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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bone marrow-on-a-chip: Long-term culture of human haematopoietic stem cells in a three-dimensional microfluidic environment

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Abstract

Multipotent haematopoietic stem and progenitor cells (HSPCs) are the source for all blood cell types. The bone marrow stem cell niche in which the HSPCs are maintained is known to be vital for their maintenance. Unfortunately, to date, no *in vitro* model exists that accurately mimics the aspects of the bone marrow niche and simultaneously allows the long-term culture of HSPCs. In this study, a novel three-dimensional coculture model is presented, based on a hydroxyapatite coated zirconium oxide scaffold, comprising of human mesenchymal stromal cells (MSCs) and cord blood derived HSPCs, enabling successful HSPC culture for a time span of 28 days within the microfluidic multiorgan chip. The HSPCs were found to stay in their primitive state ($CD34^+CD38^-$) and capable of granulocyte, erythrocyte, macrophage, megakaryocyte colony formation. Furthermore, a microenvironment was formed bearing molecular and structural similarity to the *in vivo* bone marrow niche containing extracellular matrix and signalling molecules known to play an important role in HSPC homeostasis. Here, a novel human *in vitro* bone marrow model is presented for the first time, capable of long-term culture of primitive HSPCs in a microfluidic environment.

KEYWORDS

alternative to animal testing, bone marrow on a chip, ceramic scaffold, haematopoietic stem cells, mesenchymal stem cells, stem cell niche

1 | INTRODUCTION

Multipotent haematopoietic stem and progenitor cells (HSPCs) are the source for all blood cell types. HSPCs remain their stemness by residing in a specific microenvironment called the stem cell niche located in the trabecular structures of the bone marrow. These niches play a key role in the determination of cell fate (Lilly, Johnson, & Bunce, 2011; Nagasawa, Omatsu, & Sugiyama, 2011) and can be classified according to their structural and biological properties into the endosteal and perivascular niche (Lévesque, Helwani, & Winkler, 2010; Wilson & Trumpp, 2006). In contrast to the classical view that the most primitive, slow proliferating, quiescent HSPCs are preserved by the microenvironment generated by the endosteal niche compartment, recent publications indicate that dormant HSPCs are maintained in a perivascular niche, close to blood vessels (Morrison & Scadden, 2014; Oguro, Ding, & Morrison, 2013). The function of individual niche compartments is currently the subject of intense discussions.

The HSPC niche is a complex structure composed of various cell types, secreted factors and extracellular matrix (ECM) that promote HSPC localization, maintenance and differentiation induction (Lilly et al., 2011). Several studies have pointed out the importance of direct cell-to-cell contact by *partner cells* for the maintenance of HSPCs within the niche (Arai & Suda, 2007; Lilly et al., 2011). Specialized bone marrow stromal cells, besides endothelial cells, are thought to be the most important associated cells for HPSC preservation (Morrison & Scadden, 2014). Mesenchymal stromal cells (MSCs) give rise to a variety of cell types in the bone marrow and niche structures. Providing the required partner cell subsets, signalling molecules and ECM components, such as fibronectin, which is known to mediate HSPC homing (Abdallah & Kassem, 2008). The control of maintenance, guided differentiation and mobilization of HSPCs in the

haematopoietic niche has been a subject of considerable interest in recent times.

To study the interplay of partner cells and signalling cues for HSPC maintenance, several *ex vivo* culture approaches have been developed. Unfortunately, until now the concepts were not successful in cultivating HSPCs over a prolonged period. However, several studies have revealed the importance of a three-dimensional (3D) scaffold that mimics the properties of the physiological niche and thereby improves HSPC culture (Choi, Mahadik, & Harley, 2015; Lee et al., 2014). Different approaches with culture times up to 14 days emphasize that 3D structure-providing scaffolds such as poly(ethylene glycol) hydrogels (Raic, Rödling, Kalbacher, Lee-Thedieck, 2013), collagen gels (Leisten et al., 2012), fibrin polymers (Ferreira et al., 2012) or fibronectin-conjugated polyethylene terephthalate matrices (Feng, Chai, Jiang, Leong, & Mao, 2006) seeded with mesenchymal stromal cells support the expansion of HSPCs. Sharma, Limaye, and Kale (2012) presented a 3D hydrogel-based MSC HSPC coculture system. They could show that the HSPCs stayed in a quiescent state for 7 days of culture and attributed this to an interaction with the MSCs and the formation of a hypoxia gradient. Di Maggio et al. (2011) cultured freshly isolated human bone marrow nucleated cells on a hydroxyapatite scaffold in a perfused system for 3 weeks. Subsequently, HSPCs were successfully cultured in this scaffold for 1 week (Di Maggio et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2012; Walasek, van Os, & de Haan, 2012).

Besides the individual approaches of *in vitro* culture systems, animal test systems are used since decades to elucidate scientific issues. Apart from ethical considerations, this practice contains several downsides. Among these are the unreliable results due to species-specific differences in rodent models. Due to the high rate of failure in clinical trials and the associated high costs, the development and the release of drugs with higher specificity and efficacy to treat various diseases is significantly delayed. Thus, innovative *in vitro* 3D culture models, simulating the human *in vivo* situation, would be of great value. The aspiring field of miniaturized organ (called organoids) culture technologies provide a promising tool to meet these requirements. The assembled organoids resemble their *in vivo* counterparts and are suited to address biological issues with high significance (Lancaster & Knoblich, 2014; Yin et al., 2016). To increase the fidelity of the *in vitro* culture approaches particular preassembled organoid structures are combined in a microfluidic perfusion network, called microphysiological systems or organs on chips (Huh, Hamilton, & Ingber, 2011). Concerning the bone marrow niche, Torisawa et al. (2014) introduced a bone marrow-on-a-chip, which was engineered *in vivo* in a mouse employing mouse haematopoietic stem cells. The model was subsequently transferred to a microfluidic device and cultured for 7 days (Torisawa et al., 2014).

The aim of this study was the generation of a versatile, pure *in vitro* culture system imitating the human bone marrow and niche biology for HSPC sustainment and multiplication, suitable to addresses diverse biological issues. Here, a novel 3D coculture model is described, based on a hydroxyapatite coated zirconium oxide ceramic scaffold, enabling successful HSPC culture for up to 28 days in a microfluidic environment. The scaffold was engineered with the intention of mimicking the porous yet rigid properties of the cancellous bone microstructure. Primary MSCs isolated from bone marrow were employed to generate a niche-like microenvironment for successful HSPC cultivation within the scaffold. The niche generation could be achieved by the preculture of MSCs on the ceramic scaffold inducing the deposition of ECM and the secretion of various factors. As medium, a special HSPC culture medium with the addition of a minimal basic combination of cytokines was chosen.

The herein described bone marrow model was built up on the multiorgan chip (MOC), a microfluidic device (Wagner et al., 2013). It consists of a circular channel system, which connects tissue culture compartments for the culture of different organoids. Thus, enabling the culture of the bone marrow model within a dynamic environment and offering the possibility of culturing it in concert with another organoid.

