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To cite this article: Jun-Zi Wu, Gareth R. Williams, He-Yu Li, Dong-Xiu Wang, Shu-De Li & Li-Min Zhu (2017) Insulin-loaded PLGA microspheres for glucose-responsive release, *Drug Delivery*, 24:1, 1513-1525, DOI: [10.1080/10717544.2017.1381200](https://doi.org/10.1080/10717544.2017.1381200)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10717544.2017.1381200>



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## Insulin-loaded PLGA microspheres for glucose-responsive release

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### ABSTRACT

Porous poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA) microspheres were prepared, loaded with insulin, and then coated in poly(vinyl alcohol) (PVA) and a novel boronic acid-containing copolymer [poly(acrylamide phenyl boronic acid-co-N-vinylcaprolactam); p(AAPBA-co-NVCL)]. Multilayer microspheres were generated using a layer-by-layer approach depositing alternating coats of PVA and p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) on the PLGA surface, with the optimal system found to be that with eight alternating layers of each coating. The resultant material comprised spherical particles with a porous PLGA core and the pores covered in the coating layers. Insulin could successfully be loaded into the particles, with loading capacity and encapsulation efficiencies reaching  $2.83 \pm 0.15$  and  $82.6 \pm 5.1\%$  respectively, and was found to be present in the amorphous form. The insulin-loaded microspheres could regulate drug release in response to a changing concentration of glucose. *In vitro* and *in vivo* toxicology tests demonstrated that they are safe and have high biocompatibility. Using the multilayer microspheres to treat diabetic mice, we found they can effectively control blood sugar levels over at least 18 days, retaining their glucose-sensitive properties during this time. Therefore, the novel multilayer microspheres developed in this work have significant potential as smart drug-delivery systems for the treatment of diabetes.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 August 2017  
Revised 11 September 2017  
Accepted 14 September 2017

### KEYWORDS

Porous microspheres; layer-by-layer; glucose sensitive; sustained release; smart drug delivery system





### Introduction


Diabetes is one of the most serious diseases affecting human health (American Diabetes Association, 2014; Hanson & Gluckman, 2014; Zimmet et al., 2014). The most effective strategy to treat this condition is using daily subcutaneous insulin injections to reduce blood glucose, but in the clinic such injections can lead to two significant problems (Henry et al., 1993; Pickup & Keen, 2002). The first is that different patients have different blood glucose levels and/or body weights, so to effectively regulate their blood sugar different doses of insulin are required. To solve this problem, systems which are glucose-sensitive in physiological conditions (based for instance on concanavalin, glucose oxidase, or phenylboronic acid) have been widely investigated (Soni et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2015; Dong et al., 2016). The second problem is that patients may be uncomfortable with injecting themselves daily, and to overcome this challenge scientists have developed a range of long term sustained-release platforms based on polymers such as poly(L-lactide) and poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA). These materials have achieved promising results, offering long-lasting sustained release (some function for up to 30–60 days) (Kozuka et al., 2017; Ying et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2017).

Concanavalin and glucose oxidase are proteins, so although they are glucose sensitive they are also expensive

and can be immunogenic (Matsumoto et al., 2013). Phenylboronic acid (PBA)-containing polymers are lower cost, non-immunogenic, and have wider versatility and better *in vivo* stability (Aoki et al., 1996). A range of glucose-responsive materials based on PBA and its derivatives have been reported, including bulk gels, nanogels and micelles (Ma & Shi, 2014; Wu et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2017). However, even though PBA-containing polymers have good sensitivity for glucose, the maximum time period over which they can release a drug loading is 2–5 days (Aminabhavi et al., 2015; Dong et al., 2016). After this, a further application is required. Also, once in the body the degradation time for PBA-containing polymers is rather long (*ca.* 20–40 days), which could cause toxicity if the amount of PBA present builds up following repeated applications (Winblade et al., 2002; Soriano-Ursúa et al., 2014).

In recent decades, a range of long term sustained-release materials have been reported (Hou et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2016; Maulvi et al., 2016). These are commonly based on PLGA, which is a generally recognized as safe (GRAS) excipient certified by the FDA. PLGA has attracted particular attention for the sustained delivery of protein and peptide drugs (Wang et al., 2015) and can be processed into a number of different formulation types. Among the most commonly explored are drug-loaded PLGA microspheres, whose loading capacity, encapsulation efficiency, release rates and other

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here.

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properties have been investigated in detail (Zhang et al., 2011; Saini et al., 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2016b; Yang et al., 2017). The literature clearly demonstrates that PLGA microspheres are highly suitable for use as sustained-release carriers. However, there are relatively few drug-loaded PLGA microspheres used in the clinic, and currently available medicines using this technology are limited to Vivitrol (for the treatment of opioid dependence), Plenaxis (prostate cancer), Risperdal Consta (bipolar disorder), Nutropin (growth hormone deficiency), Sandostatin (severe diarrhea), Profact (advanced carcinoma, endometriosis) and Decapeptyl (prostate cancer). There are two main reasons for this. First, the microspheres may exhibit a burst of release during the first day or so after administration into the body, which could cause side effects (Zhang et al., 2016a). Second, although release can be prolonged, it is hard to control the exact amount of drug released per day (Shi et al., 2016), which in the context of diabetes could lead to blood sugar levels not being controlled at a stable and desirable level. It would thus be preferable to combine properties of glucose sensitivity and long-lasting release in a single microsphere system.

The layer-by-layer (LbL) assembly approach has attracted attention for the fabrication of multifunctional systems as a result of giving precise control over the size, shape, composition, wall thickness and functions of the materials produced (Xiao et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2016a; Richardson et al., 2015). LbL assembly can be used to prepare multilayer films, microspheres or nanoparticles (Ariga et al., 2013; Yan et al., 2013; Borges & Mano 2014). Any substrate surface can be used and the structure is controlled without the requirement for any specialist equipment. The usage of LbL technology to coat PLGA microspheres or nanoparticles has been reported a number of times (Wang et al., 2010; Go et al., 2015; Chai et al., 2017). For instance, Go et al. (2015) developed multilayered polyelectrolyte films incorporating alpha-melanocyte stimulating hormone and basic fibroblast growth factor. The layers were successfully deposited on macroporous PLGA microspheres and the resultant materials were found to have potential applications in tissue engineering. In addition, Chai et al. (2017) deposited multilayers of chitosan and alginate on doxorubicin-loaded PLGA nanoparticles and were able to use these to control drug release. However, there is much less work reported into stimuli-responsive coated microspheres (for instance, those which can respond to glucose, temperature or pH).

A number of authors have explored LbL systems based on polyhydroxy polymers and those containing boronic acid units, forming borate/diol complexes through the LbL approach (Asoh et al., 2015; Nurpeissova et al., 2015; Aly & El-Mohdy, 2016). Unfortunately, those systems release a drug load over a relatively short period of time (12 h to 6 days) and also commonly exhibit an initial burst release. Here, we seek to overcome these shortcomings by combining, for the first time, a glucose-sensitive LbL system with a sustained release PLGA core. To do this, we exploit a novel polymer [poly(acrylamide phenyl boronic acid-co-N-vinylcaprolactam); (p(AAPBA-co-NVCL))] prepared recently in our lab (Wu et al., 2016b) which has been shown to have excellent glucose

sensitivity at physiological pH. In addition, the production method is simple and the new polymer has excellent biocompatibility both *in vitro* and *in vivo*.

In this work, insulin-loaded PLGA microspheres with controllable porous structures were first fabricated by a modified double emulsion method. The LbL approach was then used to apply poly(vinyl alcohol) and a boronic acid copolymer sequentially to the surface of the microspheres. The physicochemical properties, drug loading and drug release of the multilayer microspheres were studied in detail. Their glucose sensitivity and toxicity were also evaluated, both *in vitro* and *in vivo*. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first example of glucose-sensitive polymer complexes being combined with PLGA microspheres. We believe our findings should hasten the development of more effective diabetic treatment regimens.

