



## Recent trends and perspectives in reconstruction and regeneration of intra/extra-oral wounds using tissue-engineered oral mucosa equivalents

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### ABSTRACT

Many conditions, including cancer, trauma, and congenital anomalies, can damage the oral mucosa. Multiple cultures of oral mucosal cells have been used for biocompatibility tests and oral biology studies. In recent decades, the clinical translation of tissue-engineered products has progressed significantly in developing tangible therapies and inspiring advancements in medical science. However, the reconstruction of an intraoral mucosa defect remains a significant challenge. Despite the drawbacks of donor-site morbidity and limited tissue supply, the use of autologous oral mucosa remains the gold standard for oral mucosa reconstruction and repair. Tissue engineering offers a promising solution for repairing and reconstructing oral mucosa tissues. Cell- and scaffold-based tissue engineering approaches have been employed to treat various soft tissue defects, suggesting the potential clinical use of tissue-engineered oral mucosa (TEOMs). In this review, we first cover the recent trends in the reconstruction and regeneration of extra-/intra-oral wounds using TEOMs. Next, we describe the current status and challenges of TEOMs. Finally, future strategic approaches and potential technologies to support the advancement of TEOMs for clinical use are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

Significant tissue damage and loss of integrity in the oral mucosa caused by major trauma, congenital deformities, and pathological lesions that are unamenable for primary closure pose significant challenges to treatment. These critically sized oral mucosa defects cannot be left open owing to the risk of microbial infection, excessive fluid loss, pain, foreign material contamination, wound contracture, and scarring when healed by secondary intention [1]. Therefore, it is crucial to cover these defects with tissue or biomaterial grafts to prevent severe functional deficits, such as difficulties in chewing, swallowing, and speech, and to promote proper wound healing. Various reconstructive surgical methods have been employed for intraoral wounds and soft tissue defects, including split and full-thickness skin grafts, free oral mucosa grafts, local flaps, pedicled distant flaps, and microvascular flap

transfers. While autologous grafts from other epithelial tissues remain the gold standard for critical-sized defects, this approach has drawbacks, such as donor-site morbidity, limited tissue availability, and poor integration. Therefore, alternative approaches are needed to replace or regenerate intraoral wounds and oral mucosa defects. Tissue engineering is a promising solution to address the limitations of autologous grafts, offering a way to compensate for the lack of autologous tissue and avoid the complications associated with graft harvesting. Thus, regenerative medicine and tissue engineering have contributed significantly to our understanding of tissue regeneration mechanisms and the development of reconstructive products for transplantation into tissue defects. These advances are of significant interest in oral and cranio-maxillofacial surgery.

Previously, we reviewed the progress of tissue-engineered oral mucosa (TEOM), mostly at pre-clinical and clinical levels [2]. In this

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updated review, we focus on recent trends in reconstructing and regenerating extra- and intraoral wounds using tissue engineering of the autologous oral mucosa, emphasizing its clinical relevance instead of in vitro models for research evaluation. Furthermore, this review highlights the potential strategies of TEOMs, regardless of their components (acellular/cellular, natural/synthetic biomaterials, and monolayered/bilayered), and discusses perspectives and future directions to expedite clinical translation in regenerative dentistry.

## 2. Overview of the functions and structure of oral mucosa

The oral mucosa performs several clinical functions, including barrier protection, sensation, and secretion. The oral cavity is constantly exposed to mechanical, chemical, and biological challenges from daily activities and an intrinsically moist environment, and its primary function is to protect the underlying tissues from life-threatening trauma, infection, and dehydration. This barrier protection is achieved by multilayered oral epithelial cells, cell-cell junctions, and immune cells, which serve as both physical and immune barriers [3].

The oral mucosa comprises three layers. The surface is structured by a squamous stratified epithelial layer consisting of keratinocytes, with thickness and keratinization varying according to the region and functional requirements (i.e., masticatory and lining mucosa) [4]. Underneath the epithelium lies the lamina propria, a layer of connective tissue composed of blood vessels, nerves, fibroblasts, and macrophages. Type I collagen fibrils form a major component of the extracellular matrix (ECM). The undulating projections of the deeper layers of the epithelium were attached to the underlying papillary projections of the lamina propria. The nanostructure of the basement membrane lies underneath the epithelium and supports the connection of the lamina propria through hemidesmosomes. [5]. Some regions also have a submucosal layer containing adipose tissue, minor salivary glands, vasculature, lymphoid tissue, and muscles [6].

Restoring oral mucosa functions and structures can be achieved by enhancing regenerative abilities or developing biological tissue substitutes that compensate for the lost structures and functions. Tissue engineering has great potential for effectively facilitating reconstruction without the need for autologous intact tissue harvesting by generating a bioengineered solution. Options include using an oral mucosa epithelial cell sheet, off-the-shelf biomaterials such as acellular matrices, or a newly engineered equivalent scaffold seeded with cells consisting of the oral mucosa.

## 3. Updates of tissue-engineered oral mucosa (TEOM)

### 3.1. Clinical application for extraoral wound treatment

Based on recent literature reviews of TEOMs for human clinical use [7–9], along with our own research, a significant breakthrough and noteworthy development has been observed. Since 2015, our previous review was published, three autologous TEOMs have become available on the market worldwide.