Besides the applications as a model to study specific niche interactions, the development of this bone marrow model could help to reduce animal testing and provide the prerequisite for the expansion of HSPCs prior to transplantation.

2 | MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1 | Isolation and expansion of MSC

Human MSCs were isolated from the bone marrow of femoral heads, which were obtained after hip replacement surgery, with written consent of the donating patients as per the guidelines of the Ethics board of the *Charité* – Universitätsmedizin Berlin. The cells were washed out with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and separated by density gradient centrifugation. The cells were characterized by staining of specific MSC markers (CD105, CD73, CD90, CD106 and CD146) and by performing osteogenic, adipogenic and chondrogenic differentiation assays as described in (Pittenger et al., 1999). The cells were expanded in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM; Corning Inc., USA) + 10% fetal calf serum (FCS; Biochrom, Germany) + 1% Penicillin–Streptomycin (P/S; Biowest, France). The cells were used until passage 7.

2.2 | Isolation of HSPCs

Human HSPCs were isolated from umbilical cord blood that was obtained directly after birth, with written consent of the donating mother as per the guidelines of the Ethics board of the *Charité* – Universitätsmedizin Berlin. The blood was diluted with PBS + 3% bovine serum albumin +5 mM ethylenediamine tetra-acetic acid (PBE) and separated by density gradient centrifugation. The HSPCs were then segregated from the other cells by use of immunomagnetic separation, using the MACS CD34+ isolation kit (Miltenyi Biotec, Germany). Cell number, phenotype and purity were evaluated by flow cytometry according to CD34 and CD38 expression. The freshly isolated cells were directly added onto the scaffold.

2.3 | Cell culture systems

Hydroxyapatite-coated zirconium oxide-based Sponceram® 3D ceramic scaffolds (Zellwerk GmbH, Germany) of 5.8 mm in height and diameter were used as a scaffold. The ceramic was seeded with

MSCs in an ultralow attachment 96-well plate (Corning Inc., USA) at a density of 500,000 cells per ceramic. After 7 hours, the ceramics were transferred to an ultralow attachment 24-well plate (Corning Inc., USA). DMEM +10% FCS + 1% P/S was used as medium and was exchanged every 48 hours. The MSCs were cultured in the ceramic for 7 days prior to the seeding of HSPCs.

The ceramic was transferred to a 96-well ultralow attachment plate and the medium was changed to Stemspan-ACF (Stemcell Technologies, Canada) + 25 ng/ml Fms-related tyrosine kinase 3 ligand (FLT3-L) + 10 ng/ml thrombopoietin (TPO; both PeproTech, USA) + 1% P/S. Concurrently, 1000–5000 $CD34^+CD38^-$ HSPCs were added and allowed to adhere overnight. Next, the ceramics were transferred to the MOC (see below). The medium was changed every 48 hours. Cell culture took place at 37°C and 5% CO_2.

Experiments were performed for 1, 2, 3 and 4 weeks. Afterwards, HSPCs were extracted from the ceramic by incubating it for 10 min in PBE. The ceramics were subsequently flushed with the PBE and centrifuged for 5 min at 300×*g*. Four independent MSC and HSPC donors were used for this study. The cells were analyzed by flow cytometry, immunofluorescent staining, quantitative polymerase chain reaction and colony forming unit (CFU)–granulocyte, erythrocyte, macrophage, megakaryocyte (GEMM) assays.

2.4 | Microfluidic system

To simulate a microfluidic environment, the ceramic was integrated into the MOC platform. The MOC used in this study consists of two separate independent circular channel systems. Each circuit hosts two culture compartments interconnected by a channel system. A peristaltic on-chip micro pump integrated into each circuit controls the flow rate of the medium. The pump provides a pulsatile medium flow through 500 µm wide and 100 µm high channels. The pumping volume ranges from 5 to 70 µl/min and the frequency from 0.2–2.5 Hz. (Ataç et al., 2013; Marx et al., 2012; Maschmeyer, Hasenburg et al., 2015; Sonntag et al., 2010,). A pump frequency of 2 Hz was used for the continuous dynamic operation at a flow rate of 5 µl/min; Figure 2b + c).

The microfluidic device was manufactured as described by Wagner et al. (2013). In brief, a silicon rubber additive (WACKER PRIMER G 790; Wacker Chemie, Munich, Germany) was applied to the cover-plate and incubated for 20 minutes at 80°C. Next, a casting chamber was prepared consisting of the prepared cover-plate, a master mold and a casting frame. PDMS was injected into this casting station and the whole setup was incubated for 60 minutes at 80°C. The resulting 2 mm thick PDMS layer containing the imprint of the channels and pumps was permanently bonded by low pressure plasma oxidation (Femto; Diener, Ebhausen, Germany) to a glass slide with a footprint of 75 × 25 mm (Menzel, Braunschweig, Germany), thereby forming the enclosed microfluidic channel system.

The ceramic was placed in one culture compartment of each circuit, hosting the ceramic holder that was specially designed for the cultivation of the bone marrow model on the MOC. The ceramic holder has the same diameter as a 96 well plate well. It can hold 400 µl of medium when loaded with a ceramic. The channel itself contains a volume of 10 µl. Only one of the compartments of the system was used for the ceramic while the other served as a medium reservoir. Medium (400 µl) of was added to each compartment of each circuit of the MOC. The circular medium flow was directed away from the ceramic thereby first passing through the medium reservoir.

2.5 | Immunofluorescence and 2-photon microscopy

After the extraction of the HSPCs, the ceramics were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA) for 3 hours at room temperature. Afterwards, the scaffolds were rinsed in PBS and cut using a scalpel. The pieces were transferred into 1.5-ml reaction tubes and stained with primary antibodies for stem cell factor (Abcam, UK) and fibronectin (eBioscience, USA). Samples were washed and then stained with goat anti-rabbit and goat anti-mouse secondary antibodies coupled with Alexa-488 or Alexa-594 (both Invitrogen, USA), respectively. Nuclei were counterstained with 4,6-diamidino-2-phenyindole (Sigma, USA). Both steps were performed over night at 4°C. Subsequently, samples were washed and visualized using a two-photon microscope (Trimscope II, LaVision BioTec, Germany) and processed using Imaris version 7.5 (Bitplane Scientific Software, Switzerland).

2.6 | Flow cytometry

After 1, 2, 3 and 4 weeks of culture, the HSPCs were extracted from the ceramic and subsequently analysed by flow cytometry. Cells were stained with CD34-PE, CD38-APC, CD49f-FITC, CD90-FITC and CD133-FITC (all Miltenyi Biotec, Germany) for 10 minutes on ice. Samples were washed and analysis was carried out using a MACSQuant® Analyzer (Miltenyi, Germany) flow cytometer. Here, the percentage of HSPCs that maintained their primitive phenotype ($CD34^+CD38^-$) was investigated. Data were processed using FlowJo 10 (Tree Star inc., USA).

