

TITLE: Methods of Minimising the Effect of Integrity Loss in Hollow Fibre Membrane Modules

5 TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates to membrane filtration systems and in particular to system using a plurality of porous hollow fibre membranes wherein loss of membrane integrity can lead to degradation of filtration performance.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

10 Consider a typical hollow fibre membrane module as shown in Figure 1. The module consists of plurality of hollow fibre membranes 5 potted at least at one end into a pot 6 having a length L. In order to calculate the flow from individual fibres the TMP (Transmembrane pressure $P_1 - P_2$) is considered as acting across a total module resistance R to give a flow Q:

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$$\text{TMP}/R \propto Q \text{ (at constant temperature)}$$

Now in this typical model we can break the resistance down into:

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$$R = R_m + R_{\text{pot}}$$

$$\text{and } Q_i \propto \text{TMP}/(R_m + R_{\text{pot}})$$

Where Q_i is the flow emerging from the top of the intact fibre, R_m is the module
25 resistance and R_{pot} is the resistance across the pot.

We can assume R_m is constant – a sort of average - though it will vary down the length of the fibre.

Now taking the case where a fibre is broken at the top pot (a worst case for filtrate bypass). In this case:

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$$R_m = 0$$

$$\text{and } Q_b \propto \text{TMP}/R_{\text{pot}}$$

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Where Q_b is the flow of filtrate emerging from the top of the broken fibre.

The ratio of the flow down a broken fibre to the flow down an intact fibre is calculated as follows:

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$$\begin{aligned} &= Q_b/Q_i &= & (R_m + R_{pot})/R_{pot} \\ & &= & 1 + R_m/R_{pot} \end{aligned}$$

10 In the normal case $R_m \gg R_{pot}$ – typically 20. Thus it can be seen a broken fibre allows a significant amount of feed to contaminate the filtrate and thus degrade filtration performance. Additionally, increasing the internal diameter of the fibre makes the problem massively worse as typically $R_{pot} \propto L/d^4$, where d is the diameter of the lumen and L is the length of the pot.

15 Accordingly, it is desirable to reduce the flow of filtrate from a broken fibre. Take the case where we increase R_{pot} (for instance by increasing L or reducing d). The limit of Q_b/Q_i tends to 1. This is a highly desirable result. But increasing the length of the pot is undesirable in other ways – it increases the length of the module and the expense of the module and process. The other option is to reducing the internal diameter
20 of the fibre in the pot,

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the present invention to overcome or at least ameliorate the problems of the prior art associated with integrity loss in hollow fibre membrane filtration systems or at least provide a useful alternative.

25 According to one aspect, the present invention provides a method of reducing the effect of integrity loss in a hollow fibre membrane module, said module including a plurality of hollow fibre membranes, at least one end of said fibre membranes being supported in a pot, the method including the step of increasing flow resistance of the liquid through the lumen of the fibre membrane in the region of the pot.

30 Preferably, the step of increasing the flow resistance is produced by reducing the inner cross-sectional area of the fibre lumen in the region of the pot. For preference, the step of increasing the flow resistance is produced by placing a porous layer in the flow path of the fibre lumen in the region of the pot.

According to a second aspect, the present invention provides a hollow fibre membrane module including a plurality of hollow fibre membranes supported at least at one end in a pot and having flow restriction means in the lumens of said fibre membranes in the region of said pot.

- 5 Preferably, the flow restriction means comprise means for reducing the inner cross-sectional area of the fibre lumen in the region of the pot.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

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

- 10 Figure 1 is a schematic sectional elevation of a typical hollow fibre membrane module with an intact and broken fibre;

Figure 2 is a similar view to Figure 1 with the addition of a porous layer to the pot surface;

- Figures 3A to 3K show enlarged schematic cross-sectional elevations of various
15 embodiments of the invention, and

Figure 4 shows a

DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

- Referring to Figure 2 of the drawings, one preferred embodiment of the invention is illustrated. A sinter or porous layer 10 is placed on top of the pot 6 to provide a
20 further series resistance R_{pot2} to the pot i.e.

$$R_{pot} = R_{pot1} + R_{pot2}$$

- An appropriate sinter 10 may have openings of microns in dimension and only be
25 a few millimetres thick. This method may reduce the Q_b/Q_i by a factor of 10.

Such an arrangement provides added benefits when used for membrane filter systems in a bio-reactor. The high solids feed in bio reactors leads to the sludge actually plugging the filter and self sealing the broken fibre totally.

- The may be extended to the general case by replacing the sinter with a membrane
30 with the same pore size as the hollow fibre membrane and enabling achievement of this self plugging capability even with low solids feeds.

It will be apparent the extra resistance of the sinter or membrane 10 will require an extra pressure to maintain the module filtrate flow, however, this is only an operating

cost not a membrane process operating efficiency as it is operating over the pot assembly, not across the compressible dirt layer on the membrane.

Fouling of this membrane sinter can be reduced by a regular chemical cleaning backwash with chlorine or other suitable cleaners.

5 The membrane/sinter 10 is desirably in intimate contact with the pot 6 to prevent sideways flow of filtrate/ feed bypass. This may also be achieved with a replaceable sinter/membrane element.

10 A highly asymmetric membrane 10 with the large pore side contacting the pot 6 (so in normal filtrate flow the filtrate flows in the direction of reducing pore size) is desirable.

As shown in figures 3B-3K a variety of methods may be used to increase the pot flow resistance.

Referring to Figure 3A a normal pot 6 without modification is shown. Figure 3B shows an increased length pot 6 which, while increasing pot flow resistance, has other
15 disadvantages.

Figure 3C illustrates providing the fibre 5 with a non porous coating 7 adjacent the interface 8 between the fibre 5 and the pot 6. This serves to increase pot flow resistance while also moving the fibre failure point away from the fibre-pot interface.

