

MEMBRANE CLEANING WITH PULSED AIRLIFT PUMP

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] The present invention relates to membrane filtration systems and, more particularly, to apparatus and related methods to effectively clean the membranes used in such systems by means of pulsed fluid flow.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The importance of membranes for treatment of wastewater is growing rapidly. It is now well known that membrane processes can be used as an effective tertiary treatment of sewage and provide quality effluent. However, the capital and operating cost can be prohibitive. With the arrival of submerged membrane processes where the membrane modules are immersed in a large feed tank and filtrate is collected through suction applied to the filtrate side of the membrane or through gravity feed, membrane bioreactors combining biological and physical processes in one stage promise to be more compact, efficient and economic. Due to their versatility, the size of membrane bioreactors can range from household (such as septic tank systems) to the community and large-scale sewage treatment.

[0003] The success of a membrane filtration process largely depends on employing an effective and efficient membrane cleaning method. Commonly used physical cleaning methods include backwash (backpulse, backflush) using a liquid permeate or a gas or combination thereof, membrane surface scrubbing or scouring using a gas in the form of bubbles in a liquid. Typically, in gas scouring systems, a gas is injected, usually by means of a blower, into a liquid system where a membrane module is submerged to form gas bubbles. The bubbles so formed then travel upwards to scrub the membrane surface to remove the fouling substances formed on the membrane surface. The shear force produced largely relies on the initial gas bubble velocity, bubble size and the resultant of forces applied to the bubbles. To enhance the scrubbing effect, more gas has to be supplied. However, this method consumes large amounts of energy. Moreover, in an environment of high concentration of solids, the

gas distribution system may gradually become blocked by dehydrated solids or simply be blocked when the gas flow accidentally ceases.

[0004] Furthermore, in an environment of high concentration of solids, the solid concentration polarisation near the membrane surface becomes significant during
5 filtration where clean filtrate passes through membrane and a higher solid-content retentate is left, leading to an increased membrane resistance. Some of these problems have been addressed by the use of two-phase flow to clean the membrane.

[0005] Cyclic aeration systems which provide gas bubbles on a cyclic basis are claimed to reduce energy consumption while still providing sufficient gas to effectively
10 scrub the membrane surfaces. In order to provide for such cyclic operation, such systems normally require complex valve arrangements and control devices which tend to increase initial system cost and ongoing maintenance costs of the complex valve and switching arrangements required. Cyclic frequency is also limited by mechanical valve functioning in large systems. Moreover, cyclic aeration has been found to not
15 effectively refresh the membrane surface.

[0006] It would be desirable to provide an energy efficient operation of the scouring process without the need to control the operation by means of complex valve switching etc. It is also preferable to provide a two-phase liquid gas flow past the membrane surfaces to provide a more effective scouring process while minimising
20 energy requirements for such a cleaning process.

DISCLOSURE OF THE INVENTION

[0007] The present invention, at least in its embodiments, seeks to overcome or least ameliorate some of the disadvantages of the prior art or at least provide the public with a useful alternative.

25 [0008] According to one aspect, the present invention provides a method of cleaning a membrane surface immersed in a liquid medium with a fluid flow, including the steps of providing a randomly generated intermittent or pulsed fluid flow along said membrane surface to dislodge fouling materials therefrom and reduce the solid concentration polarisation. For preference, the fluid flow includes a gas flow.
30 Preferably, the gas flow is in the form of gas bubbles. For further preference, the fluid

flow includes a two phase gas/liquid flow. Preferably, the method includes producing the pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow using a device supplied with a flow of pressurised gas. For further preference, the supply of pressurised gas flow is essentially constant. Preferably, the pulsed fluid flow is random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or
5 duration.

[0009] In one form of the invention, the pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow is used in conjunction with an essentially constant two-phase gas/liquid flow.

[0010] Optionally, an additional source of bubbles may be provided in said liquid medium by means of a blower or like device. The gas used may include air,
10 oxygen, gaseous chlorine, ozone, nitrogen, methane or any other gas suitable for a particular application. Air is the most economical for the purposes of scrubbing and/or aeration. Gaseous chlorine may be used for scrubbing, disinfection and enhancing the cleaning efficiency by chemical reaction at the membrane surface. The use of ozone, besides the similar effects mentioned for gaseous chlorine, has additional features, such
15 as oxidizing DBP precursors and converting non-biodegradable NOM's to biodegradable dissolved organic carbon. In some applications, for example, an anaerobic biological environment or a non-biological environment where oxygen or oxidants are undesirable, nitrogen may be used, particularly where the feed tank is closed with ability to capture and recycle the nitrogen.

