Artery Vessel Fabrication using the Combined Fused Deposition Modeling and Electrospinning Techniques

- Amal Owida

Faculty of Engineering and Industrial Sciences,
Swinburne University of Technology,
Victoria, Australia.
Email: aahmedowida@swin.edu.au
Fax: +61 3 92145050
Tel.: +61 3 92143057

Dr. Owida just received her PhD from Swinburne University of Technology and is currently working with Biomechanics and Tissue Engineering Group at Swinburne. Her area of interest is hemodynamic studies especially of blood vessels.

- Shital Patel

Faculty of Engineering and Industrial Sciences,
Swinburne University of Technology,
Victoria, Australia.
Email: spatel@swin.edu.au
Fax: +61 3 92145050
Tel.: +61 3 92145633

Ms. Patel, a PhD student, is working on tissue engineering of heart valves at Swinburne University of Technology. Her research interests lie in the fields of biomechanics and tissue engineering of mainly heart valves, heart vessels and bone.

- Rui Chen

College of Textile,
Donghua University,
Shanghai, China.
Email: ruichen@swin.edu.au
Fax: +61 3 92148296
Tel.: +61 3 92148296

Rui Chen, a PhD student, is coming from Donghua University, China. His research interests are biomedical materials for tissue engineering, nanofabrication techniques, rapid prototyping and physiological fluid dynamic. Now he is doing research work as academic visitor in Swinburne University of Technology.

- Yos Morsi

Faculty of Engineering and Industrial Sciences,
Swinburne University of Technology,
Victoria, Australia.

Email: ymorsi@swin.edu.au
Fax: +61 3 92148296
Tel.: +61 3 92148646
Prof. Morsi has substantial amount of experience in biomedical engineering. He is the research leader of Biomechanics and Tissue Engineering Group at Swinburne and is interested in nanofabrication, hemodynamic studies, fluid mechanics and tissue engineering.

- Xiumei Mo

Institute of Biology Science and Technology,
Donghua University,
Shanghai, China.
Email: xmm@dhu.edu.cn
Tel.: +86 21 67792653
Prof Mo has considerable experience in the biomaterials research area. She has been doing research in Kyoto University，National University of Singapore，Aachen University of Applied Science for seven years before she came back to China. Now she is the director of tissue engineering and biomaterials research group in Donghua University.

- Qinfei Ke

College of Textile,
Donghua University,
Shanghai, China.
Email: kqf@dhu.edu.cn
Tel.: +86 21 67792432
Prof Ke is an expert of textile engineering applied on biomaterials. She also has considerable experience in nonwoven industry. Now she is focusing on complex electrospinning and melt blown technique used in tissue engineering field.

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1. Abstract:

Purpose

In this paper a new combined method of Rapid Prototyping, fused deposition modeling (FDM) and electrospinning have been proposed for the fabrication of Coronary Artery Bypass Graft (CABG).

Design/methodology/Approach

A dynamically optimum design of blood vessel graft was constructed using FDM and Elecro-spinning. Fabrication of 3D CABG model was constructed using pro-engineer based on the optimum hemodynamic analysis and was converted to an STstereolithography (STL) file format which was imported to the Magic software where it was edited to a high resolution contour. The model was then created from acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) which was used as a collector for electrospinning fabrication.

For the electrospinning thermoplastic polyurethane was dissolved with hexafluoroisopropanol (HFIP). The voltage applied for electrospinning was 15 kV where the solid FDM model was used to collect nanofibers at fixed distance.

Findings

The properties of the fabricated vessel agreed well with those of human artery. The proposed method can be effectively used for the fabrication of an optimized graft design. This proposed method has been proved as a promising fabrication processes in fabricating a specially designed graft with the correct physical and mechanical properties.

Originality/Value

The proposed method is novel and combines the advantages of both FDM and electrospinning techniques.

Keywords: coronary artery bypass graft, fused deposition modeling, electrospinning, polyurethane, nanofibres, hemodynamic analysis

2. Introduction

Coronary bypass grafting is an invasive surgery in which the surgeon creates new routes (bypass) around narrowed and blocked arteries, allowing sufficient blood flow to deliver oxygen and nutrients to the heart muscle. In the majority of the cases coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) is implemented using autogenous vein or the internal mammary artery. However, in some patients, autogenous vessel may not be available for use due to quality or absence due to previous operations. In these cases prosthetic or artificial grafts are the only option.

Unfortunately, the clinical results for prosthetic graft in CABG so far are poor compared to autogenous vessel and they lack the ability to repair and re-vascularise and are potentially more thrombogenic than autologous grafts. Moreover, methods to achieve a clinically effective material have frequently involved incorporating biological components in porous biomaterials scaffolds. The selection of the biomaterials is based on biocompatibility, ease of manufacturing into the desired three-dimensional architecture and matching of the resultant mechanical properties with that of the target tissue. Biomaterials that have been widely tested include natural materials, such as collagen, agarose, silk and fibrin and synthetic polymers, such as poly (glycolic acid) (PGA), poly (lactic acid) (PLA), poly (ε-caprolactone) (PCL) and their copolymers and polyurethanes

Concurrently, design of the scaffold architecture remains a challenging task. To be effective, the scaffold must be capable of regulating morphology and function of adherent cells, without compromising tissue-specific mechanical properties. In the case of anisotropic structural tissues such as blood vessels, achievement of suitable mechanical properties and the design and manufacturing of the vessel that totally or partially mimics the physical property of natural tissue is a challenging task. Current fabrication techniques are not sufficiently suitable to control scaffold structure to modulate mechanical properties and surface characteristics and hence a new manufacturing technique is needed.

