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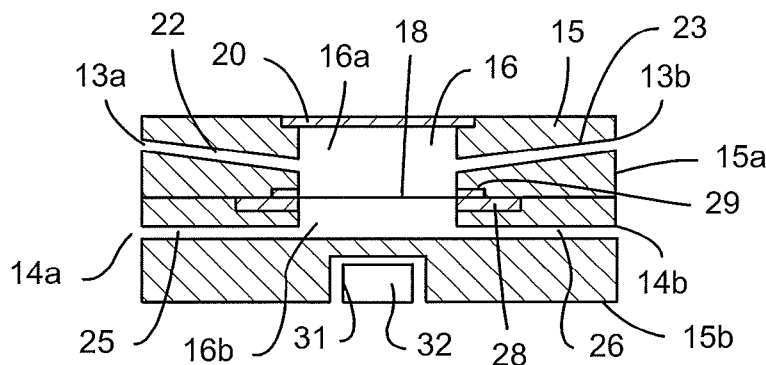
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(54) Title: MICRO-FLUIDIC SYSTEM USING MICRO-APERTURES FOR HIGH THROUGHPUT DETECTION OF CELLS

**FIG. 2**

(57) Abstract: A microfluidic detection system for micrometer-sized entities, such as biological cells, includes a detector component incorporating a plate with a plurality of opening, the plate separating two chambers, one in communication with a fluid source containing target cells bound to magnetic beads. The openings are sized to always permit passage of the magnetic beads therethrough into a lower one of the chambers and are further sized to always prevent passage of the target cells from the upper one of the chambers. The detector component further includes a magnet positioned to pull unbound magnetic beads through the openings and to capture target cells bound to magnetic beads on the surface of the plate. The microfluidic detection system includes a pump flowing the fluid through the detector component at high flow rates of milliliters per minute for high throughput detection of target cells.

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Micro-Fluidic System Using Micro-apertures for High Throughput Detection of Cells

PRIORITY CLAIM

[001] The present application is a non-provisional application claiming priority to co-pending provisional application S.N. 61/471,762, filed on April 5, 2011, in the name of the same inventors, the entire disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[002] The present invention generally relates to microfluidics and particularly to detecting targeted cells present in sample fluids.

BACKGROUND

[003] Circulating tumor cells (or CTCs) are rare cells present in the blood of metastatic cancer patients. Quantitative detection of CTCs is important for early detection of cancer as well as monitoring of the disease progression and response to therapy. CTC count correlates with overall tumor burden and can often serve as more reliable indicators of metastatic disease than molecular disease markers. For example, the level of prostate specific antigen (PSA) can often rise due to benign prostate hyperplasia (common in people over 60) and hence may not necessarily indicate cancer.

[004] The presence of a significant number of CTCs can be a reliable indicator of the presence of cancer. Also, possible recurrence after surgery can be detected much earlier by CTCs than by most molecular markers. Another advantage is that CTCs can be further interrogated after

detection; sequencing of the genome and transcriptome could reveal the mutations that had led to cancer as well as the expression levels of the genes in question. The cells can also be cultured, grown and tested with different combinations of chemotherapeutic agents for drug discovery and personalized medicine.

[005] Detecting CTCs however is a challenging task because of their scarcity in blood samples, as few as single cell in multiple milliliter (mL) blood samples. The current favored approach to detecting whole cells in clinical and laboratory settings is flow cytometry, wherein labeled cells are detected as they flow in single file through an optical detector. This technology is used widely from vaccine analysis to monitoring of AIDS. However, the high cost and large size of flow cytometers usually limits this testing approach to central facilities shared by many users. Furthermore, since the cells have to pass through a sensing portion of the flow cytometers in a single file manner, volumetric sample throughput is relatively low and cytometers need to run for long times to analyze large samples. For so-called "rare" cells - i.e., cells that are scarce in a fluid sample, such as CTC cells – relatively large volume samples may be required to find the cells. In this instance, the current flow cytometers can be prohibitively expensive for frequent diagnostic usage.

[006] Microfluidic cell detectors have been developed to overcome the cost and size limitations of traditional flow cytometers in certain applications. These sophisticated systems can successfully interrogate small samples, on the order of μLs (microliters), but such systems have been found to have limited capability for analyzing large samples, on the order of multiple mLs. Most microfluidic systems offer good performance in analyzing small, microliter- or nanoliter-sized sample volumes. However, because of their micrometer dimensions, microfluidic "lab-on-a-chip" detectors need many hours to process large, milliliter-sized sample volumes. Slow flow

rates in microfluidic assays are usually a consequence of the microscale dimensions of the sensing channels. These dimensions are necessary to increase the probability of a rare cell (i.e., a CTC) binding on the walls of the microchannels and in some cases to increase the signal-to-noise ratio of the underlying detection mechanism. Thus, the prior microfluidic cell detectors can be generally inefficient and can require prohibitively long analysis times for analyzing the large volume samples necessary for the detection of rare targets like CTCs.

[007] In one microfluidic detection system developed by the Toner and Haber groups of Massachusetts General Hospital, a lab-on-a-chip is populated with antibody-functionalized 100 μm diameter posts spaced 50 μm apart to create fluid flow paths. In another chip design, the posts were replaced with a herringbone structure to actively assist mixing of the cells and increase their probability to bind the functionalized walls. In these studies, flow rates used with clinical samples were on the order of 1 mL per hour, at which rate processing a typical 7.5 mL blood sample could take many hours. In order to reduce the fluidic transport times to a manageable level of minutes rather than hours, the flow rate through these prior systems would have to be increased by one or two orders of magnitude. In general the necessary modifications to prior microfluidic systems can be problematic because: 1) the fluidic resistance of the micron-sized flow channels and the associated macro-to-micro connections would be very high; 2) a high flow rate through a small cross-sectional area would result in a high “linear speed” which would create shear stresses beyond levels that could be sustained by the antibody/cell binding on the device wall and lead to detachment of the cells; and 3) too high a linear speed would detrimentally affect the capture efficiency of the target cells in the first place. Increasing the size of the channels would allow higher flow rates but this would significantly reduce the probability of the target cells’ interaction with the functionalized walls.

[008] In the case of other microfluidic devices that use electronic detection techniques, larger dimensions would reduce the device's detection sensitivity since most microdevices need some form of focusing of targets onto a small sensor area for detection. Other researchers have parallelized their microfluidic detectors (many micro-channels side by side) to overcome the throughput problem. However, the flow rates that are used can be on the order of only 10 microliters (μLs) per minute, which can lead to hours of time to process the large volume samples necessary for CTC detection.

[009] A high-throughput yet relatively simple and robust rare cell detection system would be highly beneficial in many research and clinical settings. Therefore, a sensor apparatus is needed that can detect rare cells, such as CTCs, in whole blood in a high-throughput manner by which sample fluids at rates of milliliters per minute (as opposed to microliters per minute) are processed to capture the contained cells. Such a system would also be highly useful in detecting various other types of cells, bacteria and spores present in sample fluids or in the environment.

SUMMARY

[010] According to one aspect of the current teachings a fluidic system including a detector component with micro-apertures is disclosed which is configured to detect target cells bound by recognition elements, such as magnetic beads, in a high-throughput analysis for flow rates of milliliters per minute. In particular, a microfluidic detection system is provided for detection of target cells in a fluid containing a quantity of magnetic beads and a quantity of target cells bound to one or more magnetic beads, in which each target cell bound to a magnetic bead has a smallest effective dimension greater than a smallest effective dimension of each magnetic bead. In one aspect, the system comprises a detector component including a body defining a reservoir and a sensor chip in the form of an apertured plate disposed within the reservoir and separating the reservoir into a first chamber and a second chamber. The plate includes a plurality of micro-openings, each opening having smallest effective dimension greater than the smallest effective dimension of each magnetic bead and less than the smallest effective dimension of each target cell bound to a magnetic bead. In one aspect, the first chamber of the reservoir has a first inlet and a first outlet, in which the first inlet is fluidly connectable to a source of the fluid containing the target cells, while the first outlet is fluidly connectable to a collection vessel.

[011] The detector component further includes a magnet disposed relative to the reservoir so that the second chamber of the reservoir and the apertured plate are situated between the magnet and the first chamber of the reservoir. The magnet configured to generate a magnetic force sufficient to attract magnetic beads in the first chamber of the reservoir to the second chamber of the reservoir. The microfluidic detection system further comprises a pump for continuously flowing the fluid from the source of the fluid containing the target cells through the first chamber of the reservoir.

[012] A method is provided for detecting target cells in a fluid containing a quantity of magnetic beads and a quantity of target cells bound to one or more magnetic beads, in which each target cell bound to a magnetic bead has a smallest effective dimension greater than largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead. In one aspect, the method comprises: continuously flowing the fluid through a first chamber of a reservoir separated from a second chamber of the reservoir by an apertured plate, each opening in the plate having a smallest effective dimension greater than the smallest effective dimension of each magnetic bead and less than the smallest effective dimension of each target cell bound to a magnetic bead; and applying a magnetic force beneath the apertured plate sufficient to draw magnetic beads not bound to a target cell through the apertures into the second chamber and sufficient to hold the target cells bound to one or more magnetic beads against the surface of the apertured plate within the first chamber of the reservoir.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[013] **FIG. 1A** is a schematic view of a microfluidic detection system according to the present disclosure.