20 [0011] According to a second aspect, the present invention provides a membrane module comprising a plurality of porous membranes or a set of membrane modules and means for providing a randomly generated, pulsed fluid flow such that, in use, said fluid flow moves past the surfaces of said membranes to dislodge fouling materials therefrom. For preference, the fluid flow includes a gas flow which generates bubbles which move
25 past the surfaces of said membranes. For further preference, the fluid flow includes a two phase gas/liquid flow. Preferably, said pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow is produced by a device provided with an essentially constant supply of gas. Preferably, the pulsed fluid flow is random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or duration.

[0012] Where a set of membrane modules are used, the modules are generally
30 assembled in an array, rack or a cassette located in a feed containing vessel or tank. To clean a rack or a cassette of membrane modules, the device for providing the pulsed gas

or two-phase gas/liquid flow can be connected to a distributor and the pulsed gas bubbles generated are distributed into the modules through the distributor. It is preferred to arrange one device to one module or to a small number of modules. Accordingly, there typically are a number of devices installed for one rack or cassette. Gas is
5 preferably supplied to the rack and then distributed to each device along the rack manifold. Although the gas is supplied to individual device in a continuous mode, the eruption of gas bubbles from the devices along the rack is produced at random times, keeping the membrane tank feed essentially constantly in an unstable condition. This effect reduces solid concentration polarisation and hence the filtration resistance. When
10 looking down from the top of a rack, gas bubbles appear randomly from different modules within the rack, forming a random distribution pattern.

[0013] Even where the gas supply to the rack is continuous and at the same flow rate, the volumetric gas flow to an individual module generally fluctuates in a small range, generally in less than 15%. This is due to the variation in back pressure inside the
15 pulsed gas-lift device.

[0014] For preference, the membranes comprise porous hollow fibers, the fibers being fixed at each end in a header, the lower header having one or more holes formed therein through which the two-phase gas/liquid flow is introduced. The holes can be circular, elliptical or in the form of a slot. The fibers are normally sealed at one end
20 (usually, the lower end) and open at their other end to allow removal of filtrate, however, in some arrangements, the fibers may be open at both ends to allow removal of filtrate from one or both ends. The sealed ends of the fibers may be potted in a potting head or may be left unpotted. The fibers are preferably arranged in mats, cylindrical arrays or bundles. It will be appreciated that the cleaning process described is equally applicable
25 to other forms of membrane such flat or plate membranes.

[0015] For further preference, the membranes comprise porous hollow fibers, the fibers being fixed at each end in a header to form a sub-module. A set of sub-modules are assembled to form a module. Between sub-modules, one or more holes are left to allow the passage or distribution of gas/liquid into the sub-modules.

30 [0016] According to one preferred form, the present invention provides a method of removing fouling materials from the surface of a plurality of porous hollow fiber

membranes mounted and extending longitudinally in an array to form a membrane module, said membranes being arranged in close proximity to one another and mounted to prevent excessive movement therebetween, the method comprising the steps of providing a generally random, uniformly distributed pulsed gas bubble flow past the
5 surfaces of said membranes, said distribution being such that said bubbles flow substantially uniformly between each membrane in said array to scour the surface of said membranes and remove accumulated solids from within the membrane module.

[0017] For preference, gas bubble flow further includes a two phase gas/liquid flow. Preferably, said pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow is produced by a device
10 provided with an essentially constant supply of gas. Preferably, the pulsed gas flow is random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or duration.

[0018] According to a third aspect the present invention provides a membrane module comprising a plurality of porous hollow fiber membranes, said fiber membranes being arranged in close proximity to one another and mounted to prevent excessive
15 movement therebetween, the fiber membranes being fixed at each end in a header, one header having one or more openings formed therein through which a generally random pulsed fluid flow is introduced for cleaning the surfaces of said hollow fiber membranes.

[0019] For preference, the fluid flow includes a gas flow. For further preference, the gas flow is in the form of gas bubbles. For preference, gas flow includes a two phase
20 gas/liquid flow. Preferably, said pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow is produced by a device provided with an essentially constant supply of gas. Preferably, the pulsed fluid flow is random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or duration.

[0020] Preferably, the device includes a gaslift pump apparatus operative in response to said essentially constant supply of pressurized gas from a gas source
25 connected thereto to store and randomly release pressurized gas and use the released pressurized gas to gaslift quantities of said liquid from a reservoir of liquid to produce said pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow.

[0021] For preference, said gaslift pump apparatus includes an inverted gas storage chamber for storing said gas provided by said gas source and having a closed
30 upper end and an open lower end positioned in said reservoir of liquid, a vertical riser

tube having an inlet port in fluid communication with said reservoir of liquid and an outlet port in fluid communication with said membrane module, said riser tube having an opening in fluid communication with said gas storage chamber positioned for receiving said stored gas from said chamber when the level of gas within the chamber reaches a
5 predetermined level and gaslifting the liquid through said riser tube for discharge into said module. Preferably, the vertical riser tube is located within the gas storage chamber.