## Experimental section

### Materials

Poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA; D,L-lactide/glycolide 50/50; Mw 12 kDa) was purchased from the Jinan Daigang Biomaterial Co., Ltd (Jinan, China). Poly(vinyl alcohol) (PVA-1788, medical grade) was obtained from Xi'an Tianzheng Medicinal Materials Co., Ltd (Xian, China). 3-Acrylamido phenylboronic acid (AAPBA) was sourced from the Beijing Pure Chemical Co., Ltd. (Beijing, China), N-vinylcaprolactam (NVCL) was purchased from Hubei Jusheng Co., Ltd. (Wuhan, China) and dimethyl formamide (DMF) and 2,2-azobisisobutyronitrile (AIBN) from the Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co. (Shanghai, China). Insulin was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (San Francisco, CA). Dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO), sodium hydroxide (NaOH) and phosphate buffered saline (PBS) were purchased from the China National Medicines Corporation Ltd. (Beijing, China). All solvents used in this work were of analytical grade.

### Microparticle preparation

#### *Poly(acrylamide phenylboronic acid-co-N-vinylcaprolactam) (p(AAPBA-co-NVCL)) synthesis*

p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) was synthesized following a previously reported method (Wu et al., 2016b).

#### *Preparation of PLGA microspheres*

Porous PLGA microsphere preparation has been reported previously, using the water/oil/water (W1/O/W2) double emulsion solvent evaporation method (Wu et al., 2016c). A series of formulations were prepared for optimization, which are detailed in the Results section. For the optimum formulation, the preparation method is as follows. Firstly, 5 mg of insulin was dissolved in 0.1 mL of tris-HCl solution (0.5 M tris, with HCl used to adjust the pH to 7.0) and the resultant solution was immediately added to 10 mL of a solution of PLGA (1% w/v) and ammonium bicarbonate (1% w/v) in dichloromethane. The combined solution was subjected to an ultrasound treatment for 5 min at 120 W (SL-900D instrument,

Nanjing Shunliu Instrument Co., Ltd., Nanjing, China) to yield a W1/O emulsion. Next, the W1/O emulsion was poured into 200 mL of a 2% w/v PVA aqueous solution (W2). The resultant solution was left under stirring for 5 hours at room temperature, to remove dichloromethane. The PLGA microspheres were collected by centrifugation (5810R instrument, Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany) for 10 min at 8000 rpm. After recovery, the microspheres were washed using distilled water (2 × 10 mL) three times. Finally, they were dispersed in a 5% w/v mannitol solution prior to freeze-drying (10 Pa, −50 °C; SJIA-10N instrument, Ningbo Dual Ka Instrument Co., Ltd., Ningbo, China) for 72 h. Analogous materials were prepared without insulin.

#### Layer-by-layer assembly on PLGA microspheres

1 mL of a suspension of the insulin-loaded PLGA microspheres (20 mg/mL) was added to a 0.2% w/v aqueous PVA solution (10 mL). After 5 minutes, the microspheres were separated through centrifugation and washed three times with NaOH solution (10 mL, pH = 10.0). The microspheres were then re-dispersed in water (1 mL) and combined with a 0.2% w/v aqueous p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) solution. After 5 minutes the microspheres were recovered and washed three times with NaOH solution (10 mL, pH = 10.0). These two steps were repeated to give four, eight, or twelve alternating layers. After the layer deposition process was complete, the microspheres were exposed to an aqueous NaOH solution (50 mL, pH = 8.5) for 150 hours to remove any loosely bound molecular chains. The product was washed with distilled water three times, then it was transferred to a dialysis tube (MWCO 1000) and dialyzed against water for 24 h. The water was replaced every 4 h during this process. Finally, the microspheres were dispersed in a 5% w/v mannitol solution prior to freeze-drying (10 Pa, −50 °C; SJIA-10N instrument, Ningbo Dual Ka Instrument Co., Ltd., Ningbo, China). The final microsphere yield was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Yield (\%)} = \frac{\text{Mass of lyophilized LBL microspheres (mg)}}{[\text{mass of insulin added (mg)} + \text{total mass of polymer added (mg)}]} \times 100\%$$

Analogous materials were prepared without insulin.

### Characterization

#### Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy

Infrared (IR) spectra were recorded with a FTIR-1500 spectrometer (Shanghai Precision Instrument Co., Shanghai, China). 2 mg of each sample was mixed with 200 mg potassium bromide in an agate mortar and then compressed into a pellet. The measurement range was 4000–400 cm<sup>−1</sup>; 32 scans for each sample were collected at a resolution of 2 cm<sup>−1</sup>.

#### Zeta potential

The zeta potential was determined for 0.3 mg/mL suspensions of the microspheres in deionized water, using a

submicron particle size analyzer (Zeta PALS/90 plus, Brookhaven Instruments Corporation, Holtsville, NY, USA).

#### Physical form

The physical form of the drug in the microspheres was first analyzed using differential scanning calorimetry (DSC; DSC822 instrument, Mettler Toledo, Columbus, OH, USA). Accurately weighed samples (ca. 3–5 mg) were placed in aluminum pans and sealed. The samples were then heated at a constant rate of 2 °C/min from 0 to 100 °C under a dry atmosphere of nitrogen.

X-ray powder diffraction (XRD) patterns of the samples were recorded on a D/MAX-2500PC instrument (Rigaku, Tokyo, Japan) supplied with Cu K $\alpha$  radiation. Diffraction patterns were collected over the 2 $\theta$  range 10–75° with a step size of 0.01° (2 $\theta$ ) and count time of 1 s per step.

#### Morphology

The PLGA microspheres were re-dispersed in distilled water and then a drop of the suspension was dropped onto an aluminum stub covered with double-sided adhesive tape. The stub was dried for 1 day in a vacuum desiccator and then sputter coated with a thin layer of gold under an argon atmosphere. The coated specimen was examined using scanning electron microscopy (SEM) on a JSM-5600 instrument (JEOL, Tokyo, Japan).

#### Circular dichroism

Insulin was extracted from the drug-loaded PLGA microspheres by dissolving ca. 5 mg of insulin-loaded microspheres in a 10 mM citrate buffer containing 150 mM NaCl (1 mL, pH 3.0). The resultant supernatant was collected through centrifugation. A fresh insulin solution was prepared using the same method, and used as a control. The solutions were then diluted to 0.1 mg/mL using pH 7.4 PBS for measurement. Circular dichroism (CD) spectra were obtained on a Jasco J-810 spectrometer (Jasco, Tokyo, Japan). Samples were scanned from 190–260 nm, with 10 spectra recorded for each material at a resolution of 1.0 nm and scanning speed of 100 nm/min. All CD data are expressed as mean residue ellipticity.

#### In vitro drug release and degradation studies

10 mg of insulin loaded PLGA microspheres were incubated in a 1.5 mL centrifuge tube containing 1 mL of 10 mM PBS (pH 7.4). This was placed under agitation (100 rpm) using a magnetic flea and held at 37 °C. A number of tubes were set up in parallel and after predetermined time points the release medium was removed and replaced with an equal volume of fresh buffer. The insulin content of the collected aliquots was determined using an insulin ELISA kit (China Institute of Atomic Energy, Beijing, China). Experiments were run in triplicate for each batch of microspheres. SEM was performed to inspect the microspheres at various time points in the release experiment, in order to assess their degradation.

## Toxicology studies

All animal experiments were conducted in accordance with the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals published by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH Publication No. 8523, revised 1985). The animals were housed in controlled environments at 22 °C, with 12: 12 h light:dark cycles and relative humidity of 50 ± 15%. Water and food were provided *ad libitum*. All experiments were approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of Kunming Medical University (reference 2014002). Forty Kunming mice (20 male and 20 female) weighing approximately 20 g were randomly divided into three treatment and a control group (10 mice/group). The treatment groups were daily given intraperitoneal injections of 10, 20 or 40 mg/kg/d doses of drug-free PLGA microspheres in 1 mL/kg of saline solution, respectively. The control group was given daily intraperitoneal injections (1 mL/kg) of saline solution. After 60 days, the mice were sacrificed.