[014] **FIG. 1B** is a schematic view of a portion of the system shown in **FIG. 1B** modified in accordance with an alternative embodiment.

[015] **FIG. 2** is a side cross-sectional view of a detector component according to the present disclosure for use in the detection system shown in **FIG. 1**.

[016] **FIG. 3** is a plan view of a sensor chip micro-perforated plate for use in the system shown in **FIG. 1A**.

[017] **FIG. 4** is a side representation of the operation of the sensor chip shown in **FIG. 44** to capture target cells and extract unbound magnetic recognition elements.

[018] **FIGS. 5A-D** are schematic views of the microfluidic detection system of **FIG. 1A**, showing fluid flow paths in different stages of operation of the system.

[019] **FIG. 6** is a bright-field microscopic picture of target cells captured on a sensor chip in accordance with a disclosed embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[020] For the purposes of promoting an understanding of the principles of the invention, reference will now be made to the embodiments illustrated in the drawings and described in the following written specification. It is understood that no limitation to the scope of the invention is thereby intended. It is further understood that the present invention includes any alterations and modifications to the illustrated embodiments and includes further applications of the principles of the invention as would normally occur to one of ordinary skill in the art to which this invention pertains.

[021] The present disclosure provides a micro-fluidic system with a detector component having an apertured plate or chip configured to provide high-throughput analysis of mLs (milliliters) per minute of a fluid sample flowing through relatively large (millimeter (mm) as opposed to micrometer (μm)) flow channels. The fluid sample may be a bodily fluid, including but not limited to whole blood, processed blood, serum, plasma, saliva and urine, or environmental fluids, including but not limited to fluid samples from rivers, sewage lines, water processing facilities and factories. Using functionalized beads capable of binding to target cells in three dimensions, the system eliminates the need for chemical affinity-based binding of the cells to a stationary two-dimensional chip surface. The system uses both convective fluid flow to assist in mass transport of target cells bound by functionalized magnetic beads, and magnetic sieving of the bound cells onto a plate or chip with micro-apertures which captures the cells but allows free magnetic beads (i.e., those not bound to target cells) to pass through the apertures. In certain embodiments the magnetic beads simultaneously serve to: 1) affinity-based bind specific target cells; 2) magnetically transport the bound cells to the plate or chip surface; and 3) generate recognition or labeling signals for detection. The novel fluidic system of the present disclosure

can analyze large amounts of sample fluids, including clinically significant amounts of bodily fluids such as whole blood, in a relatively short amount of time.

[022] FIG. 1A depicts a schematic of a micro-fluidic system **10** according to one embodiment of the present disclosure. The system **10** includes a detector component **12** having a first flow segment **13** and a parallel second flow segment **14**. The first flow segment **13** is provided with an inlet **13a** and an outlet **13b**, in which the inlet is connected by an inlet conduit **35** to a sample fluid source **S**. The outlet **13b** is connected by outlet conduit **36** to a collection vessel **CC**, which is suitable for collecting and storing target cells isolated by the microfluidic detection system **10**. The second inlet **14a** is connected by an inlet conduit **38** to a source of a buffered or physiologically inert or non-reactive solution **B**. The second outlet **14b** is connected by an outlet conduit **39** to a collection vessel **BC** for collecting buffered solution exiting the detector component **12**.

[023] In one embodiment a pump **40** is provided for flowing fluid from the sample source **S** through the first flow segment **13** of the detector component **12**. In the embodiment shown in FIG. 1 the pump **40** is integrated into the outlet conduit **36** to draw fluid through the detector component. However, it is contemplated that the pump **40** may be situated within the inlet conduit **35** as desired. The embodiment of FIG. 1A further includes a second pump **41** that is integrated into the outlet conduit **14b** to flow the buffer fluid from source **B** through the second flow segment **14** of the detector component **12**. The pump **41** may be provided in the inlet conduit **38** to draw buffer fluid from the source **B** and pump it through the second flow segment **14**. Alternatively the same pump, such as pump **40**, may be used to pump both the sample fluid from the source **S** through the first flow segment **13** and the fluid from source **B** through the second flow segment **14**, as depicted in the enlarged segment shown in FIG. 1B. In this

embodiment the two outlet conduits **36, 39** are connected to the pump **40** through a bi-directional valve **V6** that is controllable to selectably connect one or the other outlet for flow through the pump, according to a fluid flow protocol discussed herein.

[024] Returning to **FIG. 1A**, the microfluidic system **10** incorporates bypass lines that are selectively activated according to a fluid flow protocol described below. A bypass line **42** is provided between the buffer source **B** and the inlet conduit **35** to the first flow segment **13** of the detector component. A valve **V1** is operable to control flow of buffer solution from the source **B** into both inlet conduits **35, 38**, while a valve **V2** is operable to control flow of buffer solution into the first inlet conduit **35**.

[025] In a second bypass path, a bypass line **43** is connected between the first outlet conduit **36** and the first inlet conduit **35**. This bypass line thus returns fluid exiting the first flow segment **13** of the detector component back to the inlet **13a** for the first flow segment. A valve **V3** controls fluid flow through the second bypass line **43**. A third bypass path includes the bypass line **44** from the second outlet conduit **39** to the source **S** containing the sample fluid. A valve **V4** is configured to direct the flow of buffer fluid exiting the second flow segment **14** either to the buffer collection vessel **BC** or to the third bypass line **44**. The system **10** is provided with a control module **45** that is operable to control the pump(s) **40** (and **41** if present) as well as the valves to control the flow of fluids through each flow segment **13, 14** of the detector component **12**, according to a flow protocol described herein.

[026] The microfluidic system **10** may be configured to accept sample fluids from multiple sources **S_i**. The multiple sources **S_i** may be connected in series or in parallel, with appropriate valving to connect the particular source to the inlet conduit **35** to the first flow segment **13** of the detector component. The system may be further modified to include additional detector

components **12i** connected to the outlet conduit **36** from the first flow segment **13**, by way of a control valve **V5**.

[027] The flow of sample fluid and buffer solution through the system **10**, and particularly through the detector component **12**, has thus far been described. Details of the detector component **12** and its function are illustrated in **FIGS. 2-4**. Turning first to the cross-sectional view in **FIG. 2**, the detector component **12** includes a body **15** that may be in the form of two halves **15a, 15b** that are combined to form the complete component. The body **15** defines a reservoir **16** that is separated into a first chamber **16a** and a second chamber **16b** by a sensor chip in the form of a micro-apertured plate **18**. The first chamber **16a** is in communication with the first flow inlet **13a** and the first flow outlet **13b** and thus forms the first flow segment **13** of the detector component. A first inlet channel **22** communicates between the first chamber **16a** and the inlet **13a**, while a first outlet channel **23** communicates with the outlet **13b**. In the illustrated embodiment, the two channels are angled toward the reservoir **16**, or defined at a non-planar angle relative to the reservoir, so that the target cells and sample fluid do not accumulate within the channel **22** or inlet conduit **35**.

[028] The second chamber **16b** is in communication with the respective second inlet and outlet **14a, 14b** to form the second flow segment **14** of the detector component. An inlet channel **25** communicates between the second chamber and the second inlet **14a**, which an outlet channel **26** communicates with the second outlet **14b**. The two channels **25, 26** can be angled but need not be since the second chamber **16b** is connected to the buffer solution source **B** and no target cells flow through this second fluid flow path **14**.

[029] The reservoir **16** may be open at one side of the detector component **12**, with the reservoir opening sealed and closed by a window or viewing panel **20**. The viewing panel **20** is

oriented to provide an unobstructed view of the apertured plate **18** within the reservoir **16**. In one embodiment the viewing panel **20** is optically transparent to permit direct visualization of the surface of the apertured plate.

[030] The sensor chip or apertured plate **18** may be supported by a plate mounting **28**, formed around the perimeter of the plate, that is trapped between the two body halves **15a**, **15b** when they are coupled together. A seal **29** may be provided on one or both sides of the plate mounting **28** to ensure a fluid-tight seal between the two chambers **16a**, **16b**. Details of the apertured plate are shown in **FIGS. 3-4**. In particular, the plate **18** includes an upper surface **51** and a plurality of micro-sized apertures or openings **50** defined therethrough. In one embodiment the openings are generally uniformly sized and have a largest effective dimension **d** that is less than the smallest effective dimension of a target cell **T** (**FIG. 4**) that is to be detected. Moreover, the smallest effective dimension **d** of the plate openings is greater than a largest effective dimension of magnetic recognition elements **M**. For the purposes of the present disclosure, the term "effective dimension" refers to a dimension of a particular element measured along a particular axis. For a circular opening in the plate or a spherical magnetic bead, the smallest and largest effective dimensions are the same and are simply the diameter of the opening or bead. For an oblong opening, the largest effective dimension is the length of the opening along its long axis, while the smallest effective dimension is the width along the short axis. The target cells may not exhibit a uniform three-dimensional shape, (such as a sphere) so the cell will have a different dimension depending upon the axis of measurement. For cells of this type, the term "smallest effective dimension" refers to the smallest of those measurements. Thus, the relative effective dimensions of the plate openings are such that a magnetic bead can always pass through any

opening no matter how the bead is oriented, while a target cell can never pass through any opening regardless of how it is oriented.