The main advantage of rapid prototyping (RP) is to create an uncharacteristic product with complicated features easily and quickly with high degree of accuracy. However, selecting a proper RP to fabricate the coronary artery blood vessel can simplify the fabrication process, which depends on the raw materials of vessel and the require properties of tissue mimicking. It is difficult to fabricate the vessel directly if the raw materials need longer curing time for solidification. Furthermore, the operating temperature of the system is too high to incorporate bio-molecules into the scaffold, therefore limiting the bio-mimetic aspects of the scaffold produced. Moreover, the material deposited solidifies into dense filaments, blocking the formation of micro-porosity. Micro-porosity is an important factor in encouraging revascularization and cell attachment [1].

Moreover, one of the most important factors in implant vessel is to allow biological activities such as cell adhesion, migration, growth and differentiation to attain a proper integration between cells and implant for vascularization and endothelialization of the vessel [2]. Most of these human organs are deposited on fibrous structures with the fibril/fiber size realigning from nanometer realigning to millimeter scale. So nano-fibers have now been extensively used to mimic these natural tissue matrixes.

Currently, electrospinning manufacturing technique is the most prevalent process that can create nanofibers through an electrically charged jet of polymer solution or polymer melt. Different processing parameters such as kind of polymer, viscosity, surface tension, jet charge density, temperature and humidity control the electrospinning process, especially the diameter and morphology of the resulting fibers [3]. Recently, researchers have found that the nanofibrous structure formed by electrospinning method will improve the function *in vitro* tissue regeneration and decrease the formation of scar tissue [4]. Therefore, the scaffolds constructed from electrospinning technique can be tailored to totally or partially mimicking the native extracellular matrix (ECM) and the physical properties of the vessel. To date representative polymers including synthetic ones such as poly(lactic-acid) (PLA) [5, 6]), poly(glycolic-acid) (PGA) [7], poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA) [8], poly(ε-caprolactone) (PCL) [9, 10] and natural ones such as collagen [11], chitosan [12], gelatin [13]and silk [14] have been electrospun into nanofibers.

Thus far several vascular scaffolds have been developed based on a variety of hydrolytical polymers. Hong *et al* for example investigated poly (ester urethane) urea and phospholipids polymer blend for small diameter, fibrous vascular conduit [15] Kim *et al* (2008) used electrospun PCL nano-fibers with anisotropic mechanical properties as vascular scaffold. Tillman *et al* (2009) employed PCL-collagen compound scaffolds for vascular reconstruction. Yin *et al* (2009) used silk fibroin/gelatin blend nanofibers for biomedical scaffold application.

However, despite the huge amount of research carried out in electrospinning of various kinds of polymers and biological materials for biomedical scaffold, there is still a need to optimize the mechanical and physical properties of the vessel to mimic the native ECM.

Thermoplastic polyurethanes (TPUs) are widely used class of polymers with excellent mechanical properties and good biocompatibility, and have been evaluated for a variety of biomedical applications such as coating materials for best implants, catheters, and prosthetic heart valve leaflets [16]. Conventional TPU are among biomaterials not intended to degrade but are susceptible to hydrolytic, oxidative and enzymatic degradation *in vivo*. While the susceptibility of TPU to such degradation is

a problem for long lasting biomedical implants, it can be deliberately exploited to design biodegradable polyurethane [17]. The TPU used in this research is of medical-grade, aliphatic, polyether-based TPUs that can degrade and its biostability is better than poly(ester urethane). In this paper, an indirect fabrication method based on the combined RP technology and electro-spinning is proposed for manufacturing blood vessel suitable for coronary artery bypass. The three dimensional graft computer aided design (CAD) model with specific features is designed and fabricated by RP and is used as a collector for electrospinning technique.

3. Design the solid model

Reconstruction of a 3D representation of CABG model constructed using pro-engineer based on the hemodynamic analysis was converted to an STL file format which was imported to Magics software [18]. In Magics software the 3D volume of CABG was edited, distortions resulting and errors due to partial volume effects were corrected. Furthermore, morphology operations, Boolean operations, and cavity fill were used to generate a high resolution contour suitable for the application in hand.

4. Rapid Prototyping Process

4.1 Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM)

Fused deposition processing builds a 3D object layer by layer from a CAD design. Filaments of 200 μm nominal diameter were fed into a liquefier head via computer driven rollers. The FDM machine has a second nozzle that extrudes support material and builds support for any structure that has an overhang angle of less than 45º from horizontal as a default. The material extruded out of the heated liquefier head in the FDM system is deposited in the form of a fine bead of material, referred to as a “road”.

The process of deposition in each layer starts with a road of material of defined width and thickness being deposited to define the perimeter(s) or boundary (ies) of the given part layer. Once the perimeters are defined, the internal portion of the layer is filled by roads of defined width and thickness. The raster fill approach is used most frequently due to its speed and the ability to change the direction of raster motion in adjacent layers. Typically, alternate layers are built with raster directions at 90° to one another. Such a strategy results in maximum packing of material and a minimum of voids between roads and layers.

