

COLUMN-BASED DEVICE AND METHOD FOR RETRIEVAL OF RARE CELLS BASED ON SIZE, AND USES THEREOF

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

- 5 [0001] This application claims the benefit of priority of Singapore provisional application Nos. 10201500471Q and 10201500472R, both filed on 21 January 2015, the contents of which are being hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety for all purposes.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

- 10 [0002] The present invention relates to a device and method for retrieving cells of interest, in particular rare cells. The present invention also relates to cells retrieved using the disclosed device and method, and use of the cells as biomarkers for the diagnosis and prognosis of cancer.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

- 15 [0003] Detection and retrieval of rare cells, such as diseased cells, are becoming increasingly important for accurate diagnosis of a disease state, such as cancer. Cancer is the second leading cause of death worldwide, accounting for 8.2 million deaths in 2012. Cancer mortality can be significantly reduced if detected and treated early. However, methods for
20 reliable early detection of cancer mainly involve the use of endoscopies or radioactive scannings, which are costly and impose certain health risks to the patient.
- [0004] Most devices currently available for isolation and detection of cells focus on capturing the cells only (for example using filter sieves), without retrieving the captured cells. This limits subsequent analysis of the captured cells to on-sieve characterization, for example
25 using immunohistochemical staining. Using such devices, more complex analyses such as DNA mutation analysis or gene expression analysis on single cells of interest are not feasible. The devices and methods currently available for the isolation of rare cells suffer from the drawback of requiring additional steps to detach the cells stuck on the filter (using cumbersome techniques such as laser dissection microscopy). In fact, rare cells isolated using
30 available microfiltration devices easily adhere to the filters or other components of the devices impacting negatively on the retrieval efficiency or even preventing any cell to be retrieved for downstream analyses.

[0005] Therefore, there is a need to provide a device and method for efficiently capturing and retrieving cells, particularly rare cells, that overcome, or at least ameliorate, one or more of the disadvantages described above. There is a need to optimize the efficiency of the retrieval of isolated rare cells using methods, materials and/or device configurations in such a way that the rare cells do not adhere to the components of the device and filters, so that the rare cells can be easily and efficiently retrieved for downstream procedures.

[0006] There is a need to provide less invasive screening test methods for the early detection of cancer.

SUMMARY

[0007] In a first example, there is provided an apparatus for capturing and retrieving a cell from a sample, comprising at least one column, the column comprising:

(i) an inner wall defining an inner chamber, the inner chamber having an inlet opening at a first end of the column for receiving the sample, and an outlet opening at a second end of the column;

(ii) a perforated plug disposed within the inner chamber adjacent to the second end of the column;

(iii) a sleeve insert having an opening at a first end and an opening at a second end, the sleeve insert comprising a channel tapered at the second end and disposed within the inner chamber with its second end adjacent to the perforated plug; and

(iv) a filtering means housed within the sleeve insert, the filtering means comprising a sieve sandwiched between two sealing means.

[0008] In a second example, there is provided a method of capturing and retrieving a cell from a sample, comprising the steps of:

(a) introducing the sample to the inlet opening of the apparatus as described herein to allow the sample to flow through the sleeve insert and filtering means of the apparatus; and

(b) collecting the residue retained on the surface of the sieve in the filtering means of the apparatus.

[0009] In a third example, there is provided an isolated cell population having the following characteristics:

(i) being endothelial cells derived from a tumor and isolated from blood;

- (ii) each cell having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;
- (iii) each cell having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;
- (iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins;
- (v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins; and
- 5 (vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins.

[0010] In a fourth example, there is provided a method for detecting the isolated cell population as described herein in a sample of a subject, the method comprising:

(a) capturing and retrieving the cells from the sample using the apparatus as described herein or the method as described herein.

10 [0011] In another example, the method of the fourth example further comprises the steps of:

(b) contacting the cells from step (a) with at least one antibody coupled to a detectable label to allow binding of the antibody to one or more target biomarkers expressed on the cells;

15 (c) removing unbound antibody from the sample; and

(d) detecting and analyzing the detectable label bound to the antibody to detect the isolated population of cells.

[0012] In another example, the method of the fourth example further comprises the steps of:

20 (b) lysing the cells from step (a);

(c) contacting the lysed cell sample from step (b) with a reverse primer from a first primer pair, the reverse primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target RNA region, and a reverse transcriptase to effect reverse transcription of the RNA into cDNA;

(d) subsequently contacting the sample from step (c) with:

25 (i) a forward primer from the first primer pair, the forward primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target cDNA region,

(ii) a reverse primer and a forward primer from a second primer pair, the reverse primer and forward primer from the second primer pair being directed to a target DNA region, and

30 (iii) a DNA polymerase

to simultaneously amplify the target cDNA region and the target DNA region in a pre-amplification step; and

(e) analyzing the amplified target cDNA region and/or the amplified target DNA region.

[0013] In another example, the method of the fourth example further comprises: subjecting the sample from step (d) to a semi-nested PCR using the reverse primer in step (c) or the forward primer in step (d)(i), and a nested primer that binds within the amplified target cDNA region.

[0014] In yet another example, the method of the fourth example further comprises: subjecting the sample from step (d) to a nested PCR using a nested primer pair that binds within the amplified target DNA region.

[0015] In a fifth example, there is provided a method for detecting the isolated cell population of the third example in a sample of a subject, the method comprising:

(a) contacting cells from the sample with at least one antibody coupled to a detectable label to allow binding of the antibody to one or more target biomarkers expressed on the cells;

(b) removing unbound antibody from the sample; and

(c) detecting and analyzing the detectable label bound to the antibody to detect the isolated population of cells.

[0015a] In another example, there is provided a method for detecting an isolated cell population having the following characteristics:

(i) being endothelial cells derived from blood vessel of a tumor and isolated from blood;

(ii) each cell having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;

(iii) each cell having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;

(iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins;

(v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins; and

(vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins,

in a sample of a subject, the method comprising:

(a) contacting cells from the sample with at least one antibody coupled to a detectable label to allow binding of the antibody to one or more target biomarkers expressed on the cells;

(b) removing unbound antibody from the sample; and

(c) detecting and analyzing the detectable label bound to the antibody to detect the isolated population of cells.

[0016] In a sixth example, there is provided a method for detecting the isolated cell population of the third example in a sample of a subject, the method comprising:

(a) lysing the cells present in the sample;

(b) contacting the lysed cell sample from step (a) with a reverse primer from a first primer pair, the reverse primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target RNA region, and a reverse transcriptase to effect reverse transcription of the RNA into cDNA;

(c) subsequently contacting the sample from step (b) with:

(i) a forward primer from the first primer pair, the forward primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target cDNA region,

(ii) a reverse primer and a forward primer from a second primer pair, the reverse primer and forward primer from the second primer pair being directed to a target DNA region, and

(iii) a DNA polymerase

to simultaneously amplify the target cDNA region and the target DNA region in a pre-amplification step; and

(d) analyzing the amplified target cDNA region and/or the amplified target DNA region.

5 [0016a] In another example, there is provided a method for detecting an isolated cell population having the following characteristics:

- (i) being endothelial cells derived from blood vessel of a tumor and isolated from blood;
 - (ii) each cell having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;
 - (iii) each cell having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;
 - 10 (iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins;
 - (v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins; and
 - (vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins,
- in a sample of a subject, the method comprising:

(a) lysing the cells present in the sample;

15 (b) contacting the lysed cell sample from step (a) with a reverse primer from a first primer pair, the reverse primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target RNA region, and a reverse transcriptase to effect reverse transcription of the RNA into cDNA;

(c) subsequently contacting the sample from step (b) with:

20 (i) a forward primer from the first primer pair, the forward primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target cDNA region,

(ii) a reverse primer and a forward primer from a second primer pair, the reverse primer and forward primer from the second primer pair being directed to a target DNA region, and

(iii) a DNA polymerase

25 to simultaneously amplify the target cDNA region and the target DNA region in a pre-amplification step; and

(d) analyzing the amplified target cDNA region and/or the amplified target DNA region.

[0017] In another example, the method of the sixth example further comprises: subjecting the sample from step (c) to a semi-nested PCR using the reverse primer in step (b) or the
30 forward primer in step (c)(i), and a nested primer that binds within the amplified target cDNA region.

[0018] In yet another example, the method of the sixth example further comprises: subjecting the sample from step (c) to a nested PCR using a nested primer pair that binds within the amplified target DNA region.

35 [0019] In a seventh example, there is provided a method of diagnosing a cancer in a subject, comprising analyzing a sample from the subject for presence of the isolated population of cells as described herein, wherein presence of the isolated population of cells indicates that the subject has cancer.

[0019a] In one aspect, the present disclosure refers to a method of diagnosing a colorectal
40 cancer in a subject, comprising analyzing a sample from the subject for presence of an isolated population of cell clusters, each cell cluster comprising at least two cells and having the following characteristics:

(i) being endothelial cell clusters derived from blood vessel of a colorectal tumor and isolated from blood;

45 (ii) each cell cluster having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;

(iii) each cell cluster having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;

(iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins, comprising *FOLH1*;

(v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins;

(vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins; and
(vii) being cytomorphologically consistent with malignancy but not having primary tumor mutations or chromosomal abnormalities,

wherein presence of the isolated population of cell clusters indicates that the subject has cancer.

[0020] In an eighth example, there is provided a method for monitoring and/or predicting the response to treatment of a cancer patient, the method comprising analyzing a sample obtained from the patient after treatment for determining the number of the isolated population of cells as described herein, wherein a reduction in the number of the isolated population of cells compared to the number of the isolated population of cells in a baseline sample obtained from the patient prior to treatment indicates that the patient is responding positively to the treatment.

[0020a] In another aspect, the present disclosure refers to a method for monitoring and/or predicting the response to treatment of a colorectal cancer patient, the method comprising analyzing a sample obtained from the patient after treatment for determining the number of an isolated population of cell clusters, each cell cluster comprising at least two cells and having the following characteristics:

(i) being endothelial cell clusters derived from blood vessel of a colorectal tumor and isolated from blood;

(ii) each cell cluster having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;

(iii) each cell cluster having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;

(iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins comprising *FOLH1*;

(v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins;

(vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins; and
(vii) being cytomorphologically consistent with malignancy but not having primary tumor mutations or chromosomal abnormalities,

wherein a reduction in the number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to the number of the isolated population of cell clusters in a baseline sample obtained from the patient prior to treatment indicates that the patient is responding positively to the treatment.

[0021] In a ninth example, there is provided a method for predicting the response to treatment of a cancer patient, the method comprising analyzing a sample obtained from the cancer patient before treatment for determining the number of the isolated population of cells as described herein, wherein an equal or higher number of the isolated population of cells compared to the number of the isolated population of cells in a sample obtained before treatment from a patient or a group of patients that have responded positively to the treatment indicates that the cancer patient will respond positively to the treatment, and wherein a lower number of the isolated population of cells compared to the number of the isolated population of cells in a sample obtained before treatment from a patient or a group of patients that have

responded positively to the treatment indicates that the cancer patient will respond negatively to the treatment.

[0021a] In another aspect, the present disclosure refers to a method for predicting the response to treatment of a colorectal cancer patient, the method comprising analyzing a sample obtained from the cancer patient before treatment for determining the number of an isolated population of cell clusters, each cell cluster comprising at least two cells and having the following characteristics:

- (i) being endothelial cell clusters derived from blood vessel of a colorectal tumor and isolated from blood;
- (ii) each cell cluster having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;
- (iii) each cell cluster having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;
- (iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins comprising *FOLH1*;
- (v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins;
- (vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins; and
- (vii) being cytomorphologically consistent with malignancy but not having primary tumor mutations or chromosomal abnormalities,

wherein an equal or higher number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to the number of the isolated population of cell clusters in a sample obtained before treatment from a patient or a group of patients that have responded positively to the treatment indicates that the colorectal cancer patient will respond positively to the treatment, and wherein a lower number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to the number of the isolated population of cell clusters in a sample obtained before treatment from a patient or a group of patients that have responded positively to the treatment indicates that the colorectal cancer patient will respond negatively to the treatment.

[0022] In a tenth example, there is provided a method for analyzing blood vessel characteristics of a tumor in a subject, the method comprising analyzing a sample from the subject for determining the number of the isolated population of cells as described herein, wherein an increased number of the isolated population of cells compared to a baseline sample indicates that the tumor has larger blood vessels compared to the baseline sample, and wherein a reduced number of the isolated population of cells compared to a baseline sample indicates that the tumor has smaller blood vessels compared to the baseline sample.

[0022a] In another aspect, the present disclosure refers to a method for analyzing blood vessel characteristics of a colorectal tumor in a subject, the method comprising analyzing a sample from the subject for determining the number of an isolated population of cell clusters, each cell cluster comprising at least two cells and having the following characteristics:

- (i) being endothelial cell clusters derived from blood vessel of a colorectal tumor and isolated from blood;
- (ii) each cell cluster having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;
- (iii) each cell cluster having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;
- (iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins comprising *FOLH1*;
- (v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins;
- (vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins; and
- (vii) being cytomorphologically consistent with malignancy but not having primary tumor mutations or chromosomal abnormalities,

wherein an increased number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to a baseline sample indicates that the colorectal tumor has larger blood vessels compared to the baseline sample, and wherein a reduced number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to a baseline sample indicates that the colorectal tumor has smaller blood vessels compared to the baseline sample.

[0023] In an eleventh example, there is provided a kit for use in the method of the second, the fourth, the seventh, the eighth, the ninth or the tenth examples, the kit comprising:

- (a) the apparatus as described herein.

[0024] In another example, the kit of the eleventh embodiment further comprises one or more of the following:

(b) one or more cell lysis buffers;

(c) a primer selected from the group consisting of:

i. the reverse primer of step (c) of the method of the fourth embodiment,

ii. the forward primer of step (d)(i) of the method of the fourth embodiment,

iii. the primer pair of step (d)(ii) of the method of the fourth embodiment, and

iv. the nested primer and nested primer pair of the method of the fourth

embodiment;

(d) one or more reagents, selected from the group consisting of:

i. a reverse transcriptase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the reverse transcription in step (c) of the method of the fourth embodiment,

ii. a DNA polymerase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the amplification in step (d) of the method of the fourth embodiment or the semi-nested or nested PCR of the method of the fourth embodiment, and

iii. one or more labelled or unlabelled deoxyribonucleotides selected from the group consisting of dATP, dCTP, dGTP, and dTTP or dUTP; and

(e) an antibody capable of specific binding to a protein selected from the group consisting of PAI-1, Vimentin, FOXC1, keratin-8, keratin-18, keratin-19, Ep-CAM, CD45, VWF, PECAM-1, CD146, CD41, CD34, PSMA, CD105, CD309, CD144, CD202B and

Angiopoietin 2, wherein the antibody is coupled to a detectable label; and optionally means for detecting the detectable label.

[0025] In a twelfth example, there is provided a kit for use in the method of the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, the eighth, the ninth or the tenth examples, the kit comprising one or more of the following:

- (a) one or more cell lysis buffers;
- (b) a primer selected from the group consisting of:
 - i. the reverse primer of step (b) of the method of the fifth example,
 - ii. the forward primer of step (c)(i) of the method of the fifth example,
 - iii. the primer pair of step (c)(ii) of the method of the fifth example, and
 - iv. the nested primer and nested primer pair of the method of the fifth example;
- (c) one or more reagents, selected from the group consisting of:
 - i. a reverse transcriptase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the reverse transcription in step (b) of the method of the fifth example,
 - ii. a DNA polymerase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the amplification in step (c) of the method of the fifth example or the semi-nested or nested PCR of the method of the fifth example, and
 - iii. one or more labelled or unlabelled deoxyribonucleotides selected from the group consisting of dATP, dCTP, dGTP, and dTTP or dUTP; and
- (d) an antibody capable of specific binding to a protein selected from the group consisting of PAI-1, Vimentin, FOXC1, keratin-8, keratin-18, keratin-19, Ep-CAM, CD45, VWF, PECAM-1, CD146, CD41, CD34, PSMA, CD105, CD309, CD144, CD202B and Angiopoietin 2, wherein the antibody is coupled to a detectable label as described herein; and optionally means for detecting the detectable label.

[0025a] In another example, there is provided a kit for use in the method of any one of the aspects described herein, the kit comprising one of more of the following:

- (a) one or more cell lysis buffers;
- (b) a primer selected from the group consisting of:
 - i. the reverse primer of step (b) of the method of paragraph [0016a],
 - ii. the forward primer of step (c)(i) of the method of paragraph [0016a],
 - iii. the primer pair of step (c)(ii) of the method of paragraph [0016a], and
 - iv. the nested primer and nested primer pair of the method of paragraph [0016a];
- (c) one or more reagents, selected from the group consisting of:
 - i. a reverse transcriptase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the reverse transcription in step (b) of the method of paragraph [0016a],
 - ii. a DNA polymerase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the amplification in step (d) of the method of paragraph [0016a] or the semi-nested or nested PCR of the method of paragraph [0016a], and
 - iii. one or more labelled or unlabelled deoxyribonucleotides selected from the group consisting of dATP, dCTP, dGTP, and dTTP or dUTP; and
- (d) an antibody capable of specific binding to a protein selected from the group consisting of PAI-1, Vimentin, FOXC1, keratin-8, keratin-18, keratin-19, Ep-CAM, CD45, VWF, PECAM-1, CD146, CD41, CD34, PSMA, CD105, CD309, CD144, CD202B and Angiopoietin 2, wherein the antibody is coupled to a detectable label; and optionally means for detecting the detectable label.

[0026] In another example, the kit of the eleventh or the twelfth example further comprises instructions for performing the methods as described herein.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0027] The invention will be better understood with reference to the detailed description when considered in conjunction with the non-limiting examples and the accompanying drawings, in which:

[0028] **Fig. 1** shows an example of the device described herein for the capture and retrieval of rare cells. (A) shows the insert sleeve, which has an inlet at the upper end and an outlet at the lower end. The insert sleeve functions as a housing for the cell capturing sieve, securing the cell capture sieve near the outlet of a column. The sample flows in from the inlet of the insert sleeve, and flows out through the outlet of the insert sleeve. (B) shows that the channel through which the sample flows tapers at the lower end of the insert sleeve. (C) illustrates the assembly of the insert sleeve (or “sleeve insert” used interchangeably herein) and the cell capture sieve in a column of the device. The cell capture sieve (sandwiched between two O-rings acting as the sealing means) is first placed into the slot near the outlet of the insert sleeve, and then the entire assembly is inserted into the column by using an insert tool in the form of a rod (not shown). (D) shows two cell capturing and retrieval devices being connected to a peristaltic pump in one exemplary configuration when using the devices in a method described herein. A blood sample was filtered through the device. (E) shows depletions of contaminating white blood cells (WBCs) and red blood cells (RBCs) using cell capturing sieves with various pore diameters. One ml of whole blood was filtered through the device. Contaminating WBCs and RBCs were retrieved and counted (black bars), or retrieved and counted after inverting the flow of the peristaltic pump (“backflushing”) for a short time to dislodge cells that were stuck on the sieve (white bars). Fold depletion was calculated as follows: Fold Depletion of WBCs or RBCs = (WBCs or RBCs in Whole Blood) / (WBCs or RBCs in Microfiltrate). The bars in (E) represents the mean value obtained from tests with three different devices for each condition tested. Error bar represents the standard deviation. (F) shows the size distribution of SW620 (light grey line), ($n = 50$). Median size of WBCs and circulating tumor cells (CTCs) isolated from colorectal, prostate and breast cancer patients respectively reported from Coumans, F *et al.*, 2013. (G) shows retrieval efficacy of the device using whole blood spiked with the various cell lines. 20 to 50 cells/ml were labeled and spiked in 1 ml or 3 ml of whole blood. Each blood sample was passed through the device, and the target cells were retrieved, placed in a 96-well plate and counted. Retrieval efficacy was calculated as follows: % Retrieval Efficiency = (Retrieved cells) $\times$ 100 / (Spiked Cells). Each dot corresponds to an independent experiment.