[031] The microfluidic system **10** is configured to detect and isolate target cells **T** that are bound to recognition elements **M**. Thus, the fluid source **S** holds a sample fluid that contains target cells, for instance a blood sample of a patient that contains circulating tumor cells (CTCs) or a sample that has exemplary tumor cell lines such as lymph node carcinoma of the prostate cells (LNCaP) or ovarian cancer cells (IGROV). The fluid sample further contains recognition elements in the form of magnetic beads **M** that bind to the target cells. Details of the target cells and recognition elements will follow, but with respect to the openings **50** in plate **18** it can be appreciated that the size of the openings is calibrated so that any free magnetic beads **M** (i.e., beads that have not bound to a target cell **T**) will pass freely through the opening, such as the beads **M_x** on the right side of the plate in **FIG. 4**. On the other hand, the openings **50** are sized so that the target cells **T** cannot pass therethrough, with or without any magnetic beads bound thereto, such as beads **M_B**.

[032] The significance of the magnetic beads **M** can be appreciated by referring back to **FIG. 2**. In particular, the body **15** of the detector component **12** includes a magnet **32** mounted within a cavity **31** beneath the second chamber **16b**. In particular, the magnet **32** is positioned so that the magnetic force attracts magnetic beads **M** within the first chamber **16a** toward the apertured plate **18**. It is this magnetic force that pulls the free magnetic beads **M_x** through the openings **50**, as illustrated in **FIG. 4**, even while the beads are under the influence of a fluid flow **F** that is substantially parallel to the surface **51** of the plate **18**. This same magnetic force also attracts beads **M_B** that are bound to a target cell **T**, which are also under the influence of the parallel fluid flow **F**. However, since the target cell **T** is too large to pass through any opening the magnetic

force serves to hold the bound target cell against the surface **51** of the apertured plate **18**. In certain instances the target cell **T** is large enough relative to the magnetic beads **M** to have several beads **M_B** bound to the cell. As depicted in **FIG. 4**, some of the bound beads **M_B** extend partially into an opening **50**. The beads **M_B** are held within the opening by the magnetic force, which not only holds the bound target cell **T** to the plate surface **51** but also restrains or "locks" the cell against translating along the surface or being washed away under the influence of the fluid flow **F**. Thus, the bound beads **M_B** not only capture target cells but also help prevent the captured target cells from bunching up or collecting at the outlet end of the first chamber **16a**.

[033] The magnet **32** is calibrated relative to the magnetic beads **M** to exert a magnetic force sufficient to pull the beads toward the apertured plate but not so strong as to break the bound beads **M_B** away from a target cell **T** captured on the plate surface **51**. The magnetic force is also sufficiently strong to pull the beads and target cells out of the fluid flow **F** that tends to propel the beads and cells in a flow path parallel to the surface **51** of the sensor chip plate **18**. In a specific example the magnet is a NdFeB Cube Magnet (about 5x5x5mm) with a measured flux density and gradient of 0.4 T and 100 T/m, respectively. Other magnets are envisioned including but not limited to larger or smaller permanent magnets made of various materials, and electromagnets that are commercially available or manufactured using standard or microfabrication procedures and that are capable of generating time-varying magnetic fields. In the illustrated embodiment of **FIG. 2** the magnet **32** is housed within a cavity **31** formed in the bottom half **15b** of the housing. However, the magnet may be affixed to or supported relative to the outside of the detector component **12** provided that it is oriented in a manner to draw the magnetic beads **M** from the first chamber **16a** to the second chamber **16b**. It is further contemplated that the magnet **32** may be associated with the detector body **15** so that the distance

of the magnet from the apertured plate **18** may be varied to thereby vary the magnetic force applied to the magnetic beads in the first chamber **16a**. The magnetic force may thus be calibrated to a particular magnetic bead. In addition, the magnet **32** may be moved to remove the magnetic force entirely according to a flow protocol for the microfluidic system **10**. Removal of the magnetic field can facilitate the removal of captured target cells from the plate surface so that the target cells may be transported or flushed to a separate collection vessel **CC**.

[034] In another embodiment, a magnetic field may be applied from the top of the detector component **12** or directly above the surface **51** of the sensor chip plate **18**. This magnetic field may thus "levitate" the captured target cells off the surface **51** to further facilitate their removal. It is contemplated in this embodiment that the magnetic field of the magnet **32** is disrupted as described above so that the magnetic field applied from the top of the component does not "compete" with the original capturing magnetic field.

[035] As explained above, the pump(s) **40** (**41**) and the valves **V1-V5** are controlled according to a flow protocol adapted to; a) prepare the detector component **12** to receive a fluid containing bound target cells; b) capture the bound target cells; c) flush unbound magnetic beads; and d) extract captured target cells. In a first step of the protocol, the system is primed with a non-reactive or buffered solution from source **B**. The solution from source **B** is preferably non-reactive to the target cells **T**, to the recognition elements or magnetic beads **B**, and to any ligands, antibodies, aptamers, peptides, low molecular weight ligands, or antigens used to functionalize and bind the recognition elements. In a specific embodiment the solution may be a phosphate buffered saline (PBS). Referring to **FIGS. 1A** and **5A**, the reservoir **16** is initially flooded with PBS by opening valve **V1**, moving valve **V4** to close the bypass line **44** but open the flow path to the collection container **BC**, and moving valve **V2** to close the inlet conduit **35**

to the sample source **S** and open the conduit to the bypass line **42**. Valves **V3** and **V5** are closed so that all of the fluid exiting the detector component **12** is fed to the buffer collection container **BC**. The buffered solution PBS flows freely through both chambers **16a**, **16b** and through the apertured plate **18** so that all fluid flows through the second outlet channel **26** and second outlet **14b** into outlet conduit **39** and collection container **BC**. In certain embodiments it may be desirable to open valve **V5** to pump PBS from chamber **16a** into collection vessel **CC** in order to avoid any pressure increase within the chamber. The pump **41** is thus activated to control the flow of PBS through both flow segments **13**, **14**. In the alternative configuration of **FIG. 1B**, the pump **40** provides the motive force for fluid flow with the valve **V6** open to both outlets **13b**, **14b** but with pump discharge to only the second outlet conduit **39**. It can be appreciated that this initial flow of PBS through the system will purge the air from the reservoir and channels.

[036] With the detector component primed, the buffered solution fluid circuit is deactivated by closing the valves **V1** and **V4**, closing the bypass line **42** at valve **V2**, and deactivating pump **41**. The first chamber **16a** is now ready to receive the sample fluid from source **S** by opening valve **V2** to the inlet conduit **35** and valve **V5** to the collection vessel **CC**, as illustrated in **FIG. 5B**. Pump **40** is activated to draw the sample fluid from the source **S** through the detector component **12**, and more particularly to pull the sample fluid through the first inlet **13a** into the first chamber **16a**. The magnet **32** is activated to pull the magnetic beads **M** to the apertured plate **18**, as depicted in **FIG. 4**. It can be appreciated that the rate of flow **F** of the sample fluid is calibrated so that the fluid pressure does not overcome the magnetic force. By way of non-limiting example, the pump **40** may be configured to produce a flow rate of several mLs/min, which is significantly faster than the mLs/hour rates of prior microfluidic systems. In one specific embodiment the inlet and outlet channels **22**, **23** may have a smallest effective dimension of

0.5mm so that a 1 mL/min flow rate may generate a linear flow velocity of about 3 mm/sec in the channels and about 0.7 mm/sec through the reservoir **16**. These linear velocities are nearly 100 fold lower than velocities believed to cause damage to target cells **T**. However, at this flow rate a typical 7.5 ml fluid sample may pass through the detector component **12** in 7.5 minutes or less. Similarly, a 3 mL/min flow rate would indicate a passage of a 7.5 mL sample in about 2.5 minutes.

[037] The target cells and magnetic beads are under the influence of fluid flow that attempts to wash them away from the sensor chip surface as well as a magnetic force that attempts to draw them to the chip surface. The magnetic force produced by the magnet **32** can thus be calibrated to counteract the influence of the fluid flow **F**. In other words, a greater flow rate may be accomplished by increasing the magnetic force, since a greater force is required to dislodge the cells and beads from the fluid flow. A limiting factor to the strength of the magnetic field generated by the magnet **32** is that the magnetic force cannot be great enough to disassociate the magnetic beads **B** from the bound target cells **T** or great enough to damage the target cell as the beads are pulled by the magnetic force.

[038] As the fluid sample flows through the first chamber **16a** the magnet attracts the recognition elements **M** to the plate **18** and lower second reservoir **16b**. As explained above, most of the unbound beads **M_B** will pass through the openings **51** and into the lower reservoir **16b** where they are held in place by the magnetic force. Likewise, the bound target cells **T** will be captured against the surface **51** of the apertured plate **18** so long as the magnetic force is present. The remaining sample fluid, less the captured target cells, may be delivered to the collection vessel **CC**. Alternatively, the valve **V5** may be closed and the valve **V3** opened to allow the sample fluid discharged from outlet **13b** to be returned to the inlet **13a** via bypass line

43, as reflected in the diagram of **FIG. 5C**. The use of the bypass can account for any bound target cells or any unbound magnetic beads that escape capture within the reservoir **16**. The sample fluid may be continuously recirculated for a period of time deemed sufficient to capture all of the bound target cells.

