

Connectors for Pneumatic Devices in Microfluidic Systems

This application claims priority of U.S. Provisional Application Serial No. 62/130,089 filed March 9, 2015, the disclosure of which is incorporation herein by reference.

Field of the Disclosure

The disclosure generally relates to microfluidic devices and methods for cell culture. In particular, the disclosure relates to connectors used in the pneumatic control of microfluidic devices and cell culture.

Background

The ability to grow and maintain cells *in vitro* was a significant milestone in the biological sciences. However, traditional cell culture techniques lack the ability to analyze single cells, as opposed to bulk cultures. Population-averaged bulk assays are often inaccurate or misleading due to natural cell-to-cell variability. Further, cell signaling and other biochemical parameters constantly change, making dynamic analysis of cells crucial in understanding how a biological system operates. In response to these limitations, microfluidic cell culture systems have been developed that allow for high throughput and multiplexed culture and analysis of individual cells.

Microfluidic cell culture is a promising technology for applications in drug screening, tissue culturing, toxicity screening, and biologic research and can provide improved biological function, higher quality cell-based data, reduced reagent consumption, and lower cost. The most common approach for manufacturing microfluidic devices is soft lithography of polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS), which allows structures of micrometer resolution to be molded from a hard master. PDMS-based culture systems and devices may include a variety of structures, including various kinds of channels, chambers, barriers, and valves. Each of these components may be networked together in various configurations to create a “lab on a chip” device that can be utilized to conduct a variety of biological

experiments. Further, microfluidic cell culture systems can be highly multiplexed, allowing for multiple conditions or samples to be tested on a single device.

Key benefits of microfluidic cell culture include improved biological function, higher-quality cell-based data, reduced reagent consumption, and lower cost. Further, high quality molecular and cellular sample preparations are important for various clinical, research, and other applications. *In vitro* samples closely representing their *in vivo* characteristics can potentially benefit a wide range of molecular and cellular applications. Handling, characterization, culturing, and visualization of cells or other biologically or chemically active materials (such as beads coated with various biological molecules) have become increasingly valued in the fields of drug discovery, disease diagnoses and analysis, and a variety of other therapeutic and experimental work.

The relatively small scale and multiplexed nature of microfluidic devices results in high applicability to automation. Automated systems are particularly useful in the pharmaceutical industry, which relies on high throughput screening of libraries of chemical compounds to find potential drug candidates. By using microfluidic devices, high throughput screening can test many discrete compounds in parallel so that large numbers of test compounds are screened for biological activity simultaneously. In such systems, pneumatic control is often used to load cells and drive other actions on a microfluidic device. However, imperfect sealing of a pneumatic control system to a microfluidic device may result in improper pressures being applied to the device, thus biasing the results of the analysis. Connections between the pneumatic control system and microfluidic device, such as gas line tubing, may also become contaminated, requiring either disposal, or extensive and manual cleaning.

Summary

The problems of the prior art are addressed by a novel design of a pneumatic connector for interfacing a microfluidic control and analysis system with a microfluidic device. Embodiments of pneumatic connectors according to the

disclosure may be in communication with either end of a tubing, such as 10-line ribbon tubing, used to supply gases, fluids, or other media from a pneumatic control system to a microfluidic device. Pneumatic connectors may be removable and secured using an existing in-line vacuum force provided via the tubing and pneumatic control system. In certain embodiments, the pneumatic connectors may be removable and secured using magnetic force. In still further embodiments, the pneumatic connectors may use mechanical attachment means, such as thumb screws and the like. Pneumatic connectors may simultaneously establish multiple secure connections from a pneumatic control system to a microfluidic device. The connections may be configured to deliver variable pressure to control fluidic flow on the microfluidic device. At least one connection may be configured to deliver negative pressure to create a vacuum. In certain embodiments, pneumatic connectors may be configured to engage with a rigid pneumatic manifold that interfaces with a consumable microfluidic plate designed for live cell culture and imaging. Accordingly, in these embodiments, the vacuum may be used to seal the pneumatic manifold to the microfluidic plate, and also to seal the pneumatic connector to the pneumatic manifold. In still further embodiments, pneumatic connectors may be configured to engage with a pneumatic interface of the pneumatic control system. Further, in certain embodiments, the connector may comprise filters for preventing the backflow of liquids into a controller. Accordingly, the novel design results in a removable, repeatable, and reliable pneumatic connector located directly at a convenient interface between the pneumatic controller and the microfluidic plate. When used in an automated system, embodiments of pneumatic connectors according to the disclosure greatly ease user workflow and substantially reduce the possibility of malfunctions.

Brief Description of the Drawings

For a better understanding of the present disclosure, reference is made to the accompanying drawings, which are incorporated herein by reference and in which:

FIG. 1 is a system diagram of an embodiment of a microfluidic control and analysis system according to the disclosure;

FIG. 2 is a top view of an embodiment of a microfluidic plate within the microfluidic control and analysis system of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a diagram depicting an embodiment of a cell culture area within the microfluidic plate of FIG. 2;

FIGS. 4A-B are perspective views of an embodiment of a pneumatic manifold according to the disclosure as it is positioned onto the microfluidic plate of FIG. 2;

FIG. 5 is a top view of the pneumatic manifold of FIGS. 4A-B;

FIG. 6 is a perspective view of an embodiment of a pneumatic connector according to the disclosure;

FIG. 7 is a perspective view of the pneumatic connector of FIG. 6 and the pneumatic manifold of FIG. 5;

FIG. 8 is a front view of the pneumatic connector of FIG. 6;

FIGS. 9A-B are cross-sectional views of the pneumatic connector of FIG. 6 and the pneumatic manifold of FIG. 7 as the pneumatic connector is placed in communication with the pneumatic manifold;

FIG. 10 is a top view of an embodiment of a pneumatic interface for receiving a pneumatic connector located on an embodiment of a pneumatic manifold according to the disclosure;

FIGS. 11A-B are perspective views of another embodiment of a pneumatic interface located on a pneumatic control system for receiving the pneumatic connector of FIG. 6;

FIGS. 12A-B are perspective views of another embodiment of a pneumatic connector according to the disclosure in the disengaged and engaged states, respectively;

FIGS. 13A-B are front views of the pneumatic connector of FIGS. 12A-B in the disengaged and engaged states, respectively;

FIG. 14 is an exploded front view of the removable pneumatic connector of FIGS. 12A-B;

FIG. 15 is a perspective view of an embodiment of a cleaning plate according to an embodiment of the disclosure;

FIGS. 16 is a top view of the cleaning plate of FIG. 15; and

FIG. 17 is a top view of a pneumatic manifold positioned over the cleaning plate of FIG. 15.

Detailed Description

The detailed description set forth below in connection with the appended drawings is intended as a description of embodiments and does not represent the only forms which may be constructed and/or utilized. However, it is to be understood that the same or equivalent functions and sequences may be accomplished by different embodiments that are also intended to be encompassed within the spirit and scope of the disclosure, such as removable pneumatic connectors and systems using different geometries, materials, number of connections, and other alignment or mounting features in order to facilitate mounting, automation, or simple operator use.