4.2 Rapid processing in this research

Insight software is used to prepare the model for fabrication. The model orientation was chosen and a model support which holds the model together during the building process was created. Note that the determination of the optimal part orientation is essential for all layered manufacturing (LM) processes. The task of slicing involves

intersecting a CAD model (or the associated STereolithography, STL file) with a horizontal plane. Slicing transforms the process planning tasks from the model to the layer domains. While the computation of layer thicknesses requires information about the geometry of the whole CAD model, the output from the slicing procedure is the layer thickness values of the individual slices for the manufacture of the complete CAD model.

Subsequently, a tool-path plan which determines the motion of the extruder head was also generated for each layer. Path planning is a pure layer domain task. While determining the geometric path and the process parameters associated with the path is solved in interior path planning, exterior path planning controls the accuracy of the external geometry of the manufactured layer. Interior path planning is therefore required for nearly all LM processes. The tool-path information was then converted into machine codes for physical model fabrication as shown in (Figures 1 and 2).

Take in Figure no. 1 and 2

The figure below illustrates simplified cross-sections and measurements used in calculation of the anastomoses length for a typical angle of 40°. In this model the cross-section of graft changes gradually along its length from a circular to an elliptical shape where the elliptical intersection between the graft and host artery is further compressed to fit the smaller artery at the anastomosis based on the assumption of [19]*l* (Wijesinghe, LD , Smye, SW & Scott, DJA 1998, 'Measurements of in vitro PTFE End-to-side Anatomoses: Effect of Angle and Miller Cuff', *Europe Journal of Vascula and Endovascular Surgery,* 16, 6.) so that the cross section area of the ellipse has to be the same as the area of the circular cross section.

Take in Figure no. 3

With the calculated parameters, the graft was modeled first with defined geometry comprised of four sections as illustrated in the above figure. Two sections are two circles with the same diameter, and the other two sections are ellipses. All sections must have the same area. The distances between sections were varied graft by graft to make the transition of the surface as smooth and natural as possible at the site of the squeeze. In this technique the host artery was generated to cut naturally through the graft at one end, where there is an elliptic cross section. In this way the grafting junction does not show an elliptic suture line (Fig. 4) which allows the maximum compliance between the host and the graft in the way that both of the host artery and the graft are not affected much by local high stress concentration by deformation. In addition, it permits the maximum flow through the junction. These two factors are expected to help reduce the problems of intimal thickening and restenosis at the junction.

Take in Figure no. 4a and 4b

4.3 Electrospinning fabrication methodology

Polyurethane (PU) was dissolved with hexafluoroisopropanol (HFIP) at a concentration of 6%. When PU has been dissolved completely, it was fed into a plastic syringe with a needle (inner diameter, 0.21 mm). A syringe pump (789100C, Cole-Pamer, USA) was used to feed the solution to needle with a feed-rate of 1.5 ml/h. Electrospinning voltage was applied to the needle at 15 kV using a high-voltage power supplier (BGG6-358, BMEI CO.LTD., China). A mandrel can be used to collected nanofibers at fixed distance (18 mm from the needle tip).

In order to fabricate small diameter tubular scaffold, a grounded mandrel FDM model was chosen instead of foil to collect the nanofibers and fabricate the porous tubular scaffold. The length and thickness of tubular scaffold are determined by the length of mandrel and electrospinning time. The basic experimental schematic illustration used is shown in Figure 5. Aligned electrospun polyurethane nanofibers were formed onto the target form 200 rpm to 2000 rpm. Scaffolds were allowed to dry overnight at room temperature and then placed under vacuum for 48 hours at 30 ^{o}C.

Take in Figure no. 5

5. Combination of fabrication techniques

In this paper we used FDM for exact fabrication of the hemodynamically optimized artery graft to make exact CABG mould made from ABS as the electrospinning ground collector. Normally either sheet or cylinder is used as the ground cylinder for electrospinning. However, here the mould was fabricated by FDM technique so that the exact CABG geometry scaffold was used. Figure 6 illustrates the combined process. The combination manufacturing step consisted of 5 steps which were shown in detail below. From step 1 to step 4 were the manufacturing process of rotation collector of bypass based on FDM. Step 5, 6 is the tubular nanofibrous scaffold manufacturing process based on electrospinning. Using electrospinning and rotary collecting method, we can get aligned nanofibrous tubular scaffold with exact optimum geometry. This is most the significant novelty in this research.

Take in Figure no. 6

Manufacturing Steps
Step 1: Import of CAD data in. STL (STereoLithography) format into QuickSlicet.
Step 2: Slicing of the CAD model into horizontal layers and conversion into a .slc (SLiCe) format.
Step 3: Creation of deposition path for each layer and conversion into a .sml (Stratasys Machine Language) format for downloading to FDM machine.

Step 4: FDM fabrication process using a filament modeling material to build actual CABG physical part in an additive manner layer-by-layer.
Step 5: Using this FDM physical model as mould for electrospinning ground collector and get the optimized specific geometry.
Step6: Removing the electrospinning nanofibrous scaffold from FDM mould.