[039] It can be appreciated that at the end of the this second stage of the flow protocol all or at least a majority of the bound target cells **T** in the sample fluid have been captured against the surface **51** of the apertured plate **18** within the upper first chamber **16a**. Likewise, all or at least a majority of the unbound magnetic beads **R_B** have been pulled through the openings and are collected in the lower second chamber **16b**. The captured target cells are thus available for viewing through the viewing panel **20** in order to count the number of target cells, for instance. It is contemplated that in a typical procedure the target cells will be rare or at an extremely low concentration within a sample (e.g., CTCs in a blood sample). Thus, the number of captured cells may be very low but easily discernible on the apertured plate. In one approach the captured cells may be viewed by bright-field microscopy. In addition, the captured cells may be further labeled with fluorescent reporters and visualized using fluorescent microscopy. Alternatively or in addition, the magnetic beads may be functionalized with a visual indicator, such as with fluorescent labeling. The magnetic beads may be visualized using fluorescence microscopy. Since the target cells are typically bound to a number of magnetic beads the fluorescent image of the beads will reveal the presence of the bound target cells. An example of captured target cells is shown in the bright-field microscopy image in **FIG. 6**. In this image the captured cells are clearly visible. The cells are MCF-7 (breast cancer cells) that are bound to magnetic beads functionalized with anti-EpCAM antibodies in a known manner. It can be noted that while the great majority of the several million unbound magnetic beads in the sample passed through the

plate openings, some unbound magnetic beads are also present on the plate surface. However, it is apparent that the presence of these few beads does not interfere with a clear view of the captured target cells. In the specific example shown in **FIG. 6** the openings have a diameter (or smallest effective dimension) of 5 μm and the magnetic beads have a diameter of 300 nm.

[040] In order to improve visualization of the collected cells, the reservoir may be washed to eliminate the sample fluid and other cells that might visually interfere. In this instance, the magnetic field is maintained while the buffered solution from source **B** is flowed through the upper and lower portions of the reservoir. The washing cycle may be conducted in the same manner as the initially preparation cycle described above, namely by opening the two chambers **16a**, **16b** to the PBS solution, closing the valve **V5** and opening the valve **V4** to the buffer collection vessel **BC**. Since the magnet remains in position during this washing cycle the target cells will remain captured on the apertured plate within upper chamber **16a** and the unbound magnetic beads will remain collected within the lower chamber **16b**.

[041] The microfluidic system **10** disclosed herein is also capable of collecting the captured target cells **T** as well as recovering the magnetic beads **M**. In one approach, the buffered solution (PBS) is flowed only through the upper first chamber **16a** with the magnetic field removed. Thus, as shown in the diagram of **FIG. 5D**, the valve **V1** is controlled to close flow to the inlet **14a** but open to conduit **35** and valve **V1**. Valve **V1** is controlled to prevent flow from the source **S** but accept the PBS flow from source **B**. Valves **V3** and **V4** are closed but valve **V5** is open to the collection vessel **CC**. In the absence of the magnetic field the bound target cells are easily dislodged from the apertured plate. The flow of PBS can wash the target cells through the outlet conduit **23** and into a collection vessel **CC**. Since the second inlet **14a** and outlet **14b** are closed there is no fluid flow through the lower second chamber **16b**. Thus, the collected

beads **M** remain pooled at the bottom of the reservoir **16** even as the target cells are washed away. Alternatively, the magnetic field may be adjusted to reduce the magnetic force experienced by the bound target cells to a level sufficient to be overcome by fluid pressure from the PBS flowing through the upper chamber **16a**. Since the pooled unbound beads in the lower chamber are closer to the magnet, the magnetic force is sufficient to hold the beads in place. Once the target cells have been removed and collected the magnetic field can be removed and valves **V1** and **V4** opened to flow PBS through the lower chamber to wash the unbound beads into the collection vessel **BC**. Alternatively, the valve **V4** can be activated to open the bypass line **44** to redirect the unbound beads back to the sample source **S**. In this instance the unbound beads may be incubated to bind with any previously unbound target cells in the original source **S** or additional sources **Si**.

[042] As previously described, the microfluidic system **10** may include additional detector components **12i** that may be brought on line by via the valve **V5**. In certain protocols it may be contemplated that the sample fluid will flow continuously from the first detector component **12** to each successive detector component **12i** before flowing to the collection vessel **CC**.

[043] It is contemplated that the conduits and valves be formed of chemically inert materials. In a specific example the conduits **35**, **36**, **38**, and **39**, and the bypass lines **42-44** may be tubing such as 1/16 inch Cole-Parmer type tubes or other chemically-inert tubing. In certain procedures the source of target cells may be a conventional 7.5 mL whole blood sample in which the targeted cells have already been bound to recognition elements, such as magnetic beads. For a typical flow protocol, the buffer source **B** may be a 10 mL PBS reservoir or larger. In certain procedures the sample may be a processed blood sample in which the red blood cells have already been removed by means of lysing or by means of commercially available tubes, such as

BD Vacutainer Cell Preparation Tubes. In other procedures the sample may be other bodily fluids such as urine, or may be water or other fluid samples collected from environmental or industrial sources.

[044] In one embodiment the top and the bottom halves **15a**, **15b** of the detector component body **15** are machined out of acrylic and fastened by screws in a manner that sandwiches the apertured plate **18** and seal ring **29** to form a fluid tight seal between the chambers. However, other manufacturing and material are also envisioned, including but not limited to molded plastic formed in a plastic molding operation.

[045] In one embodiment, the sensor chip apertured plate **18** is about a 15mm by 15mm silicon-on-insulator (SOI) wafer having a thickness of about 0.5 mm. The openings **50** may be limited to a predetermined active area of the detector component of about 10mm by 10mm. The array of openings (such as checker-board arrangement) may be defined on the wafer using lithography and then the holes formed by reactive ion etching of the front side of the wafer. Individual sensor chips may be defined by reactive ion etching of the back side of the wafer followed by HF etching of the insulating oxide. Alternatively, grooves may be defined using lithography and etched into the front side of a silicon wafer by reactive ion etching followed by coating with a thin layer of nitride. The nitride on the backside of the wafer can be patterned using lithography etched to define individual chips. Finally, the silicon wafer can be etched in the opening array pattern using reactive ion etching or potassium hydroxide, and the remaining nitride layer can be removed by etching. As discussed above, the openings have a smallest effective dimension that is sufficiently small to trap target cell-bound magnetic beads, yet sufficiently large to allow free magnetic beads that are not bound to the target cells to pass therethrough. In a specific example, the target cells are CTCs, so the openings need to be

smaller than the targeted CTCs but larger than the beads. For example, the average size of a lymph node carcinoma of the prostate cells (LNCaP) or ovarian cancer cells (IGROV) is about 20 μm while the size of a certain type of magnetic bead may be about 1 μm . Hence, 3 μm openings will be large enough to easily pass a free bead but too small to let a CTC through. In a specific embodiment, the openings may be provided at about 30% packing density, which can result in about 14 openings underneath a 20 μm cell. Furthermore, if each cell is bound by multiple magnetic beads (as depicted in **FIG. 4**), each bead is pulled by the magnetic force so that the target cell is pulled down in multiple locations, making it even more difficult for a cell to pass through a single opening. The openings are also configured to trap the cell-bound magnetic beads to “lock” the target cells from moving horizontally, preventing them from being washed away from the surface of the plate by the fluid flow. In the embodiment illustrated in **FIGS. 3-4**, the openings **50** are shown as having a circular or cylindrical with a diameter. However, the openings may have other shapes, such as a conical bore or an oblong opening in the direction of the fluid flow **F** provided that the smallest effective dimension of the opening meets the dimensional requirements set forth above. In an alternative embodiment, the plate **18** may be configured with micro-grooves each having a width equal to the smallest effective dimension **d** discussed above sized so that the target cells cannot enter the micro-grooves but the much smaller magnetic beads can.

[046] The apertured plate **18** may be coated or passivated with a physiologically inert material, such as bovine serum albumin (BSA) or poly ethylene glycol (PEG). Since the system according to the present disclosure does not utilize chemical binding between a functionalized target cell and the plate, the surface of the plate can be, and is preferably, non-reactive.

[047] In accordance with the present disclosure, the target cell-to-magnetic bead binding is the only aimed affinity binding step, since the detector component **12** does not rely on chemically binding the target cells to a portion of the component. Magnetic beads are functionalized in many conventional ways, including with appropriate monoclonal or polyclonal antibodies (including but not limited to EpCAM antibodies), aptamers or short peptides that can bind to specific target cells. In an alternative functionalization strategy, low molecular weight ligands (e.g. 2-[3-(1, 3-dicarboxy propyl)-ureido] pentanedioic acid or “DUPA” for prostate cancer cells, and folic acid for ovarian cancer cells or other cancer cells that over-express the folate receptor on their surfaces including lung, colon, renal and breast cancers) are used to promote binding to certain cells, most particularly CTCs. Specifically, low molecular weight ligands (e.g. DUPA and folate) can be produced with a functional group (amino, n-hydroxy succinamide (NHS), or biotin depending on the functional group on the magnetic bead to be used) with a PEG chain in between the low molecular weight ligand and the functional group to suppress nonspecific binding to the beads.

