygen saturation.

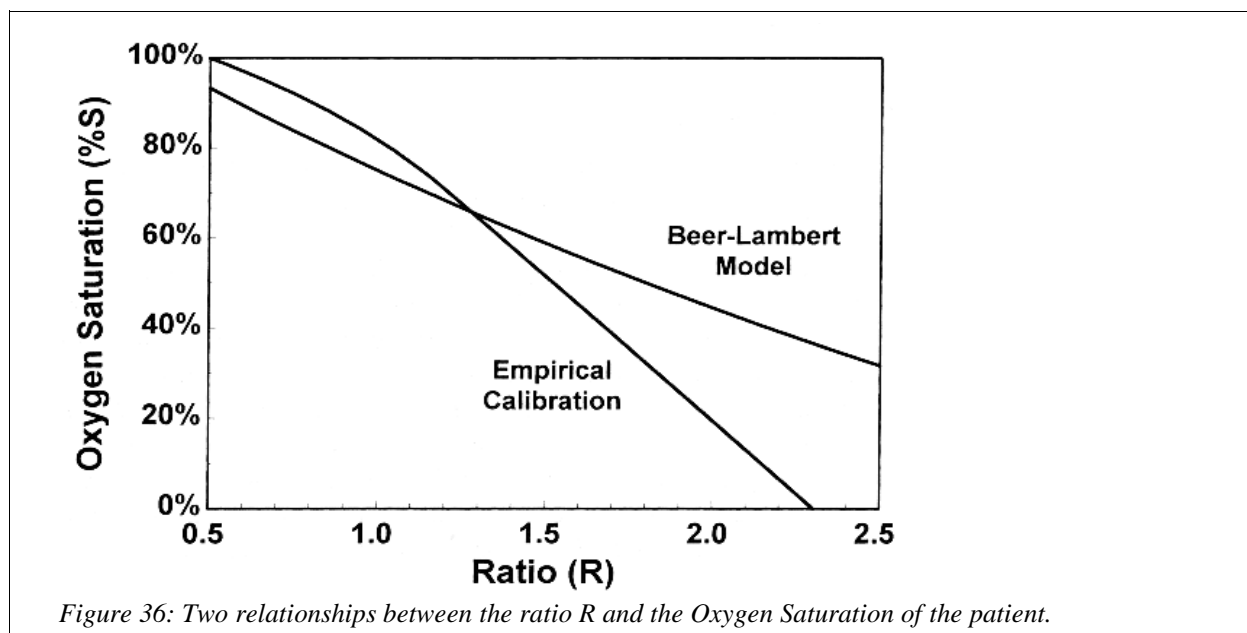
It is a simple matter to show (as you will be asked to do in one of the questions on the Problem Sheet) that the general oximetry equation derived earlier is equally valid for pulse oximetry if R is now given by:

$$R = \frac{\log_{10}((I_{dc+ac})/I_{dc})_{\lambda 1}}{\log_{10}((I_{dc+ac})/I_{dc})_{\lambda 2}} \quad (2)$$

Figures 35(b) and 35(c) show typical cardiac synchronous pulsatile signals detected when red or NIR light is shone through a finger. Note that the d.c. content (or baseline) has been removed from these traces. It is clear from these graphs that there is quite a wide variation in the shape of the signals between people – note how the trace in Figure 35(c) has a secondary peak for each heart beat. This phenomenon is quite common: the second peak is known as the *dichrotic notch* and can cause signal processing problems.