[0029] **Fig. 2** shows the retrieval efficiency as compared to capture efficiency using the cell capturing and retrieval device described herein, with cell capture sieves having different pore diameters (8 μ m, 9 μ m, 10 μ m). (A) shows the results using HCT 116 cells. For each

independent experiment, 30 to 50 HCT 116 cells were spiked in 1 ml of whole blood, and retrieved cells were placed in a 96-well plate and counted. The number of cells remaining on the device was examined. Number of cells captured = number of cells retrieved + number of cells remaining on the device. The result shows that HCT 116 cells could be retrieved with an efficiency of > 98%. Capture efficiency = (number of cells captured) $\times$ 100% / number of spiked cells. Retrieval efficiency = (number of cells retrieved) $\times$ 100% / number of cells captured. (B) shows the results using RKO cells. Capture efficiency was lower for RKO cells as compared to HCT 116 cells. However, the retrieval efficiency of captured RKO cells was always 100% for all pore diameters of cell capture sieves used. (C) shows a bright field composite image (upper left panel), scanning electron micrographs (upper right panels) of silicon microsieve, and photographs (lower panel) of microsieves with silicon and silicon nitride as different filter materials. (D) shows the cell capturing and retrieval efficiency using different filter materials tested with HepG2 cells, which indicates that the two different filter materials, silicon and silicon nitride, provided similar cell capturing and retrieval efficiency.

[0030] **Fig. 3** shows the retrieval of tumor-derived endothelial cell clusters (TECCs) using the microfiltration device described herein. (A) shows an exemplary setup of the microfiltration device described herein, wherein four microfiltration devices each enclosing a silicon microsieve (inset, scale bar =10 μ m) are connected to a peristaltic pump for flow rate control. (B) shows the microfiltration procedure for various downstream applications including imaging, counting, single-cell isolation and analysis, cell culture and pooled nucleic acid extraction. The numbers indicate procedure time (in minutes) for each step. The detailed procedures shown in (B) are as follows: whole blood sample (for example, 2ml) was allowed to filter through the sieve for 8 minutes, washed for 20 minutes, and stained on sieve for 34 minutes for a total time of 62 minutes. Detailed procedures of on-sieve immunofluorescence are described in Example 3. (C) shows that use of silicon microsieves allow efficient retrieval of captured cells. Capture efficiency of SW620 cells from whole blood, indicating % of captured cells on the microsieve that can be retrieved for downstream assays (black bars), that are lost due to adhesion to the microsieve (white bars), or that are lost during the isolation procedure (grey bars). Results of four independent experiments are shown. (D) shows optimization of retrieval efficiency and purity for downstream single-cell micromanipulation. The scatter plots represent experiments using various flow rates and microsieve pore diameters. Black dashed rectangle indicates the target area of > 90% retrieval

efficiency and $> 5 \times 10^3$ WBC depletion for optimal downstream handling of retrieved cells. Data points are means $\pm$ s.e.m. of three independent experiments under each condition.

[0031] **Fig. 4** shows the visualization of cells captured and retrieved using the device described herein. (A) shows that cells retrieved from the blood of colorectal cancer patient could be easily visualized by inverted fluorescence microscopy using standard differential interference contrast (DIC). Large multinucleated cell cluster or microemboli were observed. (B) shows that cellular clusters retrieved from clinical samples could be easily micromanipulated and analyzed for their gene expression and genomic DNA content. In this example, a cellular cluster was identified by means of immunofluorescence staining for CD45 and DAPI, and subsequently micromanipulated for analysis of gene expression and genomic DNA content.

[0032] **Fig. 5** provides the proof of principle for the scrmPCR method described herein. Single DLD-1 and RKO cells (colorectal cancer cell lines) were micro-manipulated in 5 μ l 2x Reaction Buffer (CellDirect kit). scrmPCR was then performed as described herein, with the results shown in (a). Genomic regions belonging to *TP53*, *KRAS* and *BRAF* genes were amplified. PCR products were subjected to Sanger sequencing and known hotspot mutations that have been previously characterized in both cell lines were detected as shown in (b). At the same time several transcripts from the same cells were amplified and shown to have variable gene expression in both cell lines. Gene expression specificity was verified by the melting curve peak temperature and by the presence of a single peak, as shown in (c).

[0033] **Fig. 6** shows that TECCs express epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) markers, but do not mirror primary tumor mutations or chromosome abnormalities, thus indicating that TECCs and CTCs are different entities. (a) shows an exemplary scrmPCR workflow as described herein for single-cells or single-TECC. (b) shows images of nine TECCs from 4 colorectal cancer patients with known primary tumor mutations micro-manipulated in single tubes for downstream scrmPCR. (c) shows the gene expression heat map of TECCs shown in (b), and control single-cells for the indicated epithelial and mesenchymal markers and PTPRC (CD45). Colours represent gene expression from absent (black) to maximum (light grey). NTC – no template control. (d) shows chromatograms of hotspot gene sequences derived from the same single-TECC shown in (b) and (c). Matching primary tumor and normal colon tissues (top panels) were used to compare gene mutations.

Note that in TECCs no such mutations were found, indicating that TECCs do not originate from the tumor epithelium, as such TECCs are different from previously described malignant CTC clusters. (e) TECC array comparative genomic hybridization (aCGH) shows images of three TECCs from a representative colorectal cancer patient with known chromosomal abnormality. (f) shows aCGH analysis of TECCs shown in (e) with matching normal and tumor tissues. (g) shows the analysis for chromosomes 7 and 8 for the indicated tissues and TECCs. The lines indicate smoothed data calculated using Affymetrix ChAS software.

[0034] **Fig. 7** shows that TECCs express EMT markers but have normal chromosomal structures. (A) shows representative 4-colour immunofluorescence of two TECCs for CD45, Vimentin (VIM), pan-Keratin (CK) and DAPI, indicating heterogeneous mesenchymal and epithelial markers expression (the points of the arrows indicate visible stainings). (B) shows a control experiment to assess the impact of whole genome amplification (WGA) for aCGH experiments using single-cells. (C–E) each shows aCGH of single-TECC for the indicated patients similar to normal tissue DNA shown in (B). As shown in (c-e), in TECCs, no chromosomal abnormalities could be found, indicating that TECCs do not originate from the tumor epithelium. As such, TECCs are different from previously described malignant CTC clusters.

[0035] **Fig. 8** shows characterization of TECCs. (A) shows scrmPCR gene expression in control single cells and 14 TECCs ($N = 4$ patients) indicate the presence of endothelial cell markers but the absence of epithelial cell markers or markers for white blood cells (leukocyte), red blood cells (Erythroid), platelets/megakaryocytes or osteoclasts. (B) shows results from immunofluorescence studies which confirm endothelial lineage of TECCs. Representative TECCs stained with the antibodies indicated and internal controls for each staining. Inset central panel, a CD41&CD42B⁺ platelet aggregate. Inset right panel, a CD45⁺ white blood cell. (C) Table indicates TECCs counts positive or negative for the indicated immunofluorescence ($N = 68$ patients). (D) Experimental procedure used to classify TECCs as normal endothelial cells (NECs) and tumor endothelial cells (TECs). (E) Genes differentially expressed between NECs and TECs. P_{NOI} probability of differential expression as computed by NOISe. Log₂FC, log₂(fold change). (F) Column chart stacked to 100% indicating classification of TECCs as TECs (red columns) and NECs (blue columns). Left column indicates the observed probabilities; right column indicates the mean probabilities obtained by 1000 random signatures. $**P = 0.003$, effect size $r = 0.46$, exact binomial test.

This experiment indicate that TECCs are indeed tumor-derived (G) Longitudinal sample collection strategy before and after surgery. (H) Ladder plot showing CD31⁺CD45⁻ TECCs counts 0–24 h before and 24–72 h after surgery. Lines connect data from the same patient. *** $P = 0.0006$, effect size $r = 0.54$. This experiment support the hypothesis that TECCs are

tumor-derived because they disappear shortly after tumor resection.

[0036] **Fig. 9** shows lineage mapping of TECCs and CTC clusters (Aceto *et al.*). (a) shows selected breast cancer cell lines with epithelial and mesenchymal lineage profiles and primary endothelial cells were used as positive controls for epithelial, mesenchymal stem cells and endothelial lineages. Lineages were mapped using the method described in Cima I *et al.* (b) shows lineage inference of CTC clusters reported in Aceto *et al.* which shows the presence of epithelial-derived cell clusters. (c) shows lineage inference of single TECCs analyzed in this study indicate that TECCs are endothelial cells and are thus different from CTC clusters.

[0037] **Fig. 10** shows amplification and analysis of PSMA gene using scrmPCR. PSMA (*FOLH1*) gene expression is shown for the indicated samples of normal and tumor endothelial cells, and for the blood microfiltrates for the indicated healthy donors (D) or CRC patients (P). F, female; M, male.

[0038] **Fig. 11** shows tumor endothelial markers expressed in TECCs. Additional tumor endothelial markers were expressed in normal, tumour tissues and TECCs, detected from RNA-Seq data. *PLXDC1*, plexin domain containing 1 (tumor endothelial marker 3/7); *MMP2*, matrix metalloproteinase 2; *NID1*, nidogen 1; *MMP11*, matrix metalloproteinase 11; *CLEC14A*, C-type lectin domain family 14, member A; *POSTN*, periostin; *VWF*, von Willebrand factor; *ECSCR*, endothelial cell surface expressed chemotaxis and apoptosis regulator.

[0039] **Fig. 12** shows that TECCs are detected in colorectal cancer (CRC) patients but not in healthy individuals. (A) shows TECCS count for healthy controls (median = 0, $N = 45$) and CRC patients (median = 4.5, $N = 80$). *** $P = 7.31 \times 10^{-15}$, effect size $r = 0.65$. (B) Trend of TECCs count during sequence of treatment for colorectal cancer. Blood samples were collected independently at the following discrete time points: 1) treatment-naïve, 2) post neoadjuvant therapy, 3) post surgery, 4) post adjuvant therapy, and 5) palliative therapy. Boxes indicate the interquartile range (IQR), line across boxes indicates the median, dashed line indicates spline interpolation of medians. Arrows indicate treatment events. $N = 80$ CRC cases, *** $P = 0.0002$, effect size $r = 0.41$, ND, not detected. (C) shows association of TECC

count with patients and tumour characteristics ($n = 80$ CRC cases). Two-tailed Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney U test with Bonferroni correction, $**P = 0.0072$, effect size $r = 0.34$, $\hat{\Delta}$ (95% CI) = -6 (-13 – (-1)). (D) ROC curve comparing treatment-naïve CRC patients with healthy controls (total $N = 89$). Grey area represents the bootstrapped 95% CI. AUC (95% CI) = 0.930 (0.880–0.980), effect size $r = 0.716$. (E) ROC curve comparing treatment-naïve, early-stage CRC patients ($\leq$ IIA) versus healthy controls. AUC (95% CI) = 0.922 (0.846–0.999), effect size $r = 0.706$, (total $N = 61$). (F) Validation set. ROC curve comparing treatment-naïve CRC patients with healthy controls (total $N = 100$). AUC (95% CI) = 0.923 (0.837–1), effect size $r = 0.706$. In (D) to (F), 100% stacked bar charts indicate the percentage of TECCs-positive (dark grey) and TECCs-negative (light grey) samples for both healthy controls and CRC cases.

[0040] **Fig. 13** shows that TECC counts do not correlate with inflammatory markers or other variables. (a–c) show the association of TECC number with the indicated tumor characteristics, patient’s characteristics, and blood test values respectively. Correlations are shown as dot plots and measured using the Kendall’s τ coefficient and its derived P value. Comparisons of dichotomized variables are shown as boxplots and differences are quantified using P values from two-tailed exact Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney U tests.

[0041] **Fig. 14** shows a lineage inference workflow used to generate the data shown in Figure 9. (a) is a flow chart of the lineage inference workflow. (b) shows selected genes with highest specificity index for representative lineages are verified for specificity using BioGPS (Wu *et al.*) (c) shows gene expression level of markers commonly used in CTC research to denote epithelial cells. Note *KRT18* expression in the endothelial lineages and *EPCAM* expression in hematopoietic cells.

[0042] **Fig. 15** shows a lineage inference algorithm validation. (A) shows heat maps comparing number of genes enriched for each sample (rows) and lineage (columns) over random enrichment. Samples are published RNA-Seq data from selected lineages. Each coloured box represents a normalized odds ratio of the respective Fisher’s exact test from 0 (black) to 1 (light grey). (B) Same as in (A), except that whole tissues or complex cell mixtures such as PBMCs, skin and brain datasets were used.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT INVENTION

[0043] The present disclosure provides an apparatus for capturing and retrieving cells, particularly rare cells, which allows easy downstream manipulation and analysis of the captured cells. Thus, in a first aspect, there is provided an apparatus for capturing and
5 retrieving a cell from a sample, comprising at least one column, the column comprising:

(i) an inner wall defining an inner chamber, the inner chamber having an inlet opening at a first end of the column for receiving the sample, and an outlet opening at a second end of the column;

10 (ii) a perforated plug disposed within the inner chamber adjacent to the second end of the column;

(iii) a sleeve insert having an opening at a first end and an opening at a second end, the sleeve insert comprising a channel tapered at the second end and disposed within the inner chamber with its second end adjacent to the perforated plug; and

15 (iv) a filtering means housed within the sleeve insert, the filtering means comprising a sieve sandwiched between two sealing means.

[0044] The terms “apparatus” and “device” are used interchangeably in the present disclosure.

[0045] The term “capture” or “capturing” used herein means catching or trapping the cell(s) of interest. The term “retrieve”, “retrieval” or “retrieving” used herein means
20 recovering or collecting the captured cell(s). For example, the retrieval may involve recovering or collecting the cells from the capture sieve by detaching the cells using a pipette.

[0046] The term “isolate”, “isolating” or “isolated” used herein means separating the cell(s) of interest from the sample, such that the separated cell(s) is substantially or essentially free from other components present in the sample.

25 [0047] The term “microfiltration” used herein refers to a physical filtration process wherein a sample is passed through a special pore-sized filtering means to isolate suspended particles (such as cells, microorganisms, etc.) from the sample. The typical pore diameters used for microfiltration are in microns (i.e. micro meter or μm).

[0048] The term “sample” used herein refers to a biological sample, or a sample that
30 comprises at least some biological materials such as cells. The biological samples of this disclosure may be any sample suspected to contain TECCs, including solid tissue samples, such as bone marrow, and liquid samples, such as whole blood, blood serum, blood plasma,

cerebrospinal fluid, central spinal fluid, lymph fluid, cystic fluid, sputum, stool, pleural effusion, mucus, pleural fluid, ascitic fluid, amniotic fluid, peritoneal fluid, saliva, bronchial washes and urine. In some embodiments, the biological sample is a blood sample. As will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, a biological sample can include any fraction or component of blood, without limitation, T-cells, monocytes, neutrophils, erythrocytes, platelets and microvesicles such as exosomes and exosome-like vesicles.

[0049] The biological samples of this disclosure may be obtained from any organism, including mammals such as humans, primates (e.g., monkeys, chimpanzees, orangutans, and gorillas), cats, dogs, rabbits, farm animals (e.g., cows, horses, goats, sheep, pigs), and rodents (e.g., mice, rats, hamsters, and guinea pigs).

[0050] It is noted that, as used herein, the terms "organism," "individual," "subject," or "patient" are used as synonyms and interchangeably.

[0051] The organism may be a healthy organism or suffer from a disease condition. Disease conditions may include any disease. In some embodiments, the disease is cancer, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, or an autoimmune disorder. In some embodiments, the healthy or diseased organism is a human organism. In some embodiments, the healthy or diseased organism is an animal model for a disease condition, such as cancer. A person of ordinary skill understands that animal models for various disease conditions are well known in the art.

[0052] A diseased organism may be untreated or may have received treatment, such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery. The treatment may predate the sample collection or be ongoing at the time of sample collection.

[0053] The samples of this disclosure may each contain a plurality of cell populations and cell subpopulations that can be distinguishable by methods well known in the art (e.g., FACS, immunohistochemistry). For example, a blood sample may contain populations of non-nucleated cells, such as erythrocytes or platelets, and populations of nucleated cells such as white blood cells (WBCs), circulating tumor cells (CTC). WBCs may contain cellular subpopulations such as neutrophils, lymphocytes, monocytes, eosinophils, basophils and the like. The samples of this disclosure may be non-enriched samples, i.e., they are not enriched for any specific population or subpopulation of nucleated or non-nucleated cells. For example, non-enriched blood samples are not enriched for TECCs, WBCs, B-cells, T-cells, NK-cells, monocytes, or the like.

[0054] The term "rare cell," as used herein, refers to a cell that has an abundance of less than 1:1,000 in a cell population, e.g., an abundance of less than 1:5,000, 1:10,000, 1:30,000, 1:50,000, 1:100,000, 1:300,000, 1:500,000, 1:1,000,000, 1:5,000,000, 1:10,000,000, 1:30,000,000, 1:50,000,000, 1:100,000,000, 1:300,000,000, 1:500,000,000 or 1:1,000,000,000. In some embodiments, the rare cell has an abundance of 1:1,000,000 to 1:10,000,000,000 in the cell population. In some examples, the cell population is a nucleated or non-nucleated cell population. In some embodiments, the rare cell is a TECC.

[0055] The term "adjacent" used herein means near, next to, proximate to, or adjoining. For example, the sleeve insert of the device described herein may be next to or proximate to the perforated plug in the column of the device. A gap may or may not be present between the sleeve insert and the perforate plug, and the sleeve insert may or may not be attached to the perforated plug.

[0056] In one embodiment, the apparatus comprises one column. In some other embodiments, the apparatus comprises two or more columns. The two or more columns can be arranged in any configurations, including but not limited to in series or in parallel, or any combinations thereof. The column may be any completely or partially hollow structure of any shape, such as cylindrical, conical or cubical. In one example, the column is cylindrical. In one example, the column comprises a syringe.

[0057] The first end of the column can be adapted for connection to an upstream device or apparatus, while the second end of the column can be adapted for connection to a downstream device or apparatus. In one embodiment, the first end of the column comprises an opening which allows easy retrieval of the captured cells. In one example, simply pipetting can be used to retrieve the cells from the opening. Advantageously, in some examples, back-flushing of the captured cells is not necessary for retrieval. Advantages of omitting the back-flushing step include but are not limited to, reduction in the number of steps required in the capturing and retrieving procedure and reduced contamination of the captured and retrieved cells by impurities. In one embodiment, the second end of the column is adapted for connection to one or more pumps for controlling flow-rate of the sample passing through the column. Any pumps suitable for this purpose may be used, such as peristaltic pumps.

[0058] The flow-rate at which the sample is passed through the column may be determined by factors including but not limited to: the types of samples used, the amount of samples available, the size of the target cells to be captured and retrieved, the number of cells

to be captured and retrieved, the percentage of cells in the sample to be captured and retrieved, etc. In some examples, the flow-rate can be any one of the following: at least about 0.01 mL/min, at least about 0.02 mL/min, at least about 0.03 mL/min, at least about 0.04 mL/min, at least about 0.05 mL/min, at least about 0.06 mL/min, at least about 0.07 mL/min, at least about 0.08 mL/min, at least about 0.09 mL/min, at least about 0.10 mL/min, at least about 0.15 mL/min, at least about 0.20 mL/min, at least about 0.25 mL/min, at least about 0.30 mL/min, at least about 0.35 mL/min, at least about 0.40 mL/min, at least about 0.45 mL/min, at least about 0.50 mL/min, at least about 0.60 mL/min, at least about 0.70 mL/min, at least about 0.80 mL/min, at least about 0.90 mL/min, at least about 1.0 mL/min, at least about 1.1 mL/min, at least about 1.2 mL/min, at least about 1.3 mL/min, at least about 1.4 mL/min, at least about 1.5 mL/min, at least about 1.6 mL/min, at least about 1.7 mL/min, at least about 1.8 mL/min, at least about 1.9 mL/min, at least about 2.0 mL/min, at least about 3.0 mL/min, at least about 4.0 mL/min, at least about 5.0 mL/min, at least about 6.0 mL/min, at least about 7.0 mL/min, at least about 8.0 mL/min, at least about 9.0 mL/min, at least about 10.0 mL/min, at least about 15.0mL/min, at least about 20.0mL/min, at least about 25.0mL/min, at least about 30.0mL/min, at least about 35.0mL/min, at least about 40.0mL/min, at least about 45.0mL/min, or at least about 50.0mL/min. In one example, the flow rate is between 0.05mL/min and 50.0mL/min.

