Nanopore-Spanning Lipid Bilayers on Silicon Nitride Membranes That Seal and Selectively Transport Ions

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INTRODUCTION

The lipid bilayer membrane serves as the barrier that separates cells from their environment and thus critically regulates material and information flow into biological systems. Because lipid membranes facilitate the highly selective transport of molecules and ions entering and leaving a cell, they have great potential for applications such as drug screening and biological and chemical sensors.1 Pore-spanning bilayers over micrometer2−4 and nanoscale5−17 holes mimic both the nature of in vivo bilayers and their membrane protein’s native environment with fluid on both the cis and trans sides. Reducing the pore diameter to nanoscale dimensions improves the stability of the pore-spanning bilayer, a fact that has stimulated the development of substrates with nanoscale pores for lipid membrane studies.8 Additionally, the creation of arrays of pore-spanning bilayers opens the possibility to use microfluidic automation common with lab-on-a-chip arrangements.4

The creation of these pore-spanning membranes has been accomplished by a variety of methods. The application of a lipid solution in an organic solvent (e.g., n-decane) across a hole2,3 or hole array forms a black lipid membrane (BLM).9,10 A weakness of this approach is that some of the solvent remains in the BLM. The solvent can denature proteins, and as the solvent dissipates, it destabilizes the bilayer and can induce its rupture. A second, solvent-free approach is to deposit the bilayer into place onto the porous surface. Lipid bilayers can be deposited from a cell membrane,11 from a monolayer-coated bubble,12 or from a giant unilamellar vesicle (GUV).13,14 However, these methods do not permit the controlled incorporation of membrane proteins. A more robust way of forming solvent-free pore-spanning bilayers is by the fusion of small unilamellar vesicles (SUVs).18 These SUVs are capable of forming solvent-free pore-spanning bilayers is by the fusion of small unilamellar vesicles (SUVs).18 These SUVs are capable of incorporating of varied lipid compositions, peptides, and membrane proteins.19 However, to date, systems using SUVs have achieved limited success in accomplishing high-impedance pore spanning.

Although none of these studies has achieved efficient pore spanning by high-resistance, solvent-free membranes, they have given tremendous insight into the requirements of such a system. First, low surface roughness of the support is necessary to promote bilayer fluidity on the substrate and good sealing at the pore edges while maintaining high impedance across the pores.15 Second, the surface must be hydrophilic to avoid the formation of an aqueous layer between the bilayer and support, which diminishes the resistance by serving as an ionic reservoir.16 Finally, Kumar et al. determined that the formation of nanopore-spanning bilayers requires a vesicle diameter larger than the pore diameter to favor pore-spanning bilayers over surface-conforming bilayers.17

This Letter describes the combined fluorescence and electrical characterization of pore-spanning, solvent-free lipid membranes formed by the fusion of small (200 nm) vesicles on surface-conforming bilayers.17

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~100 nm diameter nanopores created by e-beam lithography and etched through a freestanding silicon nitride membrane supported on a silicon substrate. By rendering the Si$_3$N$_4$ surface hydrophobic using an organosilane layer, we achieve a high electrical resistance (>1 GΩ), which is important for enabling ion current studies. Optically transparent silicon nitride substrates containing an array of 40,000 pore-spanning membranes demonstrate a membrane lifetime in excess of 72 h.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Device Fabrication.** Silicon wafers coated with 200 nm of silicon nitride were patterned and anisotropically etched with KOH to form 100 μm square silicon nitride membranes (Figure 1). A 200 × 200 array of nanopores of ~100 nm diameter and 500 nm pitch was patterned through each membrane using electron-beam lithography and CF$_4$ plasma etching. A detailed description of the fabrication process is provided in the Supporting Information (SI). Following cleaning, the silicon nitride surface was rendered hydrophobic using an organosilane monolayer formed using either the solution-phase deposition of octadecyltrichlorosilane (OTS, Sigma-Aldrich, MO, USA) or the vapor-phase deposition of tridecafluoro-1,1,2,2-tetrahydrooctyl trichlorosilane (FOTS, Gelest, PA, USA) using a commercial molecular vapor deposition system (AMST MVD100). OTS was deposited on oxygen-plasma-cleaned substrates oriented vertically in a glass beaker to minimize the collection of agglomerates on the silicon nitride surface. Anhydrous toluene was added to the beaker, flushed once, and then replenished. OTS was added to the beaker to make a final dilution of 1:1000 OTS/toluene, and the samples were incubated for 45 min. Following incubation, samples were rinsed twice in toluene, isopropanol, and methanol, respectively, keeping the sample immersed in solvent throughout the process. Finally, substrates were removed and dried in a stream of nitrogen.

