RESEARCH NOTE

Improving energy efficiency of electrochemical blackwater disinfection through sequential reduction of suspended solids and chemical oxygen demand [version 1; referees: 1 approved]

Brian T. Hawkins¹,², Tate W. Rogers³, Christopher J. Davey⁴, Mikayla H. Stoner¹,², Ewan J. McAdam⁴, Brian R. Stoner¹,²

¹Center for WaSH-AID, Duke University, Durham, NC, 27701, USA
²Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Duke University, Durham, NC, 27701, USA
³Triangle Environmental Health Initiative, Durham, NC, 27701, USA
⁴Cranfield Water Sciences Institute, Cranfield University, Cranfield, Bedfordshire, MK43 0AL, UK

Abstract

Onsite reuse of blackwater requires removal of considerable amounts of suspended solids and organic material in addition to inactivation of pathogens. Previously, we showed that electrochemical treatment could be used for effective pathogen inactivation in blackwater, but was inadequate to remove solids and organics to emerging industry standards. Further, we found that as solids and organics accumulate with repeated recycling, electrochemical treatment becomes less energetically sustainable. Here, we describe a pilot study in which concentrated blackwater is pretreated with ultrafiltration and granular activated carbon prior to electrochemical disinfection, and show that this combination of treatments removes 75-99% of chemical oxygen demand, 92-100% of total suspended solids, and improves the energy efficiency of electrochemical blackwater treatment by an order of magnitude.

Keywords

Sustainability, water reuse, electrochemical disinfection, ultrafiltration, activated carbon, blackwater

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Corresponding author: Brian T. Hawkins (brian.hawkins@duke.edu)

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Introduction

Electrochemical disinfection is a promising approach to sustainable decentralized waste water treatment because it enables oxidative inactivation of pathogens without requiring onsite storage of disinfecting chemicals (e.g., sodium hypochlorite or chlorine gas). In systems that utilize recycled blackwater for flushing, these processes become more energy intensive over time as solids accumulate in the process liquid\(^1\). Understanding how the constituents of blackwater that accumulate in such systems contribute to the decreased efficiency of electrochemical disinfection is key to developing remediation strategies that will enable practical implementation and long service lifetimes.

Previously, we investigated the effects on electrochemical disinfection energy efficiency of removing total suspended solids (TSS) with improved settling tank design\(^2\) and removing chemical oxygen demand (COD) with granular activated carbon (GAC)\(^3\) and found that only the latter resulted in a significant improvement. This implied that soluble COD was the principle cause of diminishing efficiency with repeated recycling of blackwater. However, because we had not completely removed TSS in any of these studies, we could not conclude definitively that suspended solids did not contribute. We also found that the same GAC media could remove a substantial fraction of blackwater COD in multiple treatment batches—suggesting that the filter medium was not fully saturated in these experiments—but that within each batch up to half of COD could not be readily removed by GAC\(^3\). Thus, we hypothesized that this poorly adsorbing fraction of COD was associated with suspended particulate matter not removed by settling or GAC, and further, that successful removal of this fraction from blackwater would improve the energy efficiency of subsequent electrochemical disinfection. We tested this hypothesis in a pilot study in which blackwater was treated by cross-flow ultrafiltration followed by a GAC packed bed filter, and assessed the effect of these combined pretreatments on the energy required for subsequent electrochemical disinfection.

Methods

Blackwater was collected from a prototype blackwater recycling toilet system previously described\(^4\). Procedures for the collection of human urine and feces used to generate blackwater were reviewed and approved by Duke University’s Institutional Review Board. Characteristics of the untreated blackwater used in this study are shown in Table 1.

Ultrafiltration was carried out in 8–12 L batches by passing blackwater through an ultra-high molecular weight polyethylene tubular membrane with a nominal pore size of 0.02 µm and a total active surface area of 0.07 m\(^2\) (Porex, Norcross, GA, USA) with a centrifugal pump (Lowara, Montecchio Maggiore, Italy) run in a recirculation configuration. In these experiments, flow was maintained between 28 and 30 L min\(^{-1}\) for a cross flow velocity in the retentate channel of 3.7 – 3.9 m s\(^{-1}\). Transmembrane pressures were monitored by pressure transducers (Omega PX039-015G5V, Omega, Norwalk, CT) on either side of the membrane connected to an Omega OM-DAQ-USB-2400 data logger, and during ultrafiltration typically ranged between 2 and 2.5 bar. Transmembrane flux was monitored by placing the permeate collecting vessel on a balance connected to a computer and using ADAM DU software to log changes in mass, and during ultrafiltration typically ranged between 80 and 120 kg m\(^{-2}\) h\(^{-1}\) (Figure S1).

Ultrafiltered blackwater was passed through a packed bed column filter with Aquacarb® 830, an 8 x 30 mesh-sized GAC derived from bituminous coal (Evoqua, Pittsburgh, PA), as the medium. The filter consisted of 1.8 kg GAC in a PVC pipe (9.4 cm inner diameter) with a media length of 58 cm, a media volume of ~ 4 L, and an interstitial volume of ~1 L. Liquid was pumped through at a rate of ~1 L min\(^{-1}\) in a recirculation configuration for up to 18 h. In a subset of experiments, COD was monitored during the first ~2 h of GAC treatment to evaluate the COD removal kinetics of GAC with ultrafiltered blackwater in comparison to untreated blackwater (Figure S2).