[0022] In one embodiment of the invention, the supply of gas may be provided by an external tank containing pressurised gas, the tank being in fluid communication
10 with the membrane module and having control means for providing randomly generated pulses of gas to the module to form said two phase gas/liquid flow for cleaning the membrane surfaces. In one embodiment, the control means may comprise a device positioned in a gas/liquid inlet to the membrane module and operable in dependence on the level of liquid in the inlet to provide gas from the external tank. For example, a float
15 device could be used to activate the control means depending on the liquid level.

[0023] Preferably, the fibers may be protected and fiber movement is limited by a module support screen which has both vertical and horizontal elements appropriately spaced to provide unrestricted fluid and gas flow through the fibers and to restrict the amplitude of fiber motion reducing energy concentration at the potted ends of the fibers.

20 [0024] For preference, the module may be encapsulated in a substantially solid or liquid/gas impervious tube and connected to the pulsed gas-lift pump device so as to retain the two-phase gas/liquid flow within the module.

[0025] For preference, said openings comprise a slot, slots or a row of holes. Preferably, the fiber bundles are located in the potting head between the slots or rows of
25 holes.

[0026] The liquid used may be the feed to the membrane module.

[0027] For preference, the pulse frequency of the randomly generated pulses varies in a range of generally from 0.1 to 200 seconds. It will be appreciated the pulse

frequency is related to the structure of the device and with a particular structure, the pulse frequency preferably varies in a range of about 10 to about 300%.

[0028] Preferably, the pulsed gas-lift pump device can be optionally connected in fluid communication with a fluid distributor to substantially uniformly distribute the pulsed gas bubbles into the filtration module or modules.

[0029] Preferably, the fibers within the module have a packing density (as defined above) of between about 5 to about 80% and, more preferably, between about 8 to about 55%.

[0030] For preference, said holes have a diameter in the range of about 1 to 40 mm and more preferably in the range of about 1.5 to about 25 mm. In the case of a slot or row of holes, the open area is chosen to be equivalent to that of the above holes.

[0031] Typically, the fiber inner diameter ranges from about 0.1 mm to about 5 mm and is preferably in the range of about 0.25 mm to about 2 mm. The fibers wall thickness is dependent on materials used and strength required versus filtration efficiency. Typically wall thickness is between 0.05 to 2 mm and more often between 0.1 mm to 1 mm.

[0032] According to another aspect, the present invention provides a membrane bioreactor including a tank having means for the introduction of feed thereto, means for forming activated sludge within said tank, a membrane module according to the third aspect positioned within said tank so as to be immersed in said sludge and said membrane module provided with means for withdrawing filtrate from at least one end of said membranes.

[0033] According to yet another aspect, the present invention provides a method of operating a membrane bioreactor of the type described in the above aspect comprising introducing feed to said tank, applying a vacuum to said fibers to withdraw filtrate therefrom while providing said pulsed gas flow through aeration openings within said module such that, in use, said gas flow moves past the surfaces of said membrane fibers to dislodge fouling materials therefrom.

[0034] If required, a further source of aeration may be provided within the tank to assist microorganism activity. For preference, the membrane module is suspended vertically within the tank and said further source of aeration may be provided beneath the suspended module. Preferably, the further source of aeration comprises a group of
5 air permeable tubes. The membrane module may be operated with or without backwash depending on the flux and feed condition. A high mixed liquor of suspended solids (5,000 to 20,000 ppm) in the bioreactor has been shown to significantly reduce residence time and improve filtrate quality. The combined use of aeration for both degradation of organic substances and membrane cleaning has been shown to enable constant filtrate
10 flow without significant increases in transmembrane pressure while establishing high concentration of MLSS.

[0035] According to another aspect the present invention provides a water treatment system including a tank; a liquid chamber fluidly connected to the tank; a gas chamber fluidly connected to the liquid chamber; and a membrane module fluidly
15 connected to the gas chamber.

[0036] Preferably the water treatment system includes a gas transfer system having a suction side connected to the liquid chamber and a discharge side connected to the gas chamber. For preference, a source of gas fluidly is connected to the liquid chamber. Preferably the system includes a membrane module vessel containing the
20 membrane module and the membrane module vessel is hydraulically connected to the tank.

[0037] According to another aspect the invention provides a water treatment system comprising a liquid reservoir fluidly connected to a source of water; a gas/liquid chamber enclosing a first compartment and a second compartment, the first compartment
25 fluidly connected to the liquid reservoir; and a membrane separation vessel hydraulically connected to the second compartment.

[0038] For preference, the system includes a chamber hydraulically isolated from the membrane module and a gas source connected to the chamber.

[0039] Preferably the membrane module is immersed in a solid-containing liquid feed contained in a membrane tank, the membrane tank is hydraulically connected to the aeration zone which is fluidly connected to the chamber.

[0040] According to another aspect the present invention provides a method of
5 scouring a membrane module including: providing a chamber having a first compartment and a second compartment; establishing a hydraulic seal between the first compartment and the membrane module; at least partially filling the first compartment with a liquid feed and introducing a gas into the chamber.