Microfluidic Plate Control and Analysis System

Microfluidic cell culture systems provide a powerful tool to conduct biological experiments. FIG. 1 illustrates an embodiment of a microfluidic plate control and analysis system **10** according to the present disclosure. The microfluidic plate control and analysis system **10** comprises a microfluidic plate **100** positioned on the stage of an inverted microscope **20**. Cell culture or other processes occurring on the plate **100** may be observed using the inverted microscope **20**. The plate **100** is in communication with a pneumatic controller **40** via tubing **30**, which may comprise 10-line ribbon tubing. The tubing **30** may also comprise other forms of communication and connections between the pneumatic controller **40** and microfluidic plate **100**, such as individual gas line tubing, electrical wiring, heating

elements, networking components, and the like. The pneumatic controller **40** may be configured to interact with the microfluidic plate **100** by using the tubing **30** to supply a gas or liquid to the plate **100**, control the temperature of the plate **100**, or perform other desired functions. The controller **40** is further in communication with a computer **60** via a network connection **50**. The computer **60** may be configured to display and/or analyze image data from the microscope **20**, record actions taken by the pneumatic controller **40**, and instruct the pneumatic controller **40** to take actions according to a protocol.

In this embodiment, the microfluidic plate **100** comprises a glass bottom for imaging, and may be configured to fit within the stage holder of the inverted microscope **20**. In certain embodiments, the microfluidic plate **100** has dimensions corresponding to a Society for Biomolecular Screening (SBS) standard 96-well plate. The microfluidic plate **100** may use an application-specific design depending on the type of experiment desired, such as cell culture, solution exchange, or comparison of conditions. In certain embodiments, the microfluidic plate **100** may be a CellASIC® ONIX Microfluidic Plate for Live Cell Analysis, commercially available from EMD Millipore Corporation. Further, the microfluidic plate **100** may be multiplexed, allowing for a single microfluidic plate **100** to perform several individual or related experiments, either simultaneously or sequentially.

The tubing **30** may be configured or utilized for a particular purpose, such as supplying a gas or liquid to the microfluidic plate **100**. In this embodiment, the tubing **30** comprises 10-line ribbon tubing configured such that eight of the lines provide variable pressure to the microfluidic plate **100**, one line provides a desired gas environment, and one line provides negative pressure to create a vacuum. In certain embodiments, the tubing **30** may further comprise a connection (e.g., an electrical connection) in communication with a heating element or heat exchanger in communication with the microfluidic plate **100**, thus incubating the microfluidic plate **100** to a desired temperature. While the embodiments described in this disclosure utilize a 10-line ribbon tubing, various other forms of connections and communication between the pneumatic controller **40** and microfluidic plate **100**

may be used, including those of greater or fewer lines, or utilizing other means of delivering pressure, gas, vacuum, and/or heat.

Each line of the 10-line ribbon tubing may be in communication with the controller **40**, which may comprise a plurality of ports configured to generate pressure or vacuum, regulate pressure, open or close valves, and/or supply a gas environment (e.g., 5% CO₂) having a desired temperature and humidity. The controller **40** may further comprise a heating controller that instructs a corresponding heating element in communication with the microfluidic plate **100** to raise or lower the temperature of the microfluidic plate **100**. For example, the heating controller may be configured to maintain the temperature of the microfluidic plate at 37°C, mimicking *in vivo* conditions. In this embodiment, the controller **40** is a CellASIC® ONIX Microfluidic Control System (commercially available from EMD Millipore Corporation), which is able to supply positive pressure up to 10 PSI and negative pressure of -8.2 PSI. However, any suitable controller that is able to provide any of variable pressure, a desired gas environment, or temperature control for a microfluidic device may be used.

The computer **60** is in communication with the controller **40** over a network connection **50**. In this embodiment, the network connection **50** comprises a USB connection. However, the network connection **50** may be any form of connection enabling communication between the controller **40** and computer **60**, including serial, parallel, and Ethernet connections. Further, in certain embodiments, the controller **40** and computer **60** may comprise a single unit. In this embodiment, the network connection **50** may be an integral component.

In this embodiment, the computer **60** includes software configured to manage various aspects of the microfluidic plate control and analysis system **10**. The computer **60** may be configured to operate the controller **40** according to a protocol for an experiment. For example, the computer **60** can send control signals to the controller **40** instructing the controller **40** to provide variable pressure to the microfluidic plate **100**, or take other actions, according to either a pre-determined or dynamic schedule. Further, the computer **60** may be configured to receive user

input and modify protocols, including the ability to set flow sequences, set desired pressures, or store programs and protocols. The computer **60** may also be used to determine the overall system status. However, in certain embodiments, these features may also be implemented wholly or partly within the controller **40**.

In certain embodiments, the computer **60** may further be in communication with a digital camera attached to the inverted microscope **20**. In these embodiments, the computer **60** may include the capability to display, monitor, and track images captured by the digital camera of the microfluidic plate **100**. This feature is particularly useful for long-term live cell analyses, wherein processes may take days and interesting events may occur during off hours. Further, in larger automated systems, this feature can be used to track conditions at designated time points for a plurality of samples without a need for human intervention.

Microfluidic Culture Plate

FIG. 2 illustrates the microfluidic plate **100** within the microfluidic control and analysis system **10** of FIG. 1 in further detail. In this embodiment, the microfluidic plate **100** may be PDMS-based and may comprise a plurality of independent assay units (i.e., the 4 rows labeled “A”-“D”). Each assay unit may comprise a plurality of fluidic channels **102** in communication with a culture chamber **104**. Cells or other fluids may be loaded into the culture chamber **104** via a cell inlet well **106** (e.g., the well labeled “A6”). Further, various solutions or reagents may be provided to the culture chamber **104** via a plurality of solution inlet wells **108** (“A2”-“A5”) and a gravity perfusion well **110** (“A1”). A viewing window **112** is formed over the culture chamber **104**, allowing for placement of the lens of a microscope (e.g., the inverted microscope **20** of FIG. 1) to view the cells or other processes taking place within. Each assay unit may further comprise a waste outlet well **114** (“A7”) for waste from the culture chamber **104**, and a perfusion outlet well **116** (“A8”) for waste from the solution inlet wells **108** and gravity perfusion well **110**.

A plurality of sidewalls **105** extending upward from the plate **100** are formed around the wells, culture chamber **104**, and viewing window **112**, isolating these

features from one another. At least some of the sidewalls **105** extend to the top of the plate **100**, such that placing a manifold over the plate **100** results in the sidewalls **105** being in contact with the manifold. As will be described further below, this feature may be used to deliver isolated pneumatic pressure to each well via a pneumatic manifold, provide a desired gas environment to the culture chambers **104**, or create a vacuum within other areas of the plate **100**.