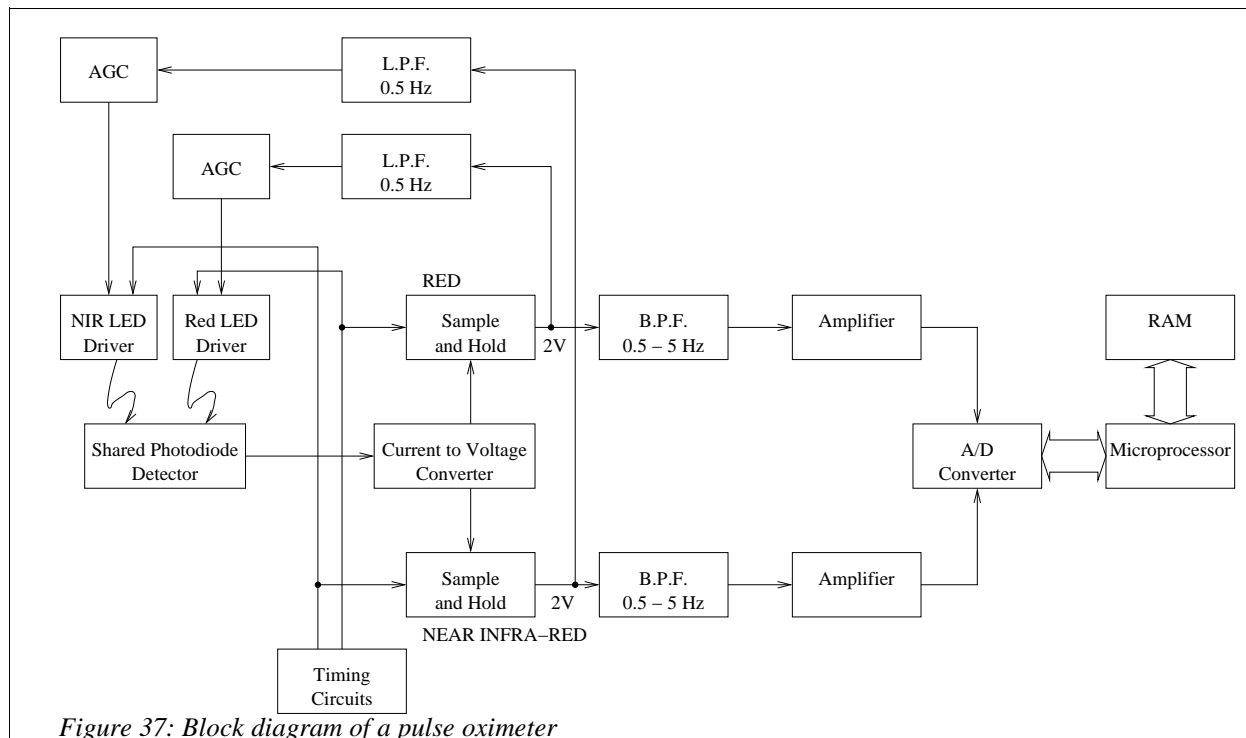
Calibration of pulse oximeters

The first pulse oximeters, which were manufactured in the early 1980's, used equation (1) to compute the values of arterial SaO_2 . However, the Beer-Lambert law, on which this equation is based, does not take into account the multiple scattering of light by the red blood cells. Although oximetry is a differential technique, the effect of scattering is only partially compensated for since scattering is wavelength dependent. Equation (1) is therefore an over-simplification: Figure 36 shows two relationships, one using the Beer-Lambert law and the other based on empirical data, between the ratio R and the oxygen saturation of the patient. Consequently, instruments based on the Beer-Lambert law tended to give erroneous estimates of the true value of oxygen saturation (especially for SaO_2 values below 85%). There have been few attempts since then to modify the theory in order to take scattering into account, and most pulse oximeters now use look-up tables derived from calibration studies on large numbers of healthy volunteers whose oxygen saturation is also measured invasively.