6. Characterization of electrospun nanofibrous scaffold

The concept based on the fact that the tubular scaffold is to be carefully removed off from the mould and then dried in the normal way under vacuum. Note that gelatin solution on the surface of the collector is normally used for ease of removal. After electrospinning process, we place the whole shaft in water to dissolve gelatine, so there would be small gap between collector mould and scaffold. Figure 7 shows CABG collector fabricated by FDM and Figure 8 shows electrospun fibrous tubular scaffold with PU solution. As shown in Figure 8, the tubular scaffold showed good morphology and excellent elasticity. Compared with primary scaffold, there was no visible structural distortion found after extending the cross section of scaffold with a medical forceps.

Take in Figure no. 7 and 8

The morphology of the cross section was observed using scanning electron microscope (SEM) (JEOL, JSM-5600, Japan) at an accelerated voltage of 15 kV. From SEM images (Figure 9), it was easy to determine that the electrospun blend fibers maintained their structure in scaffold and the fiber diameter was less than 1 μm. Nanofiber diameters were calculated from the diameter of 100 nanofibers each sample which was directly measured from SEM photographs. Moreover, porosity of tubular scaffold was found to be high as well.

Take in Figure no. 9

Mechanical measurements were achieved by applying tensile test loads to these specimens. Mechanical properties were tested by a materials testing machine (H5K-S, Hounsfield, England) at the temperature of 20 ℃ and a relative humidity of 65% and an elongation speed of 10 mm/min.

Electrospinning the polymer solution onto a stationary or rotating mandrel at varying velocities yielded scaffolds that exhibited both structurally isotropic and highly anisotropic fiber networks. The random specimens and those electrospun onto a mandrel with low tangential velocities (in the range of 200~2000 rpm) exhibited fairly isotropic networks, with no discernible difference between the flat sheet and the tubular scaffold.

Take in Figure no. 10

Table 1. Mechanical properties of TPU nano-fibers films with different rotating speed

	1000	2000
Stress (MPa)	4.0±0.48	5.8±1.74
Strain (%)	135±9.1	120±20.4

Figure 10 shows typical stress-strain curves of different electrospun thermoplastic films (Samples 1, 2 and 3) under tensile loading whereas Table 1 shows the mechanical properties values. The electrospun TPU material gives a characteristic response for elastomeric materials – sigmoid curve. It showed a very soft and flexible characteristic with low Young's modulus and the high elongation at break of 160%. With the increase of rotating speed, the initial modulus of the mats became large. This phenomenon pointed that rotating speed employed a plastic property which is different from TPU. Therefore, the mechanical property can be adjusted to meet the requirement in practice through changing the rotating speed of TPU. Moreover, as it can be seen, the broken stress increases with increasing rotating speed, and the broken strain decreases as this changing. The mechanical properties of nanofibers are important for their successful applications in blood vessel replacement and tissue engineering applications. TPU nanofibers were electrospun into 0.5 mm thick fiber mats to measure their mechanical properties. Compared with the mechanical property of natural human artery [20], the TPU stress and strain all meet the natural artery mechanical properties (natural human artery stress: 1.40 MPa; natural human artery strain: 100%).

Take in Figure no. 11

To study the biocompatibility of the electrospun TPU material, it was conditioned with medium M199 overnight at 37 ^{0}C in the incubator. Then it was seeded with ovine endothelial cells at a cell density of 1 X 10^6 cells/cm^2. The material seeded with cells was cultured for a period of 7 days at 37 ^{0}C. It was observed that the endothelial cells adhered onto TPU material after 15 hours of seeding, with the cells flattened and spread across the surface. The endothelial cells exhibited typical cobblestone morphology, as shown in Figure 11. As expected the cell coverage increased significantly with increase in experimental time period. A marked increase was observed in the cell coverage as early as 3 days post seeding and this effect continued throughout the experimental time course of 7 days.

7. Conclusion

Coronary bypass grafting is widely used for the treatment of Coronary Heart Diseases

(CHD). However, in some cases due to limitations and the availability of the use of autogenous vessels prosthetic or artificial grafts are needed. These grafts require a special design to ensure, compliance matching, re-vascularization and anti-thrombogenicity. These requirements present a challenge in the selection of biomaterials and manufacturing into the exact three-dimensional architecture and matching of the resultant mechanical properties with that of the target tissue host. The RP technique is widely used to construct uncharacteristic models based on computer tomography (CT) scan or CAD model with complicated features easily and quickly with high degree of accuracy. The electrospinning can be effectively used to optimize the mechanical and physical properties of the vessel to mimic the native ECM. In this paper, we proposed a combined manufacturing technique, namely FDM and electrospinning to fabricate the specifically designed artery graft for CABG applications. It is proved that the proposed method can clearly fabricate a specifically designed graft vessel.