[0059] The perforated plug serves as a supporting means for the insert sleeve, while at the same time providing a channel for the filtrate to pass through. The term “perforated” or “perforation” refers to a hole or a number of holes through the plug. The plug can be perforated by a puncturing means, and the perforated plug can be made of any materials. In one example, the perforated plug is a perforated rubber plug.

[0060] The sleeve insert (or insert sleeve used interchangeably herein) may function as a housing for the filtering means, while at the same time function as a sealing means to prevent the unfiltered sample from flowing through channels other than through the filtering means. The sleeve insert comprises a channel tapered at the second end to channel the sample to the center of the filtering means. In one example, the filtering means comprises a sieve.

[0061] The cells captured using the device as described herein can be easily retrieved without requiring additional steps such as laser dissection and optical tweezers to detach the captured cells from the cell capture sieve. Thus the one of more of the surfaces of the device that are in direct contact with the sample comprises non cell-adhesive material.

[0062] In one embodiment, the sieve comprises non cell-adhesive material. In another embodiment, the non cell-adhesive material is selected from the group consisting of silicon, silicon dioxide, silicon nitride, epoxy-based negative photoresist and ceramic. An example of the epoxy-based negative photoresist is SU-8.

5 [0063] The sieve of the device as described herein comprises a plurality of pores through which cells (or other components of the sample) that are not of interest and therefore not to be captured, may be allowed to pass. The size or diameter of the pores may be determined by factors including but not limited to: the size of the cells to be captured and retrieved, the size of the cells to be eliminated, the amount of sample used, the viscosity of the sample used, etc.

10 The plurality of pores in the same sieve may be of the same diameter, or maybe of various diameters. In some examples, the pore diameter can be any one of the following: at least about 5 μm , at least about 6 μm , at least about 7 μm , at least about 8 μm , at least about 9 μm , at least about 10 μm , at least about 11 μm , at least about 12 μm , at least about 13 μm , at least about 14 μm , at least about 15 μm , at least about 16 μm , at least about 17 μm , at least about

15 18 μm , at least about 19 μm , at least about 20 μm , at least about 25 μm , at least about 30 μm , at least about 35 μm , at least about 40 μm , at least about 45 μm , at least about 50 μm , at least about 60 μm , at least about 70 μm , at least about 80 μm , at least about 90 μm , at least about 100 μm or at least about 200 μm . For example, to capture and retrieve tumor-derived endothelial cell clusters (TECCs), the pore diameters can be about 6 μm , about 7 μm , about 8

20 μm , about 9 μm or about 10 μm . In one example, the pore diameter is 9 μm . In another example, the pore diameter is 10 μm .

[0064] In a second aspect, there is provided a method of capturing and retrieving a cell from a sample, comprising the steps of:

- (a) introducing the sample to the inlet opening of the apparatus as described
- 25 herein to allow the sample to flow through the sleeve insert and filtering means of the apparatus; and
- (b) collecting the residue retained on the surface of the sieve in the filtering means of the apparatus.

[0065] The method may be applied to a biological sample as described herein, which may

30 comprise heterogenous cell types from a subject. The biological sample may be selected from the group consisting of tissues, cells (e.g. a stem cell, a suspected cancer cell), body fluids and isolates thereof etc., isolated from a subject.

[0066] In one embodiment, the sample comprises a biological fluid. In some embodiments, the biological fluid comprises any one of the following: whole blood, blood serum, blood plasma, cerebrospinal fluid, lymph fluid, cystic fluid, sputum, stool, pleural effusion mucus, ascitic fluid and urine.

5 [0067] The sample may comprise any number of cells. In one embodiment, the sample comprises a single cell. In another embodiment, the sample comprises a plurality of cells. In a further embodiment, the sample comprises a plurality of cells, wherein two or more of the plurality of cells form a cell cluster or a multinucleated cell. In one embodiment, the multinucleated cell comprises a single-TECC. In one embodiment, the single cell is selected
10 from the group consisting of a suspected cancer cell, a suspected tumor-derived cell, a suspected cell derived from an embryo or a foetus, and a cell from a pathogenic organism.

[0068] In another embodiment, at least some of the plurality of cells are selected from the group consisting of: suspected cancer cells, suspected tumor-derived cells, suspected cells derived from an embryo or a foetus, and cells from a pathogenic organism.

15 [0069] The cell captured and retrieved using the method described herein may comprise various numbers of clearly distinct nuclei. For example, the number of clearly distinct nuclei can be any one of the following: from about 2 to about 100, from about 5 to about 90, from about 10 to about 80, from about 20 to about 70, from about 30 to about 60, from about 40 to about 50 distinct nuclei, or at least 2, at least 3, at least 4, at least 5, at least 7, at least 10, at
20 least 15, at least 20, at least 25, at least 30, at least 35, at least 40, at least 45, at least 50, at least 55, at least 60, at least 65, at least 70, at least 75, at least 80, at least 85, at least 90, at least 95, or at least 100 distinct nuclei.

[0070] In one embodiment, the sample is a blood sample, and the cell captured and retrieved therefrom comprises at least two clearly distinct nuclei.

25 [0071] The length of the major axis of the cell captured and retrieved can be any one of the following: at least about 5 μm , at least about 6 μm , at least about 7 μm , at least about 8 μm , at least about 9 μm , at least about 10 μm , at least about 11 μm , at least about 12 μm , at least about 13 μm , at least about 14 μm , at least about 15 μm , at least about 16 μm , at least about 17 μm , at least about 18 μm , at least about 19 μm , at least about 20 μm , at least about
30 25 μm , at least about 30 μm , at least about 35 μm , at least about 40 μm , at least about 45 μm , at least about 50 μm , at least about 60 μm , at least about 70 μm , at least about 80 μm , at least about 90 μm , at least about 100 μm or at least 200 μm .

[0072] The cell captured and retrieved using the method as described herein may be characterized by the expression or non-expression of a number of genes and/or proteins. In one embodiment, the cell captured and retrieved expresses one or more of the following genes: *PECAM1*, *VWF* and *CDH5*. In one example of this embodiment, the cell expresses
5 any of the following combinations of genes: *PECAM1* and *VWF*; *PECAM1* and *CDH5*; *VWF* and *CDH5*; or *PECAM1*, *VWF* and *CDH5*. In another embodiment, the cell captured and retrieved does not express one or more of the following genes: *PTPRC*, *ITGA2B* and *GP1BA*. In one example of this embodiment, the cell does not express any of the following combinations of genes: *PTPRC* and *ITGA2B*; *PTPRC* and *GP1BA*; *ITGA2B* and *GP1BA*; or
10 *PTPRC*, *ITGA2B* and *GP1BA*.

[0073] A person skilled in the art will understand that the gene *PECAM1* encodes for the protein CD31, the gene *VWF* encodes for the protein VWF, the gene *CDH5* encodes for the protein CD144, the gene *PTPRC* encodes for the protein CD45, the gene *ITGA2B* encodes for the protein CD41 and the gene *GP1BA* encodes for the protein CD42B. Thus, in one
15 embodiment, the cell captured and retrieved expresses one or more of the following proteins: CD31, VWF and CD144. In one example of this embodiment, the cell expresses any of the following combinations of proteins: CD31 and VWF; CD31 and CD144; VWF and CD144; or CD31, VWF and CD144. In another embodiment, the cell captured and retrieved does not express one or more of the following gene proteins: CD45, CD41 and CD42B. In one
20 example of this embodiment, the cell does not express any of the following combinations of proteins: CD45 and CD41; CD45 and CD42B; CD41 and CD42B; or CD45, CD41 and CD42B.

[0074] The method of cell capturing and retrieving as described herein may allow any percentage of the target cells in the sample to be captured. Advantageously, a high percentage
25 of the target cells in the sample may be captured and/or retrieved. The percentage of cells present in the sample being captured and retrieved using the method as described herein may be any one of the following: at least about 10, at least about 20%, at least about 30%, at least about 40%, at least about 50%, at least about 55%, at least about 60%, at least about 65%, at least about 75%, at least about 80%, at least about 81%, at least about 82%, at least about
30 83%, at least about 84%, at least about 85%, at least about 86%, at least about 87%, at least about 88%, at least about 89%, at least about 90%, at least about 91%, at least about 92%, at least about 93%, at least about 94%, at least about 95%, at least about 95.5%, at least about

96%, at least about 96.5%, at least about 97%, at least about 97.5%, at least about 98%, at least about 98.5%, at least about 99%, at least about 99.5% or 100%.

[0075] The collection of the residue retained on the surface of the sieve in the filtering means of the apparatus may be carried out using various physical and/or chemical methods.

5 In one embodiment, collecting the residue retained on the surface of the sieve in the filtering means of the apparatus comprises standard pipetting.

[0076] Using the cell capturing and retrieving device and method of the present invention allowed the inventors to identify an isolated population of cells. Thus, in a third aspect, there is provided an isolated cell population having the following characteristics:

- 10 (i) being endothelial cells derived from a tumor and isolated from blood;
- (ii) each cell having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;
- (iii) each cell having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;
- (iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins;
- (v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins; and
- 15 (vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins.

[0077] The term “endothelial cells” refers to the thin layer of simple squamous cells that line the inner surface of blood vessels and lymphatic vessels. Endothelial cells in direct contact with blood are called vascular endothelial cells, whereas those in direct contact with lymph are known as lymphatic endothelial cells.

20 [0078] The term “leukocyte” refers to white blood cells (WBCs), which are the cells of the immune system that are involved in protecting the body against both infectious disease and foreign invaders. The term “megakaryocyte” refers to a large bone marrow cell with a lobulated nucleus responsible for the production of blood thrombocytes (platelets), which are necessary for normal blood clotting. The term “platelets” refers to a component of blood
25 whose function (along with the coagulation factors) is to stop bleeding by clumping and clotting blood vessel injuries. Platelets have no cell nucleus, they are fragments of cytoplasm that are derived from the megakaryocytes of the bone marrow, and then enter the circulation.

[0079] In one embodiment, the endothelial cell genes expressed by the isolated cell population described herein include but are not limited to *PECAM1*, *VWF* and *CDH5*. In one
30 embodiment, the endothelial cell proteins expressed by the isolated cell population described herein include but are not limited to CD31, VWF and CD144.

[0080] In one embodiment, the leukocyte-specific, megakaryocytic or platelet-specific genes not expressed by the isolated cell population described herein include but are not limited to *PTPRC*, *ITGA2B* and *GP1BA*. In one embodiment, the leukocyte-specific, megakaryocytic or platelet-specific proteins not expressed by the isolated cell population described herein include but are not limited to CD45, CD41 and CD42B.

[0081] In some examples, the following combination of gene expressions can be used to define an endothelial cell: *PECAMI* positive and *PTPRC* negative, *VWF* positive and *ITGA2B* negative, *VWF* positive and *GP1BA* negative, *CDH5* positive and *PTPRC* negative. In some other examples, the following combination of protein expressions can be used to define an endothelial cell: CD31 positive and CD45 negative, VWF positive and CD41 negative, VWF positive and CD42B negative, CD144 positive and CD45 negative.

[0082] The cell capturing and retrieving device and method as described herein can be used to capture and retrieve the isolated cell population as described herein. Thus, in a fourth aspect, there is provided a method for detecting the isolated cell population as described herein in a sample of a subject, the method comprising:

(a) capturing and retrieving the cells from the sample using the apparatus as described herein or the method as described herein.

[0083] The isolated cell population captured using the device and method as described herein can be subjected to downstream manipulation and/or analysis, for example, to detect the expression of certain genes and/or proteins. Thus, in one embodiment, the method of the fourth aspect further comprises:

(b) contacting the cells from step (a) with at least one antibody coupled to a detectable label to allow binding of the antibody to one or more target biomarkers expressed on the cells;

(c) removing unbound antibody from the sample; and

(d) detecting and analyzing the detectable label bound to the antibody to detect the isolated population of cells.

[0084] The isolated cell population as described herein can also be obtained using other cell isolation methods. Thus, in a fifth aspect, there is provided a method for detecting the isolated cell population of the third aspect in a sample of a subject, the method comprising:

(a) contacting cells from the sample with at least one antibody coupled to a detectable label to allow binding of the antibody to one or more target biomarkers expressed on the cells;

(b) removing unbound antibody from the sample; and

5 (c) detecting and analyzing the detectable label bound to the antibody to detect the isolated population of cells.

[0085] In one embodiment, prior to step (a) of the method of the fifth aspect, the cells are isolated from the sample using the method of the second aspect or any cell capture and retrieval methods known in the art.

10 [0086] The term "antibody" means an immunoglobulin molecule able to bind to a specific epitope on an antigen. Antibodies can be comprised of a polyclonal mixture, or may be monoclonal in nature. Further, antibodies can be entire immunoglobulins derived from natural sources, or from recombinant sources. The antibodies used in the methods described herein may exist in a variety of forms, including for example as a whole antibody, or as an
15 antibody fragment, or other immunologically active fragment thereof, such as complementarity determining regions. Similarly, the antibody may exist as an antibody fragment having functional antigen-binding domains, that is, heavy and light chain variable domains. Also, the antibody fragment may exist in a form selected from the group consisting of, but not limited to: Fv, Fab, F(ab)2, scFv (single chain Fv), dAb (single domain antibody),
20 bi-specific antibodies, diabodies and triabodies. Exemplary antibodies are as described in Example 3.

[0087] In one embodiment, the antibodies used in the methods described herein are capable of specific binding to a biomarker. The term "biomarker" refers to a biological molecule, or a fragment of a biological molecule, the change and/or the detection of which
25 can be correlated with a particular physical condition or state of a TECC. The terms "marker" and "biomarker" are used interchangeably throughout the disclosure. Such biomarkers include, but are not limited to, biological molecules comprising nucleotides, nucleic acids, nucleosides, amino acids, sugars, fatty acids, steroids, metabolites, peptides, polypeptides, proteins, carbohydrates, lipids, hormones, antibodies, regions of interest that serve as
30 surrogates for biological macromolecules and combinations thereof (e.g., glycoproteins, ribonucleoproteins, lipoproteins). The term also encompasses portions or fragments of a biological molecule, for example, peptide fragment of a protein or polypeptide. In one

embodiment, the biomarkers are cancer biomarkers. In one embodiment, the antibody is capable of specific binding to any one of the following target biomarkers: PAI-1, Vimentin, FOXC1, keratin-8, keratin-18, keratin-19, Ep-CAM, CD45, VWF, PECAM-1, CD146, CD41, CD34, PSMA, CD105, CD309, CD144, CD202B and Angiopoietin 2.

5 [0088] In one embodiment, the antibody is coupled to a detectable label by methods known in the art, such as direct antibody conjugation and indirect antibody conjugation. The term “direct antibody conjugation” refers to the conjugation of the primary antibody to a detectable label. The term “indirect antibody conjugation” refers to a two-step method wherein the primary antibody is not conjugated to a detectable label. A secondary antibody
10 directed against the primary antibody is used, wherein the secondary antibody is conjugated to a detectable label. The detectable label can be any one of the following: a fluorescent group, a radioisotope, a stable isotope, an enzymatic group, a chemiluminescent group or a biotinyl group. Exemplary fluorescence-labeled antibodies are described in Example 3.

[0089] A number of other methods are known in the art for detecting binding of an
15 antibody to its antigen in an immunoassay and are within the scope of the present disclosure.

[0090] Other methods such as scrmpPCR can also be used for detecting and analysing the isolated cell population as described herein. Thus, one embodiment of the method of the fourth aspect further comprises:

(b) lysing the cells from step (a);

20 (c) contacting the lysed cell sample from step (b) with a reverse primer from a first primer pair, the reverse primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target RNA region, and a reverse transcriptase to effect reverse transcription of the RNA into cDNA;

(d) subsequently contacting the sample from step (c) with:

(i) a forward primer from the first primer pair, the forward primer from the first
25 primer pair being directed to a target cDNA region,

(ii) a reverse primer and a forward primer from a second primer pair, the reverse primer and forward primer from the second primer pair being directed to a target DNA region, and

(iii) a DNA polymerase

30 to simultaneously amplify the target cDNA region and the target DNA region in a pre-amplification step; and

(e) analyzing the amplified target cDNA region and/or the amplified target DNA region.

[0091] In a sixth aspect, there is provided a method for detecting the isolated cell population of the third aspect in a sample of a subject, the method comprising:

- 5 (a) lysing the cells present in the sample;
 - (b) contacting the lysed cell sample from step (a) with a reverse primer from a first primer pair, the reverse primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target RNA region, and a reverse transcriptase to effect reverse transcription of the RNA into cDNA;
 - (c) subsequently contacting the sample from step (b) with:
 - 10 (i) a forward primer from the first primer pair, the forward primer from the first primer pair being directed to a target cDNA region,
 - (ii) a reverse primer and a forward primer from a second primer pair, the reverse primer and forward primer from the second primer pair being directed to a target DNA region, and
 - 15 (iii) a DNA polymerase
- to simultaneously amplify the target cDNA region and the target DNA region in a pre-amplification step; and
- (d) analyzing the amplified target cDNA region and/or the amplified target DNA region.

20 [0092] In one embodiment, prior to step (a) of the method of the sixth aspect, the cells are isolated from the sample using the method of the second aspect or any cell capture and retrieval methods known in the art.

[0093] Advantageously, the simultaneous amplification of the target cDNA region and the target DNA region in step (d) of the fourth aspect or step (c) of the sixth aspect (see scrnPCR
25 as described in Example 3) may form a pre-amplification step that increases the amount of cDNA and/or DNA as templates for further amplification of the target cDNA and/or target DNA regions prior to analysis. The target DNA region may be a target genomic DNA region.

[0094] The term “primer” refers to an oligonucleotide which, when paired with a strand of DNA or RNA, is capable of initiating the synthesis of a primer extension product in the
30 presence of a suitable polymerising agent. The primer is preferably single-stranded for maximum efficiency in amplification but may alternatively be double-stranded. A primer must be sufficiently long to prime the synthesis of extension products in the presence of the

polymerisation agent. The length of the primer depends on many factors, including application, temperature to be employed, template reaction conditions, other reagents, and source of primers. For example, depending on the complexity of the target sequence, the oligonucleotide primer typically contains 15 to 35 or more nucleotides, although it may contain fewer nucleotides. Primers can be large polynucleotides, such as from about 200 nucleotides to several kilobases or more. Primers may be selected to be “substantially complementary” to the sequence on the template to which it is designed to hybridise and serve as a site for the initiation of synthesis. For example, not all bases in the primer need to reflect the sequence of the template molecule to which the primer will hybridize – the primer need only contain sufficient complementary bases to enable the primer to hybridize to the template. The primer may include additional bases, for example in the form of a restriction enzyme recognition sequence at the 5’ end, to facilitate cloning of the amplified DNA. A primer may also include mismatch bases at one or more positions, being bases that are not complementary to bases in the template, but rather are designed to incorporate changes into the DNA upon base extension or amplification.

[0095] The term “amplification” or “amplify” relates to the production of additional copies of a nucleic acid. Amplification may be carried out using polymerase chain reaction (PCR) technologies or other nucleic acid amplification technologies well known in the art.