[048] Functionalized beads are available from a variety of vendors with chemically reactive groups. Magnetic beads are also available in a wide range of sizes (from 100nm to 5 μ m, for example) that can be selected based on the dimensions of the target cell to which the beads are bound. In one embodiment NHS-coated 1 μ m beads can be the starting point from Chemagen. For these beads, the PEG chain will be terminated with an amino group for covalent linkage to the NHS group on the bead. The beads can also be tested from other vendors with other functional groups, and can be terminated with the PEG chain and functional group accordingly. The beads can also be functionalized with fluorescent molecules using the appropriate chemistry for the functional group. For the example of a low molecular weight ligand, DUPA-PEG-amine

and folate-PEG-amine molecules can be synthesized which can be reacted with the beads before fluorescent labeling. Thereafter, the desired amount of reactive fluorescent dye (fluorescein, for example) can be reacted with the beads, after which residual NHS groups (or other activated moieties on the beads) can be passivated by reaction with glucosamine (or another appropriate molecule for neutralizing the activated moiety on the beads). The ratio of folate-PEG-amine or DUPA-PEG-amine to fluorescent dye and passivating molecule can be optimized, as needed. Similarly, antibodies (such as the epithelial cell adhesion molecule or "EpCAM") can be immobilized on beads. One commercially available example, in which the functionalized magnetic beads are magnetic beads functionalized by attachment to a monoclonal antibody against the human Epithelial Cell Adhesion Molecule (EpCAM), such as Dynabeads® Epithelial Enrich, commercially available from Invitrogen. For example antibodies can be covalently linked to NHS-coated beads, or can be linked to streptavidin-coated beads via a biotin. Various other functionalization schemes can also be used including but not limited to carboxyl groups, thiols, and silanes. Alternatively, the beads may only have the recognition elements to bind and trap the cells on the plate surface but lack the fluorescent reporters which could be introduced separately to bind directly to the captured cells. In one procedure, fluorescently labeled antibodies (e.g. cytokeratin), low molecular weight ligands, peptides or aptamers can be separately exposed to the captured cells.

[049] The microfluidic system **10** and detector component **12** disclosed herein are particularly suited to detection of cancer cells bound to magnetic beads. Many techniques are available for functionalizing and binding magnetic beads to target cells such as CTCs. Exemplary procedures are disclosed in the published the following publications: T. Mitrelias, *et al.*, "Biological cell detection using ferromagnetic microbeads," *Journal of Magnetism and Magnetic Materials*, vol.

310, pp. 2862-2864, Mar 2007; N. Eide, *et al.*, "Immunomagnetic detection of micrometastatic cells in bone marrow in uveal melanoma patients," *Acta Ophthalmologica*, vol. 87, pp. 830-836, Dec 2009; Yu et al., "Circulating tumor cells: approaches to isolation and characterization", *The Journal of Cell Biology*, Vol. 192, No. 3, pp. 373-382 (Feb. 7, 2011); Hayes & Smerage, "Circulating Tumor Cells", *Progress in Molecular Biology and Translational Science*, Vol. 95, 2010, pp. 95-112; Alexiou et al., "Medical Applications of Magnetic Nanoparticles", *Journal of Nanoscience and Nanotechnology*, Vol.6, 2006 ,pp. 2762-2768; and Ito, et al., "Medical application of functionalized magnetic nanoparticles", *Journal of Bioscience and Bioengineering*, Vol. 100, 2005, pp. 1-11, the disclosure of each publication being incorporated herein by reference.

[050] Publications disclosing exemplary procedures for synthesis and modification of folate and DUPA are identified in the Appendix. Any of the procedures and methods disclosed in these publications may be suitable for binding magnetic beads to select CTCs that may be subsequently captured by the detector component **12** disclosed herein. Functionalization of magnetic beads with folate is fully described in references listed in the Appendix, therefore one having ordinary skill in the art is enabled to functionalize similar magnetic beads with DUPA as further described in the listed references. The DUPA molecule itself is also fully described in references listed in the Appendix and elsewhere in this specification.

[051] The ability to attract bead-bound cancer cells to a solid surface (i.e., without any openings) has been verified in experiments using MCF-7 cells (breast cancer cell line) attached to magnetic beads via EpCAM antibodies. The target cells were flowed with volumetric flow rates higher than 2 mL/minute and were successfully magnetically attracted to the solid surface during the flow. The target cells have a smallest effective dimension of about 20 μm so in

another experiment the target cells were flowed over a plate having openings with an effective diameter of 5 μm . Intact cancer cells were observed on the plate using dual surface (cytokeratin) and nuclear (DAPI) staining. In these experiments 9 out of 10 target cells were detected in a 12 mL sample, for a 90% cell recovery.

[052] The operation microfluidic detection system **10** disclosed herein can be controlled through a master controller **45**. The controller may be a microprocessor configured to follow a controlled flow protocol according to a particular target cell, recognition element and sample size. The master controller may incorporate a reader to read indicia associated with a particular sample or samples, and automatically upload and execute a predetermined flow protocol associated with the particular sample.

[053] The controller **45** may also be configured to allow user-controlled operation. For instance, the flow rate for a particular target cell-magnetic bead combination can be optimized by increasing the flow rate of a bound target cell sample until it is no longer possible to attract beads to the surface **51** of the apertured plate **18**. The continuous operation of the system may be directly observed through the visualization window to determine whether a flow bypass is required or whether the detection process is complete.

[054] In the illustrated embodiments the magnetic beads are described may be functionalized with a fluorescent marker. In these embodiments the apertured plate **18** is generally opaque so fluorescence signals coming from the unbound beads **M_B** in the bottom chamber **16b** will not be detected through the viewing panel **20**. However, in cases some free beads may remain on the surface **51** and produce fluorescence signals that can confuse the visualization. In these cases the beads can be functionalized only with ligands and not with fluorescent markers. After the sample has been fully processed and the target cells captured on the apertured plate **18**,

fluorescent-tagged ligands may be introduced separately into the reservoir to bind to the target cells directly. The target cells can then be easily observed through the visualization panel **20**. With this modified approach, in some cases the plate **18** can be devoid of any micro-apertures since the target cells on the plate surface can be readily differentiated from unbound magnetic beads by means of fluorescence.

[055] In the detection process, the lower chamber **16b** can be flooded with a minute amount of buffer or blood, after which there is no fluid flow through the lower chamber until the detection is complete. Fluid diffusion through the openings **50** between the upper and lower chambers **16a**, **16b** will be minimal since this microfluidic detection system **10** is not based on a pressure-driven flow.

[056] CTCs from blood samples of patients of various cancers, including but not limited to prostate, ovarian breast, colon, renal and lung cancers, can be detected since many cancer cells express certain molecules or antigens on their surfaces which can be targeted with various recognition elements, including but not limited to antibodies (e.g., EpCAM), aptamers, low molecular weight ligands (e.g., folate and DUPA) and peptides. The beads can be functionalized as previously described (e.g., DUPA for prostate cancer cells, and folate end EpCAM for ovarian, breast, colon, renal and lung cancer cells) and then incubated and mixed with the sample fluid for 20-30 minutes. This incubation time may be longer or shorter depending on the number of beads used, sample volume and the number of target cells sought. For instance, seeding the sample with a larger number of beads increases the chance that a target cell will "find" a magnetic bead and bind. If there are multiple samples, incubation of all samples can be carried out simultaneously. The analysis of the sample fluid by the present detection system, and the sequence of sample fluid and buffer flows can be carried out as described herein. Aliquots of the

captured cancer cells can be stained with additional recognition elements, such as antibodies to cytokeratins and EpCAM to assure that the cells retained by the detector component are indeed cancer cells. Furthermore, a preliminary indication of whether CTC numbers correlate with the stage of the disease of the sample donor can be ascertained. While the disclosed system is not limited to a particular type of cancer, prostate and ovarian cancer cells are especially mentioned herein as models for the system because both diseases can have vague symptoms resulting in confusing biomolecular tests, and both can benefit from a reliable, fast and sensitive CTC test. For example prostate cancer can have symptoms similar to benign prostatic hyperplasia. PSA biomarker tests can be confusing due to both false positives and false negatives. Similarly, ovarian cancer can have vague symptoms and may be detected as late as stage III or IV.

[057] In comparison with a number of studies which successfully used magnetic beads to manually separate a wide variety of cells (from pathogens to T cells to CTCs) from complex samples, the approach according to the present disclosure advantageously offers separation-and-detection, faster analysis and the ability to harvest the captured cells and make them available for other types of analyses, including but not limited to genetic analysis. Furthermore, in comparison with giant magneto resistive (GMR) or spin-valve sensors which are known to a person of ordinary skill in the art (made of multiple nanolayers with precisely-controlled thicknesses) that can detect magnetic beads, the present approach advantageously is more robust, easy to construct and use, and offers much higher throughput. The system according to the present disclosure also offers a significant advantage over size-based cell entrapment assays which force the cells through micron-sized cavities by fluidic pressure. These assays can suffer from clogging of the cavities (since all entities in the sample are forced to pass through the

cavities), or trapping of other entities similar in size to target cells, or complete passage and hence loss of target cells through the cavity.

[058] The source **S** may include target cells that have already been bound to recognition elements, as well as magnetic beads. Alternatively the source may initially contain a sample fluid, such as a whole blood specimen, to which magnetic beads are added and allowed to incubate. Since the target cells are rare or at a low concentration, it is desirable to seed the specimen with millions of functionalized magnetic beads. For instance, in one approach 100 million beads are provided for each mL of whole blood specimen. A twenty minute incubation time has been found to be sufficient to bind rare CTCs. The system **10** may be primed as described above during the incubation period since the sample source **S** is not involved in the fluid flow during this step. Once the incubation period is complete the flow protocol for detecting the target cells described above may be implemented. Alternatively, as described above, the sample provided may be a blood sample processed by a combination of commercial cell preparation tubes and centrifugation in order to discard red blood cells which are usually not sought during a CTC detection. Alternatively, the sample may be a processed blood sample wherein the red blood cells have been lysed using a red blood cell lysis buffer.