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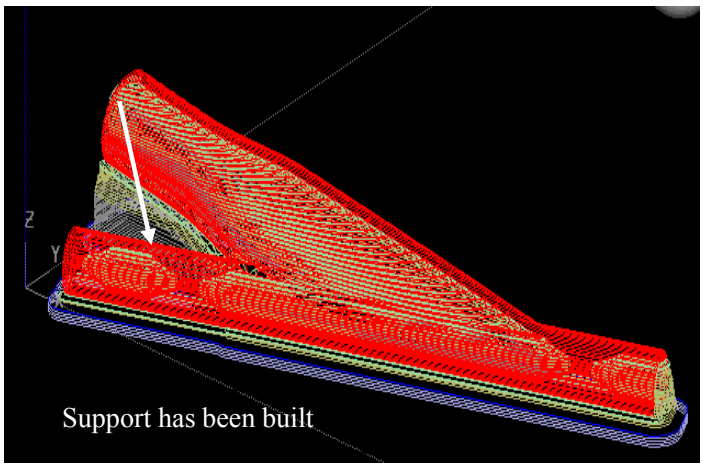

Figure 1 Support and slices in Insight

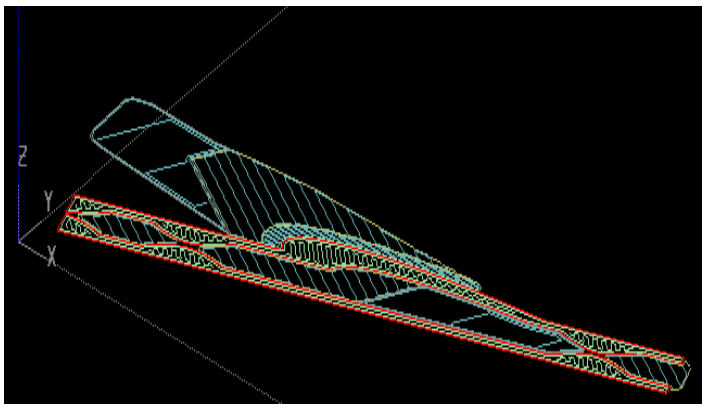

Figure 2 Tool-paths are being checked for validity

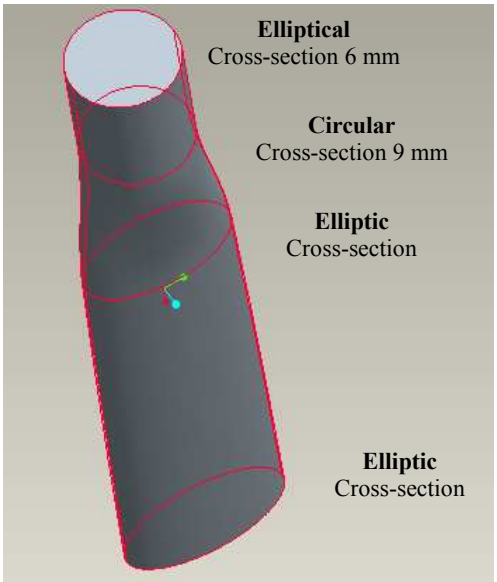

Figure 3 The solid model of the bypass graft with four of its cross sections and the altering surface profile along its length

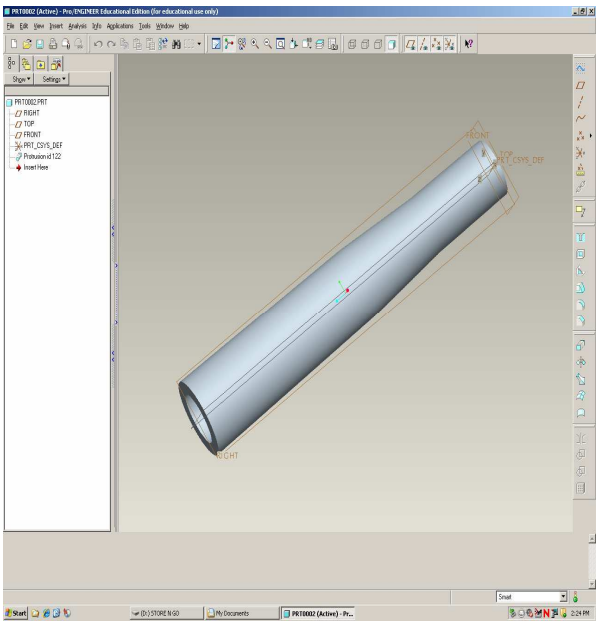

Figure 4a model of the bypass graft after intersected by the host vessel shows different sections along the graft and a non standard suture line