[0041] Preferably, the method includes breaking the hydraulic seal, wherein
10 breaking the hydraulic seal releases at least a portion of the gas contained in the chamber to the membrane module and then re-establishing the hydraulic seal between the first compartment and the membrane module.

[0042] For preference, the method includes re-breaking and re-establishing the hydraulic seal to produce a pulsed release of at least a portion of the gas contained in the
15 chamber.

[0043] Preferably, the method includes introducing liquid feed into the second compartment. In one form of the method, introduction of the gas into the chamber is performed continuously.

[0044] According to another aspect, the present invention provides a method of
20 cleaning filtration membranes located in a vessel containing liquid by providing generally random pulses of fluid within the liquid at a number of locations within the vessel. Preferably, the pulses of fluid are random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or duration. For preference, the fluid includes gas. For further preference, the gas is in the form of gas bubbles. For preference, fluid includes a two phase gas/liquid mixture.
25 Preferably, said pulsed two-phase gas/liquid mixture is produced by a device provided with an essentially constant supply of gas.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0045] Preferred embodiments of the invention will now be described, by way of example only, with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

- [0046] Figure 1 is a simplified schematic cross-sectional elevation view of a membrane module according to one embodiment of the invention;
- [0047] Figure 2 shows the module of Figure 1 during the pulse activation phase;
- [0048] Figure 3 shows the module of Figure 1 following the completion of the
5 pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow phase;
- [0049] Figure 4 is a simplified schematic cross-sectional elevation view of a membrane module according to second embodiment of the invention;
- [0050] Figure 5 is a simplified schematic cross-sectional elevation view of a water treatment system according to third embodiment of the invention;
- 10 [0051] Figure 6 a simplified schematic cross-sectional elevation view of an array of membrane modules of the type illustrated in the embodiment of Figure 1;
- [0052] Figures 7A and 7B are a simplified schematic cross-sectional elevation views of a membrane module illustrating the operation levels of liquid within the pulsed gaslift device;
- 15 [0053] Figure 8 is a simplified schematic cross-sectional elevation view of a membrane module of the type shown in the embodiment of Figure 1, illustrating sludge build up in the pulse gaslift pump;
- [0054] Figure 9 a simplified schematic cross-sectional elevation view of a membrane module illustrating one embodiment of the sludge removal process;
- 20 [0055] Figure 10 is a graph of the pulsed liquid flow pattern and air flow rate supplied over time; and
- [0056] Figure 11 is a graph of membrane permeability over time comparing cleaning efficiency using a gaslift device and a pulsed gaslift device according to the invention.

DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0057] Referring to the drawings, Figures 1 to 3 show a membrane module arrangement according to one embodiment of the invention.

[0058] The membrane module 5 includes a plurality of permeable hollow fiber membranes bundles 6 mounted in and extending from a lower potting head 7. In this embodiment, the bundles are partitioned to provide spaces 8 between the bundles 6. It will be appreciated that any desirable arrangement of membranes within the module 5 may be used. A number of openings 9 are provided in the lower potting head 7 to allow flow of fluids therethrough from the distribution chamber 10 positioned below the lower potting head 7.

[0059] A pulsed gas-lift pump device 11 is provided below the distribution chamber 10 and in fluid communication therewith. The pulsed gas-lift pump device 11 includes an inverted gas collection chamber 12 open at its lower end 13 and having a gas inlet port 14 adjacent its upper end. A central riser tube 15 extends through the gas collection chamber 12 and is fluidly connected to the base of distribution chamber 10 and open at its lower end 16. The riser tube 15 is provided with an opening or openings 17 partway along its length. A tubular trough 18 extends around and upward from the riser tube 15 at a location below the openings 17.

[0060] In use, the module 5 is immersed in liquid feed 19 and source of pressurized gas is applied, essentially continuously, to gas inlet port 14. The gas gradually displaces the feed liquid 19 within the inverted gas collection chamber 12 until it reaches the level of the opening 17. At this point, as shown in Figure 2, the gas breaks the liquid seal across the opening 17 and surges through the opening 17 and upward through the central riser tube 15 creating a pulse of gas bubbles and feed liquid which flows through the distribution chamber 10 and into the base of the membrane module 5. The rapid surge of gas also sucks liquid through the base opening 16 of the riser tube 15 resulting in a high velocity two-phase gas/liquid flow. The two-phase gas/liquid pulse then flows through the openings 9 to scour the surfaces of the membranes 6. The trough 18 prevents immediate resealing of the opening 17 and allows for a continuing flow of the gas/liquid mixture for a short period after the initial pulse.