FIG. 3 illustrates the culture chamber **104** in further detail. The cell inlet well **106** is in direct communication with the culture chamber **104**, allowing for free flow of cells from the cell inlet well **106** into the culture chamber **104**. In contrast to the cell inlet well **106**, the fluidic channels **102** connecting the solution inlet wells **108** and gravity perfusion well **110** are separated from the culture chamber **104** by a perfusion barrier **118**. In this embodiment, the perfusion barrier **118** is a combination of solid structures and passages smaller than the fluidic channels **102** that separates the fluidic channels **102** from the culture chamber **104**. The perfusion barrier **118** is designed to keep cells, other culture items, and gels from migrating into the fluidic channels **102**, while allowing some fluidic flow through diffusion, perfusion, or any combination of mass transfer mechanisms that is generally of a much higher fluidic resistance than the fluid flow in the flow channels. In this way, media and reagents can be supplied to the culture chamber **104** without the risk of blocking the fluidic channels **102**.

The microfluidic plate **100** is prepared for use by first priming the fluidic channels **102** with a desired buffer, such as sterile PBS. Next, 10 μ L of a desired cell suspension is pipetted into the cell inlet well **106**. Aspirating the waste outlet well **114** causes the cell suspension to load into the culture chambers **104** through capillary action. Once in the culture chamber **104**, cells may be perfused with media supplied to the gravity perfusion well **110**, or exposed to reagents or other chemicals supplied to any of the solution inlet wells **108**. As the plate **100** includes four independent assay units, up to four different samples of cells may be independently cultured on a single plate **100**. The status of cell culture and

response may be observed, for example, by viewing each culture chamber **104** through the viewing window **112** with a microscope.

Once cells are sufficiently cultured, a variety of experiments may be conducted using the microfluidic plate **100**. For example, the solution inlet wells **108** can be used for solution switching experiments, wherein cells are sequentially exposed to various solutions and the resulting cellular response is analyzed. To expose cells within the culture chamber **104** to a desired solution, an amount of that solution (e.g., 10uL) is pipetted into a solution inlet well **108** (e.g., A2). The solution then traverses the fluidic channels **102** and perfuses through the perfusion barrier **118** and into the culture chamber **104**. Subsequently, the cells may be exposed to other solutions via the other solution inlet wells and similarly observed. In addition to solution switching, the solution inlets may also be used for automated staining and washing protocols, and on-demand fixation by flowing fixative into the culture chamber **104** during imaging.

Further, it should be noted that while the present disclosure refers to pneumatic control of the microfluidic plate **100**, embodiments of the disclosure may be used for any form of microfluidic device, plate, or control and analysis system. Various embodiments are considered to be within the scope of the disclosure.

Pneumatic Manifold

Simple gravity-driven perfusion may be used to both culture cells and expose cells to various reagents. While gravity-driven perfusion allows for an operator to conduct an experiment using only a microfluidic plate **100** without any additional hardware (e.g., the controller **40** and/or computer **60**), it lacks a degree of fine control and also requires continuous monitoring by an operator. Accordingly, pneumatic control by way of a pneumatic manifold **120**, as in the embodiment shown in FIGS. 4A-B, may also be used to control loading of cells and reagents on the microfluidic plate **100**. The pneumatic manifold **120** may be mated to the microfluidic plate **100** in order to finely control cell loading, perfusion of media, and

solution exposure by providing variable pressure to each of the wells of the microfluidic plate **100**.

FIGS. 4A-B illustrate the placement and sealing of the pneumatic manifold **120** to the microfluidic plate **100**. The manifold **120** may comprise a cyclic olefin copolymer body configured to be positioned over the microfluidic plate **100** and further comprises a plurality of channels **122** which may be used to supply a gas or liquid or deliver negative pressure to the microfluidic plate **100**. Each of the channels **122** is in communication with the tubing **30**, which as described above may comprise 10-line tubing in communication with a suitable pneumatic controller (such as the pneumatic controller **40** of FIG. 1). The manifold **120** further comprises a soft gasket **132**, which should first be cleaned, e.g., with 70% ethanol, and then blotted dry. The plate **100** is then positioned on a flat surface, and the manifold **120** is aligned and set over the wells, as shown in the embodiment of FIG. 4B. Once in place, negative pressure is supplied to at least one of the channels **122** (via one of the gas lines of the tubing **30**) such that a vacuum is created between the microfluidic plate **100** and pneumatic manifold **120**. As the vacuum is created, an operator (or automated instrument) may press the manifold **120** against the plate **100** for several seconds to ensure uniform contact of the gasket **132**. A proper seal forms as the volume between the wells, sidewalls **105**, plate **100**, and manifold **120** becomes a vacuum. Once a proper seal has been formed, the vacuum should be maintained by an appropriate negative pressure (e.g., -8.2 PSI) to maintain a positive seal and vacuum throughout the course of the experiment. In certain embodiments, the pneumatic manifold **120** may be an F84 Manifold for CellASIC® ONIX, commercially available from EMD Millipore Corporation.

FIG. 5 illustrates the pneumatic manifold **120** and plurality of channels **122** in further detail. In the embodiment shown, each channel **122** includes a channel inlet **124** on a top side of the manifold **120**, which is in communication with a respective gas line, e.g., a line from the 10-line ribbon tubing comprising the tubing **30** of FIG. 1. Each channel **122** is further in communication with at least one

channel outlet **126** located on a bottom side of the pneumatic manifold **120**. Each channel outlet **126** is positioned such that when the pneumatic manifold **120** is positioned over the microfluidic plate **100**, each channel outlet **126** is positioned over a particular well (e.g., the wells of the microfluidic plate **100** of FIG. 2). Further, the sidewalls **105** of the microfluidic plate **100** are in contact with the underside of the manifold **120**, thus isolating each channel outlet **126** such that it is only communication with a single well or area of the microfluidic plate **100**.

In this embodiment, the pneumatic manifold **120** is configured with sufficient channels **122** and channel outlets **126** to match the number of wells and assay units on the plate **100**. Eight of the channels **122** (i.e., the channels **122** labeled “V1”–“V8”) include four channel outlets **126**, corresponding to the four independent assay units of the microfluidic plate **100** of FIG. 2. Thus, a single channel inlet **124** can be used to apply pressure to a particular well of four assay units on the microfluidic plate **100**, controlling flow rates through the fluidic channels **102** of the microfluidic plate **100**. However, in certain embodiments, the number and location of channels **122**, channel inlets **124**, and channel outlets **126** may be varied to match the configuration of a particular microfluidic plate or control system or other needs for an experiment.

The plurality of channels **122** may further comprise a gas environment channel **128**, which includes a channel outlet **126** positioned over the viewing window **112** and culture chambers **104** (as shown in FIG. 2). The gas environment channel **128** can be used to provide atmospheric control for the microfluidic plate **100** and bathe cells in the culture chamber **104** with a specified gas environment. As previously described, the microfluidic plate **100** comprises a gas-permeable device layer (i.e., PDMS) over a glass bottom. Thus, gases provided to the microfluidic plate **100** can be delivered to the culture chambers **104** through the gas-permeable device layer by diffusion. In certain embodiments, the gas delivered via the gas environment channel **128** comprises 5% CO₂; however, any gaseous mixture, such as mixtures including oxygen and/or nitrogen, may be used. By continuously flowing gas through the gas environment channel **128**, a stable gas

environment for culturing cells within the culture chambers **104** is maintained. Thus, the gas environment channel **128** provides a means for controlling the environment within the culture chambers **104** other than placing the microfluidic plate **100** into an incubator. This results in the manifold **120** becoming a “micro-incubator,” independent of the ambient air, allowing continuous medium perfusion and preventing evaporation.