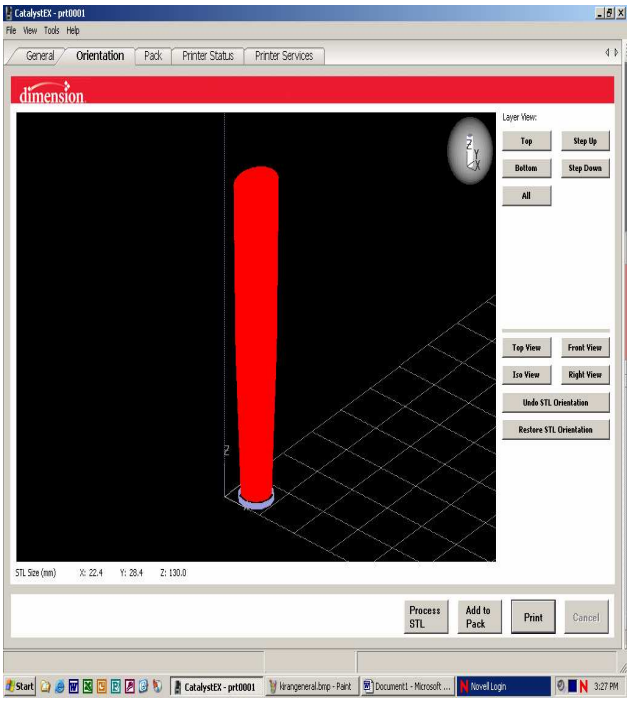

Figure 4b Export options for STL files

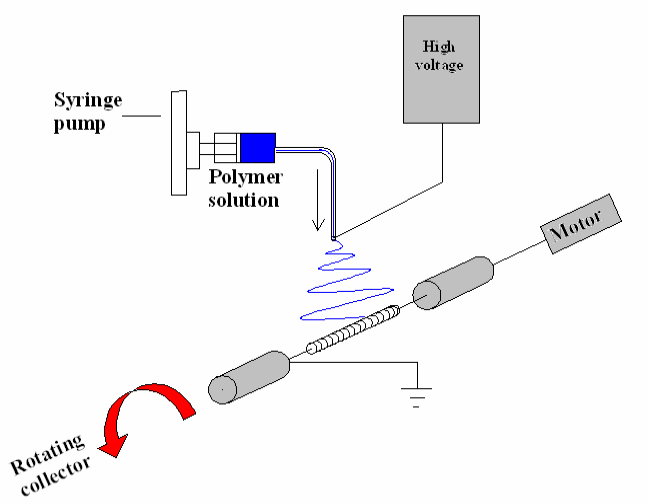

Figure 5 Collecting electrospun fibers on a rotating mandrel

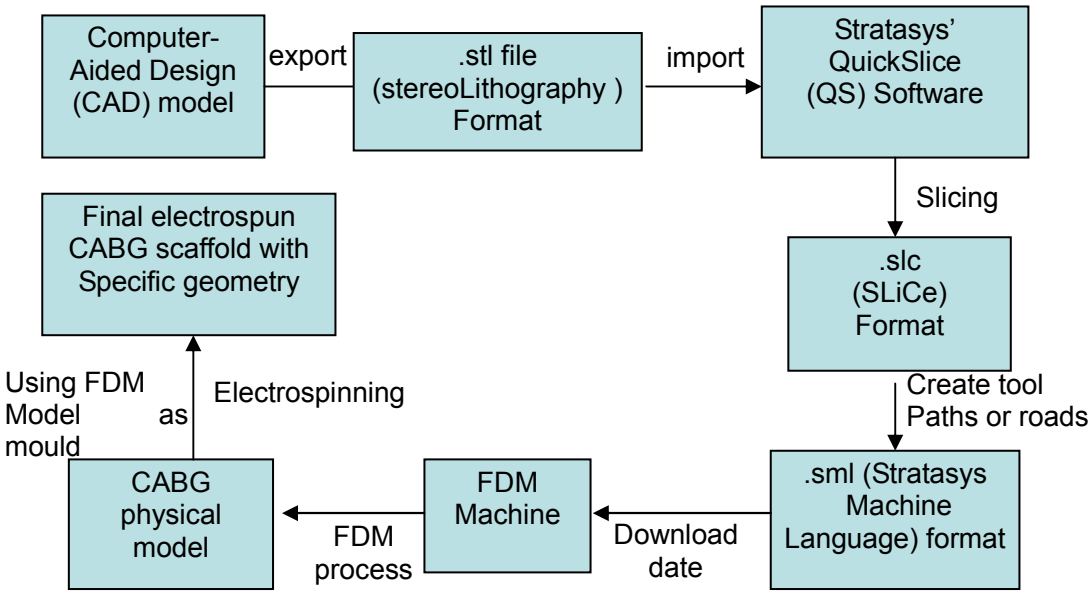

Figure 6 Summary of basic FDM process combined with electrospinning process

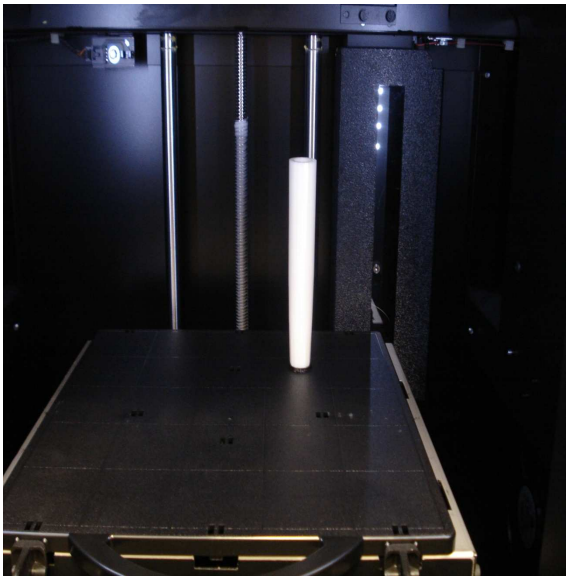