Design of pulse oximetry instrumentation

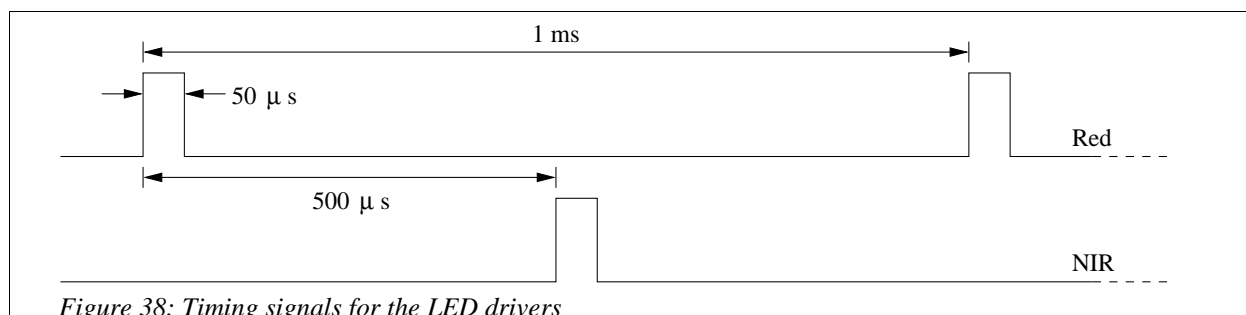
A block diagram of the circuit for a pulse oximeter is shown in Figure 37. The main sections of this block diagram are now described.



In order to build finger (or earlobe) probes which are small and unobtrusive, we need miniature light sources and detectors. Light-emitting diodes (LEDs) which work in the red and Near-Infra Red (NIR) part of the spectrum are readily available. However, the average power which can be obtained from *standard* LEDs is limited and a very sensitive detector (such as a photomultiplier tube) would be required to detect the small amount of light transmitted through the finger.

This problem can be overcome by using special-purpose LEDs which have been developed: red LEDs are now being manufactured with internal lensing systems to give high intensity outputs. Similarly, high current NIR LEDs are designed to be *pulsed* so that the *peak* power available from them can be increased without increasing the average power. This makes it possible to detect the light transmitted through the finger with a simple, compact, solid-state photodetector such as a photodiode.

If we pulse *both* light sources, we can then use a single photodetector in the finger probe, since silicon devices are responsive to light having visible and NIR wavelengths. We could, for example, use timing circuits to supply, say, 50 μ s pulses to the red and NIR LED drivers at a repetition rate of 1 kHz, as shown in Figure 38 (a frequency of 1 kHz is suitable because such a frequency is well above the maximum frequency present³ in the arterial pulse).



3 The maximum cardiac frequency is never going to be more than a few Hz.

In this mode of operation, high-intensity light outputs can be obtained with the NIR LED with currents of up to 1A over a low duty cycle. The transmitted light detected by the photodiode is amplified and converted to a voltage using an op-amp configured as a current-to-voltage converter. At this point in the circuit the signal is fed to two identical sections, one for each of the transmitted wavelengths.

Since the light is pulsed, we need to use a sample-and-hold circuit to reconstitute the waveforms at each of the two wavelengths. The same timing circuits which were used to control the red and NIR LED drivers are also used to provide the the control pulses for the corresponding sample-and-hold circuits. The outputs from these circuits are then filtered with a band-pass filter (with 0.5 Hz and 5 Hz cut-off frequencies) in order to remove primarily the d.c. component but also high frequency noise. The resulting signals thus represent the cardiac-synchronous information in the waveforms and these are further amplified before they are converted to digital format for subsequent analysis by the microprocessor.

It can be seen from the block diagram in Figure 37 that the output from each sample-and-hold is also passed to a low-pass filter. This is the first stage of an automatic gain control (AGC) circuit which adjusts the light intensity from the corresponding LED so that the d.c. level always remains at the same value (say 2V) whatever the thickness or skin characteristics of the patient's finger.