The plurality of channels **122** may further comprise a vacuum channel **130**. The channel outlet **126** for the vacuum channel **130** is positioned in an area between the wells and sidewalls **105** of the microfluidic plate **100**. Thus, supplying negative pressure to the vacuum channel **130** when the manifold **120** is positioned over the microfluidic plate **100** creates a vacuum in the volume between the wells, sidewalls **105**, manifold, and the microfluidic plate **100**, thus sealing the manifold **120** to the plate **100**.

Thus, by using the pneumatic manifold **120**, pressure can be applied to individual wells to drive cell loading, solution switching, or perfusion of media. Cells may be incubated with a suitable gas environment, and a vacuum ensures that the manifold **120** remains sealed to the microfluidic plate **100**. Further, connecting the channel inlets **124** to a controller and corresponding computer (such as the controller **40** and computer **60** of FIG. 1) can be used to automate various protocols and experiments running on the microfluidic plate **100**.

As noted above, in this embodiment, the tubing **30** comprises a gas line ribbon tubing having ten lines: eight for pressure control, one for atmosphere, and one for vacuum. However, various numbers and types of connections may be utilized according to embodiments of the disclosure. For example, in certain embodiments, the tubing **30** may provide a liquid to a microfluidic plate **100** or other device. In certain embodiments, the tubing **30** may provide both liquid and pressure control lines, or provide temperature control for the microfluidic plate **100**.

Connections between the Manifold and the Controller

As noted above, the tubing **30** connecting the manifold **120** and the controller **40** may comprise a plurality of gas lines, such as 10-line ribbon tubing. In certain embodiments, the tubing **30** may be permanently connected to both the pneumatic controller **40** and the manifold **120**. The tubing **30** may also be removable from either the pneumatic controller **40** or manifold **120**, or both, by a variety of mechanisms, including by pneumatic, magnetic, mechanical attachment, and the like.

A. First Embodiment of a Removable Pneumatic Connector

FIG. 6 illustrates an embodiment of a pneumatic connector **150**. The pneumatic connector **150** may be used as an attachment mechanism for removably securing the tubing **30** to a pneumatic manifold, such as the pneumatic manifold **120** of FIG. 5. While in this embodiment, the pneumatic connector **150** is positioned between the tubing **30** and manifold **120**, in certain embodiments the pneumatic connector **150** may be positioned between the tubing **30** and the controller **40**. In still further embodiments, pneumatic connectors **150** may be situated at both positions.

In this embodiment, the pneumatic connector **150** uses an existing vacuum line **32** on the tubing **30** to removably secure the pneumatic connector **150** to the manifold **120**. However, in certain embodiments, the pneumatic connector **150** may use alternate lines separate from the tubing **30** for delivering vacuum or negative pressure to removably secure the connector **150**.

The pneumatic connector **150** may comprise a body **152** in communication with tubing **30**, such as the 10-line ribbon tubing in communication with a pneumatic controller (such as the controller **40** of FIG. 1). In the embodiment shown, the body **152** comprises clear PDMS molded onto a polycarbonate sheet. The pneumatic connector **150** may be configured to be positioned onto the surface of a pneumatic manifold **120** having a corresponding interface as a substrate, such that each gas line of the tubing **30** is in communication with a respective channel

inlet **124** on the manifold **120** (as shown in the embodiment of FIG. 7). In this embodiment, the body **152** comprises a rounded rectangular shape. However, a variety of other shapes may be used to accommodate various configurations of tubing **30** and a corresponding interface and substrate according to various embodiments of the disclosure.

FIG. 8 illustrates various aspects of the pneumatic connector **150** in further detail. The body **152** of the pneumatic connector **150** comprises an inner surface **164** that is configured to be placed onto a corresponding substrate, such as the channel inlets **124** on the pneumatic manifold **120** of FIG. 5. The body **152** of the pneumatic connector **150** further comprises a plurality of bores **156** passing through the body **152** such that the bores **156** are exposed to the inner surface **164**. Some of the bores **156** may be surrounded by sealing members, such as seals **158**. The inner surface **164** may further comprise an outer seal **160** which surrounds each of the bores **156**. In this embodiment, at least one of the bores **156** is utilized as a vacuum bore or vacuum port **162**, which lacks a corresponding seal **158**.

Each of the bores **156** is in communication with a corresponding gas line from the tubing **30**. As previously described, the tubing **30** in this embodiment comprises ten gas lines: pressure controlled lines 1-8, a gas environment line, and a vacuum line. Each gas line is placed within a corresponding bore **156**. Whereas each bore **156** for the pressure controlled lines and gas environment line includes a corresponding seal **158**, the vacuum line placed within the vacuum port **162** does not have a seal.

Placing the connector **150** against a corresponding interface or surface on the pneumatic manifold **120** causes the seals **158** and outer seal **160** to come into contact with that substrate. When placed against such a substrate, a vacuum holding area **154** is formed. The vacuum holding area **154** comprises a space or volume having edges defined by the outer seal **160**, inner seals **158**, the inner surface **164**, and the corresponding substrate against which the connector **150** is placed. Further, the inner seals **158** create a fluid tight separation between each

gas line within each bore **156**. However, because the vacuum port **162** does not include a seal **158**, the vacuum port **162** is in fluid communication with the vacuum holding area **154**. Thus, supplying negative pressure to the vacuum port **162** (e.g., via tubing **30** in communication with the controller **40** of FIG. 1) creates a vacuum within the vacuum holding area **154**. Accordingly, the difference in pressure between the outside environment and the vacuum holding area **154** seals the pneumatic connector **150** to the surface, creating a secure connection that can be actuated by deactivating and activating the vacuum line in communication with the vacuum port **162**.

FIGS. 9A-B illustrate the pneumatic connector **150** as it is placed against a manifold **120**. In use, the pneumatic connector **150** is placed against the channel inlets **124** of the pneumatic manifold **120**. Each of the bores **156** are configured to be positioned over a corresponding channel inlet **124**. Actuating the pneumatic connector **150** by creating a vacuum within the vacuum holding area **154** thus places each gas line of the tubing **30** in communication with a respective channel inlet **124**. The seals **158** substantially prevent communication between each channel inlet **124**, minimizing any cross-talk or leakage between channels. Further, in this embodiment, the pneumatic manifold **120** also includes the vacuum channel **130**. Thus, creating a vacuum in the vacuum holding area **154** further supplies a vacuum to the vacuum channel **130** via its corresponding channel inlet **124**, sealing the manifold **120** to a microfluidic plate. In this way, the pneumatic connector **150** is able to utilize an existing vacuum line to both hold the pneumatic connector **150** in place against the pneumatic manifold **120**, and simultaneously secure the pneumatic manifold **120** to the microfluidic plate. Once secured, the connector **150** may then be used to deliver variable pressure, gas, liquid, or a specified gas environment to various components of the microfluidic plate.