[0096] “Primer pairs” can be used for amplification (and identification) of a nucleic acid, e.g., by the polymerase chain reaction (PCR). The “primer pair” may comprise a “forward primer” and a “reverse primer”. In a PCR reaction, both strands of a double stranded DNA are amplified. The “forward primer” may bind to one strand of the DNA and allow the synthesis of a primer extension product from the 5’ to 3’ direction. The “reverse primer” may bind to the complementary strand of DNA, and also allows the synthesis of a primer extension product in the 5’ to 3’ direction of the complementary DNA strand. In a reverse transcription reaction, the “reverse primer” may bind to an RNA strand and allow the synthesis of a complementary DNA (cDNA) strand in a 5’ to 3’ direction of the cDNA strand in the presence of a reverse transcriptase enzyme. The “reverse primer” may subsequently be used together with a “forward primer” to amplify the synthesized cDNA strand. PCR primer pairs can be derived from a known sequence, for example, by using computer programs intended for that purpose such as Primer (Version 0.5, 1991, Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research, Cambridge MA) and those used in the Examples disclosed herein (e.g.

PrimerBLAST). Oligonucleotides for use as primers are selected using software known in the art for such purpose. For example, OLIGO 4.06 software is useful for the selection of PCR primer pairs of up to 30-100 nucleotides each, and for the analysis of oligonucleotides and larger polynucleotides of up to 5,000 nucleotides from an input polynucleotide sequence of up to 32 kilobases.

[0097] The methods and reagents for use in PCR amplification reactions, restriction enzyme digestion and subsequent fragment resolution, and nucleic acid sequencing are well known to those skilled in the art. In each case, suitable protocols and reagents will largely depend on individual circumstances. Guidance may be obtained from a variety of sources, such as for example Sambrook *et al.*, Molecular Cloning: A Laboratory Manual, Cold Spring Harbor, New York, 1989, and Ausubel *et al.*, Current Protocols in Molecular Biology, Greene Publ. Assoc. and Wiley-Intersciences, 1992. A person skilled in the art would readily appreciate that various parameters of these procedures may be altered without affecting the ability to achieve the desired product. For example, in the case of PCR amplification, the salt concentration may be varied. Similarly, the amount of DNA used as a template may also be varied depending on the amount of DNA available or the optimal amount of template required for efficient amplification.

[0098] A skilled person would be able to understand that a “reverse transcriptase” is an enzyme that may be used to synthesise cDNA based on an RNA template. A skilled person would also understand that a “DNA polymerase” is an enzyme that can synthesise DNA molecules based on a DNA template.

[0099] By “contacting”, a primer may be brought into physical association with a sample. This allows, for example, a primer pair to anneal with the DNA present in the sample, and subsequently amplify the DNA by PCR. This also allows a primer to anneal to an RNA strand present in the sample, to allow synthesis of cDNA using a reverse transcriptase enzyme as known to a person skilled in the art.

[00100] The term “analyze” or “analyzing” refers to studying or examining the amplified target cDNA region and/or the amplified target DNA region by various techniques known in the art. The amplified cDNA region and/or the amplified target DNA region may be studied for its gene expression or for mutations that may be present.

[00101] The inventors have found that specific amplification of both DNA and RNA can be achieved by using at least a semi-nested approach for RNA and a fully nested approach for

DNA molecules. The term “semi-nested PCR” as used herein refers to a modified PCR technique in which one “nested primer” is used to reduce non-specific binding due to the amplification of unexpected binding sites. A “fully nested approach” would refer to a modified PCR technique where two nested primers are used on either side on a template DNA. The use of “nested primers” allow the specific recognition of a PCR product amplified using a first set of primers, thus eliminating contamination from unwanted products such as primer dimers, hairpins and alternative primer target sequences. The inventors have also found that amplification of DNA and RNA molecules are differentially affected by annealing temperature in the pre-amplification step. A trade-off therefore needs to be set in order to amplify both molecules.

[00102] Accordingly, one embodiment of the method of the fourth aspect or further comprises the step of: subjecting the sample from step (d) to a semi-nested PCR using the reverse primer in step (c) or the forward primer in step (d)(i), and a nested primer that binds within the amplified target cDNA region. Another embodiment of the method of the fourth aspect further comprises the step of: subjecting the sample from step (d) to a nested PCR using a nested primer pair that binds within the amplified target DNA region.

[00103] Similarly, one embodiment of the method of the sixth aspect further comprises the step of: subjecting the sample from step (c) to a semi-nested PCR using the reverse primer in step (b) or the forward primer in step (c)(i), and a nested primer that binds within the amplified target cDNA region. Another embodiment of the method of the sixth aspect further comprises the step of: subjecting the sample from step (c) to a nested PCR using a nested primer pair that binds within the amplified target DNA region.

[00104] In one embodiment, steps (c) and (d) of the method of the fourth aspect or steps (b) and (c) of the method of the sixth aspect are conducted in the same reaction mixture.

[00105] In one embodiment, the analysis in step (e) of the fourth aspect or step (d) of the sixth aspect comprises analyzing the amplified target cDNA for gene expression (e.g. in a gene expression analysis). The gene expression analysis may be conducted using any techniques known in the art, such as quantitative PCR, digital PCR, microarray, and the like.

[00106] In one embodiment, the analysis in step (e) of the fourth aspect or step (d) of the sixth aspect comprises analyzing the amplified target cDNA for mutations (e.g. in a mutational analysis). The mutational analysis may be conducted using any techniques known in the art, such as Sanger sequencing, Maxam-Gilbert sequencing, Pyrosequencing, Shot-gun

sequencing, high-throughput DNA sequencing, Allele-Specific PCR (ASPCR) or High Resolution Melting temperature PCR (HRM).

[00107] The method according to the fourth aspect or the sixth aspect can be performed simultaneously for one or more target RNA regions, and/or one or more target cDNA regions, and/or one or more target DNA regions. Accordingly, one or more reverse primers, each having the same or a differing specificity for a target RNA region may be used in step (c) of the fourth aspect or step (b) of the sixth aspect, one or more forward primers, each having the same or a differing specificity for a target cDNA region may be used in step (d)(i) of the fourth aspect or step (c)(i) of the sixth aspect, one or more primer pairs, each having the same or a differing specificity for a target DNA region may be used in step (d)(ii) of the fourth aspect or step (c)(ii) of the sixth aspect, one or more nested primers that bind to a target cDNA region, and one or more nested primer pairs that bind to a target DNA region, may be used.

[00108] The first primer pair may comprise primers that span exon-exon boundaries or are separated by at least one intron on the corresponding DNA region. The second primer pair may comprise primers that bind to intronic regions of the target DNA region.

[00109] The term “exon” refers to the portion of the genomic DNA that becomes a part of the genomic DNA that is converted into the mature messenger mRNA. The term “intron” or “intronic region” refers to the portion of the genomic DNA that is removed by RNA splicing and which would therefore not be present in the final mature mRNA.

[00110] In one embodiment, the first primer pair used can be any one or more of the primer pairs listed in Table 1.

[00111] **Table 1.** Primer pairs used for preamplification step

Gene name	ID (transcript or gene)	Marker	Preamplification step	
			Forward primer	Reverse primer
<i>SERPINE1</i>	NT_007933.15	EMT	GCCAAGAGCGCTGTCAA (SEQ ID NO: 1)	CAGCAGACCCTTCACAAA (SEQ ID NO: 2)
<i>VIM</i>	NM_003380.3	EMT	GATGTTTCCAAGCCTGACCT (SEQ ID NO: 3)	CAGTGGACTCCTGCTTTGC (SEQ ID NO: 4)
<i>FOXC1</i>	NM_001453.2	EMT	CACACCCTCAAAGCCGAAC (SEQ ID NO: 5)	AAAGTGGAGGTGGCTCTGAA (SEQ ID NO: 6)
<i>KRT8</i>	NM_002273.3	EMT/L(Ep)	AAGGATGCCAACGCCAAGTT (SEQ ID NO: 7)	CCGCTGGTGGTCTTCGTATG (SEQ ID NO: 8)
<i>EPCAM</i>	NT_022184.15	EMT/L(Ep)	GCAGGTCCTCGCGTTCG (SEQ ID NO: 9)	TCTCCCAAGTTTGTGACCATTC (SEQ ID NO: 10)
<i>PTPRC</i>	NT_004487.19	L(He)	GACATCATCACCTAGCAGTTCATG (SEQ ID NO: 11)	CAGTGGGGGAAGGTGTTGG (SEQ ID NO: 12)
<i>VWF</i>	NM_000552.3	L(En)	ACACAGGGGGACCAAAGAG (SEQ ID NO: 13)	GAGATGCCCGTTTCACACCA (SEQ ID NO: 14)

<i>PECAM1</i>	NM_000442.4	L(He,En)	TCTCAACGGTGACTTGTGG (SEQ ID NO: 15)	GTTCTTCCCATTTTGCACCGT (SEQ ID NO: 16)
<i>MCAM</i>	NM_006500.2	L(En)	CTCGGTCCCAGGAGTACC (SEQ ID NO: 17)	TGTACAAACCACTCGACTCCA (SEQ ID NO: 18)
<i>ITGA2B</i>	NM_000419.3	L(Me)	CTTCTATGCAGGCCCAAT (SEQ ID NO: 19)	AGCCTACATTTCGGGTCTCATC (SEQ ID NO: 20)
<i>CD34</i>	NM_001773.2	S/L(En)	CCTTCTGGGTTCATGAGTCTTGACA (SEQ ID NO: 21)	TGTCGTTTCTGTGATGTTTGTGTG (SEQ ID NO: 22)
<i>FOLH1</i>	NT_009237.18	TEC	CGGATATTGTACCACCTTTCAGT (SEQ ID NO: 23)	AGCAGGGTCGGAGTAGAGAA (SEQ ID NO: 24)
<i>ENG</i>	NT_008470.19	L(En)	GTGACGGTGAAGGTGGAAGTGA (SEQ ID NO: 25)	TTGAGGTGTGTCTGGGAGCT (SEQ ID NO: 26)
<i>KDR</i>	NM_002253.2	L(En)	GAAATGACACTGGAGCCTACAAG (SEQ ID NO: 27)	AATGGACCCGAGACATGGAAT (SEQ ID NO: 28)
<i>CDH5</i>	NM_001795.3	L(En)	GTTACGCATCGGTTGTTCAAT (SEQ ID NO: 29)	GCCTGCTTCTCTCGGTCCAA (SEQ ID NO: 30)
<i>TEK</i>	NT_008413.19	L(En)	CTTATTTCTGTGAAGGGCGAGTT (SEQ ID NO: 31)	CTCCCTTGTCACAGTCATAGT (SEQ ID NO: 32)
<i>ANGPT2</i>	NM_001147.2	L(En)	AACACTCCCTCTCGACAAACAATT (SEQ ID NO: 33)	CTGTAGTTGGATGATGTGCTTGTG (SEQ ID NO: 34)
<i>KRT18 (1)</i>	NM_000224.2	EMT/L(Ep)	TGCTCACCACACAGTCTGAT (SEQ ID NO: 52)	CACCTTGCCATCCACTAGCC (SEQ ID NO: 53)
<i>KRT19</i>	NM_002276.4	EMT/L(Ep)	CAGCCACTACTACACGACCA (SEQ ID NO: 54)	CGTTGATGTCGGCCTCCA (SEQ ID NO: 55)

Reference:

(1) derived from Hesse et al. (2001) J. Cell Sci. 114, 2569

Legend:

5 **EMT: Epithelial-mesenchymal transition marker**

L: Lineage marker

TEC: Tumor endothelial cell marker

S: Stem cell marker

Ep: Epithelial marker

10 **He: Hematopoietic cell marker**

En: Endothelial cell marker

Me: Megakaryocyte/platelet marker

[00112] In one embodiment, the second primer pair used can be any one or more of the primer pairs listed in Table 2.

[00113] **Table 2.** Primer pairs used for amplification step

Gene name	Allows DNA/RNA discrimination	Amplification step	
		Forward primer	Reverse primer
<i>SERPINE1</i>	1148 bp intron in DNA sequence	AGAACTTCAGGATGCAGATGTCT (SEQ ID NO: 35)	CAGCAGACCCTTACCAAAA (SEQ ID NO: 2)
<i>VIM</i>	761 bp intron in DNA sequence	GATGTTTCCAAGCCTGACCT (SEQ ID NO: 3)	TGTACCAATCTTCTGCCTCCT (SEQ ID NO: 36)
<i>FOXC1</i>	NA (single exon coding gene)	CACACCCTCAAAGCCGAAC	GAGGGATATTCTGTTCGCTGGT

		(SEQ ID NO: 5)	(SEQ ID NO: 37)
<i>KRT8</i>	159 bp intron in DNA sequence	GCTGGAGGGCGAGGAGA (SEQ ID NO: 38)	CCGCTGGTGGTCTTCGTATG (SEQ ID NO: 8)
<i>EPCAM</i>	4118 bp intron in DNA sequence	CCGCAGCTCAGGAAGAATGT (SEQ ID NO: 39)	TCTCCCAAGTTTGTAGCCATTC (SEQ ID NO: 10)
<i>PTPRC</i>	53092 bp intron in DNA sequence	CAACAGTGGAGAAAGGACGCA (SEQ ID NO: 40)	CAGTGGGGGAAGGTGTTGG (SEQ ID NO: 12)
<i>VWF</i>	Forward primer on exon junction	TGCCTCCAAAGGGCTGTATC (SEQ ID NO: 41)	GAGATGCCCGTTCACACCA (SEQ ID NO: 14)
<i>PECAM1</i>	12457 bp intron in DNA sequence	CAGTCTTCACTCTCAGGATGC (SEQ ID NO: 42)	GTTCTTCCCATTTTGCACCGT (SEQ ID NO: 16)
<i>MCAM</i>	1724 bp intron in DNA sequence	CTCGGTCCCAGGAGTACC (SEQ ID NO: 17)	CGGCCATTCTTGTACCAGATGA (SEQ ID NO: 18)
<i>ITGA2B</i>	3242 bp intron in DNA sequence	GGCGGCGTGTTCCTGT (SEQ ID NO: 44)	AGCCTACATTTCCGGTCTCATC (SEQ ID NO: 20)
<i>CD34</i>	Forward and reverse primers on exon junction	CTACCCAGAGTTACCTACCCA (SEQ ID NO: 45)	TGTCGTTTCTGTGATGTTTGTGTG (SEQ ID NO: 22)
<i>FOLH1</i>	6811 bp intron in DNA sequence	CCAGAGGGCGATCTAGTGTA (SEQ ID NO: 46)	AGCAGGGTCCGAGTAGAGAA (SEQ ID NO: 24)
<i>ENG</i>	256 bp intron in DNA sequence	GTGACGGTGAAGGTGGAAGTGA (SEQ ID NO: 47)	AGTATTCTCCAGTGGTCCAGATCT (SEQ ID NO: 47)
<i>KDR</i>	3192 bp intron in DNA sequence	GAAATGACACTGGAGCCTACAAG (SEQ ID NO: 27)	TGTTGGTCACTAACAGAAGCA (SEQ ID NO: 48)
<i>CDH5</i>	2143 bp intron in DNA sequence	CACGCCTCTGTTCATGTACCA (SEQ ID NO: 49)	GCCTGCTTCTCTCGGTCCAA (SEQ ID NO: 30)
<i>TEK</i>	10352 bp intron in DNA sequence	CTTATTTCTGTGAAGGGCGAGTT (SEQ ID NO: 31)	GTAGCTGGTAGGAAGGAAGCT (SEQ ID NO: 50)
<i>ANGPT2</i>	6144 bp intron in DNA sequence	GGACCAGACCAGTGAATAAACA (SEQ ID NO: 51)	CTGTAGTTGGATGATGTGCTTGTC (SEQ ID NO: 34)
<i>KRT18(1)</i>	641 bp introns in DNA sequence	TGGAGGACCGCTACGCCCTA (SEQ ID NO: 56)	CCAAGGCATCACCAAGACTA (SEQ ID NO: 57)
<i>KRT19</i>	2745 bp intron in DNA sequence	TGCGGGACAAGATTCTTGGT (SEQ ID NO: 58)	CGTTGATGTCGGCCTCCA (SEQ ID NO: 55)

Reference:

(1) derived from Hesse et al. (2001) J. Cell Sci. 114, 2569

[00114] The pre-amplification in step (d) of the method of the fourth aspect may comprise one or more cycling steps. Each cycling step may comprise one or more cycles of amplification (i.e. denaturation, annealing and elongation) at a pre-determined temperature for a pre-determined duration. It would be appreciated that the number of cycling steps, the number of cycles of denaturation, annealing and elongation, the temperature(s) at which these are conducted, and the duration for which each temperature is applied would depend on factors such as the reagents used in the amplification reactions, the target cDNA or DNA region, the primers used, the sample(s) to be amplified, etc. In one embodiment, the amplification does not include a final extension step.

[00115] For example, step (d) may comprise about 1 to about 60 cycling steps, about 1 to about 50 cycling steps, about 1 to about 40 cycling steps, about 1 to about 30 cycling steps, about 1 to about 25 cycling steps, about 1 to about 20 cycling steps, about 1 to about 15 cycling steps, about 1 to about 10 cycling steps, about 1 to about 5 cycling steps, about 1 to

about 4 cycling steps, about 1 to about 3 cycling steps, about 1 cycling step, about 2 cycling steps, or about 3 cycling steps.

[00116] Each cycling step may comprise about 1 to about 50 cycles, about 1 to about 40 cycles, about 1 to about 30 cycles, about 1 to about 25 cycles, about 1 to about 20 cycles, about 1 to about 18 cycles, about 1 to about 15 cycles, about 1 to about 10 cycles, about 1 to about 6 cycles, about 2 cycles, about 4 cycles, about 6 cycles, about 8 cycles, about 10 cycles, about 15 cycles about 20 cycles, about 25 cycles, about 30 cycles, about 40 cycles, or about 50 cycles of denaturation, annealing and elongation.

[00117] In some examples, the annealing and/or elongation temperature in a cycle is about 40°C to about 80°C, about 40°C to about 75°C, about 40°C to about 70°C, about 40°C to about 65°C, about 40°C to about 60°C, about 40°C to about 55°C, about 40°C to about 50°C, about 40°C, about 45°C, about 50°C, about 55°C, about 60°C, about 65°C, about 70°C, about 75°C or about 80°C.

[00118] The annealing and/or elongation temperature for successive cycling steps may be reduced by about 1°C to about 10°C, about 1°C to about 9°C, about 1°C to about 8°C, about 1°C to about 7°C, about 1°C to about 6°C, about 1°C to about 5°C, about 1°C to about 4°C, about 1°C to about 3°C, or about 1°C to about 2°C.

[00119] In some examples, the annealing and/or elongation can be carried out for about 10 seconds to about 10 minutes, about 10 seconds to about 8 minutes, about 10 seconds to about 6 minutes, about 10 seconds to about 4 minutes, about 10 seconds to about 2 minutes, about 10 seconds to about 1 minute, about 1 minute, about 2 minutes, about 4 minutes, about 6 minutes, about 8 minutes, or about 10 minutes.

[00120] In some examples, the denaturation can be carried out at a temperature of about 75°C to about 120°C, about 75°C to about 115°C, about 75°C to about 110°C, about 75°C to about 105°C, about 75°C to about 100°C, about 75°C to about 95°C, about 75°C to about 90°C, about 75°C to about 85°C, about 75°C to about 80°C, about 75°C, about 80°C, about 85°C, about 90°C, about 95°C, about 100°C, about 105°C, about 110°C, about 115°C, or about 120°C.

[00121] The denaturation may be carried out for about 1 second to about 10 minutes, about 1 second to about 5 minutes, about 1 second to about 4 minutes, about 1 second to about 3 minutes, about 1 second to about 2 minutes, about 1 second to about 1 minute, about 1 second, about 10 seconds, about 20 seconds, about 30 seconds, about 40 seconds, about 50 seconds,

about 1 minute, about 2 minutes, about 3 minutes, about 4 minutes, about 5 minutes, or about 10 minutes.