## Sacrifice and tissue collection

The mice were anesthetized using an intraperitoneal injection of an aqueous chloral hydrate solution (3% w/v), at a dose of 1 mL/kg. They were then sacrificed, samples of blood were taken and their abdominal cavities were exposed. Liver, lung, spleen, heart and kidney samples were collected and stored temporarily in 10% neutral buffered formalin (NBF) prior to hematoxylin-eosin staining. NBF (pH 7.2–7.4) was prepared from 100 mL of a 40% v/v solution of formaldehyde in water, anhydrous disodium hydrogen phosphate (6.5 g), sodium dihydrogen phosphate (4.0 g) and distilled water (900 mL).

## Hematoxylin-eosin (H&E) staining

Liver, spleen, lung, heart and kidney tissues were recovered from the 10% NBF solution. Tissue slices were dehydrated, embedded in paraffin, cut and stained using hematoxylin and eosin.

## Type 2 diabetes model

A Type 2 diabetes mice model was established as reported previously (Okoduwa et al., 2017). Kunming mice were given a high-fat diet for 8 weeks and then injected once with streptozocin (45 mg/kg). The mice were classified as diabetic if their fasting blood glucose level was greater than 15.6 mmol/L for seven consecutive days. Fifty diabetic mice were randomly divided into a negative control group, a high fat group and three groups treated with insulin (an insulin injection group, one treated with insulin loaded PLGA microspheres and one with insulin-loaded LbL microspheres). Each group contained 10 animals. Animals in the PLGA and LbL microspheres groups were given a subcutaneous injection of microspheres (containing 1.5 mg of insulin per kg of body weight) once on day zero of the experiment. The insulin treatment group was injected daily with a solution containing 60 µg/kg of insulin in 0.5 mL of a 1% w/v aqueous sodium acetate solution (giving a

total dose over 25 days of 1.5 mg/kg). The high fat and control groups were injected with 50 mg/kg of blank PLGA microspheres once on day zero of the experiment (providing a mass of microspheres essentially equal to that injected to the two microsphere treatment groups).

Glucose and serum insulin were recorded every day in the period of treatment. Before each measurement, mice were fasted for 12 hours and a blood sample taken from the tail vein (no gavage was applied). In addition, on days 1, 6, 11, 16 and 21, additional experiments were performed to quantify the fasting blood glucose concentration and insulin levels. 1 mL of 10% (w/v) brown sugar water was used for gavage, and subsequently blood glucose and insulin were measured from samples taken from the tail vein at hourly intervals over a 6 h period.

## Statistical processing

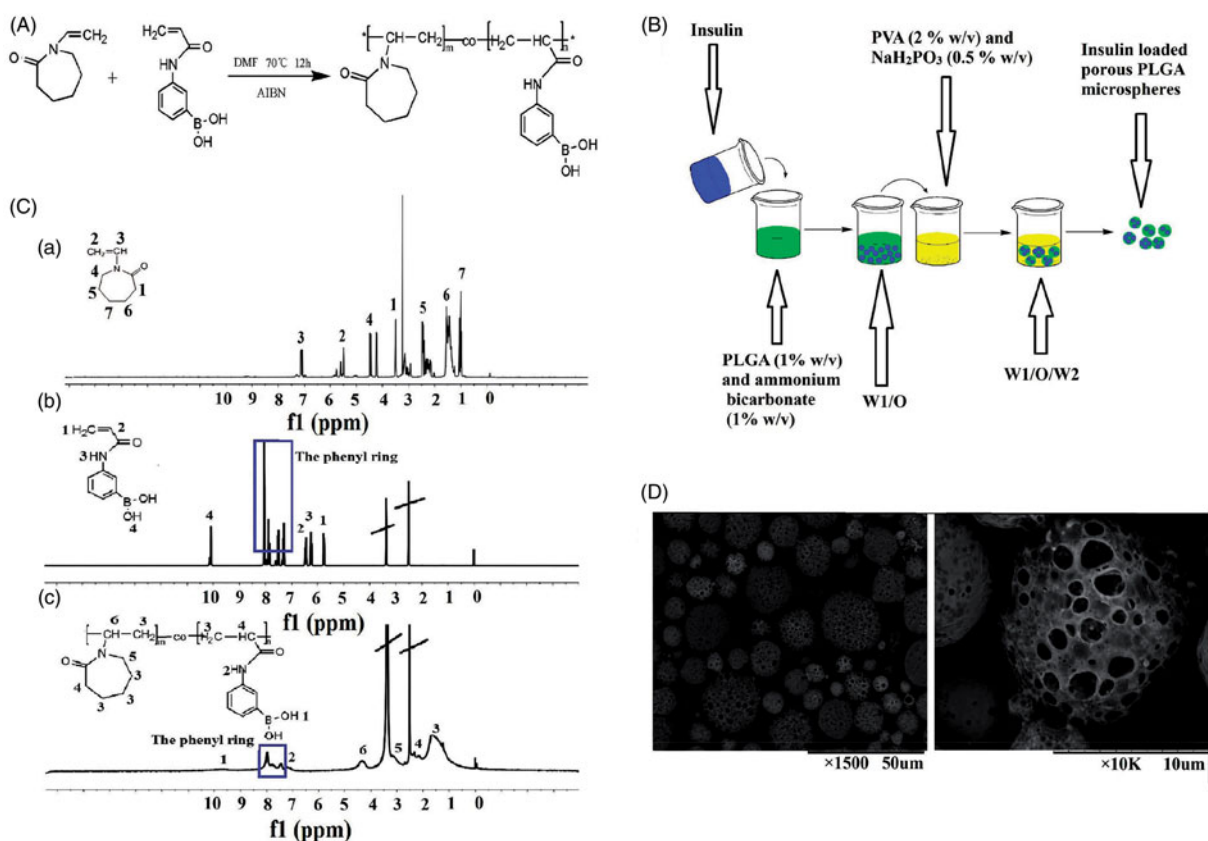
All experiments were repeated three times. Data are reported as mean ± the standard error of the mean (SEM). Differences in parameter mean values were analyzed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests, followed by SNK-q multiple comparisons using the SPSS19.0 software (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). Differences were considered statistically significant when  $p < .05$ .

## Results and discussion

### Preparation of p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) and porous PLGA microspheres

The first steps in this study were the synthesis of p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) and the porous PLGA microspheres. Schematics showing each of these are given in Figure 1(A,B), respectively. Figure 1(C) shows the <sup>1</sup>H-NMR spectra of N-vinylcaprolactam (NVCL), acrylamide phenylboronic acid (AAPBA) and p(AAPBA-co-NVCL). Resonances in the spectrum of NVCL (DMSO-d<sub>6</sub>) can be seen at δ values of: 7.23 (1H, 3-H), 5.81 (2H, 2-H), 4.46 (2H, 4-H), 3.35 (2H, 1-H), 1.62 (2H, 6-H), 2.40 (2H, 5-H) and 1.14 (2H, 7-H). AAPBA has peaks at δ (DMSO-d<sub>6</sub>) of: 10.09 (1H, 4-H), 8.10–7.25 (phenyl protons), 6.47 (1H, 2-H), 6.20 (1H, 3-H) and 5.75 (2H, 1-H). The spectrum of p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) has resonances at δ of: 9.55 (1H, 1-H), 8.17–7.32 (Hs on phenyl ring), 7.22 (1H, 2-H), 4.33 (1H, 6-H), 3.19 (2H, 5-H), 2.36 (1H, 4-H) and 1.65 (6H, 3-H). Comparing with the spectra of the monomers AAPBA and NVCL, it is obvious that the peaks of the ethylene groups have disappeared in the spectrum of p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) and are replaced with resonances at 1–4 ppm. The latter are consistent with the formation of a saturated structure, indicating that p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) was successfully synthesized. The <sup>1</sup>H NMR data are consistent with the literature (Wu et al., 2016b).