In this embodiment, the seals **158** may comprise O-rings, and the outer seal **160** may comprise a gasket, each of which have a similar thickness, height, and compressibility ratio. However, in certain embodiments, other kinds of seals may be used, provided that the seals sufficiently prevent fluid communication between

the bores **156** and thus prevent any leakage between the gas lines of the tubing **30**. Further, other kinds of seals may be used provided that a suitable vacuum holding area **154** is created that can sustain vacuum to secure the connector **150** to the manifold **120**. Ideally, the choice of seals **158** should result in low leak rates, such as less than 0.1 mL/minute when the gas lines are delivering 10 PSI and the vacuum line is held at -8.2 PSI. While in this embodiment, the tubing **30** comprises ten lines including one vacuum line, in other embodiments, various numbers and combinations of lines may be used, provided that the combination results in a secure connection to the manifold **120**.

As described above, in use, the pneumatic connector **150** is placed against the pneumatic interface **134** and the vacuum is activated. Alternately, the vacuum may be activated prior to placing the pneumatic connector **150** against the pneumatic interface **134**. The active vacuum line readily grips, holds, and compresses the seals **158** and the outer seal **160** against the substrate of the manifold **120**, drawing the connector **150** towards the substrate of the manifold, creating a fluid tight seal and establishing a confident connection of all pressure lines, substantially reducing any leakage or “cross-talk.” Due to the vacuum holding area **154**, seals **158**, and outer seal **160**, the pneumatic connector **150** allows for variable connector alignment and consistent sealing, independent of the skill of the operator. Further, misalignment can be detected by a drop in pressure or inability to provide pressure or gas to any of the corresponding channel inlets **124**. This detection may be made by a controller or computer in communication with the tubing **30**, such as the controller **40** or computer **60**, respectively, of FIG. 1.

In certain embodiments, the manifold **120** may comprise additional features to aid proper alignment of the connector **150** to the manifold **120** and channel inlets **124**. FIG. 10 illustrates an embodiment of a pneumatic manifold **120** for use with the pneumatic connector **150** that includes a pneumatic interface **134**. In this embodiment, the pneumatic interface **134** comprises a tab extending from the pneumatic manifold **120** including the channel inlets **124** in communication with the channels **122**, gas environment channel **128**, and vacuum channel **130** of the

pneumatic manifold **120**. The pneumatic interface **134** may also comprise an alignment mechanism **136** for proper alignment, such as a notch or ridge shaped to receive the pneumatic connector **150** and to hold it in place when it is positioned over the pneumatic interface **134**. However, in certain embodiments, the pneumatic interface **134** may simply comprise the plurality of channel inlets **124** without any additional features (e.g., the embodiment shown in FIG. 5).

FIGS. 11A-B illustrate another embodiment of a pneumatic interface **170** for use with a pneumatic connector **150**. The pneumatic interface **170** may be located either between the manifold and tubing, or between the controller and tubing. In this embodiment, the pneumatic interface **170** is connected to a pneumatic controller, such as the controller **40** of FIG. 1. As shown, the pneumatic interface **170** comprises a body **172** having a mating surface **174** comprising a plurality of channel inlets **176** in communication with channels within the controller **40**. The body **172** and mating surface **174** further comprise a rounded rectangle shape so as to accommodate placement of the pneumatic connector **150**. In use, the pneumatic connector **150** is placed over the interface **170** such that the vacuum line **32** of the tubing **30** is in communication with a respective vacuum channel of the interface **170**. The vacuum line **32** is then activated, securing the connector **150** to the interface **170** in the manner as described above.

In certain embodiments, the microfluidic plate **100** or pneumatic manifold **120** may not include a vacuum channel **130**. Thus, in these embodiments, a pneumatic connector **150** according to the disclosure may comprise a vacuum port **162** that is not in communication with a vacuum channel **130** of the manifold **120**. In these embodiments, the vacuum port **162** serves only to secure the connector **150** to the manifold, thus placing each bore **156** in communication with a respective channel inlet **124**.

The pneumatic connector **150** results in a variety of advantages. For example, the pneumatic connector **150** allows for the manifold **120** to be easily cleaned, or even to be used as a plate lid or cover during sample transfer within labs. Because the pneumatic connector **150** utilizes the existing vacuum line to

hold itself in place during use, no additional or pneumatics are required. Thus, the pneumatic connector **150** can utilize pre-existing hardware that can also be used to control a manifold having an umbilical-style, or permanent, connection. Further, by establishing a near-automatic holding force, the pneumatic connector **150** eases operator workflow and reduces the chances of malfunction.

The pneumatic connector **150** is particularly advantageous in microfluidic control system environments utilizing automation. As noted above, in this embodiment, the microfluidic plate **100** comprises an SBS-compliant 96 well format, and thus various “off-the-shelf” machines can be used to create an automated system. In one embodiment, an automated system includes a robotic arm or plate handler that moves the microfluidic plate **100** to a particular station. The microfluidic plate **100** may be already prepared and include the pneumatic manifold **120**; however in certain embodiments, the automated system may dispense liquids into the wells of the plate **100** and also introduce the pneumatic manifold **120**. The pneumatic connector **150** would then be mechanically introduced by to the pneumatic interface **134**. Activating the vacuum line then automatically secures the pneumatic connector **150** to the pneumatic interface **134**, establishing a secure, vacuum-held connection without any external or manual intervention. This feature has a significant advantage over connectors that use mechanical attachment or clamping means. Further, the pneumatic connector **150** presents a reliable and repeatable connector directly at a point of connection of the pneumatic manifold **120**.

As noted above, the vacuum holding area **154** and seals **158** physically separate each gas line. However, pressure leakage may still occur due to a misaligned, broken, or otherwise incomplete seal. If unnoticed, this pressure leakage may lead to incorrect pressures being applied to each channel **122**, potentially biasing the results of an experiment being performed on the microfluidic plate **100**. One advantage of using a removable pneumatic connector **150** is that any incomplete seals resulting in pressure leakage between gas lines can be recognized as an aberration in vacuum pressure within the vacuum holding area

154. In certain embodiments, the controller **40** and/or computer **60** are configured to recognize deviations in pressure within the vacuum holding area **154** and report this information, e.g., via an alert or other means, to an operator. Thus, the operator may then take corrective action, such as reseating the pneumatic connector **150**, to ensure a positive seal.

B. Second Embodiment of a Removable Pneumatic Connector

As noted above, the tubing **30** of FIG. 1 may also be removable from the controller **40** by a variety of means. For example, at the interface between the tubing **30** and controller **40**, a variety of attachment means may be used, such as pneumatic, magnetic, mechanical attachment, and the like. FIGS. 12A-14 illustrate another embodiment of a removable pneumatic connector **200** according to the disclosure. The pneumatic connector **200** may be positioned between the tubing **30** and the controller **40**, and may be configured to removably secure the pneumatic connector **200** to the controller **40**. Further, in this embodiment, the pneumatic connector **200** further comprises in-line filters, which may be used to allow the passage of gas, but prevent fluid flow.