[00122] In one example, step (d) of the method comprises:

6 cycles of 60°C for 4 minutes followed by 95°C for 1 minute,

5 6 cycles of 55°C for 4 minutes followed by 95°C for 1 minute, and

6 cycles of 50°C for 4 minutes followed by 95°C for 1 minute.

[00123] In some examples, the lysed cell sample from step (b) comprises cell-free RNA, or cell-free DNA.

[00124] Advantageously, the method according to the fourth aspect or the sixth aspect can
10 be used to analyze RNA and DNA in instances where a limited amount of sample is available, for example in rare cell samples.

[00125] In some examples, the RNA or DNA may be present in a low amount, for example from about 1 pg to about 10ng, about 5 pg to about 10 ng, about 5 pg to about 5 ng, about 5 pg to about 1 ng, about 5 pg to about 500 pg, about 5 pg to about 250 pg, about 5 pg to about
15 125 pg, about 5 pg to about 100 pg, or about 5 pg to about 50 pg.

[00126] The methods described herein can be used for diagnosis, in particular for the diagnosis of cancers. Thus, in a seventh aspect, there is provided a method of diagnosing a cancer in a subject, comprising analyzing a sample from the subject for presence of the isolated population of cells as described herein, wherein presence of the isolated population
20 of cells indicates that the subject has cancer. One example of the detection of TECCs in cancer patients is shown in Example 3.

[00127] In some examples, the isolated population of cells is considered as “present” if it is detectable above the background noise of the respective detection method used (e.g., 2-fold, 3-fold, 5-fold, or 10-fold higher than the background; e.g., 2-fold or 3-fold over background).

25 [00128] The subject may be a mammal, for example human.

[00129] The major types of cancers that can be diagnosed by the method as described herein include but are not limited to carcinoma, sarcoma, lymphoma, germ cell tumor and blastoma. The specific types of cancers that can be diagnosed by the method as described herein include but are not limited to colon cancer, rectal cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer,
30 renal cell cancer, transitional cell carcinoma, lung cancer, cholangiocarcinoma, colon cancer, brain cancer, non-small cell lung cancer, pancreatic cancer, gastric carcinoma, bladder cancer, esophageal cancer, mesothelioma, melanoma, thyroid cancer, head and neck cancer,

osteosarcoma and glioblastoma. A person skilled in the art will understand that the term “colorectal cancer” can be used to refer to colon cancer and rectal cancer. Specifically, when a colorectal cancer originates from the colon, it is considered as a colon cancer, and when a colorectal cancer originates from the rectum, it is considered as a rectal cancer.

5 [00130] In one embodiment, the cancer is invasive and/or metastatic cancer. In another embodiment, the cancer is stage I cancer, stage II cancer, stage III cancer or stage IV cancer. In a further embodiment, the cancer is early stage cancer, such as pre-operative stage cancer. An example of an early stage cancer is a primary tumor. The methods as described herein are particularly useful for the detection of early stage cancer due to the ability of the method
10 to capture and retrieve cells that are present in very low numbers, such as those in early stage cancers, for analysis.

[00131] The methods as described herein can be used for monitoring and/or predicting the response to treatment of a cancer patient. Thus, in an eighth aspect, there is provided a method for monitoring and/or predicting the response to treatment of a cancer patient, the
15 method comprising analyzing a sample obtained from the patient after treatment for determining the number of the isolated population of cells as described herein, wherein a reduction in the number of the isolated population of cells compared to the number of the isolated population of cells in a baseline sample obtained from the patient prior to treatment indicates that the patient is responding positively to the treatment. Similarly, in a ninth aspect,
20 there is provided a method for predicting the response to treatment of a cancer patient, the method comprising analyzing a sample obtained from the cancer patient before treatment for determining the number of the isolated population of cells as described herein, wherein an equal or higher number of the isolated population of cells compared to the number of the isolated population of cells in a sample obtained before treatment from a patient or a group of
25 patients that have responded positively to the treatment indicates that the cancer patient will respond positively to the treatment, and wherein a lower number of the isolated population of cells compared to the number of the isolated population of cells in a sample obtained before treatment from a patient or a group of patients that have responded positively to the treatment indicates that the cancer patient will respond negatively to the treatment.

30 [00132] The isolated population of cells is considered as “absent” if it is not detectable above the background noise of the detection method used (e.g., <1.5-fold or <2.0-fold higher than the background signal; e.g., <1.5-fold or <2.0-fold over background). The term

“reduction”, “reduced” or “lower” refers to a decrease in the number of the isolated population of cells relative or compared to a baseline sample or control. The baseline or control may be a sample obtained from the same subject prior to treatment, or a sample obtained from a normal, healthy subject, or a group of normal, healthy subjects, or a sample obtained from a patient or a group of patients that have responded to the treatment in a preliminary study. In some examples, the number of the isolated population of cells in the baseline or control sample is from 1 to 5, 1 to 10, 1 to 15, 1 to 20, 1 to 25, 1 to 30, 1 to 30, 1 to 40 or 1 to 50/ml of blood. In some examples, the reduced or lower number of the isolated population of cells is reduced by at least 10%, at least 20%, at least 30%, at least 40%, at least 50%, at least 60%, at least 70%, at least 80%, at least 90% or at least 95% as compared to the number of the isolated population of cells in a baseline or control sample. The term “increased” or “higher” refers to an increase in the number of the isolated population of cells relative or compared to a baseline sample or control. The baseline or control may be a sample obtained from the same subject prior to treatment, or a sample obtained from a normal, healthy subject or a sample obtained from a patient that has responded to the treatment in a preliminary study. In some examples, the increased or higher number of the isolated population of cells is at least about 1.05 times, at least about 1.1 times, at least about 1.2 times, at least about 1.3 times, at least about 1.4 times, at least about 1.5 times, at least about 1.6 times, at least about 1.7 times, at least about 1.8 times, at least about 1.9 times or at least about 2.0 times the number of the isolated population of cells in a baseline or control sample.

[00133] In some examples, the response to treatment of a cancer patient will be negative if the number of the isolated population of cells is less than 100/ml, less than 90/ml, less than 80/ml, less than 70/ml, less than 60/ml, less than 50/ml, less than 40/ml, less than 30/ml, less than 20/ml, less than 15/ml, less than 10/ml, less than 9/ml, less than 8/ml, less than 7/ml, less than 6/ml, less than 5/ml, less than 4/ml, less than 3/ml, less than 2/ml or less than 1/ml of blood.

[00134] In some other examples, the response to treatment of a cancer patient will be positive if the number of the isolated population of cells is more than 1/ml, more than 2/ml, more than 3/ml, more than 4/ml, more than 5/ml, more than 6/ml, more than 7/ml, more than 8/ml, more than 9/ml, more than 10/ml, more than 15/ml, more than 20/ml, more than 30/ml, more than 40/ml, more than 50/ml, more than 60/ml, more than 70/ml, more than 80/ml, more than 90/ml or more than 100/ml of blood.

[00135] A person skilled in the art will appreciate that a number of methods can be used to determine the presence, absence or the increase or decrease in the expression of a biomarker, including microscopy based approaches, including fluorescence scanning microscopy (see, e.g. , Marrinucci D. *et al*, 2012, Phys. Biol. 9016003), mass spectrometry approaches, such as MS/MS, LC-MS/MS, multiple reaction monitoring (MRM) or SRM and product-ion monitoring (PIM) and also including antibody based methods such as immunofluorescence, immunohistochemistry, immunoassays such as Western blots, enzyme-linked immunosorbant assay (ELISA), immunoprecipitation, radioimmunoassay, dot blotting, Fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS) and mass cytometry. Immunoassay techniques and protocols are generally known to those skilled in the art (Price and Newman, Principles and Practice of Immunoassay, 2nd Edition, Grove's Dictionaries, 1997; and Gosling, Immunoassays: A Practical Approach, Oxford University Press, 2000.) A variety of immunoassay techniques, including competitive and non-competitive immunoassays, can be used (Self *et al*, Curr. Opin. Biotechnol 7:60-65 (1996), see also John R. Crowther, The ELISA Guidebook, 1st ed., Humana Press 2000, ISBN 0896037282 and, An Introduction to Radioimmunoassay and Related Techniques, by Chard T, ed., Elsevier Science 1995, ISBN 0444821 198).

[00136] A person of skill in the art will further appreciate that the presence, absence or the increase or decrease in the expression of biomarkers may be detected using any class of marker-specific binding reagents known in the art, including, e.g. , antibodies, aptamers, fusion proteins, such as fusion proteins including protein receptor or protein ligand components (e.g. CD31, VWF, CD144, CD 45, CD41, or CD42B binding receptors or ligands), or biomarker-specific small molecule binders.

[00137] The isolated population of cells as described herein are mainly of endothelial nature. Since endothelial cells line the interior of all blood vessels, the method as described herein can also be used for analyzing blood vessel characteristics of a tumor. Thus, in a tenth aspect, there is provided a method for analyzing blood vessel characteristics of a tumor in a subject, the method comprising analyzing a sample from the subject for determining the number of the isolated population of cells as described herein, wherein an increased number of the isolated population of cells compared to a baseline sample indicates that the tumor has larger blood vessels compared to the baseline sample, and wherein a reduced number of the isolated population of cells compared to a baseline sample indicates that the tumor has smaller blood vessels compared to the baseline sample.

[00138] In some examples, a baseline sample or a control sample is obtained from a patient shown to have small blood vessels in a preliminary study. In some examples, the number of the isolated population of cells in the baseline or control sample is from 1 to 5, 1 to 10, 1 to 15, 1 to 20, 1 to 25, 1 to 30, 1 to 30, 1 to 40 or 1 to 50/ml of blood. In some examples, the increased number of the isolated population of cells is at least about 1.05 times, at least about 1.1 times, at least about 1.2 times, at least about 1.3 times, at least about 1.4 times, at least about 1.5 times, at least about 1.6 times, at least about 1.7 times, at least about 1.8 times, at least about 1.9 times or at least about 2.0 times the number of the isolated population of cells in a baseline or control sample. In some examples, the reduced number of the isolated population of cells is reduced by at least 10%, at least 20%, at least 30%, at least 40%, at least 50%, at least 60%, at least 70%, at least 80%, at least 90% or at least 95% as compared to the number of the isolated population of cells in a the number of the isolated population of cells in a baseline or control sample.

[00139] In some examples, a patient is classified as having large blood vessels in the tumor if the number of the isolated population of cells is more than 1/ml, more than 2/ml, more than 3/ml, more than 4/ml, more than 5/ml, more than 6/ml, more than 7/ml, more than 8/ml, more than 9/ml, more than 10/ml, more than 15/ml, more than 20/ml, more than 30/ml, more than 40/ml, more than 50/ml, more than 60/ml, more than 70/ml, more than 80/ml, more than 90/ml or more than 100/ml of blood.

[00140] In some other examples, a patient is classified as having small blood vessels in the tumor if the number of the isolated population of cells is less than 100/ml, less than 90/ml, less than 80/ml, less than 70/ml, less than 60/ml, less than 50/ml, less than 40/ml, less than 30/ml, less than 20/ml, less than 15/ml, less than 10/ml, less than 9/ml, less than 8/ml, less than 7/ml, less than 6/ml, less than 5/ml, less than 4/ml, less than 3/ml, less than 2/ml or less than 1/ml of blood.

[00141] In some examples, the response to treatment of a cancer patient will be positive if the patient has larger blood vessels in the tumor. In some other examples, the response to treatment of a cancer patient will be negative if the patient has smaller blood vessels in the tumor.

[00142] It is also envisaged that commercial kits may be developed for rapid capturing, retrieval and/or detection of the isolated cell population, for the diagnosis, monitoring and/or predicting the response to treatment, and/or for the analysis of the blood vessel characteristics

of tumor as described herein. Thus, in an eleventh aspect, there is provided a kit for use in the methods as described herein (such as methods of the second, the fourth, the seventh, the eighth, the ninth or the tenth aspects), wherein the kit comprises (a) the apparatus as described herein.

- 5 [00143] The kit of the eleventh aspect may further comprise one or more of the following:
- (b) one or more cell lysis buffers for lysing the cells obtained from a sample;
 - (c) a primer selected from the group consisting of:
 - i. the reverse primer of step (c) of the method of the fourth aspect;
 - ii. the forward primer of step (d)(i) of the method of the fourth aspect,
 - 10 iii. the primer pair of step (d)(ii) of the method of the fourth aspect, and
 - iv. the nested primer and nested primer pair of the method of the fourth aspect;
 - (d) one or more reagents, selected from the group consisting of:
 - i. a reverse transcriptase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the reverse transcription in step (c) of the method of the fourth aspect,
 - 15 ii. a DNA polymerase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the amplification in step (d) of the method of the fourth aspect or the semi-nested or nested PCR of the method of the fourth aspect, and
 - iii. one or more labelled or unlabelled deoxyribonucleotides selected from the group consisting of dATP, dCTP, dGTP, and dTTP or dUTP; and
 - 20 (e) an antibody capable of specific binding to a protein selected from the group consisting of PAI-1, Vimentin, FOXC1, keratin-8, keratin-18, keratin-19, Ep-CAM, CD45, VWF, PECAM-1, CD146, CD41, CD34, PSMA, CD105, CD309, CD144, CD202B and Angiopoietin 2, wherein the antibody is coupled to a detectable label as described herein; and optionally means for detecting the detectable label.

25 [00144] In a twelfth aspect, there is provided a kit for use in the methods described herein (such as methods of the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, the eighth, the ninth or the tenth aspects), the kit comprising:

- (a) one or more cell lysis buffers for lysing the cells obtained from a sample;
- (b) a primer selected from the group consisting of:
 - 30 i. the reverse primer of step (b) of the method of the fifth aspect,
 - ii. the forward primer of step (c)(i) of the method of the fifth aspect,
 - iii. the primer pair of step (c)(ii) of the method of the fifth aspect, and

iv. the nested primer and nested primer pair of the method of the fifth aspect;
 (c) one or more reagents, selected from the group consisting of:
 i. a reverse transcriptase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the reverse transcription in step (b) of the method of the fifth aspect,

5 ii. a DNA polymerase and one or more suitable reaction buffers for the amplification in step (c) of the method of the fifth aspect or the semi-nested or nested PCR of the method of the fifth aspect, and

iii. one or more labelled or unlabelled deoxyribonucleotides selected from the group consisting of dATP, dCTP, dGTP, and dTTP or dUTP; and

10 (d) an antibody capable of specific binding to a protein selected from the group consisting of PAI-1, Vimentin, FOXC1, keratin-8, keratin-18, keratin-19, Ep-CAM, CD45, VWF, PECAM-1, CD146, CD41, CD34, PSMA, CD105, CD309, CD144, CD202B and Angiopoietin 2, wherein the antibody is coupled to a detectable label as described herein; and optionally means for detecting the detectable label.

15 [00145] Lysis buffers commonly used in the art, such as alkaline lysis buffers or cell lysis buffers containing proteinase K, or simply buffers containing a detergent or a compound and/or an enzyme that will disrupt the cell and allow its nucleic acids to be released in solution may be used.

[00146] The kit according to the eleventh or twelfth aspect may also include probes or dyes
 20 for quantitative real-time PCR. Exemplary probes and dyes include, but are not limited to SYBR green dye, EvaGreen, dsGreen, TaqMan probes, hybridization probes and the like.

[00147] The kit may also include instructions for designing one or more of the primers, and/or optimizing the pre-amplification and/or amplification cycling conditions of steps (c) and/or (d) of the method of the fourth aspect or the fifth aspect.

25 [00148] In one embodiment, the primers and/or reagents are pre-mixed in combinations suitable for the lysis, pre-amplification, and amplification steps according to the method of the fourth aspect or the fifth aspect. In another embodiment, the primers are pre-mixed in combinations suitable for analysis of gene expression profiles or mutation signatures. The primers may be ones that have been designed for amplifying one or more target genes of
 30 interest.

[00149] One embodiment of the kit of the eleventh or the twelfth aspect further comprises instructions for performing the method as described herein.

[00150] In one embodiment, the kit comprises one or more containers comprising one or more reaction buffers for performing the methods and/or uses described above. In some embodiments, the kit includes software-driven assay protocols for use in commercial PCR instrumentation (such as the Life Technologies 7500 FastDx or Cepheid SmartCycler® II), which may be provided on a CD.

[00151] As used herein, the singular form “a”, “an” and “the” include plural references unless the context clearly dictates otherwise. For example, the term “a primer” includes a plurality of primers, including mixtures thereof.

[00152] The word “substantially” does not exclude “completely” e.g. a composition which is “substantially free” from Y may be completely free from Y. Where necessary, the word “substantially” may be omitted from the definition of the invention.

[00153] Unless specified otherwise, the terms "comprising" and "comprise", and grammatical variants thereof, are intended to represent "open" or "inclusive" language such that they include recited elements but also permit inclusion of additional, unrecited elements.

[00154] As used herein, the term "about", in the context of concentrations of components of the formulations, typically means +/- 5% of the stated value, more typically +/- 4% of the stated value, more typically +/- 3% of the stated value, more typically, +/- 2% of the stated value, even more typically +/- 1% of the stated value, and even more typically +/- 0.5% of the stated value.

[00155] Throughout this disclosure, certain embodiments may be disclosed in a range format. It should be understood that the description in range format is merely for convenience and brevity and should not be construed as an inflexible limitation on the scope of the disclosed ranges. Accordingly, the description of a range should be considered to have specifically disclosed all the possible sub-ranges as well as individual numerical values within that range. For example, description of a range such as from 1 to 6 should be considered to have specifically disclosed sub-ranges such as from 1 to 3, from 1 to 4, from 1 to 5, from 2 to 4, from 2 to 6, from 3 to 6 etc., as well as individual numbers within that range, for example, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. This applies regardless of the breadth of the range.

[00156] Certain embodiments may also be described broadly and generically herein. Each of the narrower species and subgeneric groupings falling within the generic disclosure also form part of the disclosure. This includes the generic description of the embodiments with a

proviso or negative limitation removing any subject matter from the genus, regardless of whether or not the excised material is specifically recited herein.

EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

[00157] **Example 1 – Device for the capturing and retrieval of cells from blood.**

[00158] Fig. 1A shows the insert sleeve, which has an inlet at the upper end and an outlet at the lower end. The insert sleeve functions as a housing for the cell capturing sieve, securing the cell capture sieve near the outlet of the column of the device. The sample flows in from the inlet of the insert sleeve, and flows out through the outlet of the insert sleeve. Fig. 1B shows that the channel through which the sample flows tapers at the lower end of the insert sleeve. Fig. 1C illustrates the assembly of the insert sleeve and the cell capture sieve within the column. The cell capture sieve (sandwiched between two O-rings) is first placed into the slot near the outlet of the insert sleeve, and then the entire insert sleeve assembly is inserted into the column by using an insert tool in the form of a rod (not shown). Fig. 1D shows two cell capturing and retrieval devices being connected to a peristaltic pump, while Fig. 3A shows another exemplary setup of the microfiltration apparatus with four microfiltration devices each enclosing a silicon microsieve (inset, scale bar =10 μm) connected to a peristaltic pump for flow rate control. A blood sample was filtered through the device. Depletions of contaminating white blood cells (WBCs) and red blood cells (RBCs) using cell capturing sieves with various pore diameters were tested. The results are shown in Fig. 1E. One ml of whole blood was filtered through the device. Contaminating WBCs and RBCs were retrieved and counted (black bars), or retrieved and counted after inverting the flow of the peristaltic pump (“backflushing”) for a short time to dislodge cells that were stuck on the sieve (white bars). Fold depletion was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Fold Depletion of WBCs or RBCs} = (\text{WBCs or RBCs in Whole Blood}) / (\text{WBCs or RBCs in Microfiltrate})$$

[00159] The bars in Fig. 1E represent the mean value obtained from tests with three different devices for each condition tested. Error bar represents the standard deviation.