2.7 | CFU-GEMM assay

The myeloid differentiation potential of the HSPCs extracted from the ceramic was assessed by CFU-GEMM assay (Miltenyi Biotec, Germany). The assay was performed according to the manufacturer's protocol.

2.8 | qPCR

Isolation of ribonucleic acid (RNA) was carried out using NucleoSpin RNA II kit (Macherey-Nagel, Germany), following the instructions provided. Mesenchymal stromal cells were cultured in a monolayer or in the ceramic for 1 week in DMEM +10% FCS + 1% P/S before switching the medium to Stemspan-ACF + 25 ng/ml FLT3-L + 10 ng/ml TPO + 1% P/S and culturing the cells for an additional 1, 2, 3 or 4 weeks. The ceramics were transferred onto the MOC after the first week of static preculture. After the respective culture time, the cells were lysed in the lysis buffer supplied by the manufacturer. MSCs isolated from three different donors were used. Reverse transcription of messenger RNA was performed by using TaqMan Reverse Transcription Reagents cDNA kit (Applied Biosystems, USA), as per manufacturers' instructions. Real-time PCR was performed using 1 µl complementary deoxyribose nucleic acid with 1 µl primer

mix (Table 1) and SensiFAST Sybr No-ROX kit (Bioline, Germany), in 96-well PCR plates (Biozym Scientific, Germany), and were read with Stratagene MX 3005P Multiplex Quantitative PCR System (Agilent Technologies, USA). Ubiquitin-conjugating enzyme E2 D2 (UBE2D2) was used as housekeeping gene. Four and three different donors were used for the graph in Figures 3 and 4, respectively.

2.9 | Scanning electron microscopy

Electron microscopy was performed in the department for electron microscopy (ZELMI) of the TU Berlin. The bone marrow model was cultured for 4 weeks on the MOC. Medium was removed, the ceramics were carefully washed with PBS and afterwards fixed in 4% PFA for 3 hours. They were then stored in PBS at 4°C. The samples were cut using tweezers and a scalpel. Subsequently, they were mounted on a support using silver. Afterwards, the samples were transferred to a vacuum chamber and sputter-coated with gold. Next, the support with the mounted samples was transferred through an air lock into the electron microscope where the pictures were taken.

2.10 | Statistical analysis

Unpaired *t* test was applied to the data sets, using GraphPad Prism software version 6.04 (GraphPad Software Inc., USA). *P* values ≤0.05 were considered significant.

3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The bone marrow stem cell niche that maintains HSPCs is a highly complex environment in which various cell types and physical conditions play a role. Of all the cell types MSCs, apart from endothelial cells, are thought to be the most important (Morrison & Scadden, 2014). They can differentiate into various cell types and further contribute to niche regulation by secreting signalling molecules, direct cell-to-cell contact and production of ECM (Lilly et al., 2011).

TABLE 1 Primers used in this study

Target	Primer	Sequence
Angiopoietin 1	Forward	GAAGGGAACCGAGCCTATTCAC
	Reverse	CATCAAACCACCATCCTCCTG
Fibronectin	Forward	CAGACCTATCCAAGCTCAAGTGG
	Reverse	TGGGTGGGATACTCACAGGTC
ICAM-1	Forward	CCGACTGGACGAGAGGGATT
	Reverse	TCGGCCCGACAGAGGTAGGT
Jagged1	Forward	ATGGGAACCCGATCAAGGAA
	Reverse	TCCGCAGGCACCAGTAGAAG
SCF	Forward	TTCAAGAAGTGTAATTGTGGCTTGT
	Reverse	TGGGTAGCAAGAACAGATAAAGATG
Nestin	Forward	AGCGTTGGAACAGAGGTTGG
	Reverse	AGGCTGAGGGACATCTTGAGG
Pleiotrophin	Forward	GTGGAGAATGGCAGTGGAGTGT
	Reverse	CAGGGCTCGCTTCAGACTTC
Osteopontin	Forward	CACTGATTTTCCCACGGACCT
	Reverse	CCATTCAACTCCTCGCTTTCC
CXCL12	Forward	GAGCTACAGATGCCCATGCC
	Reverse	AGCTTCGGGTCAATGCACAC
VEGF	Forward	AGCCTTGCCTTGCTGCTCTA
	Reverse	GTGCTGGCCTTGGTGAGG
UBE2D2	Forward	GACTTGGGTGACTCTAGGGCA
	Reverse	CTGCGACGGAACTAGCTGTG

Although most important cell types, signal molecules and physical aspects that make up the bone marrow niche are known, their exact interaction to form a functioning surrounding for the preservation of HSPCs remains unclear. Unfortunately, to date, no *in vitro* model exists that accurately mimics the aspects of the bone marrow niche and simultaneously allows the long-term culture of HSPCs. The herein presented model lives up to the *in vivo* situation and enables culturing of HSPCs for at least 4 weeks. It is relevant for a variety of applications, including the study of certain cell interactions as well as for drug testing.

The establishment of the bone marrow model is comprised of several sequential steps depicted schematically in Figure 1, combining the scaffold and microfluidic microphysiological system presented in Figure 2. Mesenchymal stromal cells isolated from femoral heads were cultivated on cancellous bone-like hydroxyapatite coated scaffolds. After 1 week of ECM deposition and microenvironment adjustment by the MSCs, HSPC were added and cultured under dynamic conditions for up to 4 weeks.

3.1 | MSCs build up a suitable environment for HSPC culture within 7 days

Several studies have revealed the importance of stromal support cells cultured on 3D scaffolds for HSPC culture. Hence, primary human bone marrow-derived MSCs were used, which have been described as being particularly efficient in the long-term culture of primitive HSPCs (Cook et al., 2012; Di Maggio et al., 2011; Ferreira et al., 2012; Leisten et al., 2012; Takizawa, Schanz, & Manz, 2011; Tan, Liu, Hou, & Meng, 2010) and cultured them on the hydroxyapatite-coated Sponceram 3D ceramic scaffold. The scaffold was chosen since it mimics the bone marrow as closely as possible. Hydroxyapatite is a close analogue of bone apatite, which is the foundation of the hard tissue in all vertebrates and is produced by biomineralization in the body. The pore size and structure of the scaffold is comparable to human bone marrow cavities (Murphy, Haugh, & O'Brien, 2010) Therefore, the structure should mimic the cancellous (spongy) bone (Figure 2a).

Within 7 days of culture, the MSCs generate a suitable environment for HSPC culture in the 3D scaffold. Part of this environment is the ECM that is vital for the securement of HSPCs in the bone marrow. Upon scaffold cultivation, the MSCs produce a web-like network of ECM composed of fibronectin as shown by immunofluorescent staining and qPCR. Fibronectin is an important part of the ECM in the bone marrow and known to mediate HSPC homing by adhering to surface receptors and trapping secreted factors (Abdallah & Kassem, 2008). The fibronectin deposition could be observed throughout the ceramic. It was higher expressed in the ceramic scaffold in comparison to the 2D culture (Figure 4b). The MSCs were located within this dense network of arranged matrix molecules (Figure 3a).