PLGA microspheres can be produced as monolithic or porous materials. The drug loading into monolithic systems is generally lower than the porous analogue, but the former also give less burst release (Zhang et al., 2011). Here, we opted to use porous systems to give enhanced drug loading and coated the microspheres to ameliorate the burst release



**Figure 1.** Preparation of p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) and porous PLGA microspheres. (A) The synthesis process for p(AAPBA-co-NVCL); (B) A schematic representation of the preparation of porous PLGA microspheres; (C) <sup>1</sup>H-NMR spectra of (a) NVCL, (b) AAPBA and (c) p(AAPBA-co-NVCL); (D) SEM images of exemplar insulin-loaded PLGA particles ((a)  $\times 1500$ ; (b)  $\times 10,000$ )

problem. An SEM image of exemplar microspheres is given in Figure 1(D). The microspheres are clearly spherical in shape, with pores visible on their surfaces. The concentration of ammonium bicarbonate is key in determining the porosity of the spheres and to optimize this we undertook experiments with concentrations between 0.5 and 2.5% w/v (see Supplementary Information, Figure S1). With 0.5% ammonium bicarbonate, the spheres are largely monolithic, with little evidence of porosity. At 1.0%, clear porosity is seen, but increasing the concentration further led to the spheres increasingly becoming broken and fragmented. Hence, 1% ammonium bicarbonate was adopted for onward studies.

### LbL assembly of multilayer microspheres

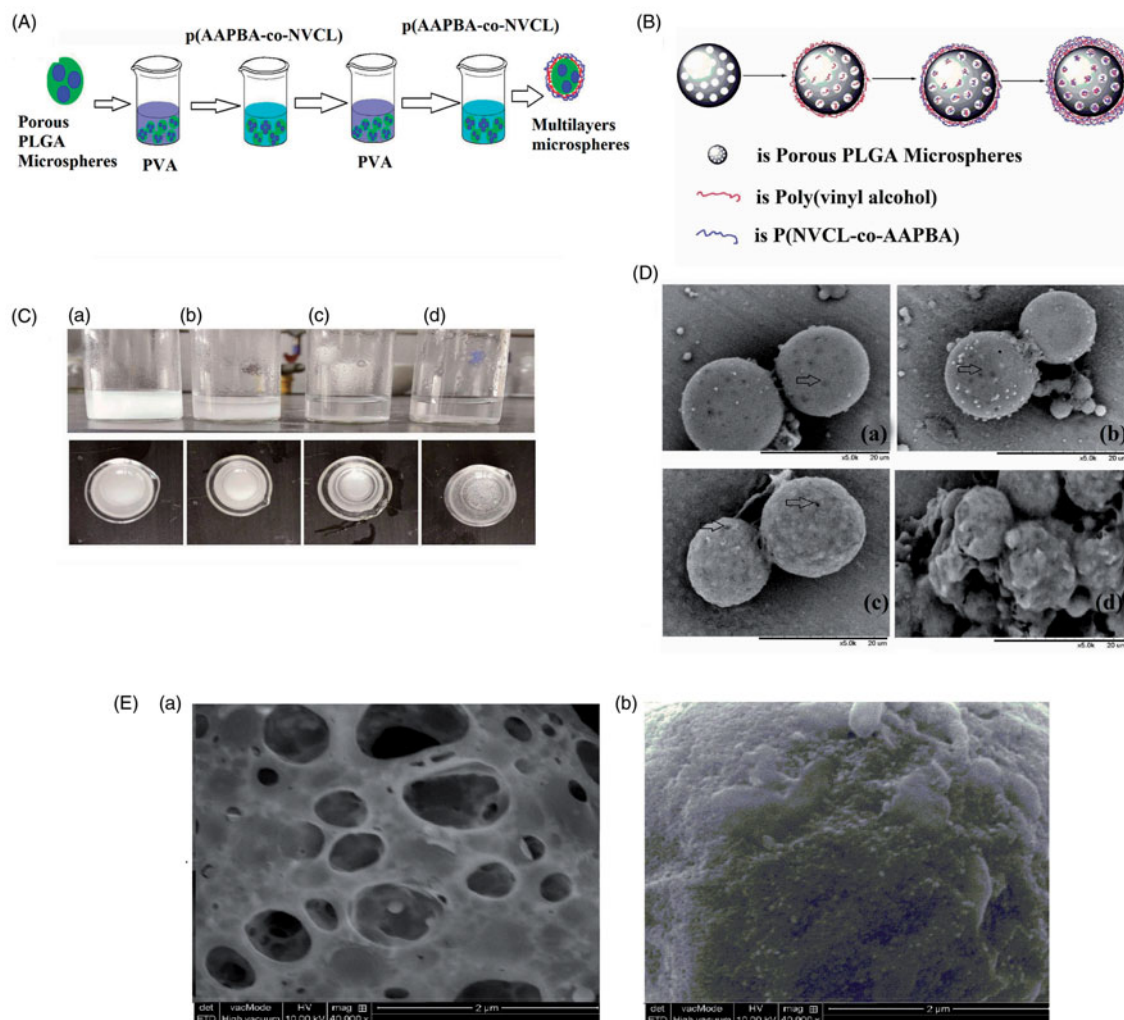
As has been reported previously (Wu et al., 2016b), p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) nanoparticles have glucose sensitivity (see Figure S2). When injected into mice, insulin loaded p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) particles were found to be effective over 48 hours and then begin to lose potency (Wu et al., 2016b). However, the degradation of p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) *in vitro* took longer (about 20 to 40 days at 37.5°C), indicating that if these particles were used clinically then there would be a significant (and potentially toxic) build-up of p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) in the body. In contrast, PLGA microspheres can lead to long-term sustained release but have no glucose sensitivity, and commonly also exhibit an initial burst of release. They thus cannot respond to changes in physiological conditions in an

appropriate manner (Anselmo & Mitragotri, 2014; Fang et al., 2014). We attempted to prepare p(AAPBA-co-NVCL)-PLGA composites using a range of methods, including simple mixing, physical absorption and electrostatic spinning, but in all cases the resultant systems had poor glucose sensitivity.

The LbL approach has already been used by some authors to develop glucose-sensitive insulin release systems. Qi et al. (2015) took poly(acrylic acid) and PBA, and successfully used the LbL approach to make a multilayer system based on porous calcium carbonate microparticles. In addition, Talusan et al. (2017) used poly(dimethyl diallyl ammonium chloride), glucose oxidase and poly(acrylic acid) to deposit multilayer shells onto insulin-loaded particles by LbL. However, the insulin release observed was too rapid for clinical use.

In this study, PVA and p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) were deposited onto porous PLGA microspheres. PVA was incorporated into the formulation because it can react with the boronic acid units in p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) to form borate/diol complexes (see Figure S3). To ensure that the PVA is firmly attached to the PLGA particles, after the initial deposition of PVA the microspheres were washed with water at pH 10.0 to fix the PVA in place (PVA will react with NaOH to become water-insoluble (Qi et al., 2014)). Figure 2(A,B) depict the synthetic procedure undertaken to develop the multilayer spheres.