[00160] TECC enrichment and retrieval efficiency was optimized by spiking 1 ml of donor blood with 30 SW620 cells, a CRC cell line with similar median size as CTCs (Fig. 1F). An

optimal tradeoff between retrieval efficiency and cell purity was obtained using a flow rate of 0.25 ml/min and pore diameters of 9–10 μm .

[00161] Retrieval efficiency of the device using whole blood spiked with the various cell lines was tested. The results are shown in Fig. 1G, with each dot plot corresponding to an independent experiment. 20 to 50 cells/ml were labeled and spiked in 1 ml or 3 ml of whole blood. Each blood sample was passed through the device, and target cells were retrieved, placed in a 96-well plate and counted. Retrieval efficacy was calculated as follows:

$$\% \text{ Retrieval Efficiency} = (\text{Retrieved cells}) \times 100 / (\text{Spiked Cells})$$

[00162] The cell retrieval efficiency as compared to capture efficacy using the apparatus was tested using two different cell lines: HCT116 and RKO cell lines. 30 to 50 cells were spiked in 1 ml of whole blood, the retrieved cells were placed in a 96-well plate and counted. The number of cells remaining un-retrieved on the sieve was also counted. Number of cells captured was calculated by combining the number of cells retrieved and the number of cells remaining un-retrieved on the sieve. As shown in Fig. 2A, the capture efficiency for HCT 116 cells was greater than 90% and the retrieval efficiency was greater than 98% using sieve of pore diameters 8 μm , 9 μm and 10 μm . As shown in Fig. 2B, the capture efficiencies for RKO cells using sieve of pore diameters 8 μm , 9 μm and 10 μm were about 40%, 68% and 58% respectively. However, the retrieval efficiency of captured RKO cells was 100% using all three different pore diameters.

[00163] Cell capturing and retrieval efficiency using different filter materials shown in Fig. 2C were tested with HepG2 cells. The results shown in Fig. 2D indicate that the two different filter materials, silicon and silicon nitride, provided similar cell capturing and retrieval efficiency.

[00164] **Example 2 – Capturing and retrieval of tumor-derived endothelial cell clusters (TECCs)**

[00165] **Patient samples and clinical data.** All subjects had given informed written consent to participate. Clinical samples were obtained between July 2012 and April 2014 according to protocols approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of the National University of Singapore, Fortis Surgical Hospital and Singapore Health Services (SingHealth). Consecutive blood samples from 82 colorectal cancer patients were provided by Fortis Surgical Hospital (FSH) and National Cancer Center, Singapore (NCC). Blood samples from 45 healthy subjects were provided by the Singapore Consortium of Cohort

Studies (SCCS). All samples were collected in EDTA Vacutainer tubes (Becton-Dickinson) and processed within 6 h at the Institute of Bioengineering and Nanotechnology. Two cases were excluded from analysis because of technical failure of the microfiltration device. Wherever available, matched tumor and metastatic samples were immediately frozen after resection, and stored at -80°C until use. Clinicopathologic data for participating subjects are described in Supplementary Table 6 and were collected retrospectively after completion of TECC counts. Clinical data collection was conducted without prior knowledge of TECC counts. Similarly, clinical data for colorectal cancer patients were not known at the time of TECC count except for diagnosis and preoperative status of FSH samples. Tumor area was calculated by width $\times$ length.

[00166] **Cell lines and culture.** HCT 116, COLO 201, SW480, SW620, DLD-1 and RKO colorectal cancer cell lines, BJ-5ta immortalized human foreskin fibroblasts and HUVECs were from ATCC. HUVECs were used at passage 1 and 2 and cultured in EGM-2 medium (Lonza). All other cell lines were cultured in DMEM (Life Technologies) supplemented with 10% FBS. Cells were maintained in a humidified incubator at 37°C in the presence of 5% CO₂.

[00167] **Device fabrication and assembly.** Silicon microsieves were fabricated as described (Lim *et al.*). Briefly, the microsieve consists of a silicon disk having an overall diameter (ϕ) of 7.3 mm and a support ring of thickness 300 μ m. The central capture region has ϕ 5.3 mm and 60 μ m thickness containing 100,000 circular pores obtained by deep reactive ion etching. To embed the microsieve in a sterile 3-ml syringe, an acrylic sleeve insert was designed, consisting of an inlet channel of ϕ 8.58 mm tapered to a ϕ 5.54 mm channel, which corresponded to the microsieve cell capture region. The sleeve insert housed the microsieve and silicone O-rings (0.5 mm thick) that ensured good sealing and cushioning as shown in Fig. 1C. The retrieval device was assembled as follows. Firstly, the rubber plug of a 3 ml syringe plunger was removed and a hole of 5.5 mm diameter was created using a punch cutter. The perforated rubber plug was placed in the 3-ml syringe. Next, an O-ring was placed in the slot of sleeve insert, followed by the microsieve and another O-ring. Finally the sleeve insert with the microsieve and O-rings was placed in the 3-ml syringe above the perforated rubber plug. This arrangement enabled the microfiltration of cells by size from whole blood and the subsequent retrieval of captured cells from the upper surface of microsieve in a convenient set-up.

[00168] **Microfiltration.** To optimize blood microfiltration, 5 μ M CellTracker (Life Technologies) labelled cells were added to donor blood at 10–50 cells per ml of whole blood. Blood was filtered at various flow rates by means of a peristaltic pump (Ismatec). After 6 washes using PBS, 0.5% BSA and 2 mM EDTA, cells were resuspended in culture medium. Subsequently, cell nuclei were stained using Hoechst 33342 (Life Technologies), and cells were retrieved to determine retrieval efficiency and fold depletion of contaminating WBCs. In some experiments, CellTracker positive cells remaining on the microsieve were also counted. Percent retrieval efficiency was calculated as follows:

$$\% \text{ Retrieval Efficiency} = (\text{Retrieved cells}) \times 100 / (\text{Spiked Cells})$$

10 Fold depletion was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Fold Depletion of WBCs or RBCs} = (\text{WBCs or RBCs in Whole Blood}) / (\text{WBCs or RBCs in Microfiltrate})$$

[00169] WBC count in microfiltrate is defined as the number of any Hoechst 33342 positive, CellTracker negative event in the case of experimental enrichment or by any CD45 positive event in the case of clinical sample analysis. All clinical samples were immediately processed for the indicated downstream applications using optimized parameters described in the description of Fig. 3B, i.e. imaging, counting, single-cell isolation and analysis, cell culture or pooled nucleic acid extraction. To estimate ideal target WBC depletion, micromanipulation on serial dilution of PBMCs containing 50 CellTracker positive HCT 116 cells was performed. Five thousand fold depletion allowed micromanipulation of pure HCT 116 cells without contaminant white blood cells. The ideal target retrieval efficiency was chosen based on literature search on existing label-free CTC isolation devices (Cima *et al.*). Microfiltration of clinical samples was performed using 2 ml whole blood for each device and optimized microfiltration conditions.

25 [00170] An optimal tradeoff between retrieval efficiency and cell purity was obtained using a flow rate of 0.25 ml min⁻¹ and pore diameters of 9 – 10 μ m. This resulted in > 90% SW620 retrieval efficiency with > 5 $\times$ 10³ fold depletion of white blood cells (Fig. 3D), allowing for a variety of downstream applications beyond cell counting.

[00171] **Example 3 – Analysis and characterization of the captured and retrieved**
30 **TECCs**

[00172] This example describes a method for identification and analysis of a well-defined population of endothelial cells (cells originating from the blood vessel) that can be isolated from blood and can be used as biomarker for:

- 1) Diagnosis of tumors at all stages, even at very early stages of the disease
- 2) Monitoring response to therapy of tumors
- 3) Predicting response to therapy of tumors
- 4) Predicting blood vessel features of the tumor

[00173] The method may be used on its own, or can be combined with standard diagnostic/prognostic methods to increase the accuracy of the diagnostic/prognostic test(s).

For example, this method can be combined with CEA measurement (a biomarker of colorectal cancer that is measured in blood) to facilitate diagnosis of colorectal tumors.

[00174] **On-sieve immunofluorescence.** Suspension cells were stained for 30 min directly ‘on sieve’ after 5 washes in PBS containing 0.5% BSA, 2 mM EDTA and human FcR Blocking Reagent (Miltenyi Biotec) using the following fluorescent-labelled antibodies: anti-CD45 1:200 (clone 2D1; eBioscience), anti-Ep-CAM 1:20 (9C4, BioLegend), anti-CD31 1:20 (WM59, BioLegend), anti-CD144 1:10 (55-7H1, BD), anti-CD41 1:20 (HIP8, BioLegend) anti-CD42B 1:20 (HIP1, BioLegend). For intracellular antigens, the Inside Stain kit (Miltenyi Biotec) and human FcR Blocking Reagent were used with the following antibodies: anti-VWF 1:200 (rabbit polyclonal A 0082, DAKO, conjugated in-house to Alexa 488 or Alexa 555 using Life Technologies APEX Antibody Labeling Kit), anti-Vimentin (V9, Santa Cruz Biotechnology), anti-pan Cytokeratin (C11, Cell Signaling Technology). Nuclei were stained using Hoechst 33342 (Life Technologies). In some experiments, Calcein AM (Life Technologies) was used to identify living cells. After a washing step, cells were retrieved and visualized in suspension under an inverted fluorescence microscope (IX81, Olympus) for imaging, counting and/or micromanipulation. Images were recorded using the MetaMorph software (Molecular Devices) with a CoolSNAP HQ2 CCD Camera (Photometrics).

[00175] **TECC definition and count.** A population of tumor-derived endothelial cells in the blood of colorectal cancer patients was detected using the methods described herein.

These cells form clusters of multiple cells deriving from the tumor vasculature (blood vessels of the tumor) (Fig. 8), and hence were identified as tumor-derived endothelial cell clusters (TECCs). TECC is defined as follows: “any cell or cellular cluster isolated from blood with a

major axis of $> 10 \mu\text{m}$, having at least 2 clearly distinct nuclei and expressing CD31, VWF or CD144 proteins but not expressing CD45, CD41 and CD42B” (Fig. 8B). Importantly, the cellular populations belonging to the megakaryocytic lineages, having large and lobulated single nuclei or large and round single nuclei, were excluded. These cells had characteristic
 5 cytomorphology easily discernible from TECC, stained positive for CD41 and CD42B, and were predominantly observed in colorectal cancer patients undergoing treatment, but also in some healthy volunteers and treatment-naïve colorectal cancer patients. Single endothelial cells, owing to their smaller diameter that would allow them to pass through the microsieve, were also excluded from the analysis. TECCs were counted by applying these inclusion and
 10 exclusion criteria by adding the microfiltrate obtained from 2 ml of whole blood to a well of a 96-well plate. After a short centrifugation step, TECCs were identified and counted by manually scanning the target well three times using a $20\times$ objective. A positive sample was defined by the detection of at least one TECC.

[00176] As shown in Fig. 13, TECC counts do not correlate with inflammatory markers or
 15 other variables. This indicates that TECCs are not directly related to inflammatory events or other variables that are unrelated to tumor. This thus supports that TECCs are tumor-derived.

[00177] **Determine if TECCs are tumor-derived**

[00178] To test if TECCs were tumor-derived, paired samples from 17 colorectal cancer patients 0 – 24 h before and 24 – 72 h were collected after surgical tumor resection ($n = 34$).

20 Tumor removal caused a sharp decline of endothelial TECCs, supporting the direct link between the tumor and TECCs (Fig. 8H and Supplementary Table 5). Folate hydrolase (*FOLH1*), the gene encoding for prostate-specific membrane antigen (PSMA), is specifically expressed in tumor vasculature of various cancer types, but absent in normal vasculature and peripheral blood. *FOLH1* was indeed expressed in $\text{CD31}^+\text{CD45}^-$ cells isolated from fresh
 25 colorectal cancer tissues and in TECCs isolated from the blood of 7/10 colorectal cancer patients, but not in endothelial cells isolated from normal tissues or in healthy donor peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) (Fig. 9). This result further supported the tumor origin of endothelial TECCs (Fig. 8). Additionally, RNA-Seq data of TECCs revealed the expression of several tumor endothelial markers (Fig. 11). It was further asked whether
 30 TECC numbers might correlate with features of the underlying tumor vasculature, by counting blood vessels in tumor tissues derived from patients with low or high TECC count. Although the median number of vessel units did not differ, the median number of lumens was

significantly higher in patients with high TECC counts. Taken together, it was shown that TECCs in colorectal cancer patients were not malignant entities but clusters of tumor-derived mature endothelial cells.

[00179] Because of the above-described associations between TECC and the primary tumor,

5 it was next asked if endothelial TECCs were informative indicators of colorectal cancer.

Endothelial TECCs from a total of 141 clinical specimens from 125 subjects (45 control healthy volunteers and a consecutive series of 80 colorectal cancer patients, including TECC

counts from above-mentioned patients) were counted. At least one endothelial TECC in 76.2% (61/80) of colorectal cancer patients but only in 2.2% (1/45) of healthy individuals was

10 observed (Fig. 12A). It was found that treatment-naïve patients presented with significantly

higher endothelial TECC counts as compared to patients that underwent therapeutic interventions for colorectal cancer (Fig. 12C). However, endothelial TECC count did not

associate with clinical parameters such as tumor stage, grade or presence of distant metastasis (Supplementary Tables 6 and 7) or with other variables, including inflammatory markers. In

15 particular, endothelial TECC numbers in time series analysis indicated that surgical resection events has the strongest effect on TECC distribution, confirming the results in Fig. 8H and

further supporting the association of endothelial TECC with the presence of a primary tumor (Fig. 12B). The presence of endothelial TECC in 86.5% of treatment-naïve patients (45/52),

but only of 2.2% of healthy controls (1/45) indicated that TECC count might be useful in

20 assisting colorectal cancer diagnosis. Area under the curve (AUC) of the receiving operator characteristic (ROC) curve comparing treatment-naïve patients and healthy controls was

0.930 (Fig. 12D), and the AUC of ROC curve comparing treatment-naïve, early-stage CRC patients and healthy controls was 0.923 (Fig. 12F). Remarkably, colorectal cancer patients

with low pathologic tumor stage (stage $\leq$ IIA) were also positive for endothelial TECC in

25 86.4% (19/22) of cases, with AUC = 0.922 (Fig. 12E). Taken together, these results further confirmed the association between endothelial TECC counts and presence of a primary tumor.

Moreover, widespread presence of endothelial TECCs in treatment-naïve patients but not in healthy individuals indicated the potential use of endothelial TECC count as a diagnostic

adjunct for colorectal cancer.

30 [00180] **Target cell identification, micromanipulation and storage.** Target cells were

manually micropipetted using a mouth pipette attached to a 25-ml syringe. Briefly, cells were identified from total cell retrieval by means of bright field image, nuclear staining and

specific fluorescent signals. Target single-cells or TECCs were then micropipetted in a 10- μ l droplet of wash buffer, followed by deposition in 0.2-ml PCR tubes containing appropriate buffer: 5 μ l of 2 $\times$ Reaction buffer (CellsDirect One-Step qRT-PCR Kit, Life Technologies) for scrmPCR, 2 μ l of PBS for whole genome amplification or 2 μ l of SuperBlock buffer (Thermo Scientific) for low-input RNA-Seq. Cells were stored immediately at -80°C until use. In some cases, the complete microfiltrate was spun down, and stored at -80°C until further use.

[00181] **Single-cell RNA and mutational analysis PCR (scrmPCR).**

[00182] To confirm the presence of DNA mutations in single-cells undergoing EMT, a PCR protocol was established for the simultaneous quantitation of RNA transcripts and detection of DNA mutations at the single-cell scale (Single-cell RNA and Mutational Analysis PCR or 'scrmPCR') (Fig. 5, Supplementary Table 1).

[00183] Primers were designed using Primer-BLAST (Ye *et al.*). For each RNA transcript, primers were designed either spanning exon-exon boundaries or primers separated by at least one intron on the corresponding genomic DNA region. Primers for mutational analysis were designed to bind intronic regions of the target gene (Supplementary Table 1). The scrmPCR could be used to simultaneously detect and quantify RNA transcripts and sequence DNA hotspots in the same cell. Briefly, single-cell RNA transcripts were reverse transcribed at 50°C for 30 min using SuperScript III Reverse Transcriptase (Invitrogen) and a mix of 500 nM target reverse primers. A preamplification round was then performed using Platinum Taq DNA polymerase (Invitrogen) by adding a matching mix of forward primers to the transcript-specific reverse primers and primers pairs for targeted genomic regions. Preamplification cycling was conducted by alternating annealing and denaturation steps without extension as follows: 6 $\times$ cycles at 60°C, 4 min, 95°C, 1 min; 6 $\times$ cycles at 55°C, 4 min, 95°C, 1 min; 6 $\times$ cycles at 50°C, 4 min, 95°C, 1 min. Primers cleanup was performed using the Axyprep PCR Clean-up Kit (Axygen). Samples were diluted 1/20 and stored at -20°C until further use. For RNA transcript quantitation, quantitative PCR was performed on a ViiA7 Instrument (Applied Biosystems) using 2 μ l of preamplification reaction, seminested primer pairs according to the target transcript (Supplementary Table 1) and the SensiFAST SYBR Lo-ROX Kit (Bioline) following manufacturer's protocol. Relative gene expression was normalized using ACTB as reference gene. To analyze selected DNA mutational hotspots, PCR was performed by using 2 μ l of preamplification reaction, nested PCR primer pairs

(Supplementary Table 1) and a master mix containing a proof-reading polymerase (KOD Hot Start Master Mix, EMD Millipore) following manufacturer's instructions. For KRAS exon 2 sequencing in tumor and normal tissue (Fig. 6d), PCR amplification was performed using the following forward primer, TTTGTATTAAAAGGTACTGGTGGAG and reverse primer, CCTTTATCTGTAT CAAAGAATGGTC. PCR products were separated on agarose gel; specific bands were excised and sequenced using the Sanger method.

[00184] Fig. 6a provides an exemplary scrmPCR workflow for TECC. TECC samples were analyzed using the scrmPCR method according to the workflow. scrmPCR in 9 TECCs derived from 4 patients revealed the presence of epithelial and mesenchymal markers including *SERPINE1*, *FOXC1* and *KRT8*, in line with epithelial-mesenchymal profiles reported previously for breast cancer CTCs (Fig. 6b and 6c). These results were confirmed by panCK and Vimentin immunostaining (Fig. 7a). These TECCs were next sequenced for mutations present in the corresponding primary tumors. Surprisingly, all tested DNA sequences hotspots matched the wild-type alleles (Fig. 6d). Targeted high-throughput DNA sequencing was further applied to 8 commonly mutated genes in DNA amplified from single-TECC (6 patients) and matching tumor tissues. Again, matching mutations between tumor tissues and associated TECCs (Supplementary Tables 2 and 3) could not be detected. Using amplified DNA from 12 TECCs (4 patients), array comparative genomic hybridization (aCGH) was next performed. In fact, CTCs from lung cancer patients have been shown to reproducibly mirror cancer tissue copy number variations. Here, the TECCs had instead normal cytogenetic profiles in contrast to matched primary tumors (Fig. 6e–g). In summary, single-cell scale analysis of 26 TECCs from 10 patients, while displaying epithelial-mesenchymal marker expression, did not mirror DNA anomalies found in matching tumor tissues. This suggested a source for TECC that was unrelated to the tumor epithelium.

[00185] **Nucleic Acid Extraction.** Complete microfiltrates or isolated cells were subjected to RNA extraction using the RNAqueous-Micro Total RNA Isolation Kit (Ambion) following manufacturer's instructions. Total RNA from tissues was isolated using the RNeasy mini kit (Qiagen). DNA from tissues was isolated using DNeasy mini kit (Qiagen).