Furthermore, the presence of stem cell factor (SCF), which exists as a membrane-bound as well as a secreted cytokine, was investigated. This signalling molecule plays an important role in the preservation and

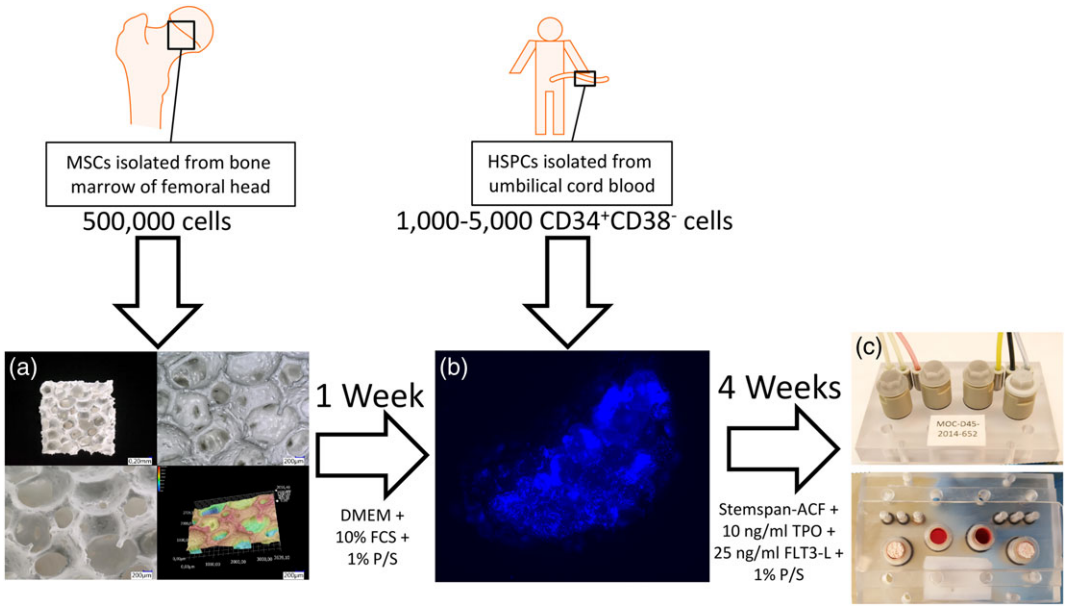

FIGURE 1 Scheme for the generation of the bone marrow model. (a) MSCs, originally isolated from human bone marrow of the femoral head, were seeded onto the hydroxyapatite coated ceramic scaffold and cultured in DMEM +10% FCS + 1% P/S in a static environment for 1 week. (b) HSPCs isolated from human umbilical cord blood were added to the prepared ceramics. The picture shows a 4,6-diamidino-2-phenyindole staining of MSCs cultured on the ceramic for 7 days. (c) The whole model was then transferred onto the MOC. The medium was changed to Stempan-ACF + 10 ng/ml Thrombopoietin +25 ng/ml Fms-related tyrosine kinase 3 ligand +1% P/S. The bone marrow model was inserted into one of the culture compartments of the MOC. The other culture compartment within the circuit was used as a medium reservoir. The model can be cultured for up to 4 weeks in this dynamic environment [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

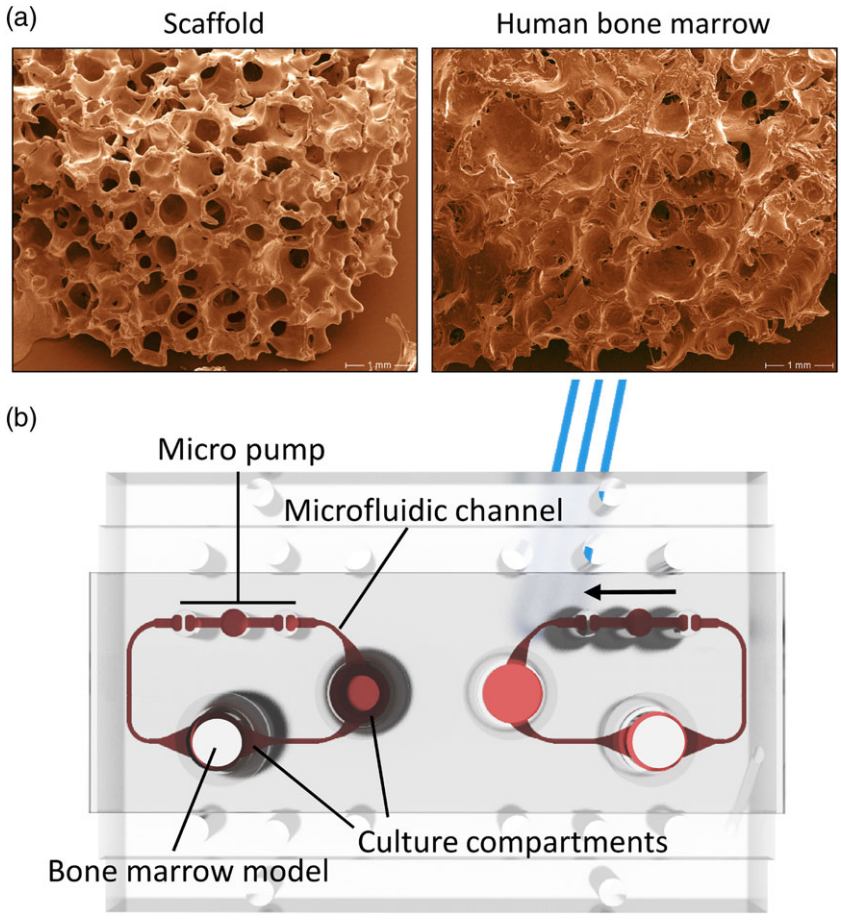

FIGURE 2 Scaffold for the bone marrow model. (a) Comparison of the ceramic scaffold and the *in vivo* bone marrow. (b) Schematic picture of the MOC viewed from below. The bone marrow model was positioned in the culture compartment opposing the micro pump. The black arrow indicates the direction of the medium flow [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