[0061] The initial surge of gas provides two phases of liquid transfer, ejection and suction. The ejection phase occurs when the bubble slug is initially released into the riser tube 15 creating a strong buoyancy force which ejects gas and liquid rapidly through the riser tube 15 and subsequently through the membrane module 5 to produce an effective cleaning action on the membrane surfaces. The ejection phase is followed by a suction or siphon phase where the rapid flow of gas out of the riser tube 15 creates a temporary reduction in pressure due to density difference which results in liquid being sucked through the bottom 16 of the riser tube 15. Accordingly, the initial rapid two-phase gas/liquid flow is followed by reduced liquid flow which may also draw in further gas through opening 17.

[0062] The gas collection chamber 12 then refills with feed liquid, as shown in Figure 3, and the process begins again resulting in another pulsing of two-phase gas/liquid cleaning of the membranes 6 within the module 5. Due to the relatively uncontrolled nature of the process, the pulses are generally random in frequency and duration.

[0063] Figure 4 shows a further modification of the embodiment of Figures 1 to 3. In this embodiment, a hybrid arrangement is provided where, in addition to the pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow, a steady state supply of gas is fed to the upper or lower portion of the riser tube 15 at port 20 to generate a constant gas/liquid flow through the module 5 supplemented by the intermittent pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow.

[0064] Figure 5 shows an array of modules 35 and pump devices 11 of the type described in relation to the embodiment of Figure 1 to 3. The modules 5 are positioned in a feed tank 36. In operation, the pulses of gas bubbles produced by each pump device 11 occur randomly for each module 5 resulting in an overall random distribution of pulsed gas bubble generation within the feed tank 36. This produces a constant but randomly or chaotically varying agitation of liquid feed within the feed tank 36.

[0065] Figure 6 shows an arrangement for use of the invention in a water treatment system using a membrane bioreactor. In this embodiment the pulsed two-phase gas liquid flow is provided between a bioreactor tank 21 and membrane tank 22. The tanks are coupled by an inverted gas collection chamber 23 having one vertically extending wall 24 positioned in the bioreactor tank 21 and a second vertically extending

wall 25 positioned in the membrane tank 22. Wall 24 extends to a lower depth within the bioreactor tank 21 than does wall 25 within the membrane tank 22. The gas collection chamber 23 is partitioned by a connecting wall 26 between the bioreactor tank 21 and the membrane tank 22 define two compartments 27 and 28. Gas, typically air, is provided to the gas collection chamber 23 through port 29. A membrane filtration module or device 30 is located within the membrane tank 22 above the lower extremity of vertical wall 25.

[0066] In use, gas is provided under pressure to the gas collection chamber 23 through port 29 resulting in the level of water within the chamber 23 being lowered until it reaches the lower end 31 of wall 25. At this stage, the gas escapes rapidly past the wall 25 from compartment 27 and rises through the membrane tank 22 as gas bubbles producing a two-phase gas/liquid flow through the membrane module 30. The surge of gas also produces a rapid reduction of gas within compartment 28 of the gas collection chamber 23 resulting in further water being siphoned from the bioreactor tank 21 and into the membrane tank 22. The flow of gas through port 29 may be controlled by a valve (not shown) connected to a source of gas (not shown). The valve may be operated by a controller device (not shown).

[0067] It will be appreciated the pulsed flow generating cleaning device described in the embodiments above may be used with a variety of known membrane configurations and is not limited to the particular arrangements shown. The device may be directly connected to a membrane module or an assembly of modules. Gas, typically air, is continuously supplied to the device and a pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow is generated for membrane cleaning and surface refreshment. The pulsed flow is generated through the device using a continuous supply of gas, however, it will be appreciated where a non-continuous supply of gas is used a pulsed flow may also be generated but with a different pattern of pulsing.

[0068] In some applications, it has been found the liquid level inside a pulsed gas-lift pump device 11 fluctuates between levels A and B as shown in Figures 7A and 7B. Near the top end inside the gas-lift pump device 11, there is typically left a space 37 that liquid phase cannot reach due to gas pocket formation. When such a pump device 11 is operated in high solid environment, such as in membrane bioreactors, scum and/or

dehydrated sludge 39 may gradually accumulate in the space 37 at the top end of the pump device 11 and this eventually can lead to blockage of the gas flow channel 40, leading to a reduced pulsing or no pulsed effect at all. Figure 8 illustrates such a scenario.

5 [0069] Several methods to overcome this effect have been identified. One method is to locate the gas injection point 38 at a point below the upper liquid level reached during operation, level A in Figures 7A and 7B. When the liquid level reaches the gas injection point 38 and above, the gas generates a liquid spray 41 that breaks up possible scum or sludge accumulation near the top end of the pump device 11. Figure 9
10 schematically shows such an action. The intensity of spray 41 is related to the gas injection location 38 and the velocity of gas. This method may prevent any long-term accumulation of sludge inside the pump device 11.

