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# **Membrane Fouling during Microfiltration of Protein Solutions**

Thesis submitted

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at Massey University

New Zealand

by

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1998

*For Prasuna*

## Abstract

Membrane fouling during cross-flow microfiltration (CFMF) of proteins is complex depending upon feed properties, operating conditions and membrane properties. Four different protein solutions (reconstituted whey protein, BSA, lactoferrin and ferritin) with a range of physicochemical properties were investigated at a variety of permeate fluxes under different solution conditions to elucidate fouling mechanisms during constant flux CFMF.

MF fouling usually occurs in three stages: i) adsorption ii) pore fouling (pore plugging or deposition near the pore entrance) and iii) formation of a surface layer. The importance of step (ii) depends upon whether a protein is completely or partially permeable through the membrane.

BSA probably fouled internally first by pore plugging followed by formation of a surface layer once all the pores were plugged. Prefiltration and the presence of SDS reduced fouling but did not prevent it, suggesting that aggregates present in the initial feed as well as those formed during MF contribute to pore plugging and so lead to severe fouling.

Fouling resistance curves for lactoferrin indicate an initial phase of slow fouling by plugging or deposition of aggregates. Mathematical modelling suggested that fouling was particularly severe at the pore entrance. As flux was increased, lactoferrin formed a concentration-induced surface layer.

Ferritin formed a concentration-induced gel layer even at relatively low fluxes ( $\geq 91$  L/m<sup>2</sup>.h) when the wall concentration of protein reached the “gel concentration”. The gel layer was highly reversible to changes in hydrodynamic conditions such as cross-flow velocity and transmembrane pressure. Fouling was more severe with reconstituted whey than with fresh whey due to the presence of protein aggregates in the reconstituted whey.

The role of the physicochemical properties of proteins in aggregation and probable fouling mechanisms during CFMF are discussed. Protein-protein interactions under the influence of shear particularly at higher fluxes lead to aggregation and subsequent fouling.

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly I would like to thank my chief supervisor Peter Munro for his encouragement, guidance and help all through this project. My immense gratitude to Allen Marshall for his direction, letting me to share his MF expertise, help in providing me all the facilities during my experiments in the pilot plant particularly showing me how to run MF rig, his help during prefiltration runs. I am grateful to Harjinder Singh for his protein chemistry expertise and supervision during protein analysis. I have always enjoyed working with my PhD supervisory team.

I am highly grateful to New Zealand Vice-Chancellors Committee for awarding me commonwealth scholarship. I thank Royal Society of New Zealand for granting me a travel award to attend my first international conference in Sydney. The financial assistance by New Zealand Dairy Research Institute and Massey University to attend the conference is highly appreciated. The financial assistance by New Zealand Dairy Board towards the preparation of the thesis is acknowledged.

There are so many people who have helped, encouraged, motivated during the project. I have gained a new perspective which is quite different from what I learnt during my previous undergraduate and postgraduate studies. I thank New Zealand Dairy Research Institute, for giving me the opportunity to conduct the experiments using constant flux MF rig in their pilot plant. I also thank Massey University for providing me all the computing and laboratory facilities. I thank Tatua Co-operative Dairy Company Ltd and New Zealand Pharmaceuticals for giving protein powders for the study.

I am thankful to staff of Protein Technology pilot plant, Mike, Bruce, Ian, Basil, Gordon, Alan, Shane for their help and consideration during my experiments. I extend my thanks to Protein Technology staff particularly Mark, Vijay, Neill, Deidre and Anne for treating me nicely. At Massey University, numerous people have helped me, Owen McCarthy, Osvaldo, Rod Bennett, Byron Mckillop, June, Mark Dorsey, Steve Glasgove and my fellow students Tasa Heavea, Ram, thank you all.

I wish to acknowledge staff at Industrial Research Ltd, Max, John, Monwar, Andrew Robertson, Zaid and many others for encouraging me to complete my thesis. To all those who have helped in the project, Tim Winters (Tatua), Louis Buchanan (NZP) for their source of information on protein literature, Andrew Fletcher (NZDRI) for his help during gain modification to permeate controller and Skelte Anema (NZDRI) during some particle sizing experiments, thank you.

I thank my friends and their families both in Palmerston North and Wellington, Vijay, Bolan, Satya Pasumathy, PK Samal, Ranjan, Pramod, Khannan Joghee, Rajiv Raman, Vishnu, Venkat Series; Karla, Ananthula, Cherukuri, Ramesh and many others. My appreciation to student friends and various international club presidents at Massey University Students Association, scholarship officer, Mrs Margaret Gilbert for all their help and friendship. I am grateful to my parents who nourished me and made me what I am today and also relatives and friends in India for encouraging me to go overseas to do a degree. I highly appreciate moral support and encouragement of staff at the college of Agricultural Engineering, ANGR Agricultural University, India.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Prasuna, daughter Keerthy and son Arun for their patience, love, caring and support during my stay in New Zealand.

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