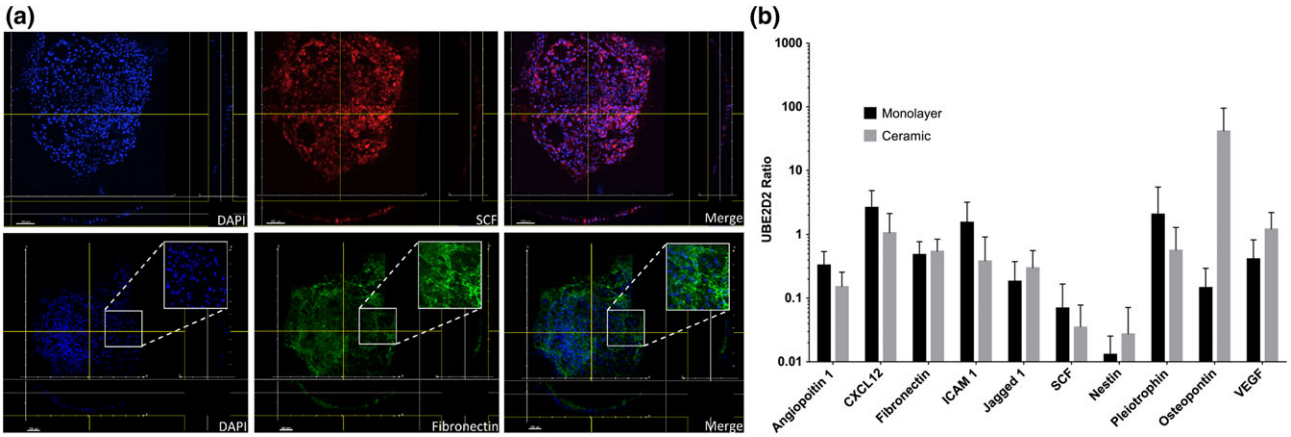

FIGURE 3 MSCs build up a suitable environment for HSPC culture within 7 days. (a) Immunofluorescent staining of MSCs that were cultured for 7 days within a ceramic. MSCs express stem cell factor (SCF; red) on their surface and secrete fibronectin (green). The white rectangles depict magnifications of the selected areas. Scale bars are 100 μm (n = 3 biological replicas). (b) Expression of various bone marrow niche relevant genes in MSCs cultured in a monolayer or on the ceramic in DMEM +10% FCS + 1% P/S for 1 week. The error bars represent the standard deviation ($n \geq 5$ biological replicas) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

self-renewal of HSPCs *in vivo* (Broudy, 1997; Oguro et al., 2013). The expression of SCF as part of HSC niche generation by the MSCs could be shown by immunofluorescent staining and qPCR (Figure 3).

qPCR results revealed the expression of various other important bone marrow associated genes (Figure 3b). These markers which are also found in the *in vivo* bone marrow niche, have been described as essential for the long-term sustainment of HSPCs, most notably nestin and osteopontin (Aggarwal, Lu, Pompili, & Das, 2012; Morrison & Scadden, 2014; Sharma et al., 2012). Quiescent HSCs have been described to reside in close proximity of nestin+ MSCs within the niche (Kunisaki et al., 2013). Higher levels of osteopontin as an early marker for osteoblast differentiation indicate the starting differentiation of MSCs to osteoblast in the ceramic culture. As stated in previous work, scaffolds with a rigid surface promote partial spontaneous osteogenic differentiation of MSCs (Diederichs et al., 2009). Osteoblasts are responsible for the generation of bone and have been described numerous times as vital part of the HSC niche (Calvi et al., 2003). Additionally, genes known to play a putative role in the HSC niche for adhesion (ICAM-1, angiopoietin 1, fibronectin), vascular development (vascular endothelial growth factor, VEGF), HSPC chemotaxis (CXCL12) and HSPC maintenance (jagged1, pleiotrophin) were being expressed by the MSCs (Balduino et al., 2012; Calvi, 2006). Interestingly, all genes are expressed in MSC monolayer expansion cultures in comparable levels, emphasizing the suitability of this cell type to maintain the HSC phenotype in coculture systems, especially in a 3D microenvironment (Feng et al., 2006; Ferreira et al., 2012; Leisten et al., 2012; Raic et al., 2013). Thus, the maintained expression of the various bone marrow niche associated genes suggests that the MSCs generate a microenvironment, when cultured within the ceramic scaffold, which is conducive to HSC maintenance.

3.2 | The bone marrow niche stays intact over the course of 28 days

To characterize the niche further, MSCs were cultured for 1, 2, 3 and 4 weeks in the serum-free HSPC culture medium on the MOC and the expression rate of numerous bone marrow associated genes was measured with qPCR. The transition to serum-free condition was mandatory, since serum components foster the differentiation induction of the HSPCs and limit the spectrum of therapeutically application of the stem cells. To bypass these difficulties several approaches for HSC culture and expansion *in vitro* have been developed (Walasek et al., 2012).

MSCs were cultured in a 2D monolayer or the ceramic for one week in DMEM +10% FCS + 1% P/S before switching the medium to Stemspan-ACF + 25 ng/ml FLT3-L + 10 ng/ml TPO + 1% P/S and culturing the cells for an additional 1, 2, 3 or 4 weeks. MSCs cultured in a monolayer did not tolerate the switch in medium very well (Figure 4a). While the cells of one donor died, the remaining donors exhibited a poor phenotype and low messenger RNA levels (Figure S1) compared to the ceramic counterpart after 4 weeks of culture in the serum-free medium. RNA yield reflects the cell amount and/or the metabolic activity of a cell culture system. The increasing RNA concentrations yielded in the DMEM monolayer culture indicate the proliferative activity in this expansion culture. According to the differentiation induction in the ceramic scaffolds, the cells down-modulate their proliferative activity mirrored by the moderate RNA levels. Nevertheless, compared to the serum-free monolayer condition the RNA yield was 3–4 times higher in the serum free scaffold culture reflecting the superior general state of the cells. Interestingly, the expansion medium seems to have an adverse impact on the 3D culture, since the RNA yield was rather lowered compared to the serum-free counterpart.

The different behaviour in a 2D or 3D environment might be ascribed to the ceramic allowing the cells to interact in an additional dimension (Figure S2) and promoting the differentiation potential of MSCs, which has also been described elsewhere (Diederichs et al., 2009; Sharma et al., 2012). Nevertheless, cells in both 2D and 3D culture conditions were lysed and qPCR was performed.

Nestin, osteopontin, VEGF, angiopoietin 1 and fibronectin were upregulated in comparison to the monolayer. Nestin and osteopontin, have been described as essential for the long-term sustainment of HSPCs, while VEGF and angiopoietin 1 are important angiogenesis promoting factors (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Morrison & Scadden, 2014;'