[0070] Another method is to periodically vent gas within the pump device 11 to allow the liquid level to reach the top end space 37 inside the pump device 11 during
15 operation. In this case, the injection of gas must be at or near the highest point inside the pump device 11 so that all or nearly all the gas pocket 37 can be vented. The gas connection point 38 shown in Figure 7 is an example. Depending on the sludge quality, the venting can be performed periodically at varying frequency to prevent the creation of any permanently dried environment inside the pump device.

20 [0071] It was also noted in operation of the pump device 11 that the liquid level A in Figure 7 can vary according to the gas flowrate. The higher the gas flowrate, the less the gas pocket formation inside the pump device 11. Accordingly, another method which may be used is to periodically inject a much higher air flow into the pump device 11 during operation to break up dehydrated sludge. Depending on the design of the
25 device, the gas flowrate required for this action is normally around 30% or more higher than the normal operating gas flowrate. This is possible in some plant operations by diverting gas from other membrane tanks to a selected tank to temporarily produce a short, much higher gas flow to break up dehydrated sludge. Alternatively, a standby blower (not shown) can be used periodically to supply more gas flow for a short
30 duration.

[0072] The methods described above can be applied individually or in a combined mode to get a long term stable operation and to eliminate any scum/sludge accumulation inside the pump device 11.

Examples

5 [0073] One typical membrane module is composed of hollow fiber membranes, has a total length of 1.6m and a membrane surface area of 38 m². A pulsed flow generating device was connected to the typical membrane module. A paddle wheel flowmeter was located at the lower end of the riser tube to monitor the pulsed liquid flow-rate lifted by gas. Figure 10 shows a snapshot of the pulsed liquid flow-rate at a
10 constant supply of gas flow at 7.8 Nm³/hr. The snapshot shows that the liquid flow entering the module had a random or chaotic pattern between highs and lows. The frequency from low to high liquid flow-rates was in the range of about 1 to 4.5 seconds. The actual gas flow-rate released to the module was not measured because it was mixed with liquid, but the flow pattern was expected to be similar to the liquid flow – ranging
15 between highs and lows in a chaotic nature.

[0074] A comparison of membrane cleaning effect via pulsed and normal airlift devices was conducted in a membrane bioreactor. The membrane filtration cycle was 12 minutes filtration followed by 1 minute relaxation. At each of the air flow-rates, two repeated cycles were tested. The only difference between the two sets of tests was the
20 device connected to the module – a normal gaslift device versus a pulsed gaslift device. The membrane cleaning efficiency was evaluated according to the permeability decline during the filtration. Figure 11 shows the permeability profiles with the two different gaslift devices at different air flow-rates. It is apparent from these graphs that the membrane fouling rate is less with the pulsed gaslift pump because it provides more
25 stable permeability over time than the normal gaslift pump.

[0075] A further comparison was performed between the performance of a typical cyclic aeration arrangement and the pulsed gas lift aeration of the present invention. The airflow rate was 3m³/h for the pulsed airlift, and 6m³/h for the cyclic aeration. Cyclic aeration periods of 10s on/10s off and 3s on/3s off were tested. The
30 cyclic aeration of 10s on/10s off was chosen to mimic the actual operation of a large scale plant, with the fastest opening and closing of valves being 10s. The cyclic aeration

of 3s on/3s off was chosen to mimic a frequency in the range of the operation of the pulsed airlift device. The performance was tested at a normalised flux of approximately 30LMH, and included long filtration cycles of 30 minutes.

[0076] Table 1 below summarises the test results on both pulsed airlift operation and two different frequency cyclic aeration operations. The permeability drop during short filtration and long filtration cycles with pulsed airlift operation was much less significant compared to cyclic aeration operation. Although high frequency cyclic aeration improves the membrane performance slightly, the pulsed airlift operation maintained a much more stable membrane permeability, confirming a more effective cleaning process with the pulsed airlift arrangement.

Table 1 Effect of air scouring mode on membrane performance

Operation mode	Pulsed airlift	10s on/10s off cyclic aeration	3s on/3 s off cyclic aeration
Membrane permeability drop during 12 minute filtration	1.4–2.2 lmh/bar	3.3 – 6 lmh/bar	3.6 lmh/bar
Membrane permeability drop during 30 minute filtration	2.5 – 4.8 lmh/bar	10 – 12 lmh/bar	7.6 lmh/bar

[0077] The above examples demonstrate an effective membrane cleaning method with a pulsed flow generating device. With continuous supply of gas to the pulsed flow generating device, a random or chaotic flow pattern is created to effectively clean the membranes. Each cycle pattern of flow is different from the other in duration/frequency, intensity of high and low flows and the flow change profile. Within each cycle, the flow continuously varies from one value to the other in a chaotic fashion.

[0078] It will be appreciated that, although the embodiments described above use a pulsed gas/liquid flow, the invention is effective when using other randomly pulsed fluid flows including gas, gas bubbles and liquid.