As shown in the embodiment of FIGS. 12A-B, the connector **200** may comprise a housing **202**. The housing **202** may comprise clear PDMS, molded plastic, or another appropriate material. The housing **202** further comprises a tubing end **204** and an engagement end **206**. A plurality of male ports **230** are disposed within and pass laterally through the housing **202** such that each male port **230** extends from both the tubing end **204** and the engagement end **206**. On the tubing end **204**, each male port **230** comprises a barb **234** for interfacing with a gas line, such as the gas lines comprising the tubing **30** of FIG. 1. To place the male port **230** in communication with a tubing, a corresponding gas line of the tubing is placed over the barb **234**. While in this embodiment, the gas lines of the tubing **30** are secured using the barb **234**, other forms of connection for gas lines may be used, such as TC connections, Luer connections, and the like.

On the engagement end **206**, each male port **230** further comprises a stepped section **250** which is configured to engage with a corresponding female port **280** in an interface **260** on a pneumatic controller, such as the controller **40** of FIG. 1. Further, the male ports **230** comprise a channel **232** extending from the barb **234** to the stepped section **250**, which may allow for the passage of gas, liquid, or other substances between the tubing **30** and controller **40**. At least one of the male ports **230** may be designated for a particular function, such as a vacuum port **242**. Further, a pair of tabs **208** extend laterally from each side of the housing **202** on the tubing end **204**. The tabs **208** may be used, for example, for gripping the connector **200** to engage or disengage the connector **200** from the corresponding interface **260**, which may be performed either manually, or by automation with appropriately configured hardware.

The housing **202** may further comprise a post **210** comprising a connector magnet **212** positioned on the engagement end **206**. In this embodiment, the housing **202** comprises two posts **210** at each side of the male ports **230**, each post **210** comprising a connector magnet **212**. However, in certain embodiments, the housing **202** may comprise a single post, multiple posts, lack a post, or include posts without magnets. Similarly, in certain embodiments, the housing **202** may comprise a single magnet, multiple magnets, lack a magnet, or include magnets without posts. In the embodiment shown, the connector magnets **212** are shaped similarly to the attached surface of the post **210**; however, a variety of magnets and shapes may be used.

In the embodiment shown, each post **210** and connector magnet **212** are shaped to be received by a corresponding aperture **264** containing a receiving magnet **266** in the interface **260**. An attractive force between each connector magnet **212** and receiving magnet **266** may be used to secure the connector **200** to the interface **260**, thus placing the male ports **230** in fluid communication with the female ports **280**. Further, the magnets **212**, **266** may be used to help properly align and place the connector **200** over the interface **260**. For example, the polarity of the connector magnets **212** may be configured to be the same as the polarity of

the receiving magnets **266** when the connector **200** is positioned over the interface **260** backwards or in an otherwise incorrect position, thus resulting in a resistive force preventing the connector **200** from engaging with the interface **260**. However, in certain embodiments, either the connector magnets **212** or receiving magnets **266** may simply comprise a piece of metal. In these embodiments, if proper alignment is desired, other forms of engagement may be used, e.g. by keying or spacing the placement of the male ports **230** and female ports **280** such that the connector **200** may only engage with the interface **260** in a single position. For example, as shown in FIG. 13A, the spacing between the vacuum port **242** and adjacent male port **230** may be slightly wider than the spacing between the other male ports **230**. Similarly, in certain embodiments, the size and/or shape of the apertures **264** may vary compared to one another to accept only a particular post **210** and/or connector magnet **212** on a connector **200**. Various embodiments and configurations are within the scope of the present disclosure.

In certain embodiments, other forms of securing engagement, as opposed to magnetic force, may be used to secure the connector **200** to the interface **260**. For example, the connector **200** may use an existing in-line vacuum force, as in the connector **150** of FIG. 8, to pneumatically secure the connector to the interface. Alternately, other mechanical means may be used to secure the connector **200** to the interface **260**, such as screws, thumb screws, bolts, and the like. For example, thumb screws may be preferable in some embodiments, as it provides a reliable connection between the connector **200** and interface **260** that is less likely to be accidentally dislodged. However, in embodiments using automation, pneumatics and/or magnetic coupling may be preferable, as less force is needed to disengage and engage the connector **200**.

Referring to FIGS. 13A-B and FIG. 14, in this embodiment, the housing **202** further comprises a plurality of bores **216** passing through the housing **202**, such that the bores **216** are open to the tubing end **204** and the engagement end **206**. Each bore **216** may further comprise a fitting section **218** for receiving and securing one of the male ports **230** to the bore **216**, and an open section **220** proximate the

engagement end **206**. In certain embodiments, the fitting section **218** may comprise additional features for receiving and securing a male port **230**, such as threads, grooves, tapering, and the like. In the embodiment shown, the fitting section **218** has a thinner diameter than the open section **220**, and the fitting section **218** and open section **220** are axial with respect to one another. Further, a bore **216** may be intended for a particular function, such as vacuum, for the vacuum port **242**. This intention may be designated on the housing **202** by a structural feature or indicator **214**, such as a raised surface on the tubing end **204**. Alternately, the housing **202** may use other features, such as markings on the tubing end **204** or a keyed spacing or arrangement of ports, to designate the use of bores and ports for a particular function. In the embodiment shown, the vacuum port **242** is also colored differently from the male ports **230** as an indication of its intended use.

In the embodiment shown, the plurality of male ports **230** are positioned within the bores **216**. Each male port **230** may comprise two separate pieces, a syringe **252** and a filter **244**, which are configured to engage with one another to form the male port **230**. When engaged together, the channel **232** (as shown in FIGS. 12A-B) extends through the syringe **252** and filter **244**. In this embodiment, the syringe **252** and filter **244** each may comprise a body having several components. The syringe **252** comprises the barb **234**, a bolt **236**, a threaded segment **238**, and a tapered segment **240**. To position the syringe **252** within one of the bores **216**, the tapered segment **240** is placed within the fitting section **218** via the tubing end **204** of the housing **202**. The syringe **252** is then rotated by gripping the bolt **236**, causing the threaded segment **238** to engage with the inner surface of the fitting section **218**. The syringe **252** is properly positioned within the bore **216** when the bolt **236** is in contact with the surface of the tubing end **204**, thus securing the syringe **252** within the bore **216**.

While in this embodiment, the syringe **252** and filter **244** are separable, in certain embodiments, these elements may comprise a single component. Further, while the barb **234**, bolt **236**, threaded segment **238**, and tapered segment **240** are

arranged in this order along the syringe **252**, these elements may be arranged in alternate ways to accommodate alternate embodiments of bores **216** and/or housings **202** according to the disclosure. For example, in certain embodiments, a bolt **236** may be placed below a threaded segment **238** so that the syringe **252** may be positioned within the bore **216** from the engagement end **206**. Similarly, in certain embodiments, the threaded segment **238** may comprise other features, such as grooves or tapering, for securing the syringe **252** within the bore **216**. In still further embodiments, the various features of the syringe **252** and filter **244** may be molded as part of the housing **202**, for example, such that the channel **232** is an integral component of the housing **202**. Various embodiments are considered to be within the scope of the disclosure.