#### 3.1.1. Corneal epithelium

Two TEOMs have been commercialized in Japan as therapeutic options for limbal stem cell deficiency and severe ocular surface diseases. The first product, a cultured autologous oral mucosa epithelial cell sheet (COMECs) (Ocural®, J-TEC, Gamagori, Aichi, Japan), was developed using a cell sheet engineering (CSE) system. It was first used in a clinical trial by Nishida *et al.* [10] to treat bilateral limbal stem cell deficiency. One crucial step in the CSE system is to harvest intact cell sheets from the culture surface without disturbing the signaling proteins and molecules that promote cellular functions and biological processes. Among several systems designed to harvest cell sheets without using enzymes such as trypsin, autologous COMECs generated in temperature-responsive culture dishes were successfully transplanted into four patients for the first

time in 2004. This groundbreaking study confirms the clinical applicability of COMECs transplantation in restoring visual acuity in patients with bilateral limbal stem cell deficiency. Since then, autologous COMECs have been used to reconstruct severe ocular surface diseases and have been evaluated by numerous institutes, demonstrating their safety, feasibility, and effectiveness in restoring visual function, as evidenced by their clinical success rates and long-term follow-up [11].

Another notable product is a bi-layered TEOM consisting of autologous oral mucosa keratinocytes and denuded human amniotic membrane (hAM) (Sakracy®, Hirosaki LI Inc., Hirosaki, Aomori, Japan). This product originated in a human clinical trial reported by Nakamura *et al.* in 2004 [12]. Clinical trials of ex vivo cultivated oral mucosal epithelial transplantation, known as COMET, have also been conducted worldwide [13] and have been applied for treating the scar phase of severe ocular surface disorders [14]. As a surgical waste with no ethical issues, hAM is a sufficient, cost-effective, readily available biomaterial that serves as a scaffold for TEOM. Its clinical usefulness stems from its biocompatibility, low immunogenicity, and various beneficial biological and mechanical properties, including anti-inflammatory and antifibrotic effects and transparency [15]. The safety and efficacy of COMET and its long-term follow-up for symblepharon release and fornix reconstruction in eyes with chronic cicatrization have also been demonstrated [16]. However, the behavior of oral keratinocytes in grafts and their long-term survival after transplantation remain unclear. Therefore, researchers must evaluate the presence of oral keratinocytes on the ocular surface to confirm the clinical outcomes of COMECs and COMET. Therefore, there is a need for a univocal oral keratinocyte marker to identify regenerated oral mucosa and understand clinical outcomes [7,17]. Recent case reports on COMECs transplantation concluded that progenitor/stem cells originating from autologous oral keratinocytes were successfully engrafted [18]. Although fabricating COMECs and COMET incurs high healthcare costs because they are regenerative medical products for orphan diseases, their advancements have significantly propelled the tissue engineering of the oral mucosa. As a result, oral keratinocytes have emerged as significant players in regenerative medicine, leading to the reconstruction and regeneration of extraoral epithelial tissue.

#### 3.1.2. Urethral epithelium

The autologous tissue-engineered buccal mucosa (TEBM), as another TEOM, has been used for urethral reconstruction as a substitute for autologous buccal mucosa graft (MukoCell®, Urotiss Europe GmbH, Dortmund, Germany). Initially approved by Germany, it was authorized as an advanced medicinal drug product by the European Medicine Agency (EMA) and is now available on the market [19]. The prototype of MukoCell® was initially generated as an in vitro TEBM, where oral keratinocytes and fibroblasts were seeded together onto de-epidermized dermis [20]. Subsequently, clinical applications for the therapeutic use of TEBM and its clinical outcomes in five patients were reported, resulting in the survival of three patients with TEBMs in a 9-year follow-up [21,22]. Barbagli *et al.* presented the first case study of urethroplasty using the current form of MukoCell® for 12 patients. TEBM was fabricated by seeding epithelial cells obtained from the buccal mucosa on a biocompatible collagen scaffold and cultured for three weeks, indicating a protocol change with a different scaffold and without the use of oral fibroblasts [23]. Afterward, according to studies by Ram Liebig *et al.* and Karapanos *et al.*, a biodegradable membrane and a protein-containing biodegradable scaffold of animal origin was used as a scaffold, respectively [19,24]. Therefore, the exact composition of the scaffold used in MukoCell®, a substitute for autologous buccal mucosa graft, is unknown [22]. Schwab *et al.* concluded that the most suitable collagen-based biodegradable membrane to fabricate TEBM for genitourinary reconstruction was a bi-layered collagen matrix in an in vitro study [25]. Since then, TEBM has demonstrated acceptable clinical outcomes and success rates in various human clinical applications, including multi-centered studies [8,26–28]. In terms of the clinical setting as a regenerative medicinal product, this bi-layered graft

possesses remarkable features, including the unit size of its graft (2.8 × 3.8 cm) [24,29] fabricated by seeding non-split autologous buccal mucosa keratinocytes of passage 1 and durability that allows suturing to surrounding tissue [19,29]. These features are surgeon-friendly during implantation, making the development of MukoCell® admirable and encouraging for investigators and clinicians.

### 3.1.3. Other epithelia

According to Maurizi *et al.* [7], Ocural®, Sakracy®, and MukoCell® are successful examples of tissue-engineered epithelia that have bridged the gap between pre-clinical translational research and human clinical application of the commercialized product (availability of the final product). Moreover, another TEOM of autologous oral epithelial cell sheets has successfully treated ulcerative esophageal contracture, a common complication of endoscopic submucosal dissection (ESD) [11]. Since the pilot study of this novel therapy combining ESD with TEOM transplantation by Ohki *et al.* [30], several clinical applications of this surgical intervention have been completed and are ongoing, indicating that the grafts show preventive effects on scar formation and facilitate the re-epithelialization of ulceration after ESD [11]. Recently, they reported a novel system for air transportation of TEOM for esophageal repair in remote hospitals [31].