Figure 2(C) presents optical images taken after the deposition of different numbers of alternating layers of PVA/p(AAPBA-co-NVCL). After two alternating layers were deposited, the suspension of PLGA microspheres showed



**Figure 2.** Preparation and images of the multilayer microspheres; (A, B) Schematics illustrating the synthetic procedure; (C) Digital photographs after (a) two, (b) four, (c) eight and (d) 12 alternating layers being deposited; (D) SEM images of particles coated with (a) two, (b) four, (c) eight and (d) 12 alternating layers; (E) TEM images of the PLGA microspheres (a) after synthesis and (b) after coating with eight alternating layers of PVA and p(AAPBA-co-NVCL).

turbidity. With four layers, the turbidity decreased, with sedimentation appearing to begin. At eight alternating layers, the microspheres precipitated and after 12 the microspheres were both precipitated and aggregated. SEM images are shown in Figure 2(D). The spherical nature and porosity of the spheres can clearly be seen after deposition of two and four alternating layers, while after eight the particles are still spherical but almost all the pores appear to be covered. When 12 layers were deposited, the spheres are heavily aggregated, in agreement with the photographs in Figure 2(C). This suggests that the optimum spheres are obtained after eight alternating layers have been deposited. A TEM image of these particles is given in Figure 2(E). The pores of the PLGA particles are clearly covered, although the surface of the particle is rather rough in nature.

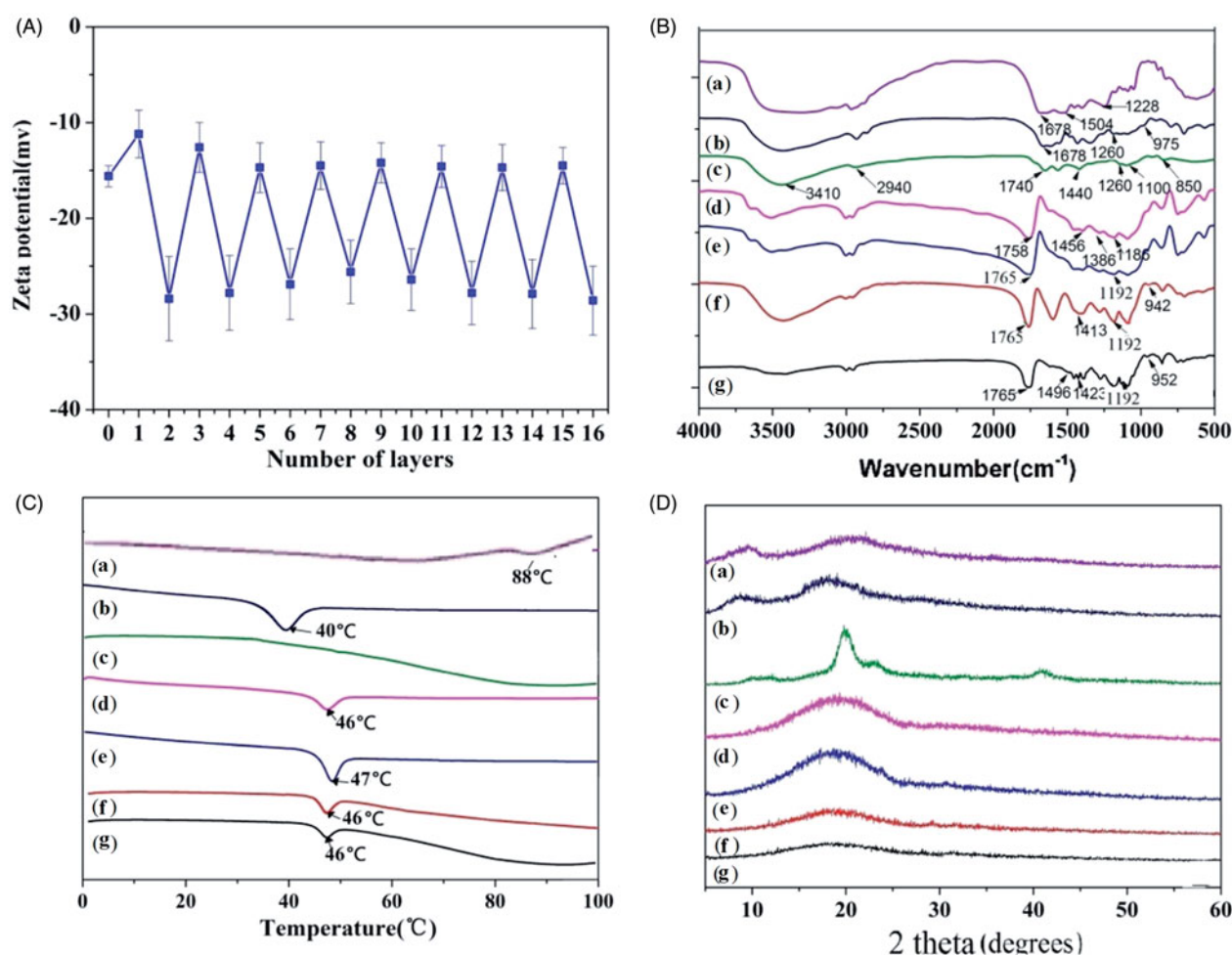
#### Characterization of the multilayer microspheres

The zeta potential offers a simple route to verify whether the LbL approach was successful or not (Deng et al., 2013; Hu & Mi 2014; Wu et al., 2016a; Zhang et al., 2017). Zeta potential data for LbL assembly of PVA and p(AAPBA-co-

NVCL) onto insulin loaded porous PLGA particles are given in Figure 3(A). The zeta potential is always negative, but after an odd number of layers is deposited (when PVA is the exterior) it is rather less negative than with even numbers of layers and a p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) exterior.

The presence and physical form of insulin in the particles was assessed using IR spectroscopy, XRD and DSC. IR spectra are given in Figure 3(B). Insulin shows three amide bands at 1678 (amide I), 1504 (II) and 1228  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (III), respectively. For PVA, there are characteristic absorption bands at 3410 (O–H stretching), 2940 (C–H stretching), 1740 (C=O stretching), 1440 (–CH<sub>2</sub>– bending), 1260 (C–H bending), 1100 (C–O bending), and 850  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (C–C bending), respectively. p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) displays C=O bending at 1678  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , C–H bending at 1260  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  and O–B–O bending at 975  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , respectively. PLGA has C=O bends at 1758  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , C–O–C bends (1186  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ) and –CH bends (1456 and 1386  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ), respectively.

The spectra of the microparticles are complex, as expected given the large number of components in them. However, in all the systems the characteristic PLGA peaks (C=O, C–O–C and –CH) occur at the same positions as the raw material.



**Figure 3.** Characterization of the multilayer microspheres. (A) The change in zeta potential during the LbL process; (B) FTIR spectra; (C) DSC traces (exo up); (D) XRD patterns. Legend: (a) Insulin; (b) p(AAPBA-co-NVCL); (c) PVA; (d) PLGA; (e) porous PLGA microspheres; (f) multilayer microspheres; and, (g) insulin loaded multilayer microspheres.

The coated particles display additional absorption bands consistent with the deposited layers: O–B–O bends at 942 and 952 cm<sup>-1</sup> indicate the presence of p(AAPBA-co-NVCL). In addition, an amide II band can be seen at 1496 cm<sup>-1</sup> for the insulin loaded microspheres, confirming the successful loading of insulin.

DSC data are presented in Figure 3(C). An amorphous relaxation endotherm for PLGA can be seen at 46 °C, and a similar endotherm was seen for p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) at 40 °C. Insulin displays a degradation peak at 88 °C. All these temperatures are in agreement with the literature (Xiong et al., 2009; Guo et al., 2015). PVA has a very high melting point of >180 °C, which is not visible in the DSC data. The relaxation endotherm of PLGA in the porous microspheres is 47 °C, very close to that of the raw polymer. When the LbL process is completed, the resultant multilayer microspheres can be seen to have relaxation endotherms at 46 °C (Figure 3(C)). The signals from insulin and p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) cannot be seen in the microsphere DSC data, likely because of their low loadings. This is consistent with the literature (Guo et al., 2015).