There are two equally important reasons for deciding to use an AGC circuit: firstly, it means that the amplitude of the a.c. signal (which may vary between 0.1% and 2% of the total signal) is also within a pre-defined range and this makes the amplifier which follows the band-pass filter easier to design. Secondly, the d.c. component of the transmitted red and NIR signals can be set at the same value (2 V) in each case. Hence it can be eliminated from the formula used by the microprocessor to calculate the oxygen saturation. A new index,

$R' = \log(I_{ac})_{\lambda_1} / \log(I_{ac})_{\lambda_2}$ is defined (compare with Equation (2)). In practice, it is not even necessary to convert the a.c. signal amplitudes at the two wavelengths to their logarithmic equivalents: instead a look-up table can be loaded into memory and this will contain the values of oxygen saturation corresponding to each value of the (Red pulse amplitude)/(NIR pulse amplitude) ratio.

We will now consider in turn each of the main circuits shown in the block diagram.

Constant current source for driving LEDs

A simple potential circuit for achieving this is shown in Figure 39(a) in which an op-amp is combined with a bipolar transistor. In this circuit, the negative feedback forces $v_e = v_{in}$. Thus, $I_e = V_{in}/R_I$. Since the collector current is almost equal to the emitter current (I_c is equal to $I_e + I_b$), the LED current is therefore also given by $I_{LED} = V_{in}/R_I$.

However, this current source is slightly imperfect because the small base current, I_b , may vary with V_{ce} . This arises because the op-amp stabilises the emitter current whereas the load sees the collector current.