Despite being at the pre-clinical stage, promising *in vivo* studies of TEOMs for extraoral TEOM use have been conducted since 2015. Chen *et al.* generated TEOMs consisting of oral keratinocytes seeded on a decellularized amniotic membrane. When implanted into wounds in the uterus of rats, they showed that TEOM had great potential for preventing fibrosis and promoting regeneration of the endometrial epithelium [32]. Fukahori *et al.* reported the reconstruction of vocal fold mucosa in dogs by transplanting organotypically cultured TEOM fabricated by seeding autologous oral keratinocytes onto collagen gels in which oral fibroblasts were repopulated, leading to the successful restoration of vocal fold mucosa [33]. Additionally, Guzmán-Urbe *et al.* demonstrated the potential application of autologous bilayered TEOMs as a viable alternative source of tissue-engineered skin for treating diabetic ulcers in patients with diabetes mellitus [34].

The unique clinical characteristics of the oral mucosa have been attributed to the wide use of TEOMs for extraoral grafting, which include easy accessibility, minimal invasiveness, and no aesthetic problems when performing a small biopsy under simple local anesthesia. Moreover, the anatomical, histological, and physiological features of the oral mucosa, including high regenerative capacity, abundance of vascularization, absence of a cornified envelope, lack of hair, and easy handling due to its mechanical properties, are useful and favorable for manufacturing cell-based products. These encouraging properties have implications for other epithelial tissue reconstructions [6,34,35].

## 3.2. Clinical application for intraoral wound treatment

The regeneration of oral mucosa defects in patients is of utmost importance. Although there have been significant advances in the use of TEOMs for extraoral epithelial reconstruction, commercially available TEOMs for intraoral applications are still lacking. In addition, new human clinical applications and pilot studies on TEOMs for reconstructing intraoral mucosa defects are scarce [2,8].

### 3.2.1. Bi-layered TEOM

Our review of the literature after 2015 revealed only two pilot studies on the intraoral clinical applications of TEOMs. Sieira Gil *et al.* demonstrated unique techniques to replace the skin surface with full-thickness TEOMs using fibula flap grafts and fibula flap prelamination [36]. Their TEOMs, fabricated using autologous oral keratinocytes grown on a plasma-based scaffold with oral fibroblasts, were used to regenerate keratinized oral mucosal grafts for future placement of dental implants into jaw bones reconstructed by the fibula [36,37]. Moreover, Amemiya *et al.* reported five clinical cases of reconstruction of relatively

small-sized oral mucosa defects with bi-layered TEOMs consisting of autologous oral keratinocytes and hAM, suggesting hAM as a useful biomaterial and a composite cultured with oral mucosal epithelial cells as a feasible graft [38].

Although TEOMs have been used in pre-clinical settings, Roh *et al.* developed a completely autologous TEOM using fibrin glue made from autologous blood samples as a scaffold [39,40]. TEOM, consisting of oral mucosa epithelial cells and oral fibroblasts, was transplanted into intraoral mucosa defects in rats, resulting in the rapidly healing oral mucosal and soft-tissue defects without scarring. Moreover, there was a pilot study of three cases of mandibular reconstruction with pre-fabricated and Integra®-prelaminated vascularized fibula flaps [41], which is a similar approach to the report of Sieira Gil *et al.* Integra® is a composite graft for dermal regenerative scaffold, with a porous layer made of cross-linked bovine type I collagen and chondroitin-6-sulfate glycosaminoglycan and an outer layer made of a thin silicone sheet. A few more case reports used Integra® for oral mucosa defects after tumor resection [42–44].

### 3.2.2. Epithelial cell sheet

Apart from bi-layered TEOMs, there have been no clinical studies to reconstruct full-thickness oral mucosa defects using autologous oral mucosa epithelial cell sheets owing to several drawbacks of clinical outcomes, such as difficult handling attributed to their fragility, blister formation by mechanical forces, and severe wound contraction [2].

### 3.2.3. Acellular dermal substitute and a new regenerative therapy

In terms of dermal substitutes for oral tissue regeneration, collagen is a major biomaterial with long-term results and many studies on its clinical applications. It is a natural polymer and a major component of the ECM of the lamina propria and is known for its low immunogenicity, high biocompatibility, and convenient extraction procedures [45]. Collagen-based biomaterials offer advantages in generating TEOMs, including both acellular and cellular constructs with incorporated oral fibroblasts, available in various forms such as hydrogels, sponges, fibrillar forms, or membranes [46]. Since 2015, several single-center case studies have demonstrated the efficacy of collagen matrix membranes in covering the oral mucosa, serving as effective substitutes for autologous grafts [46–48]. In addition to collagen matrices, human-made ECMs such as the human acellular dermal matrix (hADM) have been applied as graft materials for oral mucosa defects [49,50]. Furthermore, at the pre-clinical stage, hAM obtained by seeding oral keratinocytes shows great potential as a valuable and feasible biomaterial for oral mucosa reconstruction [51,52]. As an acellular matrix, there has been growing interest in hAM for use in soft and hard tissue reconstruction in the oral cavity owing to their biological and mechanical properties, despite the disadvantages of cost and preservation methods [6,53]. According to literature reviews by Paternoster and Vranckx and Allen *et al.* [8,9], dermal substitutes such as TEOM, collagen matrices, and hADM have been mainly applied for periodontal and peri-implant tissue regeneration to increase keratinized gingiva and soft tissue volume since 2015. Nonetheless, Li *et al.* developed a polymer-integrated amnion scaffold for cleft palate repair with great potential for wound healing in both soft and hard tissues [54].