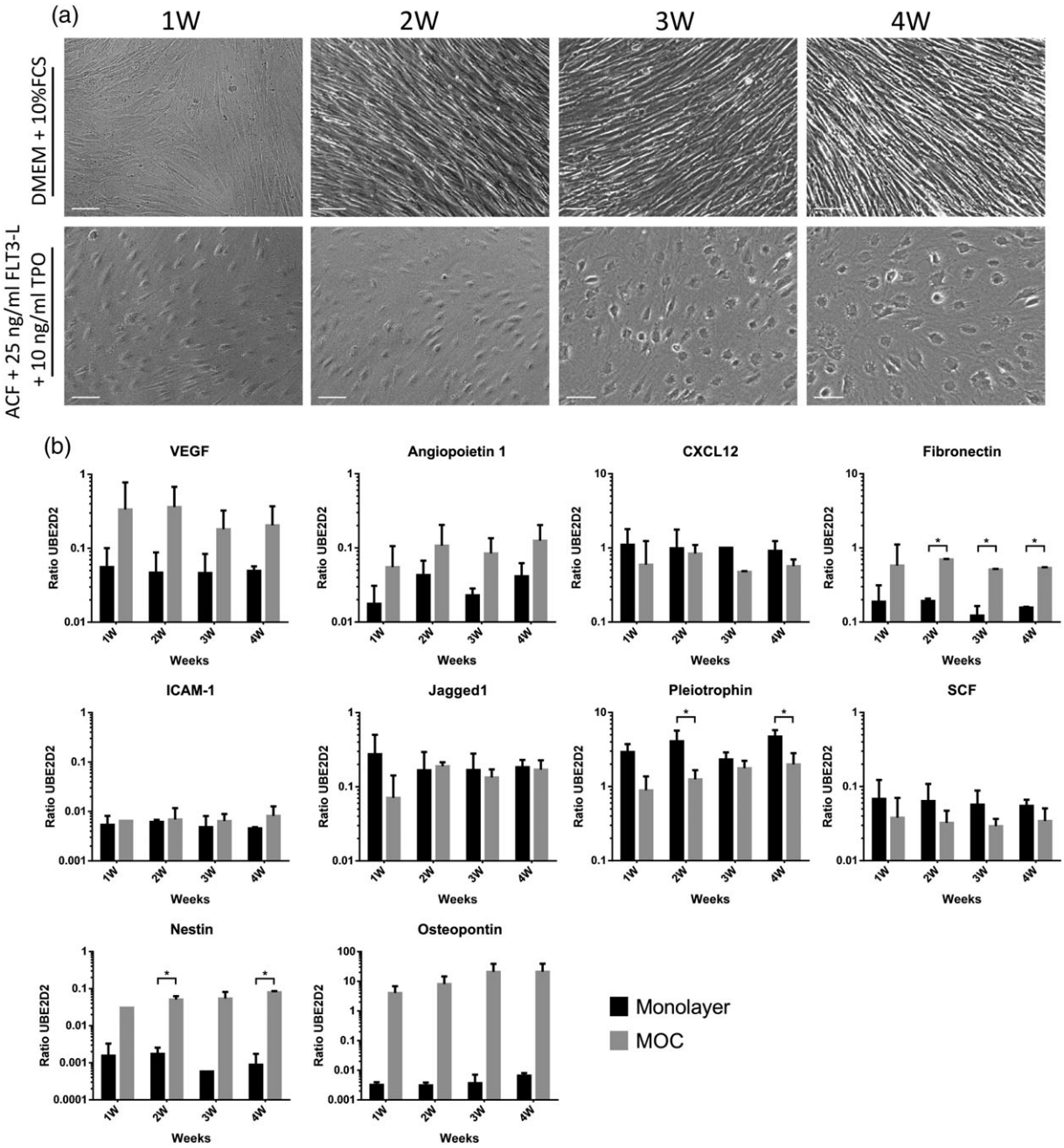

FIGURE 4 MSCs express various bone marrow niche related genes in the ceramic. (a) Comparison of MSCs cultured in a 2D monolayer cultured in DMEM +10% FCS + 1% P/S or ACF + 25 ng/ml FLT3-L + 10 ng/ml TPO +1% P/S over the course of 1, 2, 3 and 4 weeks. MSCs in the latter medium exhibited a poor phenotype while one donor completely died. (b) Expression of various bone marrow niche relevant genes in MSCs cultured for 1, 2, 3 or 4 weeks on the ceramic or in a 2D monolayer. ACF + 25 ng/ml FLT3-L + 10 ng/ml TPO +1% P/S was used as medium. The error bars represent the standard deviation (n = 3 biological replicas)

Sharma et al., 2012). Nestin-expressing MSCs have been described to reside in close proximity to quiescent HSCs within the *in vivo* bone marrow niche (Kunisaki et al., 2013). The ostensible upregulation of the two angiogenesis promoting proteins, angiopoietin 1 and VEGF, could be ascribed to the hypoxic conditions assumed to prevail within the ceramic. Jagged1, SCF, CXCL12 and ICAM-1 were evenly expressed in both cultures. Only pleiotrophin, which is a novel niche factor, was more highly expressed in the 2D culture (Morrison & Scadden, 2014).

The expression levels stayed relatively stable over the course of the 4 weeks, indicating a robust environment for HSPC culture. As mentioned above, the difference in expression levels can probably be ascribed to the different environment present in the scaffold. The tendency of relative higher expression of some marker genes in the 3D culture compared to the 2D counterpart can be explained by the poor general state of the monolayer MSC culture in the serum-free setting. Thus, the expression of the niche supporting genes is maintained by the 3D culture in serum-free conditions, enabling the long-term cultivation of HSCs in the well-conditioned but not differentiation inducing environment.

The bone marrow-mimicking 3D environment allows the cells to grow and interact in an additional dimension, while the rigid surface among other factors promotes the differentiation of the MSCs

(Diederichs et al., 2009). The cellular spread within the ceramic cavities was enabled by an active remodeling of the structural environment by ECM secretion. The deposition of matrix molecules interconnected cavity surfaces by bridge-like structures (Figure S2).

To determine the robustness of the niche, the expression of fibronectin and SCF were again visualized after 4 weeks of culture. After HSPC extraction, the ceramics were fixed in 4% PFA and immunofluorescent staining for fibronectin and SCF was performed. As illustrated in Figure 5, the ceramics were still densely populated after 4 weeks of culture in the specific serum-free HSPC culture medium. The MSCs still expressed SCF on their surface and a web-like fibronectin structure was present. Thus, after 4 weeks, a suitable niche with two key factors, SCF and fibronectin, for HSPC culture was still existent (Abdallah & Kassem, 2008; Broudy, 1997; Oguro et al., 2013).

In conclusion, it can be asserted that all relevant bone marrow niche genes were stably expressed over the course of the 4 weeks after the transition to serum-free conditions. It is uncertain if upregulation of certain genes would yield a better result since the simplicity of the model reduces the comparability to the *in vivo* situation.

3.3 | HSPCs remain their native state after 4 weeks of culture in dynamic conditions

To approximate to the *in vivo* situation, the bone marrow model was built up on the perfused MOC. This microfluidic device presents the possibility to build up a second niche in the insert that is presently solely used as a medium reservoir. The use of the MOC will further allow the addition of the human endothelial cell component in the microfluidic channels and the integration of the bone marrow model into a systemic setup of interconnected organoids (Schimek et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2013).

As mentioned above, after 1 week of static culture, a microenvironment was formed by the MSCs bearing molecular and structural similarity to the *in vivo* bone marrow niche, allowing reduction of the cytokines added to the HSPC culture medium to only two, TPO and FLT3-L. Subsequently, $CD34^+$ HSPCs were added to further complement the artificial niche. The ceramic containing MSCs and HSPCs was transferred to the MOC and cultured for up to 4 weeks.