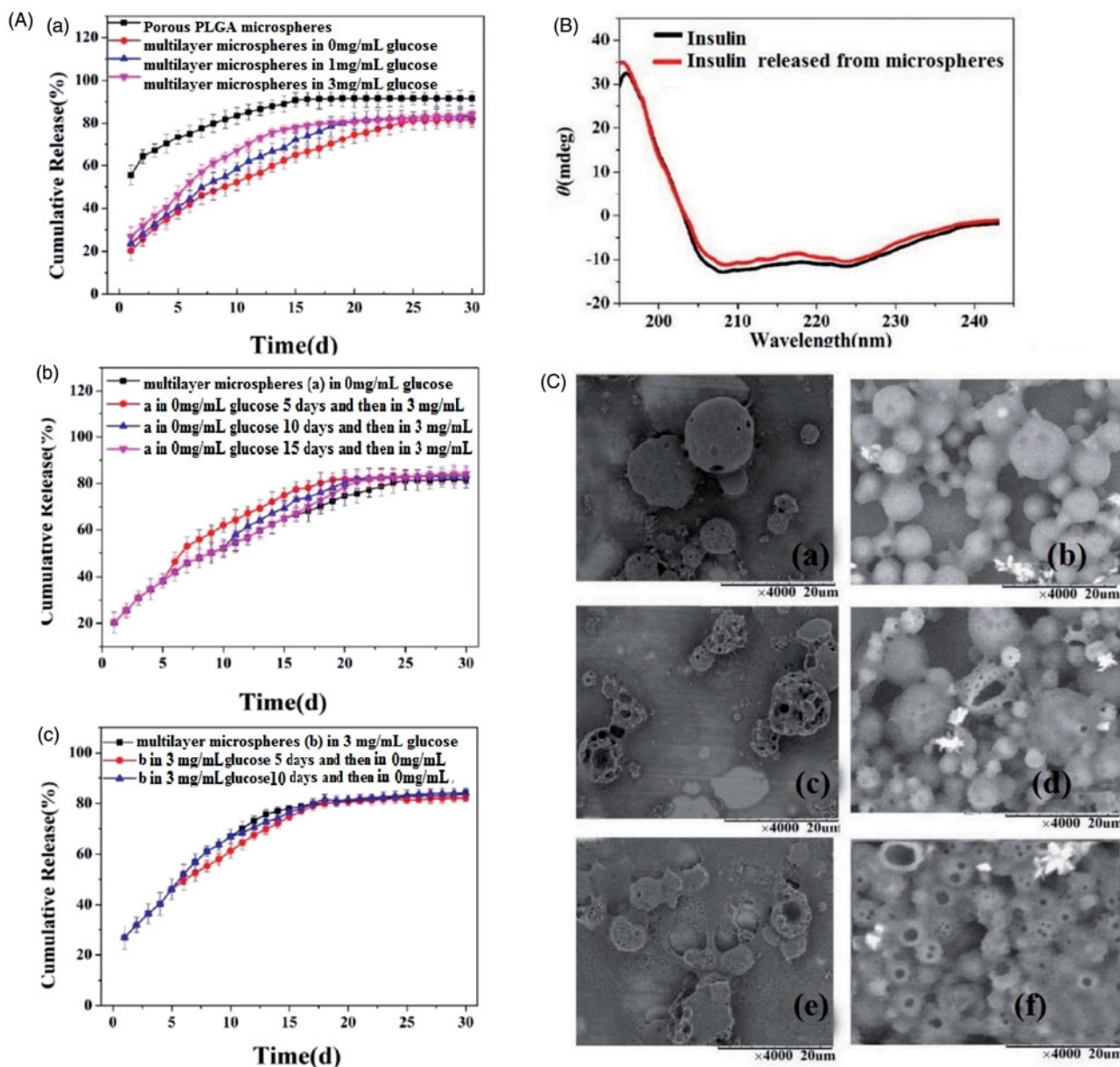
XRD data on the formulations are given in Figure 3(D). The pure insulin powder appears to be amorphous, with only

broad haloes present in the pattern. There are no clear reflections for the microsphere formulations, which suggest that these are all also amorphous materials. The XRD data thus agree with the DSC findings, confirming the systems to be solid amorphous dispersions.

### Drug loading, encapsulation efficiency and *in vitro* drug release

The drug loading and entrapment efficiency are crucial if the microspheres are to be useful clinically. The processing parameters used to make the spheres have a significant influence on both of these, and the optimum conditions have been found to vary with the drug used (Nan et al., 2014; Alcalá-Alcalá et al., 2015; Abulatefeh & Alkilyan, 2016; Rafiei & Haddadi, 2017). A range of different conditions (inner water phase/oil phase and oil phase/external water phase ratios; PVA concentration; ultrasound time and speed) were used to prepare PLGA microspheres and these were coated with eight alternating layers of PVA and p(AAPBA-co-NVCL). This resulted in a series of LbL microspheres, which we examined for drug loading and encapsulation efficiency. The results are shown in Table S1, from which it is clear that the





**Figure 4.** *In vitro* drug release from the insulin loaded microspheres. (A) Insulin release at varied glucose concentrations: (a) constant concentration throughout; (b) initially no glucose and then transfer to high-glucose conditions; and (c) Initially high-glucose then transfer to a glucose-free medium. Experiments were performed in triplicate and data are plotted as mean  $\pm$  SEM. (B) CD spectra of insulin released from the multilayer microspheres after 6 hours and fresh insulin. (C) SEM images of the particles after insulin release for 5, 15 and 25 days from (a, c and e) the porous PLGA microspheres and (b, d and f) multilayer microspheres.

optimal experimental parameters are as follows: ultrasonication for 5 min, a 2% w/v PVA solution, and volume ratios for W1/O and O/W2 of 1:100 and 1:20, respectively. This gives the highest drug loading, entrapment efficiency and process yield ( $2.83 \pm 0.15\%$ ,  $82.6 \pm 5.1\%$  and  $59.1 \pm 5.7\%$ , respectively).

The results of *in vitro* assessments of the microspheres insulin release properties are given in Figure 4(A). The PLGA microspheres have many pores on their surfaces through which insulin can diffuse. Thus, they exhibit a 55% burst of release at the very beginning of the experiment. This burst is much reduced for the multilayer microspheres, to around 20%. While the PLGA microspheres can sustain release for 15 days, the multilayer systems extend this to 25 days in PBS. The latter also show very clear glucose sensitivity

(Figure 4(A)). The insulin release rate is markedly increased with an increase in the glucose concentration of the release milieu.

We also explored how the systems respond to a change in the glucose content in the release medium during the experiment (Figure 4(A)). When the particles are placed in a 0 mg/mL solution of glucose, the insulin release rate is slow. When they are transferred into a 3 mg/mL glucose solution after 5, 10 or 15 days, the release rate clearly accelerates at the timepoint when the glucose concentration rises. The effect of reducing the concentration was also studied (Figure 4(A)). The multilayer particles were initially immersed in 3 mg/mL of glucose, where the release rate is rapid. When they are transferred (after 5 or 10 days) into a glucose-free buffer, the insulin release rate declines.

In order to be effective, it is vital that the 3D structure of the insulin is unchanged after incorporation into and release from the microparticles. This can easily be probed using circular dichroism (CD) (Liu et al., 2015). Insulin released from the microspheres was compared to standard insulin (Figure 4(B)). The CD spectrum of the released insulin exhibits typical  $\alpha$ -helical characteristics, with negative elasticity at 208 and 222 nm. The spectra of released and fresh insulin are almost identical, suggesting that there is no loss of tertiary structure during the formulation process.

Morphological examinations of the microspheres after insulin release were undertaken using SEM and images are presented in Figure 4(C). After five days (Figure 4(C)) the uncoated PLGA spheres are still intact, but after 15 and 25 days they can be seen to increasingly break down into fragments. This rate of degradation is consistent with previous reports (Janoria & Mitra, 2007; Nie et al., 2015). Figure 4(C) also depicts the morphology of the multilayer microspheres. Throughout the release experiment, the surface of these remains smooth, with the majority remaining intact after 10 days. The microspheres appear increasingly porous and aggregated with longer immersion times. This suggests that, compared to the porous PLGA microspheres, the multilayer formulation has a longer degradation time *in vitro*, leading to extended drug release.