**Vesicle Fusion and Electrochemical Impedance Spectroscopy (EIS).** SUVs were prepared by extrusion (details in Supporting Information). The vesicle solution was diluted 1:1 with 0.1 M sodium phosphate/0.15 M sodium chloride, pH 7 (PBS), and incubated for 5 min over a prewetted porous silicon nitride chip to form pore-spanning bilayers: buffer solution was forcibly introduced from the KOH-etched side of the membrane, and more buffer was then added from the other side to avoid trapping air bubbles during vesicle fusion. Gramicidin A (Enzo Life Sciences, NY, USA) was used as a model ion channel to demonstrate the biological functionality of the pore-spanning membranes. Gramicidin-containing SUVs were produced by adding 100 ng of gramicidin A to the lipid mixture in chloroform prior to drying, followed by reconstitution and extrusion as described above. If we assume that all of the gramicidin added was incorporated into the lipid bilayer, then the gramicidin/POPC molar ratio was 1:62,000 within the pore-spanning region.

The electrical properties of nanopore chips and lipid membranes on nanopore chips were studied via electrical impedance spectroscopy (EIS). The chip was mounted in a Teflon fixture with 3.68 mm inner-diameter O-rings sealing the top and bottom surfaces of the chip (Supporting Information). The area exposed to buffer solution measured about 11 mm$^2$. The upper and lower reservoirs are filled with PBS during EIS measurements.

In EIS studies of pore-spanning membranes incorporating gramicidin A, the CaCl$_2$ blocking of gramicidin served as a control to verify that changes in the membrane resistance $R_m$ were due to gramicidin A-mediated ion transport.

**Fluorescence Recovery after Photobleaching (FRAP).** Subsequent to EIS characterization, the nanoporous chips were transferred underwater from the Teflon EIS cell to a perfusion cell (CoverWell, Invitrogen) for fluorescence imaging to ascertain the fluidity and continuity of the assembled membranes. A detailed description of the fluorescence characterization is found in the Supporting Information.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Nanopore Surface Characterization.** We used silicon nitride on silicon wafers because of the ease of adapting standard lithography and etch processes. The fabrication of chips routinely resulted in a 200 × 200 array of nanopores (Figure 1A,B) with a 500 nm pitch (Figure 2A). An inspection of the nanoporous membrane by atomic force microscopy (AFM) using a special slender probe tip with a full cone angle of <10° and a tip radius of <10 nm (Improved Super Cone, ISC75-R, Nanoscience Instruments) reveals a tapered sidewall profile, with the presence of grains sized on the order of 50 nm
and height topography on the order of 20 to 40 nm with smooth transitions between adjacent grains (Figure 2B,C). The nitride surface is relatively smooth and thus well suited to promote bilayer sealing. The diameter of the opening at the bottom of the Si₃N₄ membrane is approximately 130 nm (Figure 2D).

**High-Resistance, Fluid Lipid Bilayers Span the Nanopores.** Both OTS and FOTS were deposited on silicon nitride membranes to provide surfaces suitable for the formation of a high-resistance bilayer. The vapor-phase FOTS deposition produced extremely clean surfaces, whereas solution-phase OTS deposition initially resulted in contamination resulting from agglomerates arising from ambient humidity. These agglomerates were eliminated by orienting the sample vertically and carefully flushing away the OTS solution as described above.

After exposure to SUVs containing fluorescently labeled lipids, a relatively uniform field of fluorescence is visible on the silicon nitride window (Figure 3). The fluorescence outside the square window is darker, presumably as a result of the destructive interference of the illumination with the strong reflection from the silicon underneath. This effect also seems to reduce the photobleaching of the dye in this region. As a result, the rim of the window appears somewhat brighter because of the diffusion of unbleached dye from beyond it. Inside the square, at high magnification, a regular pattern of uniformly bright spots surrounded by continuous darker regions is visible (Figure 3A, inset). Even though the holes are smaller than the resolving power of the microscope, a pattern of bright spots is still easily discernible because the holes are sufficiently far apart. This pattern is consistent with a single lipid leaflet (a hybrid bilayer) over the nitride surface and two lipid leaflets spanning the holes in the nitride film. The uniformity of the spots suggests that all holes are covered with a lipid membrane. We hypothesize that the pore-spanning membrane forms at the bottom surface of the nitride with a hybrid bilayer on the silicon nitride surface and a full bilayer over the hole, as depicted in Figure 1C.

To characterize the fluidity of the lipids on both FOTS- and OTS-coated substrates, we used FRAP. Figure 3B shows a time-lapse sequence of FRAP images along with a plot of the recovery as a function of time. The fluorophores are already diffusing during the bleaching; the small size of the bleached spot and the reduction in bleaching intensity due to the reflection from the nitride explain the blurring of the initial bleached spot and its modest contrast. A fit to the intensity data yields a diffusion constant of $1.0 \pm 0.6 \, \mu m^2/s$, which is in good agreement with values observed for POPC hybrid bilayers on silanized glass. We obtained similar diffusion constants for bilayers deposited with either FOTS or OTS.