[059] It is contemplated that the system **10** may be modified for incorporation into a dialysis or dialysis-type system. In this instance, functionalized magnetic beads may be injected into the patient's blood stream prior to dialysis. Rather than flowing into a collection vessel **CC** the blood flowing through the detector component **12** or detector components **12i** is returned to the dialysis. A magnetic collection element may be incorporated at the system output to capture all unbound magnetic beads and bound cells that have not been collected within the detector component(s).

[060] Those skilled in the art will recognize that numerous modifications can be made to the specific implementations described above. Therefore, above disclosure is not to be limited to the specific embodiments illustrated and described above. The description as presented and as they may be amended, encompass variations, alternatives, modifications, improvements, equivalents, and substantial equivalents of the embodiments and teachings disclosed herein, including those that are presently unforeseen or unappreciated, and that, for example, may arise from applicants/patentees and others.

[061] For instance, in the exemplary embodiments particular biological cells, such as CTCs, are described as being captured by the detector component **12** of the microfluidic detection system **10**. Other entities, including particles or similar bodies, in the micrometer (μm) size range may also be detected and captured by the system disclosed herein, provided the particles or bodies can bind to one or more recognition elements, such as the magnetic beads described herein.

[062] Furthermore, the apertured plate **18** is depicted as being generally parallel with the lower half **15b** of the detector component base **15**. Alternatively the plate may be angled toward the outlet channel **23** so that captured target cells tend to accumulate from the outlet end and fill in toward the inlet end. An angled plate may also facilitate passage of the unbound magnetic beads into the lower chamber **16b** by inducing a translation along the surface **51** of the plate.

Moreover, the plate **18** is shown as generally planar, although other configurations are contemplated that facilitate capturing target cells and passage of unbound beads.

[063] The magnet **32** is described herein as a permanent magnet with the application of the magnetic field controlled by moving the magnet. The magnetic field may be manipulated by an adjustable shield disposed between the magnet and the reservoir **16**. The shield may be used to completely block the magnetic field or to reduce the field as necessary. Alternatively the

magnet may be an electromagnet that can be controlled by the controller **45** to activate or deactivate the magnetic field or adjust the strength of the field. The controller may also modulate the magnetic field during a detection cycle to facilitate capturing the target cells and drawing the unbound magnetic beads into the lower chamber.

[064] In a further alternative the magnet **32** may include multiple magnets arranged in a predetermined pattern to facilitate counting cells captured on the apertured plate **18**. Thus, in one embodiment several magnets may be arranged in parallel strips so that the captured cells appear in several lines.

[065] In the fluid flow protocols described above, the target cells are flushed from the detector component **12** in one step. Alternatively the cells may be retained on the apertured plate and the plate itself removed from the detector component. In this alternative the magnetic can remain in position as the upper body half **15a** is removed to provide access to the apertured plate. The lower body half **15b** may be transported with the apertured plate and magnet intact and mated with another body half for further procedures.

What is claimed is:

1. A microfluidic detection system for detection of target cells in a fluid containing a quantity of magnetic beads and a quantity of target cells bound to one or more magnetic beads, in which each target cell bound to a magnetic bead has a smallest effective dimension greater than a largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead, the system comprising:

a detector component including:

a body defining a reservoir;

a plate disposed within said reservoir and separating said reservoir into a first chamber and a second chamber, said plate defining a plurality of openings therethrough, each opening having an effective dimension sized to always permit passage of the largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead and further sized to always prevent passage of the smallest effective dimension of each target cell;

said first chamber of said reservoir having a first inlet and a first outlet, said first inlet fluidly connectable to a source of the fluid containing the target cells; and

a magnet disposed relative to said reservoir so that said second chamber of said reservoir and said plate are situated between said magnet and said first chamber of said reservoir, said magnet configured to generate a magnetic force sufficient to attract magnetic beads in said first chamber of said reservoir to said second chamber of said reservoir; and

a pump for continuously flowing the fluid from the source of the fluid containing the target cells through said first chamber of said reservoir.

2. The microfluidic detection system of claim 1, wherein said detector component includes a viewing panel forming part of said first chamber of said reservoir and arranged to view the surface of said plate through said first chamber.

3. The microfluidic detection system of claim 2, wherein said viewing component is an optically transparent glass.
4. The microfluidic detection system of claim 1, wherein said first inlet and said first outlet include channels defined in said body in communication with said reservoir, said channels arranged at a non-planar angle relative to said reservoir.
5. The microfluidic detection system of claim 1, wherein said plate is disposed within said reservoir at a non-planar angle relative to said reservoir.
6. The microfluidic detection system of claim 1, wherein said body includes a portion defining at least part of said second chamber of said reservoir, said portion further defining a cavity with said magnet mounted within said cavity.
7. The microfluidic detection system of claim 6, wherein said magnet is adjustably mounted within said cavity to vary the distance between said magnet and said plate.
8. The microfluidic detection system of claim 1, wherein said pump is connected to said first outlet.
9. The microfluidic detection system of claim 8, wherein said pump includes:
an inlet connected to said first outlet; and
an outlet connected to a fluid line connectable to a fluid vessel.

10. The microfluidic detection system of claim 1, wherein said second chamber of said reservoir includes a second inlet and a second outlet, said second inlet fluidly connectable to a source of non-reactive fluid different from said fluid containing the target cells.

11. The microfluidic detection system of claim 10, wherein said pump includes:
an inlet connected to said first outlet and to said second outlet; and
an outlet connected to a fluid line connectable to a first vessel for receiving fluid pumped through said first outlet and to a separate second vessel for receiving fluid pumped through said second outlet.

12. The microfluidic detection system of claim 11, further comprising:
a first controllable valve disposed between said first and second outlet and the inlet of said pump;
and
a separate second controllable valve disposed between said outlet of said pump and said first and second vessels.

13. The microfluidic system of claim 10 further comprising an outlet conduit connected to said second outlet and connectable to a vessel for receiving fluid pumped through said second outlet.

14. The microfluidic system of claim 13, further comprising:
a bypass line connected to said second outlet and fluidly connectable to the source of the fluid containing the target cells; and
a controllable valve disposed between said outlet conduit and said bypass line for selectively directing fluid pumped through said second outlet to either said bypass line or the vessel.

15. The microfluidic system of claim 1, further comprising:

an outlet conduit connected to said first outlet and connectable to a fluid vessel for receiving fluid pumped through said first outlet;

a bypass line disposed between said outlet conduit and said first inlet; and

a controllable valve for directing fluid flowing through said first outlet to either the fluid vessel or said bypass line.

16. The microfluidic detection system of claim 1, wherein the surface of said plate within said first chamber is provided with a physiologically inert coating.

17. A microfluidic detection system for detection of target entities in a fluid containing a quantity of magnetic beads and a quantity of target entities bound to one or more magnetic beads, in which each target entity bound to a magnetic bead has a smallest effective dimension greater than a largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead, the system comprising:

a detector component including:

a body defining a first chamber and a second chamber;

a plate disposed within said reservoir and separating said first chamber and said second chamber, said plate defining a plurality of openings therethrough, each opening having an effective diameter sized to always permit passage of the largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead and further sized to always prevent passage of the smallest effective dimension of each target entity ; and

a magnet disposed relative to said body so that said second chamber and said plate are situated between said magnet and said first chamber, said magnet configured to generate a magnetic force sufficient to attract magnetic beads in said first chamber to said second chamber; and

a pump for continuously flowing the fluid from the source of the fluid containing the target entities through said first chamber at a flow rate sufficient to permit magnetic beads not bound to a target entity to magnetically pulled through said plate into said second chamber.

18. The microfluidic detection system of claim 17, wherein said pump is configured to flow the fluid at a flow rate sufficient to permit target entities bound to a magnetic bead to be held on said plate by said magnetic force.

19. The microfluidic system of claim 17, wherein said magnet is configured to generate a magnetic force sufficient to overcome the fluid flow across said plate to permit target entities bound to a magnetic bead to be attracted to and held on said plate by said magnetic force.

20. The microfluidic system of claim 17, wherein said detector component includes a viewing panel forming part of said first chamber and arranged to view the surface of said plate through said first chamber.

21. A method for detecting target cells in a fluid containing a quantity of magnetic beads and a quantity of target cells bound to one or more magnetic beads, in which each target cell bound to a magnetic bead has a smallest effective dimension greater than a largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead, the method comprising:

continuously flowing the fluid through a detector component having a first chamber of a reservoir separated from a second chamber of the reservoir by a plate, the plate defining a plurality of openings therethrough with each opening sized to always permit passage of the largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead and further sized to always prevent passage of the smallest effective dimension of each target cell; and

applying a magnetic force beneath the plate sufficient to draw magnetic beads not bound to a target cell through the openings into the second chamber and sufficient to hold the target cells bound to one or more magnetic beads against the surface of the plate within the first chamber of the reservoir.

22. The method of claim 21, further comprising visualizing the plate surface to determine the presence and/or quantity of target cells.

23. The method of claim 21, further comprising:
after the target cells have been held to the plate surface, modifying the magnetic force to a level sufficient to permit dislodgment of the target cells from the plate surface; and
flowing a non-reactive liquid through the first chamber to dislodge the target cells.