Polyglycolic acid (PGA) sheets (Neoveil®, Gunze Ltd., Ayabe, Kyoto, Japan), a soft, non-woven fabric with its fixation using fibrin glue spray, have been utilized in surgical procedures to treat wounds, prevent bleeding, and reduce leaking during surgeries on the liver, pancreas, and lung due to their strong affixation to the wound [55–58]. Recently, the technique of MCFP (mucosal defects covered with fibrin glue and the polyglycolic acid sheet) has been used in oral and maxillofacial surgery to repair open wounds of the oral mucosa. After the first report in 2010 on reconstructing the tongue mucosa [59], Takeuchi *et al.* evaluated the clinical outcomes of MCFP for partial glossectomy, suggesting preventive effects on postoperative pain and wound contracture [60]. This technique has also been applied to cover the surface of the jawbones

with or without buccal fat pad grafts [61–63]. A comparison of the clinical outcomes between the groups receiving MCFP and split-thickness skin grafts revealed that MCFP reduced the time of the operation, bleeding during the operation, and days of hospitalization [64].

### 3.2.4. Hallmarks of wound healing in oral mucosa vs. skin

In general, it is well-recognized that oral mucosa wounds heal faster than skin wounds with minimal scarring, which is a specific feature of oral mucosa wound healing [6,35,65]. In a study on partial glossectomy wounds, PGA sheet grafts remained intact, and re-epithelization of the mucosal defect was successfully completed [60,66]. However, to the best of our knowledge, there have been no studies on the clinical application of this technique for skin defects, suggesting that MCFP could be a novel regenerative therapy for intraoral wound closure. This ability of oral mucosa wound healing by secondary intention could be attributed to various intrinsic and extrinsic factors that differ from skin wound healing, such as the unique environment of the oral cavity, inflammation, angiogenesis, keratinocyte proliferation, fibroblasts, the ECM, and molecular cues [67].

Iglesias-Bartolome et al. [68] reported that the human oral mucosa epithelium was primed for wound healing, resulting in a higher regenerative capacity than the skin. They revealed that SOX2 and PITX1 transcriptional regulators are vital in wound repair and tissue regeneration. Our recent gene expression data from human lip epithelial layers were consistent with their study, showing higher differential expression levels of molecular signatures in the oral mucosa > lip vermilion and those in the lip vermilion > the skin [69] [Database: GEO accession (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>) (accessed on 26 Jan 2023), reference number GSE222604 and GSE222605)]. In addition to gene expression levels, compared with the skin, the unique environment of the oral mucosa bathed in saliva contributes to pro-wound healing mechanisms, such as antimicrobial peptides and local growth factors [6,35]; epidermal growth factor (EGF) is one of the key factors with positive biological effects on wound healing [67]. Our recent study on quality control and pharmacological manipulation of oral keratinocytes used in regenerative medicine revealed that EGF plays a crucial role in regulating oral keratinocyte cell motility and proliferative capacity, supporting the fact that the moist environment bathed in saliva is beneficial for re-epithelialization of the oral mucosa when healing by secondary intention [70]. Collectively, MCFP benefits from the intrinsic characteristics of oral mucosa wound healing, although it is incomparable to TEOMs owing to their different wound healing modalities.

## 4. Current status and tribulations of tissue-engineered oral mucosa

Although the concept of TEOMs is expected to cause a paradigm shift in therapeutic options to circumvent the disadvantages of autologous grafts, its clinical success is limited to minor and simple defects [38]. Therefore, tissue engineering principles must be followed to regenerate large-sized and more complexly structured oral mucosa. Furthermore, owing to the limitations of intraoral applications and the status quo of TEOM, oral mucosa tissue engineering remains rudimentary rather than burgeoning, and its clinical applications are far-fetched [8,71]. This is partly due to the lack of scientific information regarding the complex and compact structure of the oral cavity [6,72]. Therefore, it is necessary to recapitulate wound healing in the oral mucosa and emulate the microenvironment and cellular responses associated with autologous oral mucosa grafts. Other studies have developed unique composite TEOMs consisting of three different cell/tissue layers. These *in vitro* models include a three-dimensional (3-D) *in vitro* composite tissue mimicking the natural structure of the alveolar bone with overlying oral mucosa [73] and oral mucosal structures containing submucosal muscles [74]. Because the oral mucosa is highly vascularized, major hurdles encountered in tissue-engineered constructs involve a lack of vascular

supply, especially in large-sized TEOMs [75]. In the skin, poor wound healing results from a lack of vascular networks and ischemia [76]. The amount of blood supply in the skin graft is the primary factor determining the quality of the transplanted grafts [77]. As described in a previous study, pre-vascularization approaches based on the production of microvessels inside tissue-engineered grafts before implantation provide a more immediate blood supply [78]; thus, the technology for fabricating TEOMs must consider methods of autologous skin grafting.

## 5. Potential strategies and future perspectives for the next generation of tissue-engineered oral mucosa

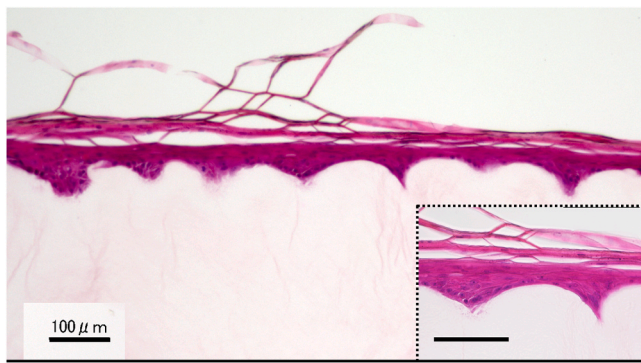
### 5.1. Pre-vascularization

For the clinical success of tissue-engineered constructs after implantation, it is essential to integrate them with host tissues to improve their lifespan. Achieving full adherence and integration of the TEOM in the open wound bed and surrounding oral mucosa requires early re-vascularization [79–81]. Pre-vascularization of the TEOMs is a critical and indispensable strategy for enhancing engraftment. To overcome the limitations of intraoral clinical translation, developing a new generation of TEOMs incorporating advanced technologies to induce vascularization is necessary. Emerging technologies have been developed for TEOMs [82–84]. Significant literature reviews have also reported the facilitation of craniofacial tissue regeneration [85–87]. Studies have shown that to prime TEOMs for rapid wound healing and tissue integration, other cell components, such as endothelial cells, endothelial progenitor cells, pericytes, and mesenchymal stem cells, which can induce vascular network structures and develop re-vascularization, need to be incorporated into the dermal matrix, such as gelatin, collagen, and fibrin, within the TEOMs [82–84]. However, angiogenic cell sources, which are primarily allogeneic, must be addressed. Although potential strategies to incorporate cellular components and vascular network structures are still in the exploratory stage, these novel oral mucosa equivalents are highly likely to lay the groundwork for the next generation of TEOMs, thereby increasing the clinical success rate of TEOM implantation. Re-vascularization and adequate blood supply are essential in any tissue engineering approach, as highlighted in many recent studies [2,8,88,89].