Figures 3D and 3E show a further method of reducing flow by reducing the inner
20 diameter of the fibre lumen 8 using a layer of material 9 applied to part or whole of the inner surface 11 of the fibre lumen 8 in the region encompassed by the pot 6.

One method of providing such a layer 9 is to coat the inside of the lumen 8 near the end of the pot 6 with a thin layer of material that effectively reduces the diameter of the fibre lumen 8 at this point. This can be achieved by drawing up a material such as
25 epoxy into the end of the fibre lumen 8 and then allowing it to run out again before it has time to set, leaving behind a thin coating 9 on the inner fibre lumen wall 12 that can then set over time.

The embodiment shown in Figure 3F illustrates smearing the surface of the pot with a suitable grout material 13 to reduce the diameter of the fibre lumen 8 adjacent its
30 opening 14 from the pot 6.

Figure 3G shows the insertion of hollow annulus 15, for example, a hollow pin, into the end of the fibre lumen 8 in the region of the pot 6 to reduce the cross-sectional area of the lumen 8 in the region of the pot 6.

Figure 3H shows the use of a porous layer of material 10 across the lumen opening 14 as also shown in the embodiment of Figure 2.

Figure 3I shows an embodiment where a porous material is forced into the lumen opening 14 to form a plug 16. This can be achieved by smearing a porous grout across and into the fibre lumen opening 14. Again this serves to reduce the flow resistance of the fibre lumen in the region of the pot 6.

Figure 3J illustrates an embodiment of the invention where the fibre lumen 8 is narrowed within the region of the pot 6 by causing the potting material to swell or constricting the end of the fibre.

Figure 3K shows an embodiment where the fibre lumen end is narrowed prior to potting.

Figure 4 shows the results of a test performed on two modules to illustrate the operation of the invention. Two modules A and B were used in the test. For each module one hollow fibre membrane was potted. The end of the fibre which was not in the pot, was sealed. A stainless steel mesh was glued on the top of one of the pots in a way that prevented sideways flow of feed bypass during filtration in a similar manner to the embodiments shown in Figures 2 and 3H. The mesh had openings of 51 microns and was 56 microns thick. The characteristics of both of the modules are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the modules

Name	Length of the pot L_p (mm)	Length of the fibre L_f (mm)	Other characteristics
Module A	56	202	none
Module B	53	205	Mesh glued on the pot

Firstly, feed water was filtered through module A for 35 minutes. During this filtration, the transmembrane pressure (TMP) was measured. Then the fibre of module A was cut as close to the pot as possible and module A filtered the same feed water for a further 35 minutes. During this filtration, the transmembrane pressure (TMP) was measured. The same test was repeated with the module B using the same feed water.

The graph shown in Figure 4 compares the TMP of the modules A and B during the two filtrations before and after the fibre was cut. The first part of the graph shows that the two curves are very similar. In particular, it shows that TMP of both modules

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increased at the same rate. Fibres of the modules were fouled at a similar rate. The small difference in TMP between the two modules is due to the mesh on module B which adds a small extra resistance to flow. The second part of the graph after the fibre of modules was cut shows that TMP of module A and B developed in a highly different way. The
5 TMP of module A remained low and level whereas the TMP of module B increased sharply showing that the mesh was blocked by the feed contaminants.

This test clearly shows the efficiency of a mesh as far as reduction of integrity loss is concerned. Due to the addition of the mesh to the module, the cut fibre quickly sealed itself, preventing the feed from contaminating the filtrate.

10 It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that a wide variety and number of techniques can be used to reduce the flow within the fibre lumen in the region of the pot and that such techniques fall within the scope of the invention described. It will also be appreciated that further embodiments and exemplifications of the invention are possible without departing from the spirit or scope of the invention described.

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What we claim is:

1. A method of reducing an effect of an integrity loss in a hollow fibre membrane module, the module comprising a plurality of hollow fibre membranes, each hollow fibre membrane comprising a lumen, wherein at least one end of each of the hollow fibre membranes is supported in a pot, the method comprising the step of:

increasing a flow resistance of a liquid through a lumen of a fibre membrane in a region of the pot, whereby an effect of an integrity loss is reduced,

wherein increasing the flow resistance comprises one of placing a porous layer in a flow path of the lumen in the region of the pot and reducing an inner cross-sectional area of the lumen by smearing a surface of the pot in the region of the lumen with a grouting material or by swelling a material used to form the pot.

2. The method according to claim 1, wherein increasing the flow resistance comprises placing a porous layer in a flow path of the lumen in the region of the pot.

3. The method according to claim 1, wherein increasing the flow resistance comprises reducing the inner cross-sectional area of the lumen by smearing a surface of the pot in the region of the lumen with a grouting material.

4. The method according to claim 1, wherein increasing the flow resistance comprises reducing the inner cross-sectional area of the lumen by swelling a material used to form the pot.

5. A hollow fibre membrane module comprising:

a plurality of hollow fibre membranes, each hollow fibre membrane comprising a lumen, wherein at least one end of each of the hollow fibre membranes is supported in a pot; and

a flow restrictor for increasing a flow resistance of a liquid through the lumen of the hollow fibre membrane in a region of the pot,

wherein the flow restrictor comprises one of a grouting material on a surface of the pot in the region of the lumen, and a porous layer in a flow path of the lumen in the region of the pot.

6. The hollow fibre membrane module according to claim 5, wherein the flow restrictor comprises a grouting material smeared on a surface of the pot in the region of the lumen.

7. The hollow fibre membrane module according to claim 5, wherein the flow restrictor comprises a porous layer in a flow path of the lumen in the region of the pot.