24. The method of claim 23, wherein the step of modifying the magnetic force includes applying a magnetic force above the plate surface to pull the target cells from the plate surface.

25. The method of claim 23, further comprising flowing the target cells to a separate collection vessel.

26. The method of claim 21, further comprising:
after the target cells have been held to the plate surface, modifying the magnetic force to a level sufficient to permit dislodgment of the unbound magnetic beads from the second chamber; and
flowing a non-reactive liquid through the second chamber to dislodge the magnetic beads.

27. The method of claim 26, further comprising flowing the dislodged magnetic beads to a collection vessel.

28. The method of claim 26, further comprising flowing the dislodged magnetic beads to the vessel containing a fluid with target cells not bound to a magnetic bead.

29. The method of claim 21, further comprising continuously flowing fluid exiting said first chamber into one or more additional similarly configured detector components.

30. The method of claim 21, in which the fluid is contained in a more than one sample vessel and wherein the detector component is fluidly connected to the sample vessels to continuously flow the fluid sequentially from the vessels through the detector component.

31. The method of claim 21, further comprising removing the plate from the detector component with the target cells held thereon.

32. The method of claim 21, in which the fluid is flowed at a rate on the order of milliliters (mL) per minute.

33. A method for detecting micrometer-sized target entities in a fluid containing a quantity of magnetic beads and a quantity of target entities bound to one or more magnetic beads, in which each target entity bound to a magnetic bead has a smallest effective dimension greater than a largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead, the method comprising:

continuously flowing the fluid through a detector component having a first chamber of a reservoir separated from a second chamber of the reservoir by a plate, the plate defining a plurality of openings therethrough with each opening sized to always permit passage of the largest effective dimension of each magnetic bead and further sized to always prevent passage of the smallest effective dimension of each target entity ; and

applying a magnetic force beneath the plate sufficient to draw magnetic beads not bound to a target entity through the openings into the second chamber and sufficient to hold the target entities bound to one or more magnetic beads against the surface of the plate within the first chamber of the reservoir.

34. The method of claim 33, further comprising visualizing the plate surface to determine the presence and/or quantity of target entities.

35. The method of claim 33, further comprising:
after the target entities have been held to the plate surface, modifying the magnetic force to a level sufficient to permit dislodgment of the target cells from the plate surface; and
flowing a non-reactive liquid through the first chamber to dislodge the target cells.

36. The method of claim 33, further comprising:
after the target entities have been held to the plate surface, modifying the magnetic force to a level sufficient to permit dislodgment of the unbound magnetic beads from the second chamber; and
flowing a non-reactive liquid through the second chamber to dislodge the magnetic beads.

37. The method of claim 33, in which the fluid is flowed at a rate on the order of milliliters (mL) per minute.

38. A method for detecting circulating tumor cells (CTCs) in a blood sample of a patient, comprising:
obtaining a blood sample containing CTCs that have been bound to one or more functionalized magnetic beads and a quantity of functionalized magnetic beads not bound to a CTC;

continuously flowing the blood sample through a detector component having a first chamber of a reservoir separated from a second chamber of the reservoir by a plate, the plate defining a plurality of openings therethrough with each opening sized to always permit passage of the each unbound magnetic bead and further sized to always prevent passage of each CTC; and

applying a magnetic force beneath the plate sufficient to draw magnetic beads not bound to a CTC through the openings into the second chamber and sufficient to hold the CTCs bound to one or more magnetic beads against the surface of the plate within the first chamber of the reservoir.

39. The method of claim 38, further comprising as the blood sample flows through the detector component, visualizing the CTCs held on the plate within the reservoir.

40. The method of claim 38, further comprising after the entire blood sample has passed through the detector component, visualizing the CTCs held on the plate within the reservoir.

41. The method of claim 40, wherein the detector component includes a viewing panel and the visualizing occurs using bright-field microscopy.

42. The method of claim 40, in which the CTCs and/or the magnetic beads have been functionalized with a fluorescent marker, wherein the detector component includes a viewing panel and the visualizing occurs using fluorescent microscopy.

43. The method of claim 38 in which obtaining a blood sample includes incubating a blood sample with a quantity of magnetic beads functionalized to bind with the CTCs for a period sufficient to bind one or more CTCs.