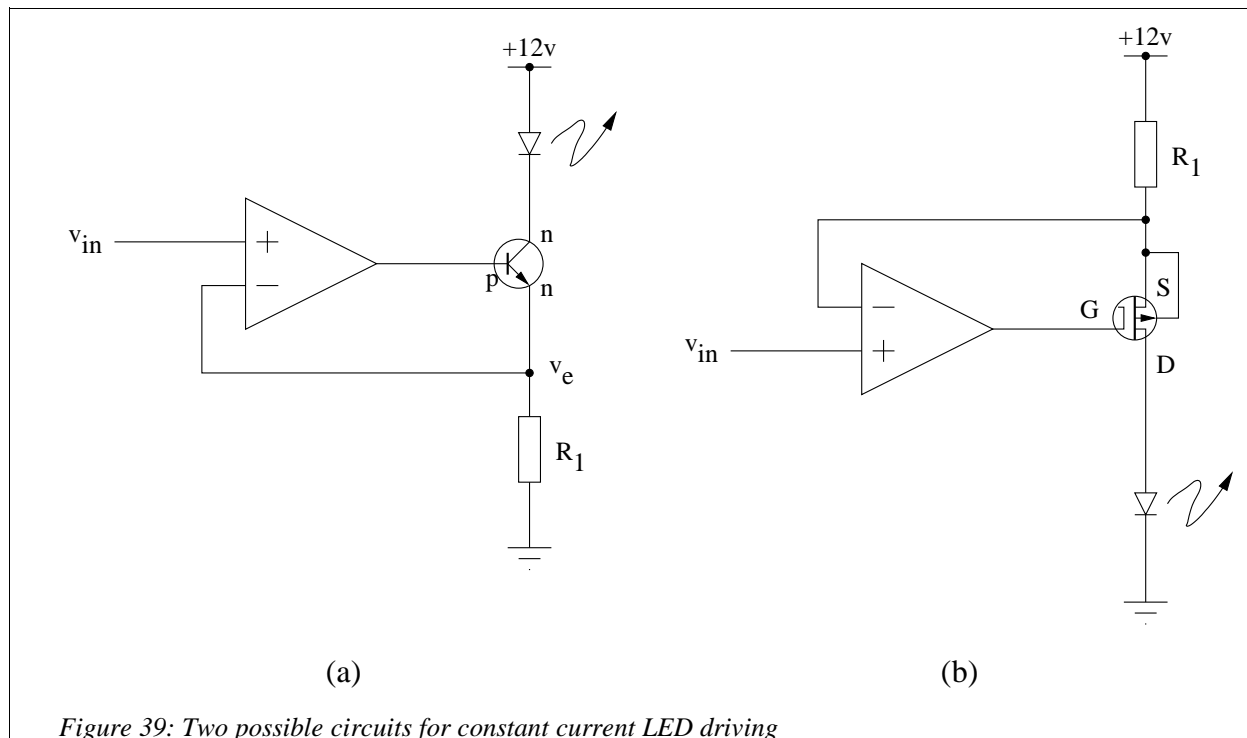


Figure 39: Two possible circuits for constant current LED driving

By using a FET instead of a bipolar transistor, this problem can be avoided as shown in Figure 39(b). Since the FET draws no gate current, the output is sampled at the source resistance without error, eliminating the base current error of the bipolar transistor. Any departures from ideal behaviour are due to non-linearities in the current sampling resistor and to errors in the op-amp input circuit, such as offsets and drifts. Note, however, that the load current is limited by the $I_{DS(on)}$ of the MOSFET.

If a bipolar power supply is available, the circuits of Figure 39 can be further simplified by omitting V_{in} and tying the non-inverting input of the op-amp to ground as shown in Figures 40(a) and 40(b) in both of which $I_{LED} = 12 \text{ V}/R_1$.

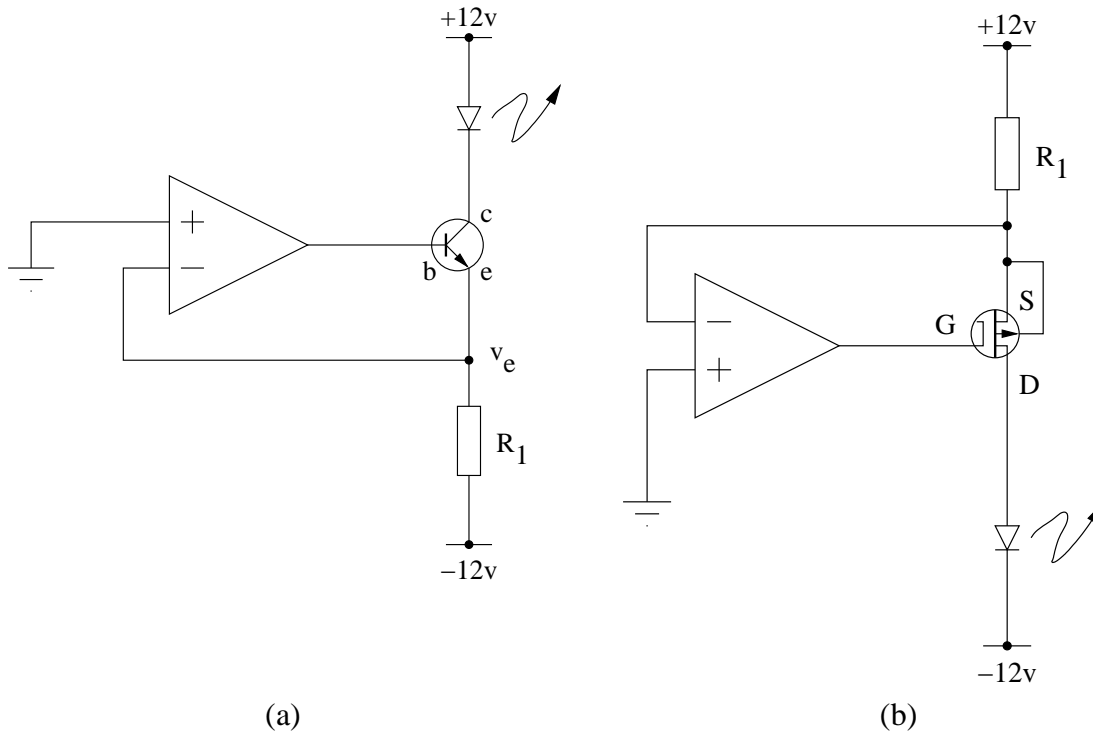


Figure 40: Alternative circuits for constant current LED driving when a bipolar power supply is available

Timing circuit

In this application, the accuracy of the timing is not of paramount importance, hence the timing circuit can be built around the 555 timer integrated circuit. From the data sheet for this i.c., it can easily be worked out that the circuit given in Figure 41 can be configured, for example by setting $C = 22 \text{ nF}$, $R_a = 56 \text{ k}\Omega$ and $R_b = 3.3 \text{ k}\Omega$, to give a $50 \mu\text{s}$ pulse approximately every millisecond, as intended.