### Chronic toxicity

In a previous report (Wu et al., 2016b), we have shown that p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) is safe in mice *in vivo*, and PLGA and PVA are FDA GRAS materials. However, the effects of the combination of these are not known, and the use of NaOH to fix PVA could be problematic if there is residual NaOH in the formulations. First, the cytocompatibility with NIH3T3 cells was explored; the results after the cells had been exposed to the various materials for 24 h can be seen in Figure S4. It is clear that the microspheres have very good biocompatibility, with viabilities very similar to untreated cells even at concentrations of 100  $\mu$ g/mL.

Although useful, an *in vitro* analysis is no substitute for *in vivo* work, which is also vital to be sure of any potential toxicity (Bianco, 2013; Wu et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2014, 2017). During *in vivo* experiments, it was found that none of mice displayed any discomfort, and all lived for the entire experimental period of 60 days. The findings obtained after sacrifice are shown in Figure 5 and Table S2. Figure 5 displays H&E staining results of the liver, kidney, heart, spleen and lungs. It can be seen that there is no damage caused to any of these organs over 60 days, suggesting the multilayer microspheres to be non-toxic.

Since organ damage can be a slow process (Licata, 2016), using H&E staining to detect organ pathology may not be sufficient to uncover toxicity during the experimental time period. An exploration of biochemical indicators in the blood can provide additional useful information to pick up the beginnings of toxic effects (Walker, 1992). The results for a number of key markers for liver, kidney and heart function and also inflammation and antioxidant markers are listed in

Table S2. Overall, the coated PLGA microspheres appeared to have no influence on the blood lipid levels, liver function, renal function or cardiac function. Inflammatory markers are somewhat raised and antioxidant capacity was seen to be reduced at high doses, but not to a level which is thought to be problematic.

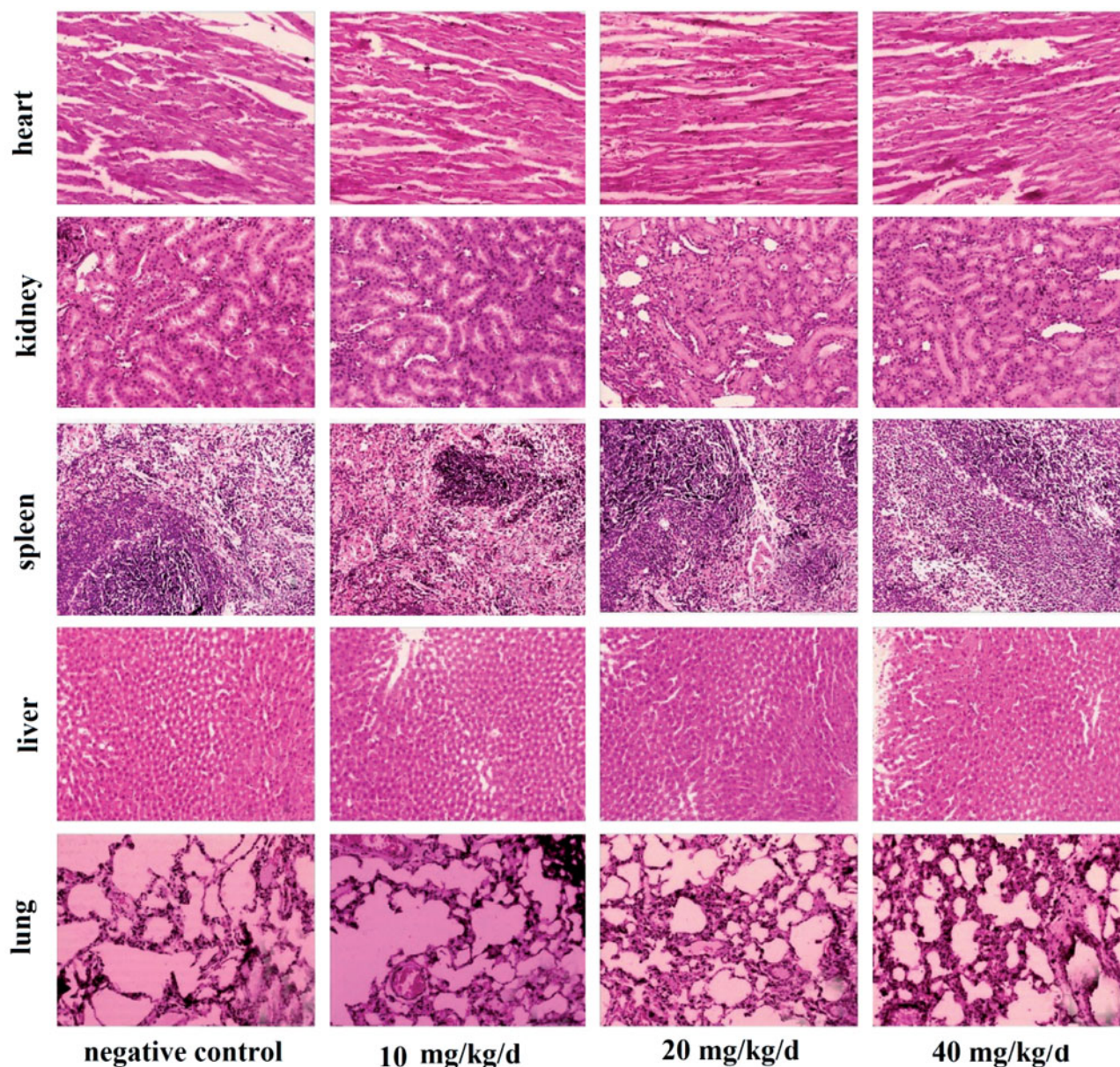
### In vivo diabetes model

Quantifying blood glucose and serum insulin can allow both the hypoglycemic effects of insulin-loaded formulations to be detected and also characterize insulin release *in vivo* (Di et al., 2014; Dhall et al., 2015; Haggag et al., 2016). For instance, Lei et al. (2016) manufactured a composite hydrogel system for oral delivery of insulin and used this method to show that their system could prolong the presence of insulin in serum. In another experiment Liu et al. (2017) used a CaCO<sub>3</sub>-based composite nanocarrier with the same methodology and reached a similar conclusion.

Figure 6 shows the blood sugar and serum insulin profiles after injection of the insulin loaded multilayer PLGA microspheres into type II diabetes model mice. From Figure 6(A), it is clear that the blood sugar remained stable for the negative and positive control groups and the insulin injection group, throughout the experiment. The negative control and the insulin injection groups have concentrations in the range of 5–6 mmol/L, while the concentrations in the positive control group are much higher at 17–23 mmol/L. For the PLGA microspheres group, for the first 7 days after injection the blood sugar level was stable at 5 to 6 mmol/L, but after 7 days the concentration began to rise, reaching ca. 17 mmol/L after 17 days. The multilayer microspheres perform much better: the blood glucose concentration remains low for 17 days, after which it begins to rise.

The changes in the insulin concentrations in the blood are also shown in Figure 6(A). Both control groups and the insulin injection group have low concentrations, around 1–3 mmol/L. However, after the first day, the insulin concentration is  $17.54 \pm 1.21$  and  $15.02 \pm 0.46$  mol/L for the porous microspheres and multilayer microspheres, respectively. For both microsphere formulations, there is then a gradual decrease in concentration until after 17 days this is ca. 3.0 mol/L or less. The multilayer microspheres are able to maintain elevated insulin levels for a longer period of time than the uncoated porous spheres.