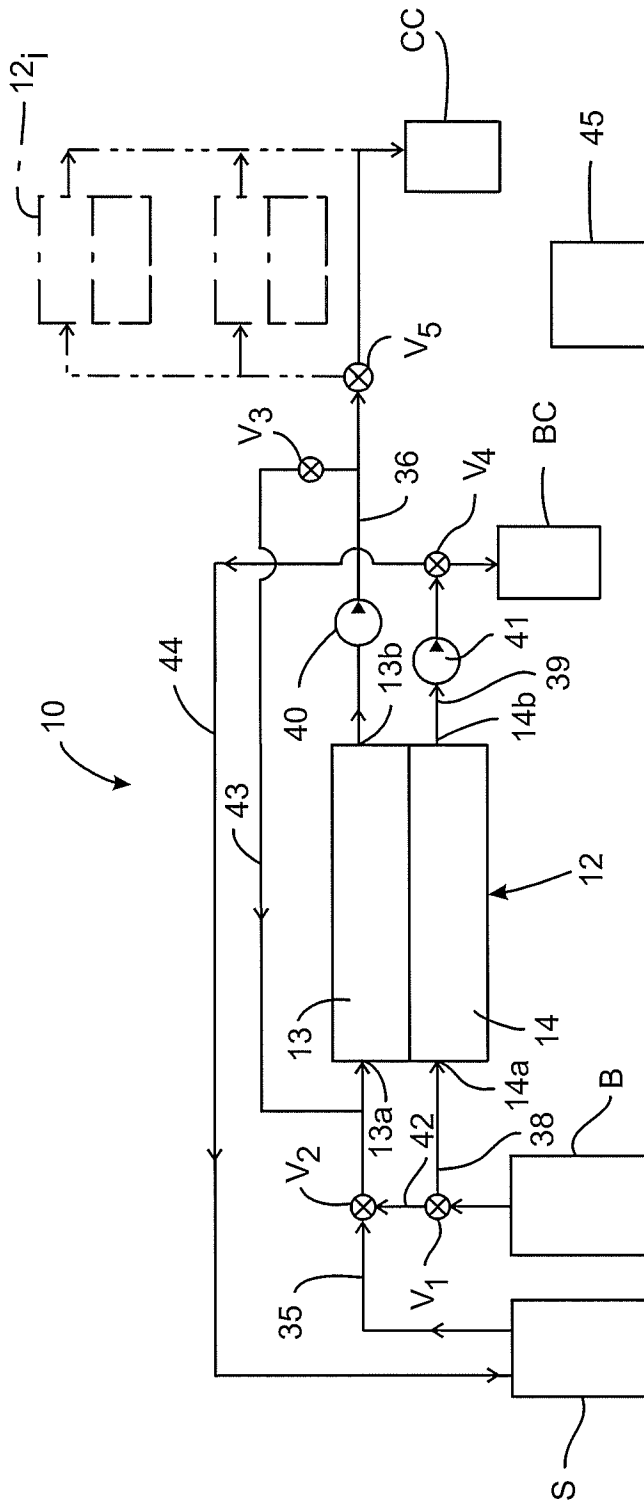


FIG. 1A

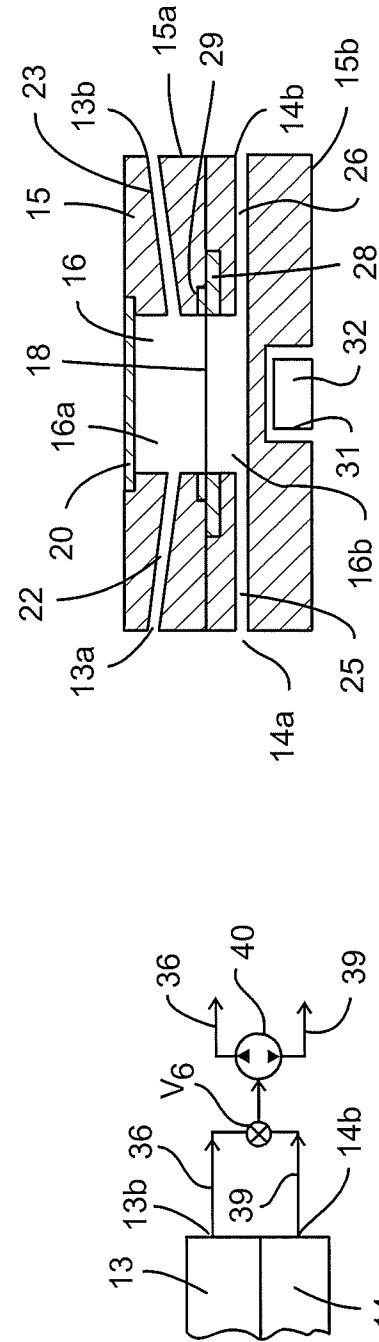


FIG. 1B

FIG. 2

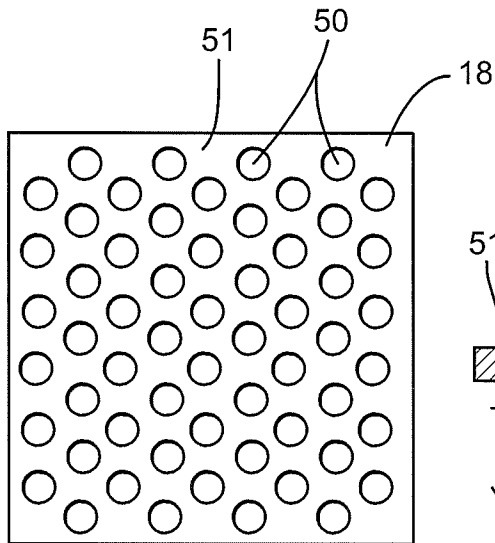


FIG. 3

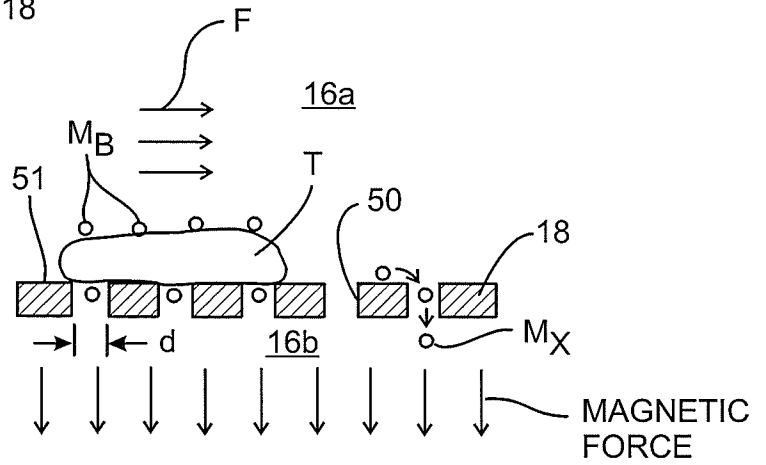


FIG. 4

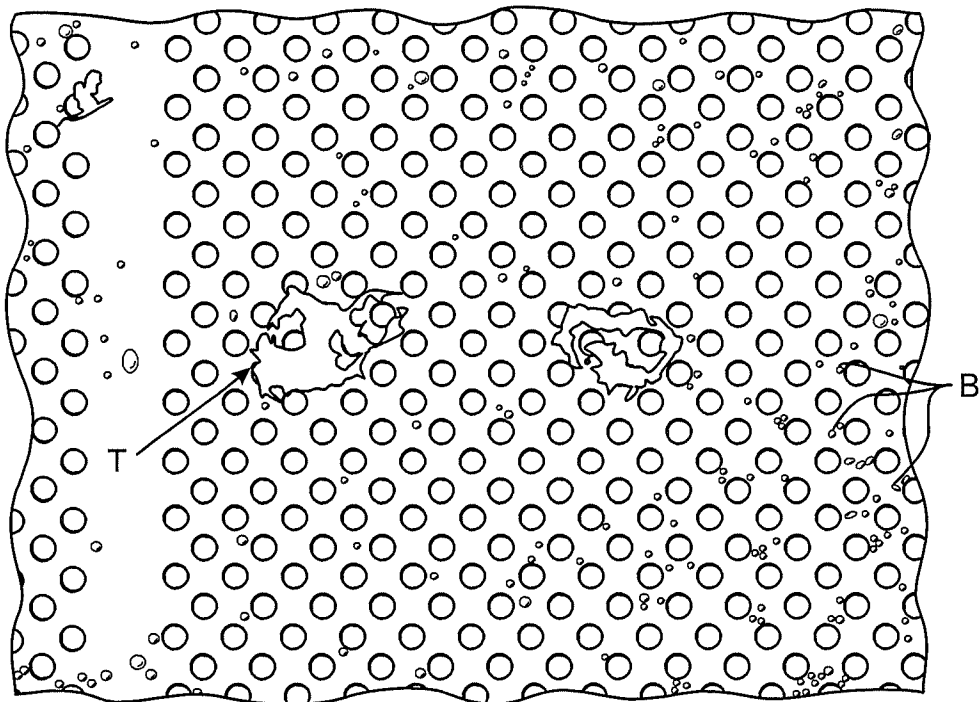


FIG. 6

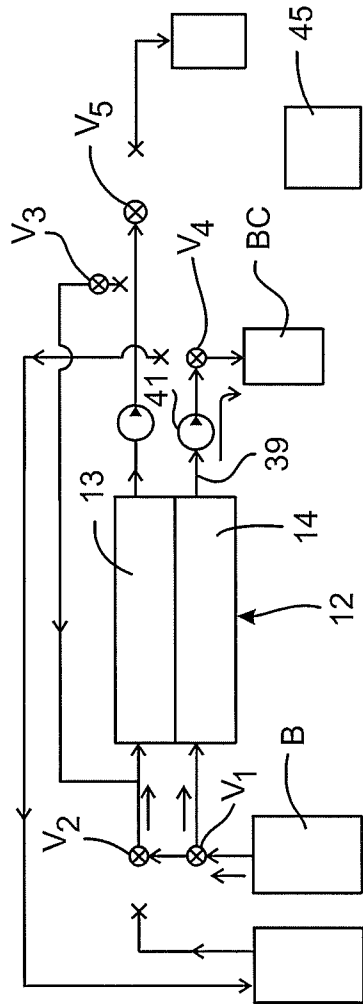


FIG. 5A

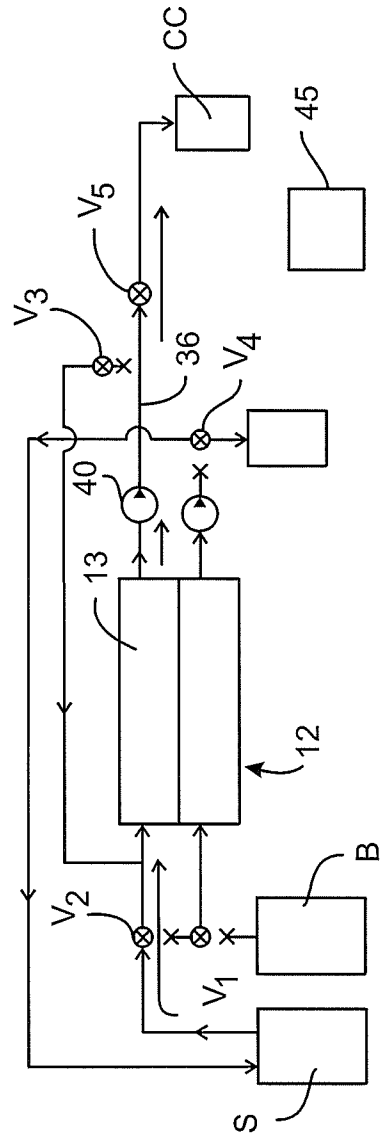


FIG. 5B

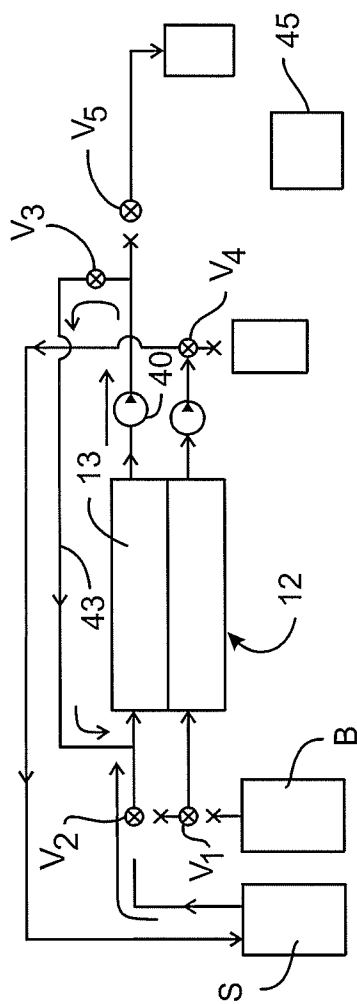


FIG. 5C

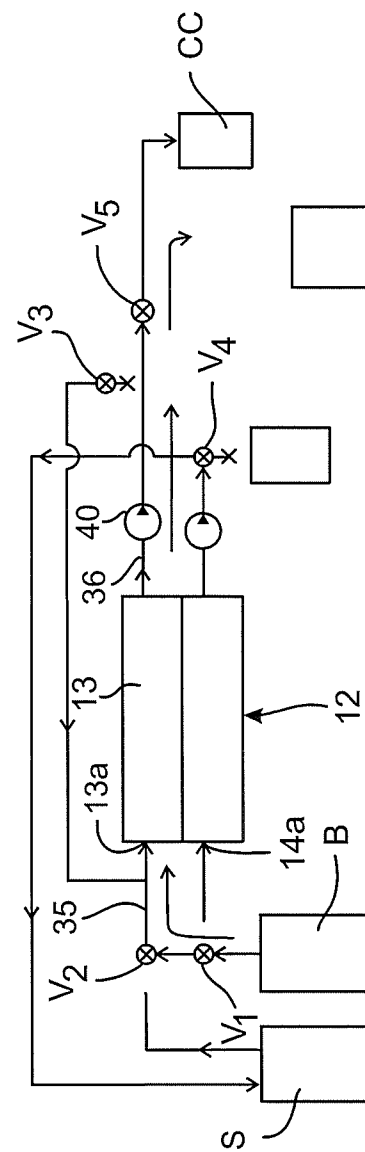


FIG. 5D