As noted above, each male port **230** may comprise two separate pieces, a syringe **252** and a filter **244**. The filter **244** may be configured to engage with the syringe **252**, for example, by using a Luer-style connection (such as a Luer slip or Luer lock), threads, or other form of engagement. In this embodiment, the filter **244** comprises a receiving section **246**, a filter element **248** disposed within the channel **232**, and the stepped section **250**. The portion of the channel **232** within the receiving section **246** may be tapered to receive the tapered segment **240** of the syringe **252**. Thus, to secure the filter **244** to the syringe **252**, the filter **244** is positioned within the open section **220** of the bore **216** such that the receiving section **246** of the filter **244** receives the tapered segment **240** of the syringe **252**. The filter **244** is then pressed against the syringe **252**, securing the filter **244** to the syringe **252** by friction and creating a fluid tight seal.

In this embodiment, the filter **244** comprises the filter element **248** disposed within the channel **232**. The filter element **248** may comprise any kind of filter, such as hydrophobic filters and PTFE filters. In this way, the filters **244** may allow passage of air and other gases, but prevent the passage of water and other fluids. The size, shape, and kind of filters **244** may also vary depending on a desired flow rate or other parameters. For example, in this embodiment, the filters **244** comprise nine 4mm 0.45µm PTFE filters and one 13 mm 0.45µm PTFE filter. The single

13mm diameter filter may be used for a vacuum line connected to the vacuum port **242**, which may benefit from a higher air flow rate. Filters may comprise, for example, Millex® syringe filters, commercially available from EMD Millipore Corporation. However, in certain embodiments, a filter **244** may lack a filter element **248**, and thus allow passage of either gas or liquid.

In this embodiment, the filters **244** are replaceable. In some embodiments, filters may be replaced by ejecting each of the filters **244** and replacing them with a new set. In certain embodiments, filters may be replaced by ejection and replacement with a new set, e.g., using mechanical means. Similarly, in certain embodiments, filters **244** may be simultaneously attached, e.g., by placing the connector **200** onto an array of filters **244** appropriately spaced to receive each of the tapered portions of the corresponding syringes. However, in still further embodiments, filters **244** may be permanently connected to a connector **200**. Various embodiments and configurations are considered to be within the scope of the disclosure.

The connector **200** is configured to engage with a corresponding interface **260**, which may be located on either side of the tubing **30**, such as on a manifold or controller. For example, a controller, such as the controller **40** of FIG. 1, may further comprise an interface **260** configured to receive the connector **200**. In the embodiment shown in FIGS. 13A-B and FIG. 14, the interface **260** comprises a plurality of female ports **280** which receive the male ports **230** of the connector **200**, placing the female ports **280** and male ports **230** in fluid communication. Each female port **280** comprises a seal **282** positioned above an opening **284** in communication with a channel **286** of the pneumatic controller **40**. Each channel **286** may be configured to supply a liquid, gas, or other substance to the female ports **280**. In the embodiment shown, each channel **286** is configured to supply variable pneumatic pressure from the controller **40**. Accordingly, when the male ports **230** of the connector **200** are in communication with the female ports **280** of the interface **260**, the channel **232** of the male port **230** is in communication with

the channel **286** of the controller **40**. Accordingly, the tubing **30** is in fluid communication with the channels **286** of the controller **40** via the connector **200**.

Seals **282** are used to fluidly separate each female port **280**, and accordingly each channel **286**, from one another. The seals **282** may be retained by a panel **262**. In the embodiment shown, the panel **262** comprises openings for each of the female ports **280** and apertures **264**. In certain embodiments, the seals **282** may be positioned within grooves defined within the openings **284** of the female port **280**, which may either complement or replace the panel **262**. Seals **282** may comprise, for example, O-rings, which may further comprise a “U”-shaped cross-section to allow for low insertion force.

In the embodiment shown in FIGS. 12A and 13A, the connector **200** may be initially separated and disengaged from the interface **260** on the controller **40**. As shown in the embodiments of FIGS. 12B and 13B, the connector **200** is engaged with the interface **260** when the engagement end **206** is brought into contact with the interface **260** such that the post **210** with the connector magnet **212** enters the corresponding aperture **264** with the receiving magnet **266**, thus using magnetic attraction to secure the connector **200** to the interface **260**. Engaging the connector **200** to the interface **260** further causes each male port **230** to enter a corresponding female port **280**, thus placing each gas line of the tubing **30** in fluid communication with the channels **286** of the controller. Further, each seal **282** is placed in contact with the stepped section **250** of the corresponding filter **244**, substantially preventing fluid communication between each channel **286**. Thus, the controller **40** can supply precise levels of variable pressure, including vacuum, to a corresponding manifold downstream to control a microfluidic process or experiment in a microfluidic plate.

Similar to the pneumatic connector **150**, the pneumatic connector **200** results in a variety of advantages, such as ease of cleaning, transportation of a manifold and tubing, reducing operator workflow, applicability to automation, and identification of incomplete or imperfect seals. Additionally, the use of a plurality of filters **244** in a single connector **200** has a significant advantage in that all of the

filters **244** may be simultaneously removed from the controller concurrent with disengaging the connector, as opposed to individually removing each filter. Thus, the connector **200** provides a fast, nearly automatic connection to the controller.

Moreover, the use of filters **244**, such as hydrophobic filters, in the removable connector **200** between the tubing **30** and controller **40** has additional advantages. For example, if a liquid backflows from the manifold **120** through the tubing **30**, filters **244** prevent the liquid from entering the channels **286**, potentially harming or contaminating the controller **40**. Filters **244** may also be used to prevent contamination of the tubing **30** and a downstream manifold and microfluidic plate, such as the microfluidic plate **100** and manifold **120** attached to the tubing **30** of FIGS. 4A-B. Moreover, filters **244** using a slip, threaded, or other form of removable connection may be single-use, helping to prevent contamination each time the connector **200** is secured to the interface **260** of the controller **40**.

A connector **200** incorporating a plurality of filters **244** may also be used for efficiently cleaning both the manifold **120** and tubing **30**. Conventional cleaning methods of the gas lines and tubing associated with pneumatic control of microfluidic devices typically involve aspirating a cleaning solution into a syringe, and then injecting the cleaning solution into individual lines. In contrast, the controller **40** may be configured to aspirate a cleaning solution, such as hydrogen peroxide, into the tubing **30**, thus cleaning all of the gas lines comprising the tubing **30** simultaneously.

Microfluidic Cleaning Plate and Method of Use

FIGS. 15-17 illustrate a cleaning plate **300** for cleaning a manifold and tubing according to an embodiment of the disclosure. The cleaning plate **300** may comprise a variety of materials, such as PDMS, molded plastic, and the like. The cleaning plate **300** has similar dimensions to a corresponding microfluidic plate, such as the microfluidic plate **100** of FIG. 2. Accordingly, in the embodiment shown in FIG. 17, a manifold, such as the manifold **120** of FIGS. 4A-B, may be positioned over the cleaning plate **300** such that it is in fluid communication with the cleaning

plate **300**, just as the manifold **120** would be positioned over and enter fluid communication with a microfluidic plate **100**. Further, a controller may deliver vacuum to the cleaning plate **300** via a vacuum channel to seal the manifold to the plate.