Electrospinning technology has also emerged as a pivotal tool for constructing novel scaffolds, including gingiva [90–92]. It enables various biomaterial customizations based on biodegradability, mechanical resistance, and compliance [93]. In terms of accelerating vascularization after grafting TEOMs, the specific approaches using leptin-encapsulated silk electrospun fiber and collagen electrospun scaffolds with optimized pore structure have shown potential utility for promoting pro-angiogenesis and oral mucosa regeneration [89,92].

### 5.2. Dermo-epidermal junction (DEJ): connective tissue papillae

The DEJ, which allows attachment between the oral mucosa epithelium and the underlying lamina propria *in vivo*, is a crucial aspect to consider when designing TEOMs that recapitulate and mimic the micro- and nanostructures [71,88,94,95] of the native oral mucosa. These structures include connective tissue papillae, an interdigitating complementary structure of the epithelial rete ridges, and a basement membrane between them. In the skin, this undulating microstructure, lacking in most nonhuman primates, provides enhanced mechanical strength and physical and physiological functions such as stem cell niches [96–98], which apply to the oral mucosa. A recent literature review on skin tissue engineering highlighted several emerging strategies for developing rete ridges, such as micromilling, electrospinning, and 3-D printing. These strategies have improved robust *in vitro* biomimetic research models for skin, ultimately enhancing clinical performances and outcomes of tissue-engineered skin substitutes [96,99]. Furthermore, acellular 3-D micropatterned dermal scaffolds, regardless



**Fig. 1.** Representative microscopic appearance of day 11 EVPOME generated on a micropatterned collagen scaffold. The day 11 EVPOME was fabricated as described previously [105]. A continuous, well-differentiated epithelial layer was formed with rete ridge-like structures corresponding to the scaffold micropattern. Original magnification,  $\times 4$  (scale bar = 100  $\mu\text{m}$ ). An image with a higher magnification, boxed by a dotted line, is shown separately at the bottom right. The epithelium was well organized with distinct layers in which the basal cells were well aligned. Original magnification  $\times 20$  (Scale bar = 100  $\mu\text{m}$ ).

of their shape and dimensions, have shown enhanced overall wound closure and wound healing outcomes [100,101], which may be attributed to the recent discovery of a wavy gap, leading to significantly faster wound healing [102].

Scaffold-based tissue engineering plays a key role in facilitating the clinical implementation of TEOMs. However, previous studies on TEOMs have not focused on DEJ restoration despite evidence showing that DEJ formation correlates with the mechanical stress associated with specific signaling molecules [103,104]. Recently, using soft lithography or stainless steel mold systems, we successfully developed a micropatterned collagen scaffold derived from the tilapia scale, mimicking the connective tissue papilla of the oral mucosa for manufacturing an ex vivo produced oral mucosa equivalent (EVPOME) [105,106]. This technology has enabled the development of a DEJ-like interdigitated structure in day 11 EVPOMEs (Fig. 1). Consequently, as a TEOM, EVPOME can withstand constant mechanical abrasion in the oral cavity, including tensile, shear, and repetitive stresses without undergoing plastic deformation or rupture after implantation. This advancement can potentially improve the clinical performance and biological functions of TEOMs.

### 5.3. Dermo-epidermal junction (DEJ): basement membrane

Similar to the undulating microstructure, the basement membrane, as a component of the DEJ, is crucial for TEOMs. The basement membrane is responsible for rigid epidermal–dermal adhesion and epithelial function and for regulating and maintaining biochemical signals between cells and their surrounding tissues [107]. Therefore, creating rete ridge-mimicking micropatterns and developing tissue-engineered basement membranes is essential to promote rapid and robust DEJ formation when fabricating TEOMs [108]. However, fabricating basement membrane mimics tailored to the scaffold is challenging because of their unique nanostructure and composition specific to the oral mucosa. Nonetheless, Jain *et al.* recently highlighted three major strategies for recapitulating the native basement membrane: porous polymeric membranes, hydrogels, and electrospun materials [107]. Recent reports have shown that basement membrane deposition can be enhanced by seeding keratinocytes into a micropatterned scaffold with fibroblasts [109,110]. The spatiotemporal properties of micropatterned scaffolds create a keratinocyte stem cell niche, making top-down scaffold-based tissue engineering approaches promising for basement membrane development [111]. Additionally, bottom-up tissue engineering, partial

block fabrication, and assembly techniques for creating higher-order bioarchitectures with the continuous development of micro-nano technology have shown promise for tissue reconstruction [112,113]. Applying this technique to develop substrates that mimic the native structure and composition of basement membranes could be a favorable strategy for TEOMs [114]. In skin tissue engineering, Malara *et al.* developed a novel technique of cultured epithelial autografts in combination with lasered micro-patterned, electrospun collagen dermal templates and enhanced basement membrane deposition, which may also be applicable to TEOMs [110].