[0079] It will be appreciated that further embodiments and exemplifications of the invention are possible without departing from the spirit or scope of the invention described.

5

CLAIMS

1. A membrane module comprising a plurality of porous membranes or a set of membrane modules and further including :

a gaslift pump apparatus operative in response to a supply of pressurized gas from a gas
5 source connected thereto to store and intermittently release pressurized gas and use the released gas to gaslift quantities of said liquid from a reservoir of liquid to produce a pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow along said membrane surface to dislodge fouling materials therefrom.
- 10 2. A membrane module according to claim 1 wherein said gaslift pump apparatus including an inverted gas storage chamber for storing said gas provided by said gas source and having a closed upper end and an open lower end positioned in said reservoir of liquid, a vertical riser tube located within said gas storage chamber and having an inlet opening in fluid communication with said reservoir of liquid and an outlet port in
15 fluid communication with said membrane module, said riser tube having an opening in fluid communication with said gas storage chamber positioned for receiving said stored gas from said chamber when the level of gas within the chamber reaches a predetermined level and gaslifting the liquid through said riser tube for discharge into said module.
- 20 3. A membrane module according to claim 1 or claim 2 wherein the gas/liquid flow comprises gas bubbles.
4. A membrane module according to any one of the preceding claims wherein said pulsed gas/liquid flow is produced by said apparatus provided with a supply of gas.
- 25 5. A membrane module according to any one of the preceding claims wherein, the gaslift pump apparatus for providing the pulsed gas/liquid flow further includes a distributor in fluid communication with said apparatus and the pulsed gas/liquid flow is distributed into the modules through the distributor.

6. A membrane module according to any one of the preceding claims wherein a gaslift pump apparatus is provided for each module.
7. A membrane module according to any one of claims 1 to 4 wherein a gaslift
5 pump apparatus is provided for a number of modules.
8. A membrane module according to claim 5 or claim 6 wherein the pulsed gas/liquid flow is randomly generated amongst said apparatus forming a random distribution pattern.
- 10
9. A membrane module according to any one of the preceding claims, further comprising a plurality of porous hollow fiber membranes, said fiber membranes being arranged in close proximity to one another and mounted to prevent excessive movement therebetween, the fiber membranes being fixed at each end in a header, one header
15 having one or more openings formed therein through which the gas/liquid flow is introduced for cleaning the surfaces of said hollow fiber membranes.
10. A membrane module according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the supply of gas is provided by an external tank containing pressurised gas, the tank being
20 in fluid communication with the membrane module and having control means for providing randomly generated pulses of gas to the module to form a gas bubble flow for cleaning the membrane surfaces.
11. A membrane module according to claim 10 wherein the control means comprise
25 a fluid flow control device positioned in a gas/liquid inlet to the membrane module and operable in dependence on the level of liquid in the inlet to provide gas from the external tank.
12. A membrane module according to claim 11 wherein the fluid flow control device
30 is connected in fluid communication with a fluid distributor to substantially uniformly distribute the pulsed gas bubbles into the module.
13. A method of cleaning a membrane surface immersed in a liquid medium with a

gas flow, including the steps of providing a randomly generated intermittent or pulsed two phase gas/liquid flow along said membrane surface to dislodge fouling materials therefrom, wherein the pulsed gas liquid flow is random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or duration.

5

14. A method according to claim 13 wherein the gas flow comprises gas bubbles.

15. A method according to claim 13 or 14 wherein the method includes producing the pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow using a device supplied with a flow of pressurised gas.

10

16. A method according to claim 15 wherein the flow of pressurised gas is essentially constant.

17. A method according to any one of claims 13 to 16 wherein the method further includes using the pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow in conjunction with an essentially constant two-phase gas/liquid flow.

15

18. A method according to any one of claims 13 to 17 wherein the method further includes providing an additional source of gas bubbles in said liquid medium.

20

19. A membrane module comprising a plurality of porous membranes or a set of membrane modules and a device for providing a generally randomly generated, pulsed two phase gas/liquid flow such that, in use, said gas/liquid flow moves past the surfaces of said membranes to dislodge fouling materials therefrom, wherein the pulsed gas liquid flow is random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or duration.

25

20. A membrane module according to claim 19 wherein the gas/liquid flow comprises gas bubbles.

30

21. A membrane module according to claim 19 wherein said pulsed gas/liquid flow is produced by said device provided with a supply of gas.