In the embodiment shown in FIGS. 15-16, the cleaning plate **300** further comprises sidewalls **302** that are raised from a surface **304** of the cleaning plate **300**. The sidewalls **302** come into contact with the manifold when the manifold is sealed to the plate. The cleaning plate **300** may comprise a plurality of wells, which in the embodiment shown comprise a central well **306**, gas line well **308**, and vacuum line well **310**. The central well **306** and gas line well **308** may be filled with a cleaning solution, such as a hydrogen peroxide solution, an alcohol solution, and the like. The cleaning plate **300** further comprises a plurality of cleaning solution channels **312**. In the embodiment shown in FIG. 17, which illustrates the manifold **120** of FIG. 5 aligned over the cleaning plate **300** of FIG. 16, the gas line well **308** and vacuum line well **310** are positioned beneath the outlets for the gas environment channel **128** and vacuum channel **130** of the manifold **120**, respectively. Similarly, the cleaning solution channels **312** are positioned beneath the channel outlets **126** of the manifold. Referring to FIGS. 15-16, the cleaning solution channels **312** further comprise openings **314**, which are in fluid communication with a plurality of transfer channels **316** in fluid communication with the central well **306**. In this embodiment, the transfer channels **316** comprise four cavities in the base of the central well **306** and an internal channel (not shown) rising up from the base and in communication with the openings **314** within the cleaning solution channels **312**.

In this embodiment, the sidewalls of the central well **306**, gas line well **308**, and cleaning solution channels **312** rise to the same height as the sidewalls **302** of the cleaning plate **300**, and thus are fluidly separated from one another when the manifold **120** is sealed to the plate. In contrast, the sidewalls of the vacuum line well **310** only rise to the surface **304** of the plate. Thus, to seal a manifold to the cleaning plate **300** (in the embodiment shown in FIG. 17), the manifold is aligned

over and placed on top of the plate and pressed down against the plate. A vacuum line in communication with the manifold **120** is then activated. Activating the vacuum line seals the manifold **120** to the plate by creating a vacuum in the volume between the surface **304**, sidewalls **302**, and the sidewalls of the central well **306**, gas line well **308**, and cleaning solution channels **312**.

Once the manifold **120** has been sealed to the cleaning plate **300**, a cleaning sequence may be performed which aspirates cleaning solution placed in the wells of the cleaning plate **120** into the manifold and the tubing between the manifold **120** and the controller, such as the controller **40** of FIG. 1. First, the central well **306** and gas line well **308** may be filled with a cleaning solution. The manifold **120** is then placed over the cleaning plate **300**, and a cleaning protocol may be activated on the controller **40**. The controller delivers negative pressure to each of the channels within the manifold **120**. The negative pressure aspirates cleaning solution from the central well **306** into the transfer channels **316**, through the cleaning solution channels **312**, and into the outlets **126** of the manifold. Similarly, cleaning solution from the gas line well **308** is aspirated into the outlet for the gas environment channel **128** of the manifold. As the cleaning solution traverses the channels of the manifold **120**, the cleaning solution continues into the tubing **30**, thus cleaning each of the gas lines comprising the tubing **30**. Finally, the cleaning solution is stopped by the filter **244** of the connector **200** (as shown in the embodiment of FIGS. 12A-B), thus maximizing cleaning of the length of the tubing **30**, manifold **120**, and any intermediate components. Further, because the filter **244** stops the flow of the cleaning solution, the connector **200** also minimizes any risk of damage to the controller **40** as a result of the cleaning protocol.

Once the cleaning process is complete, it may be reversed such that the cleaning solution is returned back into the cleaning plate **300**. The manifold **120** may then be disconnected from the cleaning plate **300**. The manifold is then ready to use for attachment to a microfluidic plate for an experiment. If the filters **244** of the connector **200** are single-use, they may be replaced.

Further, it should be noted that various features of the above embodiments and disclosure may be combined with one another to form various pneumatic connectors, pneumatic manifolds, microfluidic plates, cleaning plates, and microfluidic control and analysis systems. The present disclosure is not to be limited in scope by the specific embodiments described herein. Indeed, other various embodiments of and modifications to the present disclosure, in addition to those described herein, will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art from the foregoing description and accompanying drawings. Thus, such other embodiments and modifications are intended to fall within the scope of the present disclosure. Furthermore, although the present disclosure has been described herein in the context of a particular implementation in a particular environment for a particular purpose, those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that its usefulness is not limited thereto and that the present disclosure may be beneficially implemented in any number of environments for any number of purposes. Accordingly, the claims set forth below should be construed in view of the full breadth and spirit of the present disclosure as described herein.

What is claimed is:

1. A cleaning plate for use with a manifold, comprising:
 - A surface;
 - sidewalls that are raised from the surface and contact the manifold;
 - a central well;
 - cleaning solution channels disposed in the surface, in fluid communication with the central well; and
 - a vacuum line well, separate from the central well.
2. The cleaning plate of claim 1, wherein the cleaning solution channels are aligned with channel outputs in the manifold.
3. The cleaning plate of claim 1, wherein the cleaning solution channels are in fluid communication with the central well via transfer channels.
4. The cleaning plate of claim 3, further comprising openings in the cleaning solution channels in communication with an internal channel that is fluid communication with the transfer channels.
5. The cleaning plate of claim 4, wherein the transfer channels comprise cavities disposed at a base of the central well.
6. The cleaning plate of claim 1, wherein walls of the central well and the cleaning solution channels rise to the same height as the sidewalls so as to contact the manifold, and walls of the vacuum line well rise to a lesser extent, wherein a volume is created between the manifold, the surface of the cleaning plate, the sidewalls, the walls of the central well and the walls of the cleaning solution channels, wherein the volume is in communication with a vacuum line of the manifold.

7. A method of cleaning a manifold and its associated tubing, wherein each piece of tubing in is fluid communication with the manifold and with a respective channel of a pneumatic controller, the method comprising: disposing a cleaning solution in the cleaning plate of claim 1; placing the manifold on the cleaning plate; applying negative pressure to a vacuum channel using the pneumatic controller to seal the manifold to the cleaning plate; and performing a cleaning sequence.
8. The method of claim 7, wherein the cleaning sequence aspirates the cleaning solution into the manifold and the tubing.
9. The method of claim 7, wherein the cleaning solution is disposed in the central well.
10. The method of claim 8, wherein a negative pressure is applied to a channel using the pneumatic controller, wherein the negative pressure causes cleaning solution to enter the respective piece of tubing and flow toward the pneumatic controller.
11. The method of claim 10, where a filter is disposed between the piece of tubing and the pneumatic controller and wherein the filter prevents the flow of cleaning solution into the pneumatic controller.
12. The method of claim 11, further comprising applying a positive pressure to the channel to return the cleaning solution to the cleaning plate.