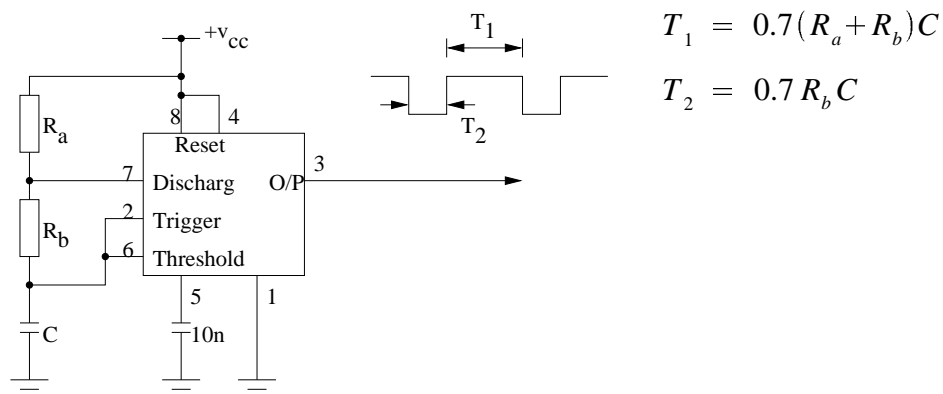


Figure 41: Generating the timing pulses for pulse oximetry

Pulsing the light output from the LEDs

The output from the LED can be pulsed by connecting an n-channel enhancement-mode MOSFET across it as shown in Figure 42. The pulses from the output pin of the 555 timer (pin 3) are taken to the gate of the transistor. The FET needs to be an enhancement-mode MOSFET for it to be turned fully off and on by the gate pulses. The MOSFET chosen for this task should also be capable of handling the maximum current flowing through the LED.