Figure 7 CABG collector fabricated by FDM

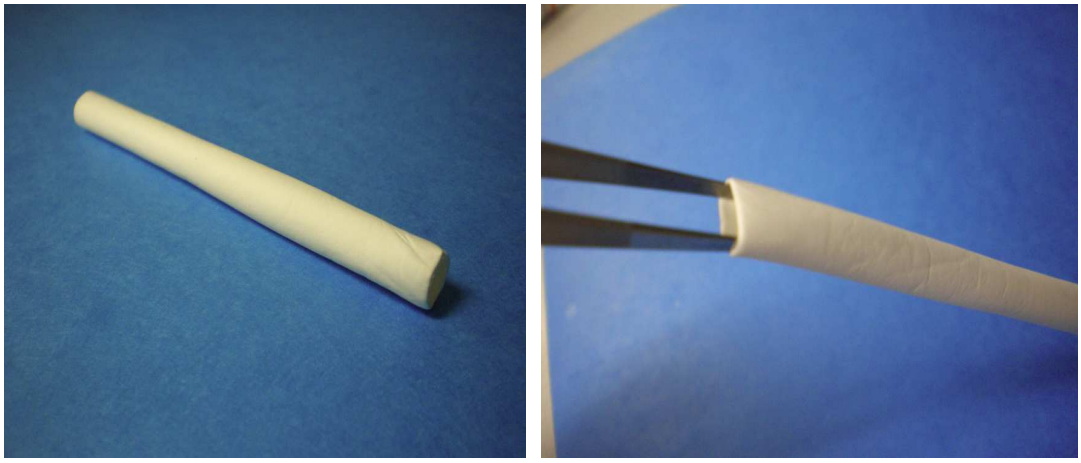

Figure 8 Electrospun fibrous tubular scaffold with polyurethane solution

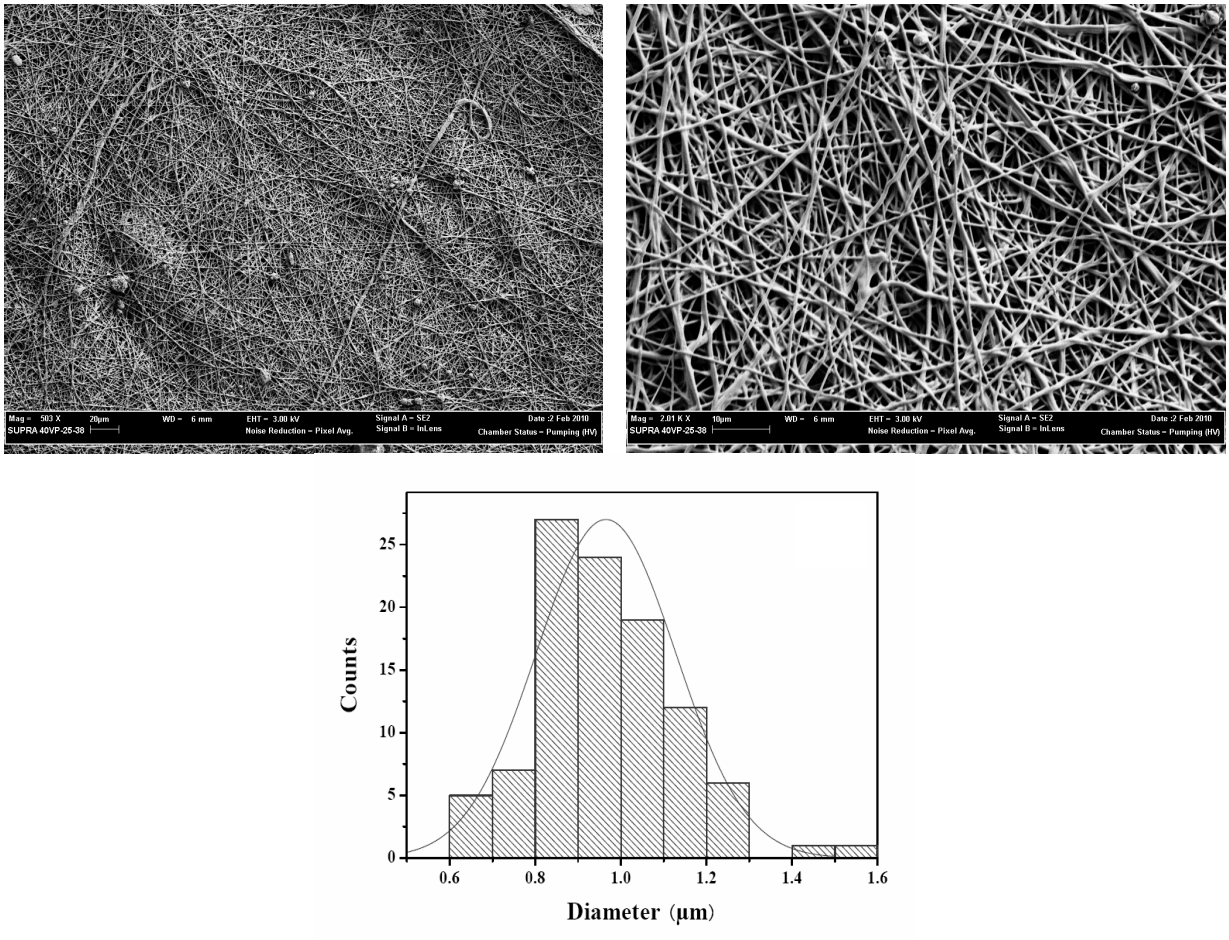

Figure 9 SEM images of electrospun polyurethane under different magnification and their fiber distribution