22. A membrane module according to any one of claims 19 to 21, wherein, the device for providing the pulsed fluid flow further includes a distributor in fluid communication with said device and the pulsed fluid flow is distributed into the modules through the distributor.
- 5
23. A membrane module according to any one of claims 19 to 22 wherein a device is provided for each module.
24. A membrane module according to any one of claims 19 to 22 wherein a device is provided for a number of modules.
- 10
25. A membrane module according to claim 23 or claim 24 wherein the pulsed gas/liquid flow is randomly generated amongst said devices forming a random distribution pattern.
- 15
26. A method of removing fouling materials from the surface of a plurality of porous hollow fiber membranes mounted and extending longitudinally in an array to form a membrane module, said membranes being arranged in close proximity to one another and mounted to prevent excessive movement therebetween, the method comprising the steps of providing a generally random, uniformly distributed pulsed gas bubble flow past the surfaces of said membranes, said distribution being such that said gas bubbles flow substantially uniformly between each membrane in said array to scour the surface of said membranes and remove accumulated solids from within the membrane module, wherein the pulsed gas bubble flow is random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or duration.
- 20
27. A method of removing fouling materials from the surface of a plurality of porous hollow fiber membranes according to claim 26 wherein said gas bubble flow includes a two phase gas/liquid flow.
- 25
28. A method of removing fouling materials from the surface of a plurality of porous hollow fiber membranes according to claim 27 wherein said pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow is produced by a device provided with an essentially constant supply of gas.
- 30

29. A membrane module comprising a plurality of porous hollow fiber membranes, said fiber membranes being arranged in close proximity to one another and mounted to prevent excessive movement therebetween, the fiber membranes being fixed at each end in a header, one header having one or more openings formed therein through which a
5 generally random pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow is introduced for cleaning the surfaces of said hollow fiber membranes wherein the pulsed gas/liquid flow is random in magnitude and/or frequency and/or duration.
30. A membrane module according to claim 29 wherein the pulsed gas flow is in the
10 form of gas bubbles.
31. A membrane module according to claim 30 wherein said pulsed two-phase gas/liquid flow is produced by a device provided with a supply of gas.
- 15 32. A membrane module according to claim 31 wherein the supply of gas is essentially constant.
33. A membrane module according to claim 21 or claim 31 wherein the supply of gas is provided by an external tank containing pressurised gas, the tank being in fluid
20 communication with the membrane module and having control means for providing randomly generated pulses of gas to the module to form a gas bubble flow for cleaning the membrane surfaces.
34. A membrane module according to claim 33 wherein the control means comprise
25 a fluid flow control device positioned in a gas/liquid inlet to the membrane module and operable in dependence on the level of liquid in the inlet to provide gas from the external tank.
35. A membrane module according to claim 34 wherein the fluid flow control device
30 is connected in fluid communication with a fluid distributor to substantially uniformly distribute the pulsed gas bubbles into the module.
36. A membrane bioreactor including a tank having means for the introduction of

feed thereto, means for forming activated sludge within said tank, a membrane module according to any one of claims 1 to 12, 19 to 25 or 29 to 35 positioned within said tank so as to be immersed in said sludge and said membrane module provided with means for withdrawing filtrate from at least one end of said membranes.

5

37. A method of operating a membrane bioreactor according to claim 36, the method comprising introducing feed to said tank, applying a vacuum to said fibers to withdraw filtrate therefrom while providing said pulsed gas flow through aeration openings within said module such that, in use, said gas flow moves past the surfaces of said membrane
10 fibers to dislodge fouling materials therefrom.

38. A method of operating a membrane bioreactor according to claim 37 further comprising providing a further source of aeration may be provided within the tank.

15 39. A method of operating a membrane bioreactor according to claim 38 wherein the membrane module is suspended vertically within the tank and said further source of aeration is provided beneath the suspended module.

40. A method of operating a membrane bioreactor according to claim 38 or claim 39
20 wherein the further source of aeration comprises a group of air permeable tubes.

41. A method of cleaning filtration membranes located in a vessel containing liquid by providing generally random pulses of gas/liquid within the liquid at a number of locations within the vessel, wherein the pulses of gas/liquid are random in magnitude
25 and/or frequency and/or duration.

42. A method according to claim 41 wherein the fluid comprises a gas.

43. A method according to claim 42 wherein the gas comprises gas bubbles.

30 44. A method according to any one of claims 40 to 43 wherein the filtration membranes are located in membranes modules according to any one of claims 1 to 12, 19 to 25 or 29 to 35.

45. A membrane filtration system including a plurality of membranes modules according to any one of claims 1 to 12, 19 to 24 or 29 to 35 located in a feed containing vessel, wherein the pulsed gas/liquid flow is randomly generated amongst said modules forming a random distribution pattern.
- 5 46. A method of cleaning filtration membranes substantially as herein described with reference to any one of the embodiments of the invention illustrated in the accompanying drawings and/or examples.
47. A membrane module substantially as herein described with reference to any one
10 of the embodiments of the invention illustrated in the accompanying drawings and/or examples.
48. A membrane bioreactor substantially as herein described with reference to any one of the embodiments of the invention illustrated in the accompanying drawings
15 and/or examples.
49. A method of operating a membrane bioreactor substantially as herein described with reference to any one of the embodiments of the invention illustrated in the accompanying drawings and/or examples.

20