Using flow cytometry it was possible to demonstrate the presence of $CD34^+CD38^-$ HSPCs within the ceramic after up to 4 weeks of culture (Figure 6a). Although the percentage of $CD34^+CD38^-$HPSCs decreased over time, a significant proportion of the regained cells, on average 31.71%, retained their primitive phenotype after 4 weeks of culture (Figure 6b). Smaller proportions of the population were also positive for the native HSC markers CD90, CD133 and CD49f, thus indicating their potential of repopulating the *in vivo* bone marrow niche (Chou, Chu, Hwang, & Lodish, 2010; Notta et al., 2011). The proportion of these native HSC markers was very similar to the one in the starting population directly after isolation from umbilical cord blood (Figure 6e). The $CD34^-CD38^+$ population stayed stable around 10% (Figure 6c). The $CD34^+CD38^+$ population decreased after week 2 to 5% and remained at this level for the rest of the culture time (Figure 6d).

The percentage decrease of $CD34^+CD38^-$ HSPCs over the course of the 4 weeks might be attributed to a part of the cells differentiating. This assumption is backed up by the fact that total cell numbers were increasing while the percentage of primitive HSPCs declined (Table 2). In fact, total cell count increases from week 1 to week 2 remained more or less stable until week 3 and dropped again after 4 weeks. Nevertheless, a higher total cell count was determined after 4 weeks compared to 1-week cultures. Still, after 4 weeks, roughly one third of the overall cell population consisted of primitive HSPCs. It might also be possible that the decrease in $CD34^+CD38^-$ HSPCs was part of niche adjustments taking place since the amount of HSCs in the human bone marrow is <1% (Chou et al., 2010; Notta et al., 2011).

3.4 | HSPCs extracted from the ceramic retain their characteristic multilineage differentiation potential

After the confirmation that the HSPCs maintained their primitive phenotype by flow cytometry, it was tested whether these cells kept

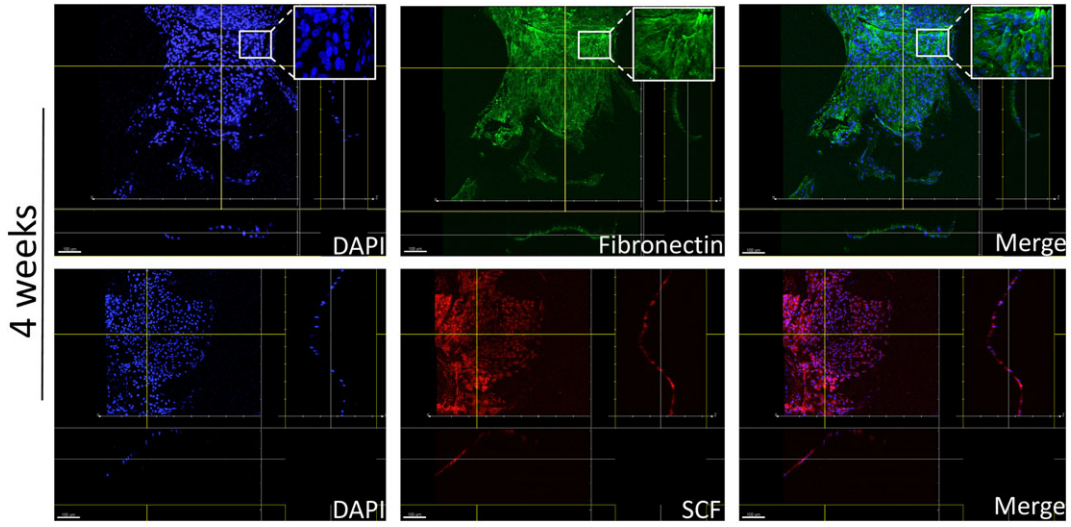

FIGURE 5 After 28 days of culture in serum-free HSC medium the ECM niche components are still intact. Immunofluorescent staining for fibronectin (green) and stem cell factor (SCF; red) of MSCs that were cultured in serum-free HSC culture medium for 4 weeks. The white rectangles depict magnifications of the selected areas. The HSPCs were extracted before the staining. Scale bars are 100 μm (n = 3 biological replicas) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