[00186] **TECC targeted resequencing and array comparative genomic hybridization (aCGH).** Single-TECC was subjected to whole genome amplification using the GenomePlex Single-cell Whole Genome Amplification Kit (Sigma) and following manufacturer's instructions. Tissue DNA (50 pg) samples were amplified using the same procedure. For

targeted resequencing, a custom gene panel targeting exons for *NRAS*, *CTNNB1*, *PIK3CA*, *EGFR*, *BRAF*, *PTEN*, *KRAS*, *AKT1* and *TP53* genes (~6.1kb) was designed. The libraries were constructed using Ion AmpliSeq Library Kits 2.0 (Life Technologies) with 10 ng of input DNA. Targeted resequencing run was performed on Ion Torrent Personal Genome Machine (PGM) Sequencer (Life Technologies). Variants were called using Ion Torrent Variant Caller Plugin in high stringency settings. aCGH was performed by hybridizing 250 ng of DNA to CytoScan 750 K arrays (Affymetrix) with manufacturer's instructions and reagents. Data were analyzed and visualized using Chas software version 2.1 (Affymetrix). Fig. 6f shows results of the aCGH analysis. The lines indicate smoothed data calculated using Affymetrix ChAS software. Asterisks indicate large chromosomal abnormalities detected in the tumor sample. Note that in TECCs, no chromosomal abnormalities could be found, indicating that TECCs do not originate from the tumor epithelium. As such TECCs are different from previously described malignant CTC clusters.

[00187] **TECC and tissues cDNA synthesis and RNA-Seq.**

[00188] 18 single-TECC from 8 patients and matching normal colon and tumor tissues were subjected to RNA expression profiling by high-throughput sequencing (RNA-Seq) (Fig. 9c, Supplementary Table 4). cDNA was synthesised from single-TECC and 10 pg of tissue RNA with the SMARTer Ultra Low RNA kit (Clontech Laboratories) using long distance PCR (LDPCR) with 25 cycles and 18 cycles respectively. For each sample, cDNA was sheared using the Adaptive Focused Acoustics system (Covaris). Libraries were constructed using NEBNext DNA Library Prep Master Mix kit (New England Biolabs). All libraries were barcoded using unique indexes and pooled for RNA sequencing run on the Illumina HiSeq 2000 platform. Data were mapped to Human Genome version 19 (hg19) using Tophat (version 2) (Trapnell *et al.*, 2009). Cufflinks (version 2.2) (Trapnell, C. *et al.*, 2010) was used to quantify gene expression as FPKM (Fragments Per Kilobase of transcript per Million mapped reads).

[00189] A workflow for the inference of cellular lineages from transcriptional profiles was further developed (Figs. 14 and 15). In a comparison including 42 different cell types (Fig. 9a to 9c), all TECC transcriptomes were associated with the cell types of the endothelial lineage (Fig. 9c). The presence of a series of endothelial lineage markers together with general EMT markers by scrmPCR was confirmed in an additional 14 TECCs (Fig. 8). Endothelial cells are considered a specialized epithelium, and are known to express both Vimentin (often used as a

mesenchymal marker) and various keratins (classic markers of epithelium). All TECCs, including those with malignant cytomorphology, stained without exception for endothelial markers such as CD31, VWF or CD144 (Fig. 8B) but were negative for CD45 or markers of megakaryocytic lineages CD41 and CD42B. This indicated that in the colorectal cancer patients, all TECCs detected were of endothelial origin. In addition, single tumor cells within TECCs were not detected. The present findings were in line with El-Heliebi *et al.*, who reported CD31 expression on circulating non-hematologic cells (CNHC) from kidney cancer patients, but were dissimilar from a recent report that described CTC clusters of malignant origins (Aceto *et al.*). Lineage inference from the RNA-Seq data of CTC clusters described in Aceto *et al.* in fact indicated the presence of epithelial derived cells. TECCs characterized in the present study represented thus a distinct population of circulating endothelial cell clusters in colorectal cancer patients.

[00190] **RNA-Seq data principal component analysis.** Principal component analysis on the complete RNA-Seq dataset (Fig. 9a-c) was performed. Rank correlations coefficients were calculated by selecting the top 300 genes sorted by their maximum loading in the 1st to 3rd principal component. From this list, the Spearman rank correlation coefficient (ρ) was calculated for each TECC and tissues and the resulting data were plotted as a heatmap. Dendrograms were generated by average linkage clustering.

[00191] **RNA-Seq data lineage inference.** Workflow for lineage inference is presented in Fig. 14 and was implemented in an R script available upon request. Briefly, the primary cell atlas dataset (GSE49910) (Mabbott *et al.*) was obtained and expression data from 298 different experiments were selected, corresponding to $N = 42$ different cell types or 'lineages' (Fig. 15). For each gene g in each lineage l , a 'specificity index' S was calculated based on Shannon information entropy and the Q statistics introduced by Schug *et al.*,

$$S_{(l|g)} = - \sum_{l=1}^N p_{(l|g)} \cdot \log_2(p_{(l|g)}) - \log_2(p_{(l|g)})$$

[00192] where $p(l|g)$ is the relative expression of the gene g in the lineage l . Gene specificity was confirmed by visualizing expression data of genes with high specificity index using BioGPS (Fig. 14). For each lineage the top 80 genes with highest specificity index ('specific genes') (Fig. 14a) were selected. 80 genes were chosen as this provided the best resolution in the analysis reported herein. Next, for each RNA-Seq sample, the number of genes specific for each lineage was calculated. At the same time, 1,000× lists of 80 randomly

selected genes were generated from the Affymetrix HG-U133_Plus_2 gene list ('random genes') and the average number of genes present by chance in each experimental RNA-Seq profile was determined. Finally, it was examined whether the number of enriched specific genes was equal to the number of randomly enriched genes by performing a Fisher exact test for each tested lineage in each experimental sample. The odds ratios for each test were mean-centered, scaled and visualized in a heat map comprising all tested lineages. The final results were used to generate hypotheses on cellular lineages based on the distribution of the normalized odds ratios. The algorithm was validated using published RNA-Seq datasets generated from various cell types and tissues (Fig. 15).

[00193] **Endothelial progenitor cell (EPC) assay.** Colony-forming EPC assay was performed as previously described (Kalka *et al.*, Colombo *et al.*). Briefly, living endothelial TECCs were counted in 2-ml microfiltrates by CD144 and Calcein AM fluorescent staining. Unstained microfiltrates from 2 ml of blood from a second device was then placed in culture on 96-well plate coated with fibronectin ($1 \mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2$) (Sigma-Aldrich) in the presence of EGM-2 cell culture medium (Lonza). Presence of TECC was confirmed by bright field microscopy before incubation. HUVECs were used as positive control as follow: 10,000 HUVECs were spiked in 2ml of donor blood and isolated by microfiltration using two devices. In one device, retrieved HUVECs were quantified by CD144 and Calcein AM staining. HUVECs retrieved from the other device were seeded at defined numbers (5, 10, 20, 40, 80 and 160 cells) in octuplicate wells. After 2 days, the medium was changed and cells were allowed to grow for a total of 30 days by changing half of the medium every other day. Presence and viability of colonies were monitored every week under bright field microscopy. After 30 days, cells were detached by trypsinisation, stained using CD144 antibodies, Calcein AM and Hoechst 33342, and quantified under an IX81 (Olympus) inverted fluorescence microscope.

[00194] **Microvessel density and lumen count.** Microvessel density (MVD) count was performed using immunofluorescence images of CD31-stained tissue sections as described previously (Wild *et al.*, Gupta *et al.*) and using ImageJ (Schneider *et al.*). Briefly, fresh tissues were embedded in Tissue-Tek O.C.T Compound (Sakura) and stored at -80°C until further use. From all available tissues, five-micrometer cryostat sections were cut on poly-L-lysine slides, fixed in PBS containing 4% paraformaldehyde for 8 min, washed in PBS, and stained using PE-anti-CD antibodies (1:20, clone WM59, BioLegend). The whole tumor area for each tissue section was imaged with a $10\times$ objective by means of an IX71 microscope

system (Olympus) and the MetaMorph software (Molecular Devices). Before imaging and throughout MVD and lumen count, patient's IDs were blinded to avoid subjective bias during data acquisition and analysis.

[00195] **Endothelial cell isolation from fresh tissues.** Endothelial cells were isolated from normal colon and tumor tissues as previously described (Van Beijnum *et al.*) with minor modifications of the protocol. Briefly, fresh tissues were minced and digested for 60 min at 37°C using collagenase, dispase and DNase as described. After a Ficoll-Paque density centrifugation step, a two-step magnetic selection was performed using MACS reagents and materials (Miltenyi Biotec) following manufacturer's instructions. First, CD45⁺ expressing cells were depleted by negative selection on LD columns, after labelling the cells with anti-CD45 magnetic beads and Human FcR Blocking Reagent. The CD45-depleted fraction was next collected and a second labelling was performed by adding anti-CD31 magnetic beads and human FcR Blocking Reagent. After a positive selection using MS columns the fraction with enriched CD31⁺CD45⁺ cells was stored at -80°C until further use.

[00196] **Detection of TECCs in patients with cancers other than colorectal cancer**

[00197] TECCs not only can be detected in the blood of colorectal cancer patients, but can also be detected in patients with other malignancies such as breast cancer, prostate cancer, kidney cancer, transitional cell carcinoma, lung cancer and cholangiocarcinoma (see Tables 3 and 4). Therefore, biomarkers for TECCs can be used for the detection of any types of cancer, and also for monitoring and predicting the outcomes of therapeutic treatments such as chemotherapy or surgery.

Table 3. TECC count correlate with response to therapy in patients with different types of metastatic disease. Clinical trial details can be accessed at clinicaltrials.gov using the following ID: NCT02435927.

Patient ID	Disease	TECC count at Baseline	TECC count after treatment	Overall target RECIST response (at TECC count after treatment)
ASLAN-0003-FST	Metastatic cholangiocarcinoma	22	3	-30%
ASLAN-0004-HCH	Metastatic breast carcinoma	14	2	-4%

ASLAN-0006-CAM	Metastatic colorectal cancer	25	2	-11%
ASLAN-1002-GMC	Metastatic colorectal cancer	13	0	-27%
ASLAN-1005-NBC	Metastatic colorectal cancer	26	5	+2%
ASLAN-1010-YLB	Metastatic colorectal cancer	17	6	-42%

Table 4. TECC count in transitional cell carcinoma patients before and after surgery

Patient ID	Disease	TECC count at Baseline	TECC count after treatment	Treatment type
TCC-001	Transitional cell carcinoma	33	4	Surgery
TCC-002	Transitional cell carcinoma	58	12	Surgery
TCC-003	Transitional cell carcinoma	208	4	Surgery
TCC-004	Transitional cell carcinoma	0	0	Surgery

[00198] **Statistical analysis.** Statistical analysis was performed in R environment (version 3.1.0) (R Core Team *et al.*). Unpaired samples were tested using two-tailed Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney U test with Bonferroni correction in case of multiple comparisons. For each test, exact *P* value with location parameter (Hodges-Lehmann estimate $\hat{\Delta}$) and its 95% confidence interval (CI) were computed using the ‘coin’ package (Zeileis *et al.*). For paired samples, a two-tailed exact Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used. ROC curves with AUC and 95% CI intervals were computed using the ‘pROC’ package (Robin *et al.*). For easy interpretation and comparison of effect sizes, the effect size *r* for each statistical test was derived as follows: $r = |Z|/\sqrt{n}$ where *Z* is the *Z* score of the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney U or the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (Rosenthal, *et al.*). *r* from AUC was derived as described in Rice & Harris (Rice *et al.*). As introduced by Cohen (Cohen *et al.*), the following interpretations were applied: *r* = 0.1, small effect; *r* = 0.3, medium effect; *r* = 0.5, large effect. Boxplots are shown as boxes representing the interquartile range (IQR) with a line across the box indicating the median, whiskers indicate $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$. To derive the minimal sample size required to the case control study, it was first assumed there was no association between

presence of TECC and presence of colorectal cancer (null hypothesis) and for a target power of 0.95, a minimal sample size of $n = 72$ was estimated using the *pwr.chisq.test* function of the 'pwr' package (Champely *et al.*). An effect size $w = 0.5$ at the significance level of 0.01 was assumed, where $w = 0.5$ was chosen based on a pilot test of five colorectal cancer patients, information derived from four healthy controls with negative TECC counts and a review of the literature that reported no TECC in healthy individuals but widespread presence of TECC in cases in various cancer types (Supplementary Table 1). Correlations were tested using Kendall's tau (τ) coefficient and its derived P value. For lineage inference and principal component analysis of RNA-Seq data, Fisher's exact tests and Spearman correlation coefficient (ρ) were used respectively, as described in the dedicated method paragraphs. Level of significance was set at 0.05. One asterisk (*), $P < 0.05$; two asterisks (**), $P < 0.01$; three asterisks (***), $P < 0.001$; not significant (ns), $P \geq 0.05$.

[00199] Results and conclusion of analysis of TECCs

[00200] TECCs isolated from colorectal cancer patients are not cancerous but represent a distinct population of tumor-derived endothelial cells. TECCs do not mirror the genetic variations of matching tumors, yet TECCs express epithelial and mesenchymal transcripts in agreement with previous reports on CTC phenotyping. Transcriptome analysis of single-TECC reveals their identity as endothelial cells with further results indicating their tumor origin and mature phenotype. Widespread presence of endothelial TECCs was found in blood sampled from preoperative, early stage cancer patients but not in healthy donors, suggesting endothelial TECC count as potential indicator for colorectal cancer. Endothelial TECCs should not be confused with *bona fide* CTCs although their analysis might be helpful diagnostically, and provide direct information on the underlying tumor vasculature during treatment and disease course.

[00201] In conclusion, the isolation, retrieval and analysis of single TECC from colorectal cancer patients presents for the first time transcriptome profiling of single-TECC and several lines of evidence for the tumor endothelial origin of TECCs. Endothelial TECCs were detected as structures of multiple cells. As such, TECCs might be shed from the chaotic tumor vasculature undergoing pathological angiogenesis, a recognized early event in colorectal tumor progression. Preclinical models might reveal the mechanisms underlying tumor endothelial cell shedding in circulation, and are currently under investigation. In contrast to CTCs, which are often detected in patients with advanced diseases, TECCs are

tumor-derived entities prevalent in early stage and preoperative colorectal cancer patients. Endothelial TECC counts represent therefore an intriguing modus for early colorectal cancer detection. In this study, the presence of CTC clusters was not detected as reported in Aceto *et al.*. This might be the result of differences in patient profiles. In fact, Aceto *et al.* analyzed blood samples from terminal breast cancer patients, whereas blood samples in this study were mostly derived from preoperative colorectal cancer patients. Further studies would need to address specificities of circulating endothelial cell clusters in various diseases. Interestingly, tissue-specific molecular signatures have been demonstrated in endothelial cells from various organs, indicating that TECC might be traced back to their organ of origin based on the expression of specific gene sets. Because of their cellular morphology reminiscent of malignancy, keratins expression and the mixed epithelial and mesenchymal marker profiles, endothelial TECCs should not be confused with bona fide malignant CTCs undergoing EMT. At the same time, endothelial TECC analysis might contribute to early colorectal cancer detection and provide direct information on the underlying tumor vasculature during treatment and disease course.

[00202] **References**

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[00203] **Supplementary Tables 1-7**

Supplementary Table 1: Selected publications including circulating tumor cell clusters or CTM described as cancerous entities (1959-2014)

#	Year	Article reporting CTM or CTC clusters as cancerous entity	Experimental evidence used to define malignancy
1	1959	Engell, H.	Cytomorphology
2	1960	Finkel, G. C., & Tishkoff, G. H.	Cytomorphology
3	1964	Seal, S. H.	Cytomorphology
4	1964	Sellwood, R. A. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology
5	1965	Cole, W. H. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology
6	1971	Song, J., <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology
7	1973	Griffiths, J. D. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology
8	1975	Salsbury, A. J.	Cytomorphology
9	1979	Ejckam, G. C. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/Myeloperoxidase staining
10	1988	Glaves, D. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/CK staining
11	1992	Aboulafia, D. M.	Cytomorphology/CK staining
12	2000	Vona, G. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/AFP staining
13	2001	Molnar, B <i>et al.</i>	Keratin magnetic labeling
14	2004	Vona, G. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/AFP staining
15	2004	Allard, W. J. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/CD45-keratin staining
16	2007	Paterlini-Brechot, P. & Benali, N. L.	Cytomorphology
17	2010	Stott, S. L. <i>et al.</i>	PSMA/CD45, CK7,8/CD45 stainings
18	2010	Hou, J. M. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/CD45-NSE stainings
19	2011	Hou, J. M. <i>et al.</i>	CD45/various epithelial and mesenchymal markers immunostainings
20	2011	Khoja, L. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/CD45-CK stainings
21	2011	Desitter, I. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/CD45-CK stainings
22	2011	Hofman, V. J. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology
23	2011	Hofman, V. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology
24	2012	Hou, J. M. <i>et al.</i>	EPCAM/CD45/CK/Ki67/Mcl-1 stainings
25	2012	Kling, J.	CD45-CK stainings
26	2012	Cho, E. H. <i>et al.</i>	CD45-CK stainings
27	2012	Krebs, M. G. <i>et al.</i>	Cytomorphology/CD45
28	2012	Marrinucci, D. <i>et al.</i>	CD45-CK stainings
29	2013	Yu, M. <i>et al.</i>	Epithelial and mesenchymal transcript and protein markers, high-throughput RNA sequencing
30	2014	Aceto, N. <i>et al.</i>	Various stainings including PSMA, EPCAM, CK. Single cell high-throughput sequencing

Supplementary Table 2: Targeted high-throughput sequencing of single TCC do not mirror matching primary tumor mutations

Patient 13					
Gene	Position	Type	Zygosity	Genotype	ExonicFunc.refGene
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25398284	SNP	Het	C/T	nonsynonymous SNV
PIK3CA	PIK3CA:chr3:178936095	SNP	Het	A/G	nonsynonymous SNV
TP53	TP53:chr17:7574003	SNP	Het	G/A	stopgain SNV
TP53	TP53:chr17:7577120	SNP	Het	C/T	nonsynonymous SNV
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578202	DEL	Het	ACACTATGTCG/A	
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578407	SNP	Het	G/C	nonsynonymous SNV
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578463	INS	Het	C/CG	frameshift insertion
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578645	SNP	Het	C/T	
Threshold:10%					32.33082707
					NA
					NA

Supplementary Table 2: Targeted high-throughput sequencing of single TEOC do not mirror matching primary tumor mutations
Patient 10

Gene	P13-TEOC 2	P13-TEOC 3	P13-TEOC 4	P13-TEOC 5	P10-Tumor	P10-TEOC 1	P10-TEOC 4	P10-TEOC 5
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PIK3CA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Threshold: 10%

Supplementary Table 2: Targeted high-throughput sequencing of single TEOC do not mirror matching primary tumor mutati

Gene	Patient 14			Patient 15		
	P10-TEOC10	P10-TEOC12	P14-Tumor	P14-TEOC1	P14-TEOC2	P15-Tumor
KRAS	NA	NA	6843291995	NA	NA	NA
PIK3CA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	5967741935
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	7626072682
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	4732098147	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Threshold:10%