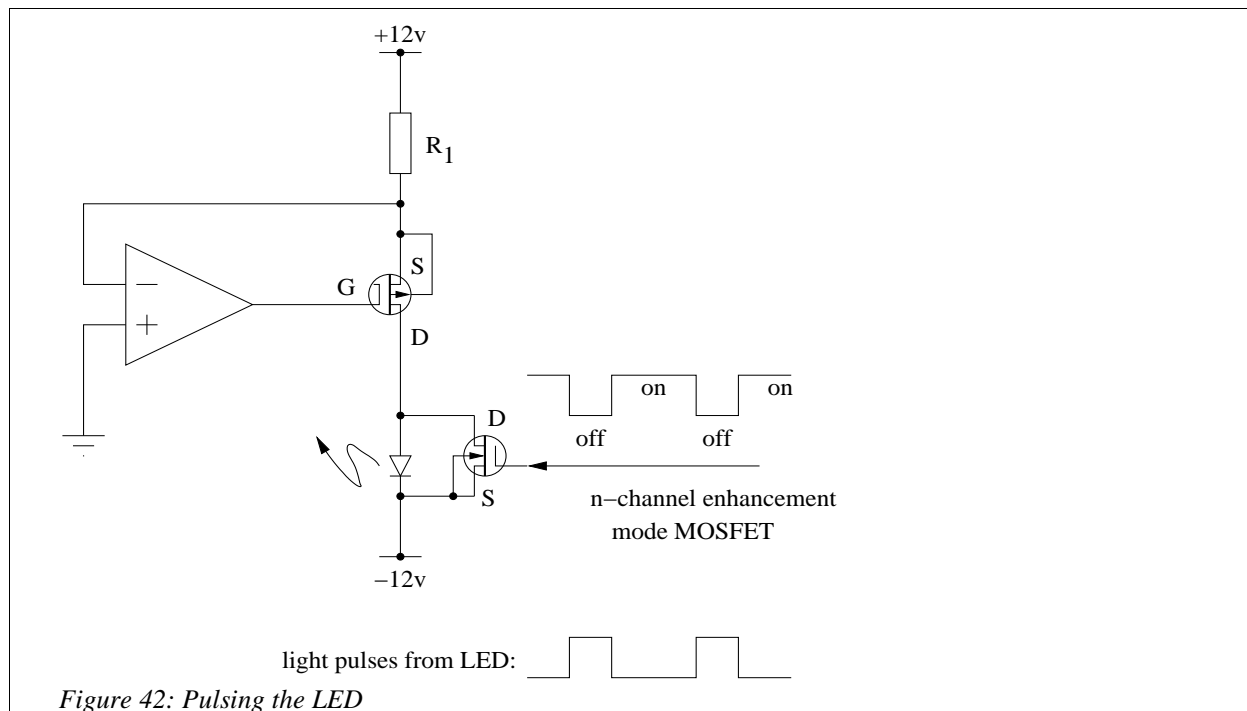


Figure 42: Pulsing the LED

Receiver circuit

The simplest solid-state optical detector is the photodiode. Photodiode detectors normally operate with reverse bias applied to the p-n junction (photoconductive mode). When light falls on the junction region of the photodiode, an electron-hole pair is created; under the influence of the junction (or built-in) field, the hole is swept towards the p-material and the electron towards the n-material. The resulting light current is seen as a large increase in the reverse current.

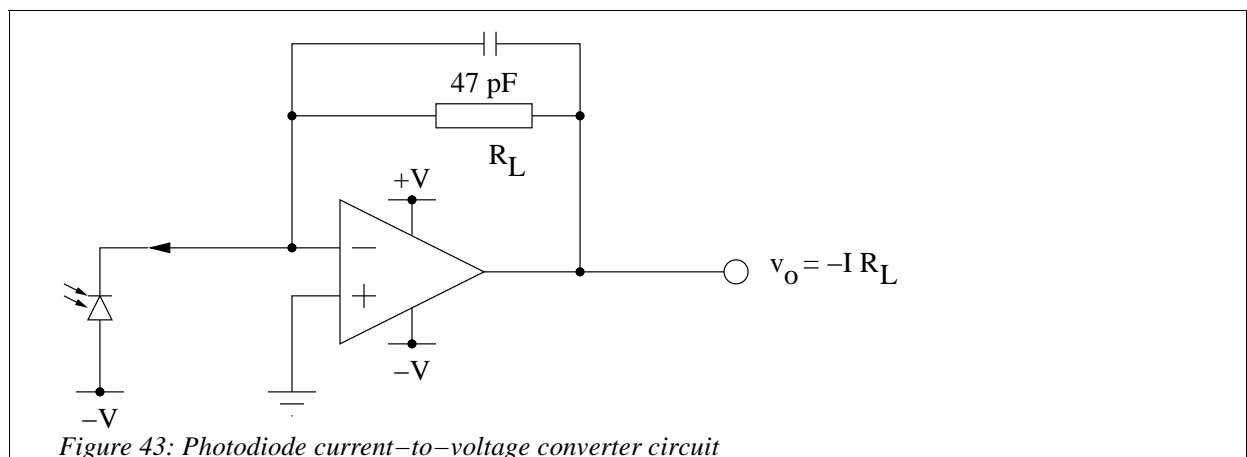


Figure 43: Photodiode current-to-voltage converter circuit

For the purposes of signal amplification, the photocurrent must be transformed into a voltage with moderate output impedance; this is achieved with the circuit shown in Figure 43, the op-amp being configured as a current-to-voltage converter. Because of the high junction resistance of the reverse-biased photodiode, the op-amp should be an FET type with a very high input impedance. Since the negative input of the op-amp acts like a virtual earth, the output voltage of the circuit is $v_o = -I R_L$. A very large feedback resistance may be used, values as high as several tens of $M\Omega$ being typical in practice.