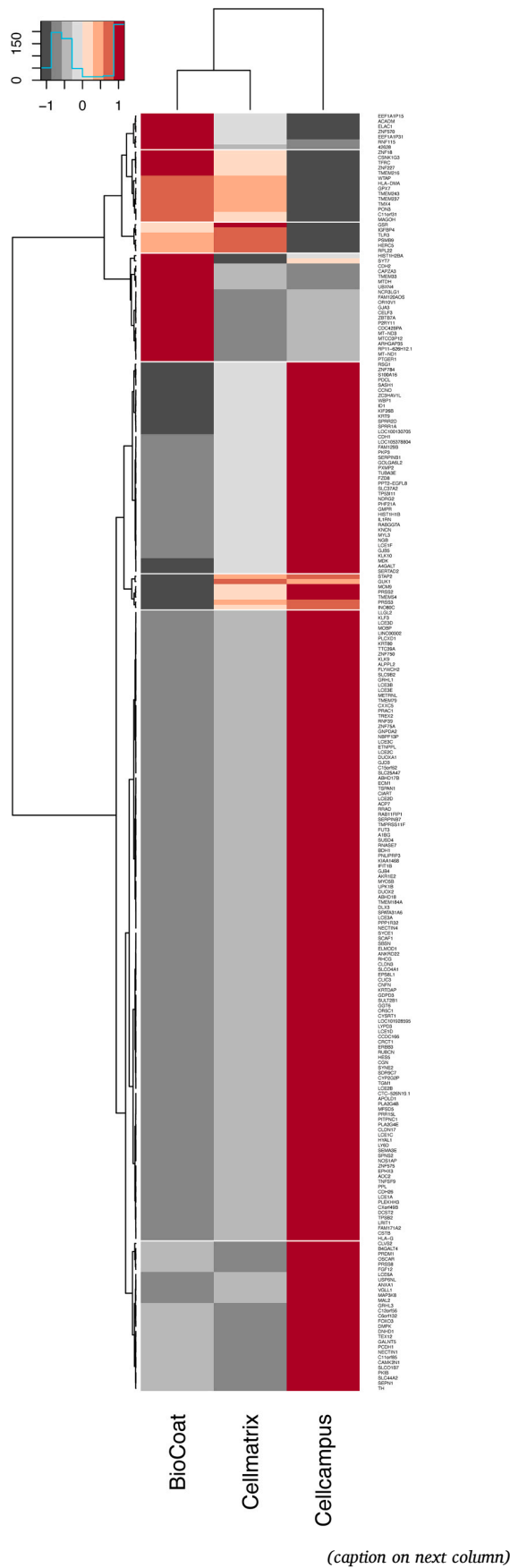
### 5.4. Mechanotransduction

Another insight into scaffold-based TEOMs is soft-tissue mechanotransduction during wound healing, which has been overlooked during the development of TEOMs [115,116]. Owing to the complex structure of the oral cavity, the biomechanical properties of the native oral mucosa differ from those of the oral cavity, such as attached gingiva, alveolar mucosa, hard palate, and buccal mucosa, owing to site-dependent functions and underlying tissue stiffness [117,118]. For example, the abrupt change in keratinization pattern at the mucogingival junction appears to be influenced by the oral mucosa's biomechanical properties and different functions [6,119]. The oral mucosa is constantly subjected to high mechanical stress, such as stretching and compression, to which oral keratinocytes can sense and respond. Therefore, oral keratinocytes interact with the viscoelastic properties of the ECM, thereby influencing their fate and function [108]. The proliferative capacity and migratory ability of cultured epidermal keratinocytes are regulated by matrix stiffness via distinct molecular mechanisms [120,121]. In our preliminary gene expression analysis of oral keratinocytes cultured in 'complete' EpiLife® containing 0.06 mM  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  [70], we observed differential gene expression patterns dependent on the stiffness of the three collagen-based matrices/surfaces (Fig. 2; unpublished data). Notably, when cells were cultured on Cellcampus®, the expression level of the late keratinocyte differentiation genes such as PRSS3 and ZNF750 were upregulated compared to cells cultured on collagen I-coated tissue-culture polystyrene dish [122,123]. Our data suggest that the regional difference in the keratinization pattern of the oral mucosa is partly due to the underlying tissue stiffness resulting from the complex local anatomy of the oral cavity. Therefore, the biomechanical properties of site-dependent intraoral wound beds must be considered in future tissue engineering approaches because the oral mucosa is a mechanosensitive tissue [9].

Collagen-based biomaterials with biomimetic mechanical and topographic features are expected to transduce mechanical loading and enhance multi-tissue repair with matched stiffness. Although the mechanical and biological properties of collagen-based biomaterials remain a significant challenge in clinical settings, innovations based on nature-derived structures and the microenvironments of oral soft tissues could revolutionize the future of collagen-mediated therapeutics [45]. Kinikiglu *et al.* (2015) highlighted the importance of optimal porosity in scaffolds for highly vascularized lamina propria of the oral mucosa, allowing optimal perfusion of the interstitial fluid, imbibition, inosculation, and adequate fibroblast ingrowth during engraftment [124]. However, there is a trade-off between the porosity and mechanical properties of the collagen matrix. Recently, to gain keratinized tissue and increase the thickness of peri-implant soft tissues, grafting a bi-layered collagen matrix consisting of a smooth and compact layer and a porous and 3-D spongy layer has enhanced clinical outcomes [125, 126]. The low-porosity collagen fibers on the surface layer enabled the bilayered collagen scaffold to be sutured to the wound margin, indicating its potential for fabricating TEOMs.