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TEOC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Patient 13						
Gene	Position	Type	Zygosity	Genotype	ExonicFunc.refGene	P13-Tumor P13-TEOC2
AKT1	AKT1:chr14:105258943	SNP	Het	T/C	nonsynonymous SNV	NA
AKT1	AKT1:chr14:105258954	SNP	Het	C/T	synonymous SNV	NA
AKT1	AKT1:chr14:105258963	SNP	Het	A/G	synonymous SNV	NA
AKT1	AKT1:chr14:105259001	SNP	Het	C/T	NA	NA
AKT1	AKT1:chr14:105259015	SNP	Het	T/C	NA	NA
BRAF	BRAF:chr7:140453027	SNP	Het	T/C	NA	NA
BRAF	BRAF:chr7:140453110	SNP	Het	G/A	stopgain SNV	NA
BRAF	BRAF:chr7:140453135	SNP	Hom	A/A	synonymous SNV	NA
BRAF	BRAF:chr7:140453160	DEL	Het	AT/TA	NA	NA
BRAF	BRAF:chr7:140453221	SNP	Het	G/T	NA	NA
CTNNB1	CTNNB1:chr3:412655533	SNP	Het	A/C	NA	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55240848	SNP	Hom	G/G	NA	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55241616	DEL	Hom	T/T	NA	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55241661	SNP	Het	C/T	synonymous SNV	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55241727	SNP	Het	G/A	synonymous SNV	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55241730	SNP	Hom	T/T	synonymous SNV	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55249014	SNP	Het	A/G	nonsynonymous SNV	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55249133	SNP	Het	T/C	nonsynonymous SNV	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55260481	SNP	Het	T/C	nonsynonymous SNV	NA
EGFR	EGFR:chr7:55260492	SNP	Het	T/C	synonymous SNV	NA
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25378745	SNP	Het	A/G	NA	12
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25380190	SNP	Het	A/G	nonsynonymous SNV	NA
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25380261	SNP	Het	G/C	nonsynonymous SNV	NA
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25380262	SNP	Het	C/T	nonsynonymous SNV	NA
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25380285	SNP	Het	G/T	nonsynonymous SNV	NA
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25380307	SNP	Het	A/C	nonsynonymous SNV	NA

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TERC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Patient 13							P13-Tumor	P13-TECC2
Gene	Position	Type	Zygosity	Genotype	ExonicFunc.refGene			
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25380309	DEL	Het	GT/G			NA	NA
KRAS	KRAS:chr12:25398236	SNP	Het	A/G	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
NRAS	NRAS:chr1:115258498	SNP	Hom	T/T	stopgain SNV		NA	NA
NRAS	NRAS:chr1:115258685	SNP	Het	C/T	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
PIK3CA	PIK3CA:chr3:178916625	SNP	Het	A/G	synonymous SNV		NA	NA
PIK3CA	PIK3CA:chr3:178916635	SNP	Het	G/A	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
PIK3CA	PIK3CA:chr3:178916638	DEL	Het	TGGGGCATCCACTT/G			NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89685300	DEL	Hom	C/C			NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89690872	SNP	Het	T/C	NA		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89690906	SNP	Het	T/C	NA		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89692825	DEL	Het	CT/C			NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89692891	SNP	Het	A/G	synonymous SNV		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89692916	SNP	Het	A/T	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89711843	SNP	Het	A/G	NA		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89711866	SNP	Het	G/A	NA		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89711910	SNP	Het	T/C	synonymous SNV		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89711998	SNP	Het	T/C	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89720698	SNP	Het	A/G	synonymous SNV		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89720707	SNP	Het	C/T	synonymous SNV		NA	NA
PTEN	PTEN:chr10:89720709	SNP	Het	C/T	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7572967	SNP	Het	T/C	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7573857	SNP	Het	A/G	NA		NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7576637	SNP	Het	T/A	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7577102	SNP	Het	C/T	nonsynonymous SNV		NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7577127	DEL	Het	CAAC			NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7577396	SNP	Het	T/C	NA		NA	NA

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TECC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Patient 13

Gene	Position	Type	Zygosity	Genotype	ExonicFunc.refGene	P13-Tumor	P13-TECC2
TP53	TP53:chr17:7577444	SNP	Het	A/G	NA	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7577450	SNP	Het	A/G	NA	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7577559	SNP	Hom	A/A	nonsynonymous SNV	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578155	SNP	Het	A/G	NA	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578237	SNP	Hom	T/T	synonymous SNV	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578297	SNP	Het	C/T	NA	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578369	DEL	Hom	A/A		NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578385	SNP	Hom	T/T	nonsynonymous SNV	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578389	DEL	Hom	G/G		NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578399	SNP	Het	G/A	synonymous SNV	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578400	SNP	Het	G/A	nonsynonymous SNV	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578502	SNP	Het	A/G	nonsynonymous SNV	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7578645	SNP	Hom	T/T		NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7579393	SNP	Het	A/G	synonymous SNV	NA	NA
TP53	TP53:chr17:7579432	SNP	Het	A/G		NA	14.814815
TP53	TP53:chr17:7579432	DEL	Het	AG/AGG		NA	NA

Threshold: 10%

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TECC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Patient 10

Gene	P13-TECC3	P13-TECC4	P13-TECC5	P10-Tumor	P10-TECC1	P10-TECC4	P10-TECC5	P10-TECC10
AKT1	NA	NA	NA	NA	26,869,159	NA	NA	NA
AKT1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	12,262,357	NA
AKT1	NA	NA	NA	NA	15,242,494	NA	NA	NA
AKT1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	11,568,128	NA
AKT1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	39,308,963	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
CTNNB1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	100	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	100	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	100	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	25,728,643	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	13,173,653
EGFR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TERC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

[illegible]

Threshold: 10%

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TECC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Gene	Patient 14			Patient 15			Patient 7		
	P10-TECC12	P14-Tumor	P14-TECC1	P14-TECC2	P15-Tumor	P15-TECC5	P7-Tumor	P7-TECC6	
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	42,857,143	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
NRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
NRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PIK3CA	NA	NA	22,413,793	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PIK3CA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PIK3CA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	18,253,266	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	10,344,828	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	72,727,273	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	47,727,273	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	13,571,429	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	19,083,19	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	10,515,774	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TEOC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Gene	Patient 14			Patient 15		Patient 7		
	P10-TEOC12	P14-Tumor	P14-TEOC1	P14-TEOC2	P15-Tumor	P15-TEOC5	P7-Tumor	P7-TEOC6
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	100	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	100
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	100
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	100
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	97.345133
TP53	NA	NA	11.18831	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	17.241379	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	100
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Threshold:10%

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TERC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Patient 8			
Gene	P7-TEOC8	P7-TEOC9	P8-Tumor P8-TEOC12
AKT1	NA	NA	NA
AKT1	NA	NA	NA
AKT1	NA	NA	NA
AKT1	NA	NA	NA
AKT1	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA
BRAF	NA	NA	NA
CTNNB1	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	35	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	23,880,597	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA
EGFR	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	19,625,168
KRAS	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	16,8
KRAS	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TEOC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Patient 8

Gene	P7-TEOC8	P7-TEOC9	P8-Tumor	P8-TEOC12
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA
KRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA
NRAS	NA	98,372,966	NA	NA
NRAS	NA	NA	NA	NA
PIK3CA	NA	NA	NA	NA
PIK3CA	NA	NA	NA	91,941,392
PIK3CA	NA	NA	NA	88,489,209
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	40	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	18,515,519	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	19,485,294	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	11,555,667	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
PTEN	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	10,714,286	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA

Supplementary Table 3: Sparse TEOC mutations are not detected in matching primary tumor tissues

Patient 8

Gene	P7-TEOC8	P7-TEOC9	P8-Tumor	P8-TEOC12
TP53	NA	13,157,895	NA	NA
TP53	NA	18,421,053	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	14,220,183
TP53	NA	NA	NA	98,536,585
TP53	NA	NA	NA	93
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	100
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA
TP53	NA	NA	NA	NA

Threshold: 10%

Supplementary Table 4: RNA-seq data, uniquely mapped reads to hg19 exons

ID	#Unique reads mapped to hg19 exons
P10-T	9,824,250
P19-Met	9,200,220
P1-N	12,046,807
P1-TUc	11,627,650
P1-TUd	10,474,561
P1-TUs	12,120,551
P18-N	11,691,022
P18-T	10,077,598
P10-N	11,940,709
P21-N	12,115,725
P21-T	10,030,315
P20-N	9,710,218
P20-T	7,196,431
P8-N	9,574,544
P8-T	9,413,088
P19-N	9,868,631
P19-T	9,156,651
P8-TEOC10	7,055,733
P8-TEOC11	6,873,889
P16-TEOC2	772,636
P21-TEOC11	6,526,429
P19-TEOC2	741,682
P1-TEOC1	3,368,445
P1-TEOC3	4,825,103
P1-TEOC4	5,493,502
P10-TEOC10	2,916,536
P18-TEOC4	357,116
P18-TEOC6	3,113,219
P20-TEOC16	1,001,059
P20-TEOC14	896,617
P1-TEOC8	620,380
P18-TEOC5	1,363,670
P8-TEOC7	3,763,227
P20-TEOC15	1,424,262
P18-TEOC2	1,007,933

Legend:

P, patient

T, tumor tissue

c, center

d, deep

s, superficial

N, normal tissue

Met, metastasis

TEOC, tumor-derived endothelial cell clusters

Supplementary Table 5: Pre- and post surgery TECC count. Data from Figure 4 e

Patient	TECC count	
	Pre	Post
P05	9	6
P19	2	0
P22	124	0
P54	0	3
P64	4	0
P66	46	0
P67	1	0
P69	0	0
P71	79	2
P72	24	0
P73	48	0
P74	13	2
P75	3	0
P77	1	0
P78	1	0
P80	0	0
P82	36	0

Pre: TECC count in blood 0-24 hrs before surgery

Post: TECC count in blood 24-72 hrs after surgery

Supplementary Table 6: Baseline patients and healthy donors characteristics

Characteristic	Patients	Controls
Total, <i>n</i>	80	45
-Age, yr, median (range)	60 (26-80)	45 (26-81)
-Gender, <i>n</i> (%)		
Male	48 (60)	19 (43)
Female	32 (40)	25 (57)
-Ethnicity, <i>n</i> (%)		
Chinese	56 (70)	
Other	24 (30)	
-Tumor Location <i>n</i> (%)		
Recto-sigmoid	67 (77)	
Other	18 (23)	
-Stage, <i>n</i> (%)		
≤ IIA	26 (35)	
IIB - IIIC	26 (35)	
IV	22 (30)	
-Grade, <i>n</i> (%)		
1-2	58 (89)	
3-4	7 (11)	
-Metastatic CRC, <i>n</i> (%)		
M0 (no distant metastasis)	54 (72)	
M1 (distant metastasis)	21 (28)	
-Treatment, <i>n</i> (%)		
Untreated	52 (65)	
Neoadjuvant	11 (14)	
Surgery*	5 (6)	
Adjuvant	4 (5)	
Palliative	8 (10)	

* post op. data from Figure 3e not included

Supplementary Table 7: TEOC count for each baseline sample type and number of single TEOC analyzed in this study

Patient ID	Abbreviation	Source	Baseline sample type	TEOC count*
Donor 1	D01	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 2	D02	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 3	D03	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 4	D04	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 5	D05	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 6	D06	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 7	D07	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 8	D08	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 9	D09	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 10	D10	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 11	D11	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 12	D12	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 13	D13	IBN	Healthy	0
Donor 14	D14	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 15	D15	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 16	D16	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 17	D17	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 18	D18	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 19	D19	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 20	D20	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 21	D21	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 22	D22	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 23	D23	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 24	D24	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 25	D25	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 26	D26	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 27	D27	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 28	D28	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 29	D29	IBN	Healthy	0
Donor 30	D30	IBN	Healthy	0
Donor 31	D31	IBN	Healthy	0
Donor 32	D32	IBN	Healthy	0
Donor 33	D33	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 34	D34	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 35	D35	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 36	D36	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 37	D37	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 38	D38	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 39	D39	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 40	D40	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 41	D41	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 42	D42	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 43	D43	NUH	Healthy	0
Donor 44	D44	NUH	Healthy	9
Donor 45	D45	NUH	Healthy	0
Patient 01	P01	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	49
Patient 02	P02	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	3
Patient 03	P03	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	7
Patient 04	P04	NCC	CRC - Palliative	17
Patient 05	P05	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	9
Patient 06	P06	FSH	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	0
Patient 07	P07	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	26
Patient 08	P08	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	76

Supplementary Table 7: TECC count for each baseline sample type and number of single TECC analyzed in this study

Patient ID	Abbreviation	Source	Baseline sample type	TECC count*
Patient 09	P09	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	52
Patient 10	P10	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	26
Patient 11	P11	NCC	CRC - Palliative	1
Patient 12	P12	NCC	CRC - Palliative	0
Patient 13	P13	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	32
Patient 14	P14	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	3
Patient 15	P15	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	13
Patient 16	P16	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	2
Patient 17	P17	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	0
Patient 18	P18	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	9
Patient 19	P19	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	2
Patient 20	P20	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	80
Patient 21	P21	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	16
Patient 22	P22	FSH	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	124
Patient 23	P23	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	12
Patient 24	P24	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	23
Patient 25	P25	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	45
Patient 26	P26	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	5
Patient 27	P27	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	34
Patient 28	P28	FSH		NA
Patient 29	P29	FSH	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	15
Patient 30	P30	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	3
Patient 31	P31	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	0
Patient 32	P32	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	18
Patient 33	P33	FSH	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	3
Patient 34	P34	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	2
Patient 35	P35	FSH	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	2
Patient 36	P36	FSH	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	0
Patient 37	P37	FSH	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	1
Patient 38	P38	FSH		NA
Patient 39	P39	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	0
Patient 40	P40	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	1
Patient 41	P41	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	2
Patient 42	P42	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	3
Patient 43	P43	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	93
Patient 44	P44	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	48
Patient 45	P45	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	9
Patient 46	P46	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	249
Patient 47	P47	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	0
Patient 48	P48	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	6
Patient 49	P49	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive	25
Patient 50	P50	FSH	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	0
Patient 51	P51	NCC	CRC - Palliative	24
Patient 52	P52	NCC	CRC - Palliative	0
Patient 53	P53	NCC	CRC - Post Surgery	0
Patient 54	P54	NCC	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	0
Patient 55	P55	NCC	CRC - Post Surgery	0
Patient 56	P56	NCC	CRC - Post Surgery	0
Patient 57	P57	NCC	CRC - Post Adjuvant	0
Patient 58	P58	NCC	CRC - Post Adjuvant	6
Patient 59	P59	NCC	CRC - Palliative	1
Patient 60	P60	NCC	CRC - Palliative	0
Patient 61	P61	NCC	CRC - Post Surgery	0

Supplementary Table 7: TECC count for each baseline sample type and number of single TECC analyzed in this study

Patient ID	Abbreviation	Source	Baseline sample type	TECC count*
Patient 62	P62	NCC	CRC - Palliative	3
Patient 63	P63	NCC	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	40
Patient 64	P64	NCC	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	4
Patient 65	P65	NCC	CRC - Post Surgery	0
Patient 66	P66	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	46
Patient 67	P67	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	1
Patient 68	P68	NCC	CRC - Post Adjuvant	0
Patient 69	P69	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	0
Patient 70	P70	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	7
Patient 71	P71	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	79
Patient 72	P72	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	24
Patient 73	P73	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	48
Patient 74	P74	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	13
Patient 75	P75	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	3
Patient 76	P76	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	12
Patient 77	P77	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	1
Patient 78	P78	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	1
Patient 79	P79	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive- Early stage	14
Patient 80	P80	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	0
Patient 81	P81	NCC	CRC - Treatment Naive	14
Patient 82	P82	NCC	CRC - Post Neoadjuvant	36

Legend:

NUH, National University Hospital Singapore

IBN, Institute of Bioengineering and Nanotechnology, Singapore

FSH, Fortis Surgical Hospital, Singapore

NCC, National Cancer Center, Singapore

CRC, Colorectal cancer

Early stage, stage $\leq$ IIA

*post-OP samples from figure 3f not included

Claims:

1. A method of diagnosing a colorectal cancer in a subject, comprising analyzing a sample from the subject for presence of an isolated population of cell clusters, each cell cluster comprising at least two cells and having the following characteristics:
 - (i) being endothelial cell clusters derived from blood vessel of a colorectal tumor and isolated from blood;
 - (ii) each cell cluster having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;
 - (iii) each cell cluster having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;
 - (iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins, comprising *FOLH1*;
 - (v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins;
 - (vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins; and
 - (vii) being cytomorphologically consistent with malignancy but not having primary tumor mutations or chromosomal abnormalities,wherein presence of the isolated population of cell clusters indicates that the subject has colorectal cancer.
2. The method of claim 1, wherein the endothelial cell genes are further selected from the group consisting of *PECAM1*, *VWF* and *CDH5*; wherein optionally the leukocyte and megakaryocytic or platelet-specific genes are selected from the group consisting of *PTPRC*, *ITGA2B* and *GP1BA*.
3. The method of claim 1 or 2, wherein optionally the cancer is an invasive and/or metastatic cancer; or a stage I cancer, stage II cancer, stage III cancer or stage IV cancer; or an early stage cancer.
4. A method for monitoring and/or predicting the response to treatment of a colorectal cancer patient, the method comprising analyzing a sample obtained from the patient after treatment for determining the number of an isolated population of cell clusters, each cell cluster comprising at least two cells and having the following characteristics:
 - (i) being endothelial cell clusters derived from blood vessel of a colorectal tumor and isolated from blood;
 - (ii) each cell cluster having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;
 - (iii) each cell cluster having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;
 - (iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins comprising *FOLH1*;
 - (v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins;
 - (vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins; and
 - (vii) being cytomorphologically consistent with malignancy but not having primary tumor mutations or chromosomal abnormalities,

wherein a reduction in the number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to the number of the isolated population of cell clusters in a baseline sample obtained from the patient prior to treatment indicates that the patient is responding positively to the treatment.

5. A method for predicting the response to treatment of a colorectal cancer patient, the method comprising analyzing a sample obtained from the cancer patient before treatment for determining the number of an isolated population of cell clusters, each cell cluster comprising at least two cells and having the following characteristics:

(i) being endothelial cell clusters derived from blood vessel of a colorectal tumor and isolated from blood;

(ii) each cell cluster having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;

(iii) each cell cluster having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;

(iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins comprising *FOLH1*;

(v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins;

(vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins; and

(vii) being cytomorphologically consistent with malignancy but not having primary tumor mutations or chromosomal abnormalities,

wherein an equal or higher number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to the number of the isolated population of cell clusters in a sample obtained before treatment from a patient or a group of patients that have responded positively to the treatment indicates that the colorectal cancer patient will respond positively to the treatment, and wherein a lower number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to the number of the isolated population of cell clusters in a sample obtained before treatment from a patient or a group of patients that have responded positively to the treatment indicates that the colorectal cancer patient will respond negatively to the treatment .

6. A method for analyzing blood vessel characteristics of a colorectal tumor in a subject, the method comprising analyzing a sample from the subject for determining the number of an isolated population of cell clusters, each cell cluster comprising at least two cells and having the following characteristics:

(i) being endothelial cell clusters derived from blood vessel of a colorectal tumor and isolated from blood;

(ii) each cell cluster having at least two clearly distinct nuclei;

(iii) each cell cluster having a major axis of greater than about 10 μm ;

(iv) expression of endothelial cell genes or proteins comprising *FOLH1*;

(v) non-expression of leukocyte-specific genes or proteins;

(vi) non-expression of megakaryocyte or platelets-specific genes or proteins; and

(vii) being cytomorphologically consistent with malignancy but not having primary tumor mutations or chromosomal abnormalities,

wherein an increased number of the isolated population of cell clusters compared to a baseline sample indicates that the colorectal tumor has larger blood vessels compared to the baseline sample, and wherein a reduced number of the isolated population of cell clusters

compared to a baseline sample indicates that the colorectal tumor has smaller blood vessels compared to the baseline sample.

7. The method of any one of claims 4 to 6, wherein the endothelial cell genes are further
5 selected from the group consisting of *PECAMI*, *VWF* and *CDH5*; wherein optionally the leukocyte and megakaryocytic or platelet-specific genes are selected from the group consisting of *PTPRC*, *ITGA2B* and *GP1BA*.