Electrochemical disinfection was performed as previously described in an 8-L HDPE tank with a commercially available electrochemical cell (Hayward Salt&Swim 3C) run at 24 VDC. Measurements of water quality parameters and microbial enumeration were performed as previously described in detail\(^4\). Energy required for disinfection was calculated as previously described and shown in Figure S3.

Statistical analyses and visualizations were performed using GraphPad Prism v7.04.

Results

Results are presented in Figure 1. Ultrafiltration significantly reduced blackwater COD by an average of 55% (range 32–74%) and TSS by an average of 97% (range 92–100%). Subsequent treatment with GAC was associated with further reduction of COD to near or below the ISO 30500 category B standard (150 mg/L) for an average total COD reduction of 87% (range 75–99%). These reductions in COD and TSS were associated with a reduced energy demand for the electrochemical process to achieve the desired disinfection threshold (MPN < 5/ml) to an average of 8.5 kJ/L, which represents an order of magnitude improvement compared with the same process using untreated blackwater (70 kJ/L).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total solids (mg / L)</td>
<td>2001 – 2634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total suspended solids (mg / L)</td>
<td>180 – 667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turbidity (NTU)</td>
<td>248 – 461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color (Pt/Co units)</td>
<td>1600 – 1800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pH</td>
<td>8.88 – 9.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most probable number (# / ml)</td>
<td>1.1 x 108 (all)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical oxygen demand (mg / L)</td>
<td>864 – 1818</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NTU: Nephlometric Turbidity Units

Table 1. Characteristics of untreated blackwater.
Conclusions
Treating blackwater first with ultrafiltration, then with activated carbon, followed by electrochemical treatment, has specific advantages. The removal of suspended solids by ultrafiltration appears to allow for faster adsorption of soluble species by subsequent GAC treatment, which could make GAC treatment in a single-pass configuration practical and thus eliminate the need for a recirculating pump (Supplemental Data, Figure S2). Further, the removal of suspended solids minimizes the tendency of the GAC packed bed filter to clog, thus obviating the need for frequent backwashing.

As predicted, removal of both suspended and soluble COD reduced the energy required to achieve the desired disinfection threshold with the electrochemical process (Figure 1C). This lowered energy requirement allows for shorter runtimes on the electrochemical process, which will prolong the service lifetime of the electrodes. Furthermore, disinfection of pretreated blackwater is achieved with much shorter chlorine contact times compared to untreated blackwater, which means that system components (plumbing, tanks) in contact with the process liquid will have less exposure to oxidative chemistry and thus be less prone to degradation over time. Thus, though these results are preliminary, they point to an improved practical approach to onsite blackwater treatment.

Data availability
Raw datasets are available on OSF, project “Improving energy efficiency of electrochemical blackwater disinfection through sequential reduction of suspended solids and chemical oxygen demand”, https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/GRMJ.

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Zero “No rights reserved” data waiver (CC0 1.0 Public domain dedication).

Grant information
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The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.
**Supplementary material**

**Figure S1: Ultrafiltration runs.** Shown are plots of the transmembrane flux (in red) and transmembrane pressure (TMP, in blue) for each of the five ultrafiltration runs in this report.

Click here to access the data.

**Figure S2: Effect of ultrafiltration of COD removal by GAC.** Shown are plots of COD in one experiment with untreated blackwater and two with ultrafiltered blackwater. Blackwater was treated in 8-L batches by continuous recirculation at ~1 L min⁻¹.

Click here to access the data.

**Figure S3: Disinfection curves and energy calculations.** Shown are plots of each electrochemical disinfection run following ultrafiltration and GAC treatment. Black dotted line indicates the disinfection threshold (MPN < 5/ml), red dotted line indicates the disinfection energy (E_d) interpolated from where the plot crosses the disinfection threshold.

Click here to access the data.

**References**


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Open Peer Review

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Version 1

Referee Report 06 November 2018
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Susan K. De Long
Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA

This work investigated the value of ultrafiltration (UF) and GAC treatment for removal of solids and dissolved organics for application in a novel toilet based on electrochemical treatment. Although this is only a technical note, I found details lacking that made it difficult to fully appreciate the value of the work. Additionally, the authors appeared to focus only on the energy involved in the electrochemical treatment with and without the UF and GAC. A more comprehensive assessment considering the life cycle costs and energy use associated with UF and GAC would be more useful. Also, the method used to assess disinfection is very basic and may fail to detect critical classes of pathogens.

Specific comments and suggestions:

1. Given that disinfection is a critical aspect of this work, I suggest the authors clearly explain the methods used in the text. What media was used and what is expected to grow on this media, for example? Why not run total and fecal coliform analyses? Additionally, I am concerned that this approach does not provide a full picture of disinfection efficacy. The methods used do not provide information regarding protozoa or viruses, both of which I expect to be of critical importance. I suggest the authors specifically acknowledge these limitations in the text to avoid any miscommunication. Further, I would suggest that future studies consider a much broader range of microbial pathogens. The authors might also give consideration to whether bacteria can become viable but not culturable (VNBC) upon electrochemical treatment.

2. What is the energy and material cost associated with UF and GAC? How long can the UF and GAC filters last before they need to be replaced with normal use? How would spent GAC be handled?

3. It would be nice to comment on the possibility of phosphorus recovery.

4. In Fig. S3, are all these data for after UF & GAC? Please clarify. It would be nice to see some comparisons with and without UF and GAC.

5. It would be helpful to more clearly explain how the electrochemical system works/will be operated such that oxidative plumbing and tanks will have less exposure to oxidative chemistry.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes
Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Referee Expertise:** Environmental engineering, biological treatment processes, applied microbiology, and molecular biology tools

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.