### 5.5. 3-D Bioprinting

The process of scaffold-based tissue engineering for the clinical



**Fig. 2.** Heatmap of differentially expressed genes (DEGs) of three groups in which oral keratinocytes were cultured on collagen-based matrices with different mechanical properties. Oral keratinocytes obtained from seven individuals were cultured for three days on three type I collagen-based matrices/ surfaces with distinctly different mechanical properties in a complete EpiLife® culture medium containing  $Ca^{2+}$  after 0.06 mM, resulting. Three matrices/ surfaces are BioCoat® type I collagen-coated culture dish made of polystyrene (Corning, New York, NY, USA), Cellcampus® (Taki Chemical Co. Ltd., Kago-gawa, Hyogo, Japan), and Cellmatrix® Type I-A (Nitta Gelatin, Osaka, Japan), whose Young's modulus is approximately 3 GPa [Young's Modulus: Modulus of Elasticity Units & Formula (specialchem.com)], 1.78 MPa, and 5 kPa, respectively. RNA was extracted from oral keratinocytes, as previously described [63]. The expression values of cultured oral keratinocytes (N = 7) were used to analyze variance (ANOVA) among the three groups, followed by a paired post hoc test. Among 18912 genes, 247 DEGs were identified by applying a threshold of values of false discovery rate below 0.01. After scaling the mean expression values of individual genes among the three groups, a clustering analysis of 247 DEGs was performed.

translation of TEOMs is closely linked to efficient vascularization strategies incorporating angiogenic cells into the ECM. It involves the modification of micro- and nanostructures as well as the physicochemical properties of native oral mucosa. These technological advancements are expected to produce synergistic effects, leading to the development of biomimetic TEOMs for the next generation [127]. 3-D bioprinting technology is an additive manufacturing process and a promising tool for clinical research and future development. It enables tissue engineers to develop new treatments and medical devices by printing cells and biomaterials to form 3-D structures that support cell growth at a defect site. Using 3-D bioprinting and ECM-based bioinks to mimic the structure of native tissues provides a new direction for tissue regeneration and reconstruction [128]. Owing to the complex and compact structure of the oral cavity, these tools offer unique opportunities for fabricating and emulating the microstructures and microenvironments of oral soft tissues, thereby enabling personalized therapies [129]. In the initial stage of bioprinting, the regeneration of keratinized soft tissue with supporting bone can be considered for composite tissue defects in the oral cavity. However, despite the literature on the bioprinting of TEOMs, most studies remain in vitro and face obstacles hindering the clinical translation of 3-D bioprinted TEOM implantation [129–132]. Collaborations across multidisciplinary fields are necessary to overcome these challenges.

5.6. Delivery of bioactive molecules

Apart from the function of scaffolds as a biomaterial for tissue-engineered construct, it serves as a carrier of various bioactive molecules to transfer onto the oral mucosa defects of the host tissue and promote tissue regeneration after intraoral grafting of TEOM [35,133]. Bioactive molecules, including growth factors as well as small endogenous vesicles such as exosomes and extracellular vesicles, could coordinate and promote cell proliferation, migration, adhesion, and differentiation [6,89,133]. Although direct injection of growth factor(s), such as EGF, transforming growth factor- $\beta$  (TGF- $\beta$ ), basic fibroblast growth factor (bFGF), platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF), vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), hepatocyte growth factor (HGF), insulin growth factor-1 (IGF-1), is a simple way to deliver to improve oral mucosa wound healing, their use for regenerative applications is minimal due to short-acting time and uncontrollable concentration in vivo [35,134]. Similar to the previous report demonstrating the capability of the sustained release of bFGF using a collagen-gelatin sponge to accelerate the regeneration of palatal mucosa in the pre-clinical model, the scaffold of TEOMs can be a delivery vehicle of bioactive molecules [135]. A robust vascular network within the TEOM by promoting a pro-angiogenic milieu is required for successful engraftment and integration of TEOMs, which enables the delivery of oxygen and nutrition

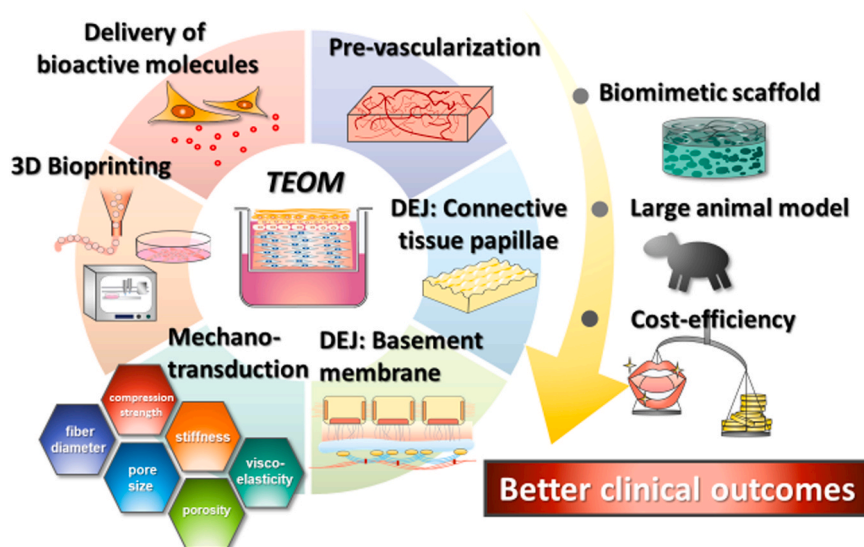


Fig. 3. Graphical representation of the potential vital strategies to be designed and incorporated to engineer scaffold-based TEOMs for intraoral grafting.

into the tissue constructs after grafting [89,136]. Therefore, the feasibility and rationale of applying growth factors to TEOM promote neo-vascularization, specifically angiogenic factors such as TGF- $\beta$ , bFGF, PDGF, VEGF, HGF, and IGF-1. However, it is necessary to develop an appropriate delivery system to accurately mimic spatiotemporal and sequential release of multiple growth factors [134]. As previously mentioned, hAM serves as a scaffold for TEOM and a reservoir of multiple growth factors [6,35,137]. In addition to growth factors, recent studies revealed that exosomes and extracellular vesicles have great potential in regenerative dentistry [138,139]. The local administration of these vesicles alone or combined with transplantation of the tissue constructs could contribute to the future clinical applications of TEOMs.