We further examined changes in blood glucose and serum insulin in more detail, to determine whether glucose sensitivity was observed. The results are shown in Figure 6(B-F). These panels show the change in glucose and insulin concentrations in the blood over 6 h after the application of a sugar gavage, with these studies done on days 1, 6, 11, 16 and 21 of the experiment. Up to day 16, the multilayer PLGA microspheres can effectively lower the blood glucose level over this 6 h period, with efficacy very similar to the insulin injection group. At 21 days, their efficacy is reduced in this regard. However, the porous PLGA microspheres show higher glucose levels after only 11 days, thus proving the effectiveness of the multilayer coating. Considering the serum insulin,

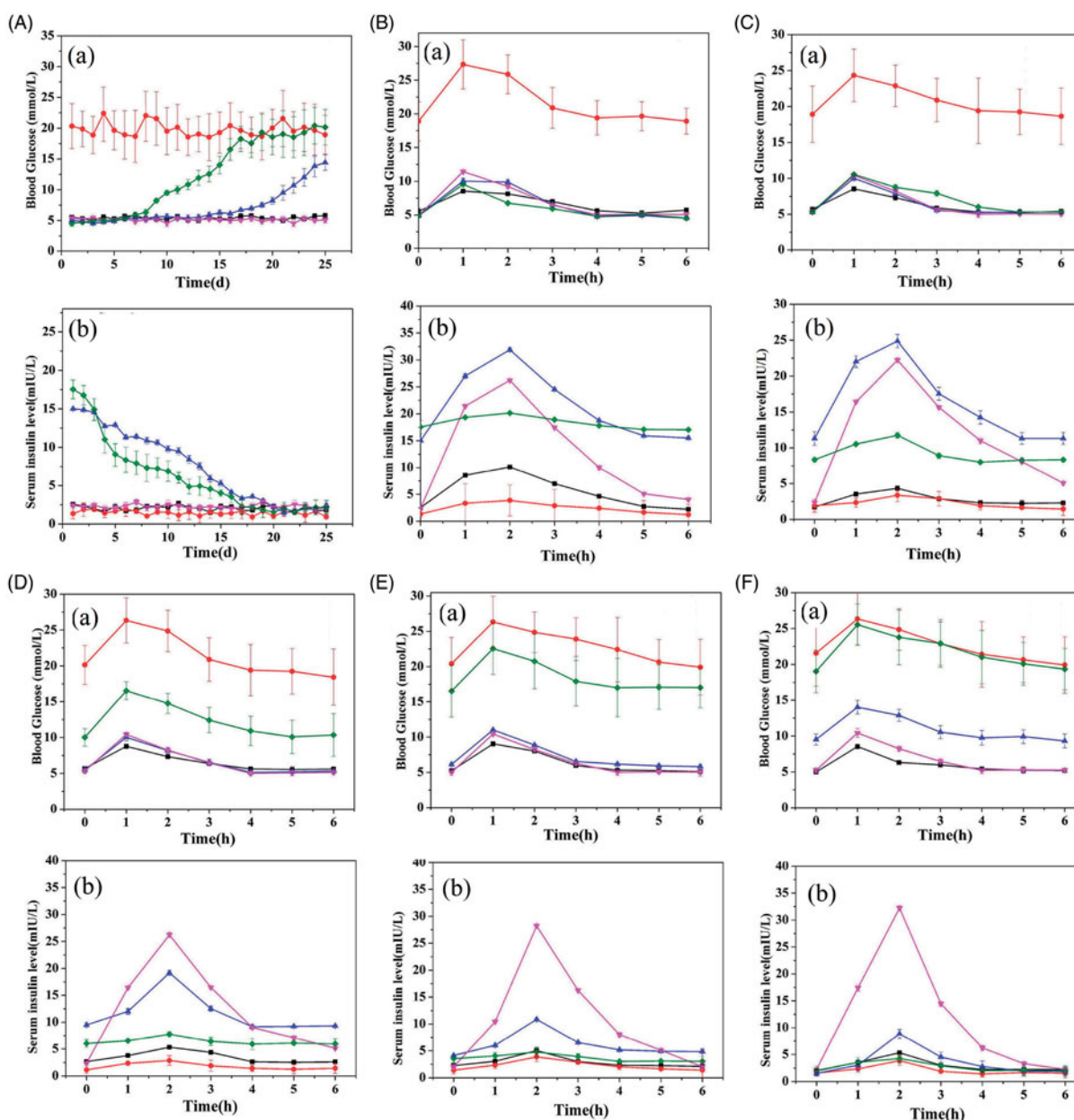


**Figure 5.** HE staining of the liver, kidney, heart, spleen and lung in mice. Images are at  $200\times$  magnification.

the injection group shows a sharp spike in insulin concentration after application of the injection, with a peak at around 2 h after injection (which was administered at the same time as the gavage). For the multilayer microspheres, the amount of insulin present increases with the rising glucose concentration, peaking around 1 h after the maximum glucose point and then declining back to baseline. This occurs throughout the whole 21 day study, although the effect is weakened after 16 days. The formulations are thus clearly glucose sensitive *in vivo* and retain this sensitivity for at least 16 days. In contrast, the uncoated porous microspheres show no such sensitivity, with the insulin levels in the blood being essentially constant over the 6 h period of measurement on each day.

These results are significantly better than the previous reports in the literature based on PBA systems (Hamishehkar et al., 2009; Luo et al., 2012). The studies undertaken to date have not been able to provide the crucial combination of

glucose sensitivity and long-term insulin release. For instance, Shi et al. (2016) fabricated insulin-loaded polyelectrolyte capsules via the LbL approach; while these had good glucose sensitivity, insulin release was only sustained over *ca.* 12–36 h. In other work, Sood et al. (2015) developed a glucose sensitive hydrogel system which modulates the release of an anti-diabetic drug in response to the blood glucose level in the body, but the release could only be maintained for 6–18 h. Luo et al. (2012), fabricated a glucose-sensitive LbL film using a star polymer, glucose oxidase and catalase and found a single dose administration could provide effective glycemic control in diabetic rats for up to 295 days. However, glucose oxidase can be immunogenic, where as our materials are not. Our systems are thus notably better in performance than other reports in the literature and display glucose sensitivity and insulin release over a long time period. Hence, they have great potential for the control of type II diabetes.



**Figure 6.** The *in vivo* efficacy of the multilayer microspheres in a murine model of type II diabetes. The characteristic of glucose concentration and serum insulin, showing (a) glucose concentration and (b) serum insulin levels over (A) 21 days and more detailed profiles during the 6 h period after gavage on days (B) 1, (C) 6, (D) 11, (E) 16 and (F) 21. Symbols for groups are as follows: ■ negative control; ● positive control; ▲ multilayer microspheres; ▼ insulin injection; and, ◆ porous PLGA microspheres.

## Conclusions

PVA and the novel copolymer p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) were used in this work to coat insulin-loaded PLGA microspheres. This was achieved through layer by layer deposition, successfully yielding a new multilayer composite which gives long-term and glucose-responsive release of insulin. It was determined that coating with eight alternating layers of PVA and p(AAPBA-co-NVCL) gave the best results in terms of particle morphology and pore coating. The microspheres produced had a reasonable loading capacity, high encapsulation efficiency and contained insulin in the amorphous state. An *in vitro* release assay confirmed that the multilayer microspheres were glucose sensitive and altered their insulin release rates

in response to a change of glucose concentration. Release could be maintained over 15 to 25 days, and the insulin freed from the microspheres has the same tertiary structure as native insulin. Cell and animal chronic toxicology studies confirmed that even if injected once a day at 40 mg/kg, the multilayer microspheres have low toxicity, although with some increase in the production of inflammatory factors. Antioxidant capacity is seen to be slightly reduced at the highest doses. In a mouse model of type II diabetes, it was shown that the multilayer microspheres are able to reduce blood sugar concentrations to normal levels and have good glucose sensitivity *in vivo*. They retain these properties for at least 16 days. Therefore, the multilayer microspheres reported

here have great potential for clinical use and in the long term offer a potent new approach to the control of diabetes.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## Funding

This investigation was supported by grant 16410723700 from the Science and Technology Commission of Shanghai Municipality, the National Natural Science Foundation of China (81360128), the Biomedical Textile Materials "111 Project" of the Ministry of Education of China (No. B07024) and the UK-China Joint Laboratory for Therapeutic Textiles (based at Donghua University).

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