

Astroplastic: colon to colony

Lalit Bharadwaj^{1*}, Alina Kunitskaya², Kaitlin Schaaf³, Harry Wilton-Clark¹, Preetha Gopalakrishnan¹, Zi Fei Wang¹, Jacob Gainger¹, Xingyu Chen¹, Maliyat Noor², Mayi Arcellana-Panlilio¹

¹Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary, Calgary AB, T2N1N4

²Schulich School of Engineering, University of Calgary, Calgary AB, T2N4V8

³Faculty of Science, University of Calgary, Calgary AB, T2N1N4

*Corresponding author email: bharadwl@ucalgary.ca

Governments and private enterprises alike are preparing for exploration and colonization of Mars. Two ecological and economical challenges to interplanetary travel arise: the sustainable management of waste produced on a Mars base [1] and the astronomical cost of shipping materials to Mars [2]. The purpose of the Astroplastic project is to mitigate these two challenges through a waste management system which can generate bioplastic as a usable end product. Our team used recombinant *Escherichia coli* (expressing genes from *Ralstonia eutropha* [3] and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* [4] to turn synthetic fecal waste into poly(3-hydroxybutyrate) (PHB), a bioplastic. Our engineered *E. coli* have also been modified to secrete the PHB they produce. Secretion makes the PHB production process continuous rather than a batch process, leading to improved efficiency and yields. In addition to engineering the bacteria, we have also designed a start-to-finish integrated system that can be used on Mars to generate items useful to astronauts during early Mars missions. Our system complies with current standards and best practices for designing space systems. In our design, we have included specifications for bioreactors and fermentation tanks, processes for separating various components of the human waste so that PHB can be isolated, and a method for the final extraction of powdered PHB nanoparticles for use in 3D printing. The byproducts of this system are water and excess organic matter which can be used as a fertilizer. The preliminary results of our project are promising: we have observed successful PHB production and secretion with our recombinant *E. coli* and have tested our process at the lab scale using synthetic human waste. We have also tested the final step of our process in microgravity to gauge whether our system can be used while travelling between Earth and an extraterrestrial destination.

Further testing and prototyping are needed to determine the viability of the approach used. Based on our preliminary results, the Astroplastic project has the potential to be a viable waste management system and reduce the costs associated with long-term space missions alongside a potential for use on Earth with slowly diminishing fossil fuel reliance.

References:

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