Sample-and-hold circuit

In the sample mode, the output of an ideal sample-and-hold circuit is equal to the input signal at that particular instant. When switched to the hold mode, the output should remain constant at that value of the input signal which existed at the instant of switching. A simple sample-and-hold circuit is shown in Figure 44.

This circuit uses a FET switch which passes the signal through during the sample period and disconnects it during the hold period. Whatever signal was present at the time the FET is turned off is then held on the capacitor C . The choice of a value for C is a compromise between two conflicting requirements:

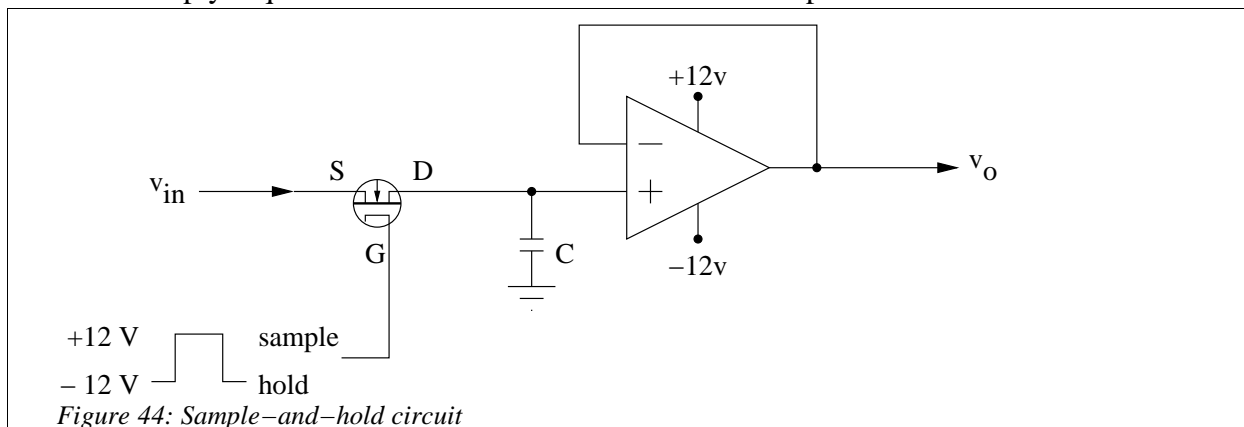
- Leakage currents in the FET and the op-amp cause the capacitor voltage to droop during the hold period according to the equation

$$\frac{dV}{dt} = \frac{I_l}{C}$$

where I_l is the leakage current. Thus C should be as large as possible in order to minimise droop.

- The resistance of the FET when turned on (typically tens of ohms) forms a low-pass filter in combination with C and so C should be small if high speed signals are to be followed accurately.

Ready-built sample-and-hold circuits are also available as monolithic integrated circuits which simply require the connection of an external hold capacitor.



Automatic gain control circuit

The output from the sample-and-hold circuit, as indicated in the general description of the block diagram, is fed to a band-pass filter which extracts the pulsatile signal prior to its further amplification and analysis. The same output is also taken to a low-pass filter with a cut-off frequency of, say, 0.1 Hz, which extracts the d.c. value of the transmitted signal. There are then several ways of implementing the AGC function. One of the simplest ways is to feed the d.c. signal to one input of a differential amplifier whose other input is a constant, reference voltage (from a zener diode, for example). The difference between these two voltages is then used to generate the voltage v_{in} in Figure 39 which sets the value of the LED current.