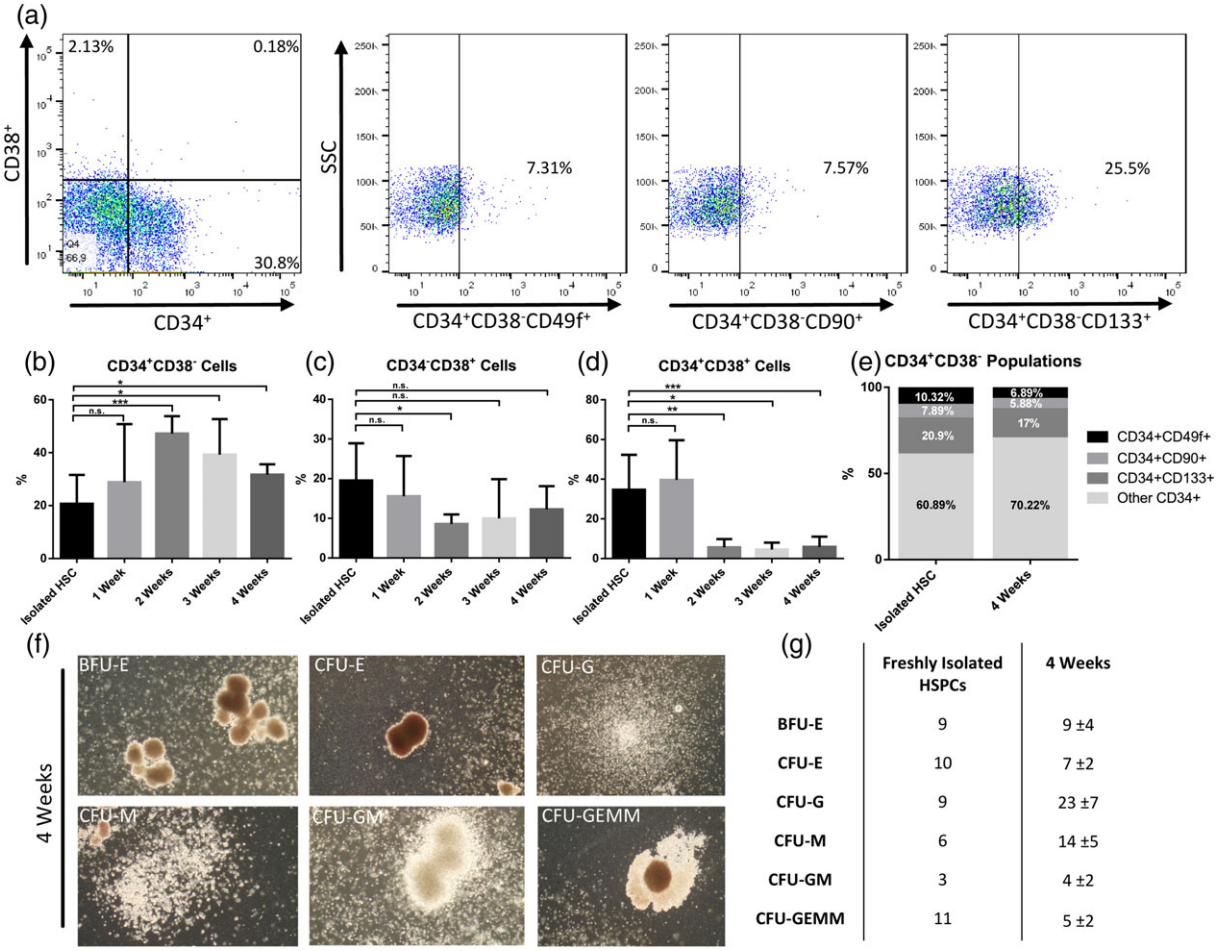

FIGURE 6 HSPCs remain in their native state after 4 weeks culture. (a) Representative FACS plots of HSPCs extracted from the ceramic after 4 weeks of culture. A significant proportion of the cells is still $CD34^+CD38^-$. Additionally, a proportion of $CD34^+CD49f^+$, $CD34^+CD90^+$ and $CD34^+CD133^+$ is measurable (n = 8 biological replicas). (b) Percentages of $CD34^+CD38^-$ cells. After 4 weeks of culture the amount of $CD34^+CD38^-$ cells is still significantly higher in comparison to the starting population directly after isolation. (c) Percentages of $CD34^-CD38^+$ cells. The population declines after week 2. (d) Percentages of $CD34^+CD38^+$ cells. The amount of $CD34^+CD38^+$ cells decreases significantly after week 1 and remains at a low level. The error bars represent the standard deviation. (e) Proportion of $CD34^+CD49f^+$, $CD34^+CD90^+$ and $CD34^+CD133^+$ is similar to the respective population directly after isolation. (f) After 4 weeks of culture, isolated HSPCs are still able to differentiate into BFU-E, CFU-E, CFU-G, CFU-M, CFU-GM and CFU-GEMM colonies. HSPCs were in culture for 1, 2, 3 and 4 weeks before being extracted from the ceramic here, representative results from HSPCs cultured for 4 weeks are shown. (g) Table showing the mean number of counted colonies of the CFU-GEMM assay performed with cells extracted after four weeks of culture (n = 7 biological replicas) or with freshly isolated HSPCs from umbilical cord blood [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 2 Mean absolute cell numbers after 1, 2, 3 and 4 weeks of culture

	1 week	2 weeks	3 weeks	4 weeks
$CD34^-CD38^+$	9905 ± 5426	22 930 ± 20 175	25 167 ± 32 645	16 600 ± 11 106
$CD34^+CD38^+$	18 248 ± 10 765	9281 ± 7465	9267 ± 12 616	13 928 ± 11 890
$CD34^+CD38^-$	52 940 ± 31 855	67 335 ± 70 929	47 858 ± 62 649	39 366 ± 24 583
$CD34^-CD38^-$	13 347 ± 7403	79 339 ± 54 401	88 400 ± 91 368	48 953 ± 41 184

their ability to differentiate. For this, the $CD34^+$cells were separated from the other cells by immunomagnetic separation and a CFU-GEMM assay was performed.

$CD34^+$ cells isolated from the 3D coculture system 1, 2, 3 or 4 weeks after seeding yielded burst-forming unit erythrocyte (BFU-E), CFU-erythrocyte (CFU-E), −granulocyte (CFU-G), −macrophage (CFU-M), −granulocyte, macrophage (CFU-GM) and CFU-GEMM colonies (representative data shown in Figure 6f). BFU-E, CFU-E and CFU-GM numbers were similar to the ones formed from freshly isolated HSPCs. More CFU-G and CFU-M and fewer CFU-GEMM colonies were found in the CFU-GEMM assay performed with the HSPCs isolated from the coculture system in comparison to freshly isolated HSPCs (Figure 6g).

This demonstrates that the cells were still functional and capable of differentiating into their various progenies, indicating a stable maintenance of functional HSPCs within the described model.

The bone marrow model is suitable for various applications. It can be used as a tool to study human niche specific interactions due to its *in vivo*-like microenvironment and as an *ex vivo* $CD34^+$ HSPC expansion system since the numbers of primitive HSPCs increased drastically over the course of the 4 weeks (Table 2).

Only Torisawa et al. (2014) introduced a bone marrow-on-a-chip so far. It was engineered *in vivo* in a mouse employing mouse haematopoietic stem cells and then transferred to a microfluidic device. The mouse HSPCs were subsequently cultured for 1 week on their chip (Kim, Lee, Selimović, Gauvin, & Bae, 2015; Torisawa et al., 2014). In contrast to the bone marrow model of Torisawa et al. (2014), only primary human cells were employed in the here presented work, thus mimicking the human *in vivo* situation as close as possible. Additionally, it was possible to expand the culture time of primitive HSPCs from the commonly presented 1 week to up to 4 weeks, thereby generating a sufficient time span for extensive drug testing. Even though the bone marrow model consists of only two different cell types, the number of cytokines being added could be reduced to two. This simplicity of the medium could lead to fewer unwanted effects on other putative organoids present on the MOC. In the future, with the addition of further cell types it is planned to use cytokine-free medium.

The simple manufacturing process of the MOC offers the possibility to run large-scale substance tests with >40 replicates while still making it easy to extract samples for analysis. This was successfully proven for the MOC-platform by Wagner et al. (2013) by testing troglitazone on a liver skin coculture. Furthermore, the MOC offers the possibility of vascularizing its channels that will lead to a vascularized bone marrow model (Schimek et al., 2013). Jusoh, Oh, Kim, Kim, and Jeon (2015) showed that hydroxyapatite has a positive effect on sprouting angiogenesis, which might be beneficial for the model.

In summary, the herein described 3D coculture system combines a rigid and well-defined scaffold with bone marrow derived MSCs, which build up a suitable environment for the successful long-term culture of primitive HSCs in a dynamic condition. This is the first time a bone marrow model was successfully built up and cultured for a time span of 4 weeks in a microfluidic microphysiological environment.

4 | CONCLUSION

A novel *in vitro* bone marrow model is presented for the first time, capable of long-term culture of primitive HSPCs. The use of a scaffold that mimics the human *in vivo* bone marrow structure and the coculture of MSCs allows us to come closer to the *in vivo* bone marrow niche environment. Combining it with another organoid on the MOC or even with three other organoids on the four-organ chip may also be possible, leading to the generation of a functioning MOC (Maschmeyer, Lorenz et al., 2015; Materne et al., 2015). Besides this application, it could also be used to investigate interactions within the bone marrow niche or as the basis for an effective HSPCs expansion system prior to transplantations.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the supporting information tab for this article.

Figure S1. RNA levels of MSCs cultured in different medium over the course of four weeks of culture RNA concentrations of MSCs cultured in ACF + FLT3-L + TPO + P/S or DMEM + 10%FCS + 1% P/S in a monolayer or in the ceramic scaffold (MOC) over the course of 4 weeks. At the beginning of the culture, 500,000 cells were seeded into each environment. All RNAs were eluted in the same volume.

Figure S2. MSCs alter the environment of the ceramic scaffold by secreting ECM and differentiating into other cell types The MSCs change the architecture of the ceramic by building bridge structures over the cavities.

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