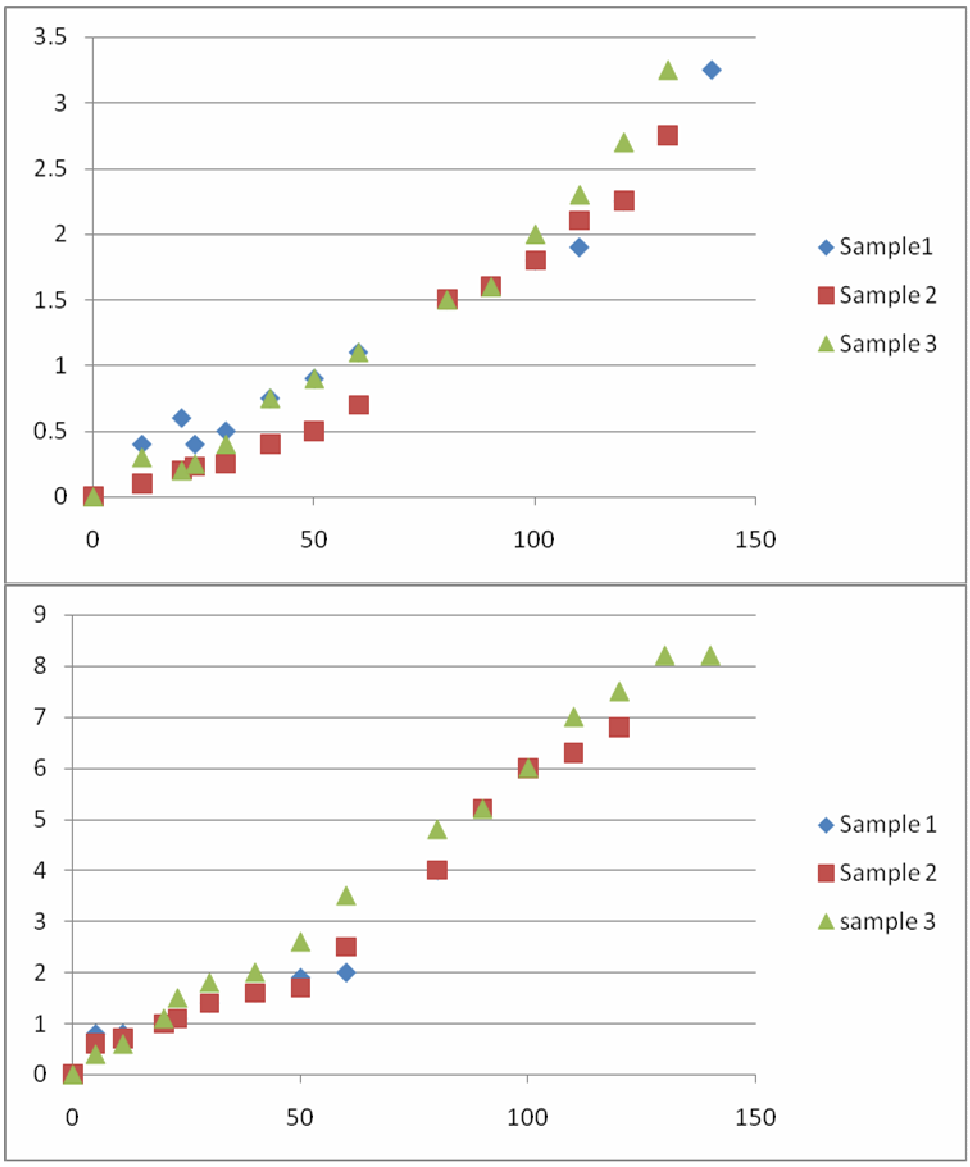

Figure 10 Typical stress-strain curve of electrospun tubular scaffold

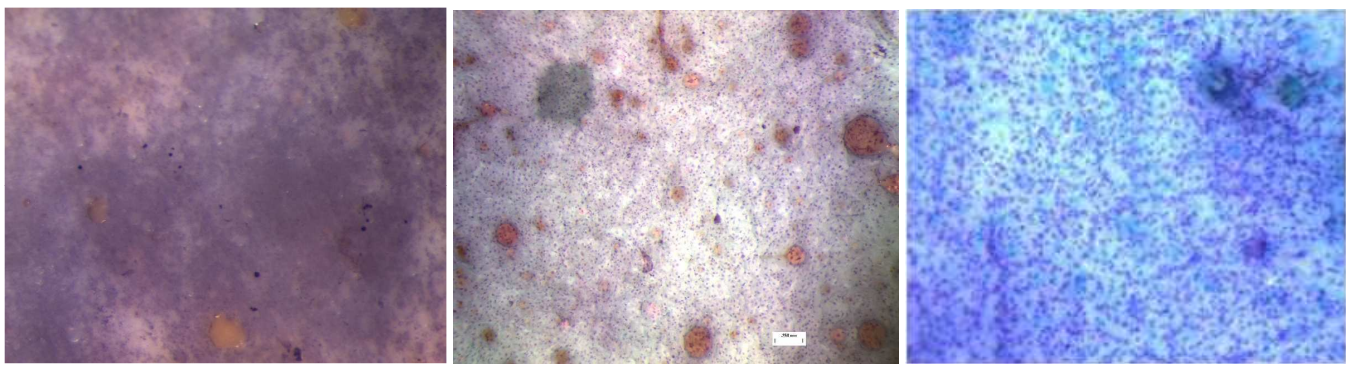

Figure 11 Endothelial cells covering TPU after 15 hours, 3 days and 7 days of culture