EIS was used to determine the electrical properties of the lipid film over the nanoporous nitride. An analysis of the EIS time-lapse spectra reveals that at low frequencies ($1 \, \text{mHz} < f < 1 \, \text{Hz}$) the impedance of the lipid-membrane-coated substrate is dominated by the membrane resistance $R_{\text{mem}}$ which is $>1 \, \text{G}\Omega$. At higher frequencies ($1 \, \text{Hz} < f < 10 \, \text{kHz}$), the dominant component is the capacitance of the Si₃N₄ layer, $C_p$. We observe capacitances $C_p$ of $2.5-4.0 \, \text{nF}$, which is in excellent agreement with the capacitance expected from the silicon nitride enclosed by the O-ring of $3.5 \, \text{nF}$, on the basis of the $11 \, \text{mm}^2$ enclosed area, the $200 \, \text{nm}$ thickness of the nitride, and the dielectric constant $\varepsilon_r$ of the nitride of 7.5.

The stability of the pore-spanning membranes was probed by recording the EIS spectra until the observed impedance reached a value close to that of a bare nanopore substrate. EIS spectra collected immediately and $77$ and $83 \, \text{h}$ after vesicle fusion are plotted along with the spectrum of a bare nanopore substrate in Figure 4. The value of $R_{\text{mem}}$ extracted from each EIS spectrum is plotted versus time in the inset. The resistance exceeds $3 \, \text{G}\Omega$ up to $71 \, \text{h}$. A small decrease in resistance is noticeable at $77 \, \text{h}$, followed by a sharp decrease at $83 \, \text{h}$. After $129 \, \text{h}$ of sampling, the bilayer’s impedance closely resembles that of the bare substrate. These changes in impedance are consistent with the preparation of well-formed pore-spanning bilayers, persisting for at least $77 \, \text{h}$. In some experiments, an intact membrane persists over $140 \, \text{h}$.

To assess how sensitive this system is to the rupture of a bilayer over a single pore, we compare the observed resistance change with the expected resistance for a single open hole, based on its geometry and the conductivity of the solution. We estimate the single hole resistance to be $12 \, \text{M}\Omega$ (Supporting Information) and the combined resistance of the $40,000$ holes in the membrane to be $0.3 \, \text{k}\Omega$. This value is lower than the observed low-frequency resistance of a membrane without a bilayer in Figure 4, but this result is attributable to the fact that the resistance of the holes is in series with the impedance of the platinum working electrode. More importantly, the resistance...
of a bilayer with a single open hole is considerably smaller than the observed gigaohm resistance of a silicon nitride membrane with a bilayer. This fact indicates that the rupture of the bilayer spanning even a single hole is readily noticeable in impedance measurements.

We attribute the observed high degree of coverage of pore-spanning bilayers to the hydrophobic treatment of the relatively smooth nitride membrane, the use of liposomes that are larger than the hole diameter, and the strong curvature of the pore edge. Prewetting the nanoporous nitride membrane before liposome fusion appears to play an important role in this result.

**Gramicidin A Is a Functional Ion Channel in Pore-Spanning Membranes.** To confirm that these nanoporous supports are suitable as a host for incorporating protein channels, gramicidin A was used as a model ion channel. As shown in Figure 5, the addition of gramicidin lowered the impedance to \(~1\, \text{M}\Omega\). On the basis of the relative molar concentrations of gramicidin and POPC and assuming that each lipid molecule occupies an area of 50 Å\(^2\), we expect approximately 43% of the total 40,000 130 nm pore-spanning membranes to contain a gramicidin dimer. Published values for gramicidin conductance\(^{20-22}\) range from 5 to 80 pS, which would result in a membrane resistance of between 0.3 and 5 M\(\Omega\), a range consistent with our experimental measurements.

To confirm that the observed decrease in impedance was due to ion transport through gramicidin pores, we added 100 mM CaCl\(_2\), which displays a shielding effect on the gramicidin pores against monovalent cations. The CaCl\(_2\) solution increased the membrane resistance to approximately 20 M\(\Omega\), roughly 50\(\times\) greater than the initial resistance. The original impedance was recovered by flushing the cell with PBS, thereby indicating successful biologically functional pore-spanning membranes.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The combined electrical and fluorescence measurements presented here show that using vesicle fusion is a beneficial route for creating functional solvent-free pore-spanning bilayer membranes. The stability of the pore-spanning bilayers is about 77 h, and on occasion we have observed lifetimes extending over 140 h.

We have successfully created hybrid bilayers using both liquid-phase octadeyl trichlorosilane (OTS) and vapor-phase trifluoro-1,1,2,2-tetrahydrooctyl trichlorosilane (FOTS) surface functionalizations. We achieved a reduction in agglomerate formation during the liquid-phase deposition of OTS by careful multiple-step rinsing while keeping the surfaces vertically oriented. Vapor-phase silanization circumvented issues with agglomerates entirely, thereby improving surface quality.

The EIS and FRAP data of the nanopore-spanning bilayers paint a consistent picture, one in which a high impedance or functional bilayer is also a bilayer that has good uniformity and fluidity.

**ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

3 Supporting Information
Details of vesicle fusion. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy. Fluorescence recovery after photobleaching. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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Notes
The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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**REFERENCES**