## 6. Other relevant topics of tissue-engineered oral mucosa

### 6.1. Large animal model

Non-clinical implantation studies are crucial for assessing the safety of tissue-engineered cell-based constructs for clinical translation, primarily stem cell therapy. These constructs require complex macroscopic and microscopic pathological evaluations owing to their physical presence and unique tissue responses [140]. However, transitioning from small-animal research, which often includes immunodeficient animals, to advanced pre-clinical studies in large animals presents a challenge in testing the safety and efficacy of products. Large animal models offer the advantage of simulating tissue engineering and regenerative medicine principles, from harvesting tissue from a patient to the implantation of 3-D autologous tissue substitutes. However, harvesting tissue samples and grafting TEOMs is challenging in small animals because of the size of the oral cavity. The Food and Drug Administration and EMA require a large animal model to evaluate cell-based devices, including TEOMs, prior to initiating human clinical studies because novel therapies, particularly cell-based TEOMs, have made substantial progress and have the potential to translate into better healing outcomes for a variety of intraoral mucosa defects [141]. Selecting the most appropriate animal model requires an in-depth knowledge of specific species and breeds to ascertain the adequacy of the model and outcome measures that closely mirror clinical situations [142]. A major challenge in the clinical translation of TEOMs is the lack of relevant animal models for intraoral use, which necessitates the development of TEOMs obtained from oral mucosa cells in the animal [6,143]. Currently, studies on pre-clinical large animal models, such as pigs and dogs, in which intraoral mucosa defects are created and treated with bilayered TEOMs are limited [35].

The location of experimental oral mucosa defects reconstructed using TEOMs must be carefully considered, given the complexity of the oral cavity, which varies depending on the type of oral mucosa [6,35]. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of anatomical and physiological issues in pigs and dogs [144,145], establishing well-validated pre-clinical models of TEOMs is essential to understanding their efficacy in healing mucosa defects and accelerating their clinical translation [146].

### 6.2. Cost-efficiency of TEOMs

Besides scientific issues, cost efficiency and performance are major concerns in tissue engineering products and human clinical trials. Extensive research and development towards the clinical commercial utilization of tissue engineering applications involving time-consuming cell culturing leads to high costs [71]. Additionally, regulatory approval, preservation, storage, distribution, shelf life, safety, and handling can further impact the financial solvency of these custom-engineered products, including TEOMs, for intraoral grafting [89]. Insufficiently powered studies have hindered the widespread implementation of tissue engineering in clinics funded by medical care authorities [26]. Considering the lack of clinical evidence of TEOMs that reconstruct small-sized and delicate/complicated tissue defects, the economic viability of pursuing TEOMs for intraoral clinical applications compared to the success of skin substitutes has become a question. This literature review shows that TEOMs still remain underdeveloped in clinical settings [2,124]. Our ultimate goal is to restore, regenerate, and enhance the oral functions impaired by oral mucosa defects. To successfully translate TEOMs from the bench to the bedside and replace autologous grafts, the focus should be on confirming their efficacy [143,147]. Therefore, investigators must be aware of translational research and how their work affects the future TEOM market, potential adoption, and the scalability of established companies [26]. Encouraging examples of clinical and industrial success, such as MukoCell® for urologic patients, demonstrate the feasibility of TEOMs in environments subjected to mechanical stress; however, the information on scaffolds used in the product is not disclosed.

## 7. Discussion

Extensive tissue engineering research has been conducted over the past three decades. Although extraoral grafting of TEOMs used in ophthalmology, urology, and esophageal applications has been

successful and is one of the front-runners in current epithelial regenerative medicine, TEOMs as intraoral grafts have not yet reached the level of clinical trials or applications. Although the scientific community has addressed this subject and witnessed broad collaboration among research organizations worldwide, there is a pressing need to build more robust cross-disciplinary collaborations and funding possibilities [89]. The success rate of tissue-engineered templates is higher when designed to mimic the niche or microenvironment of the target tissues [71]. Therefore, the biomaterials utilized for TEOMs should adapt to the dynamic environment of the oral mucosa. Because the niche of the target cells changes with time during intraoral wound remodeling, it is important to focus on developing tissue-engineered biomaterials and scaffolds that can mimic micro- or nano-architectural technique features and modify themselves according to the native environment [71]. Scaffolds play a pivotal role in the clinical translation of TEOMs, especially in promoting angiogenesis after implantation, because they interact directly with intraoral open wounds. The mechanical strength and biophysical properties, including viscoelastic modulus, porosity, and surface characteristics, should match the complex and compact oral mucosa. Researchers and clinicians should identify the intended oral sites in future studies and tailor the materials accordingly. Remarkable progress in biomaterials will contribute to the regeneration of native oral mucosa and will benefit future research into functional restoration and clinical translation [6].

An overview of the potential key strategies to be designed and incorporated into the scaffold to manufacture the next generation of TEOMs discussed in this review is illustrated in Fig. 3. This promising construct enables better clinical outcomes of intraoral grafting for future clinical applications of TEOMs.

## 8. Conclusions

In conclusion, tissue engineering for the reconstruction and regeneration of intraoral mucosa defects requires integrating biochemical and biomaterial engineering aspects with cell transplantation to generate better-quality biomimetic scaffolds, pre-vascularize 3-D tissue structures, and engineer composite interfaces depending on the type of oral mucosa.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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