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A dual-gated transistor platform for on-site detection of lead ions at trace levels

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On-site monitoring of heavy metals in drinking water has become crucial due to several high profile instances of contamination. Presently, reliable techniques for trace level heavy metal detection are mostly laboratory based while the detection limits of contemporary field methods based are barely meeting the exposure limits set by regulatory bodies such as. World Health Organization (W.H.O). Here we show an on-site deployable, Pb_{2+} sensor on a dual-gated transistor platform whose lower detection limit is two orders of magnitude better than the traditional sensor and one order of magnitude lower than the exposure limit set by W.H.O. The enhanced sensitivity of our design is verified by numerically solving PNP (Planck-Nernst-Poisson) model. We demonstrate that the enhanced sensitivity is due to the suppression of ionic flux. The simplicity and the robustness of the design make it applicable for on-site screening, thereby facilitating rapid response to contamination events.

1. Introduction

Heavy metals pose a serious threat to living organisms owing to their toxicity and bioaccumulation[1, 2]. Among the heavy metals, lead is the most widespread due to its historical use in paints, gasoline and solder joints in water pipes. Although the usage of lead has been significantly reduced in recent years, lead in drinking water still continues to be a problem for numerous communities around the world[3]. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to monitor to levels of lead in drinking water so that any possible contamination can be rapidly identified and mitigated. The World Health Organization (W.H.O.) recommends a guideline limit of 10 µg L$_{-1}$ of total lead in drinking water[4]. Conventional testing methods for detection of trace concentrations include atomic adsorption spectroscopy (AAS), spectrophotometry and inductively coupled plasma-mass spectroscopy (ICP-MS) among others[4-9]. However, these techniques require expensive laboratory-based equipment and trained personnel to operate them. Among field based techniques, the most promising candidates are anodic stripping voltammetry and ion-selective electrodes[10].

ISEs (ion-selective electrodes) are particularly interesting as they do not involve the use of the toxic dropping mercury electrode or the pre-treatment of sample with bismuth which is required in ASV[11-13]. Historically, ISEs were plagued by poor mechanical durability and relatively high lower detection limits (LDL) limiting their use in on-site detection techniques. The mechanical durability of the ISE was upgraded with the development of the solid-contact ion selective electrode (SCISE), in which the conventional internal filling solution is substituted with a conducting polymer.

In addition, improvement in LDL of ISE was achieved by using low activity internal solutions[14], establishment of pre-conditioning protocols[15,16] and transmembrane ionic flux control[17-24]. Due to the solid-contact, controlling the activity of internal filling solutions is not applicable for

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SCISEs. On the other hand, the LDL of SCISEs can be lowered by carefully controlling pre-conditioning procedures. Normally, ion selective membranes are activated through conditioning process in which the membrane is saturated with the analyte upon exposure to a solution with high analyte concentration resulting in uptake of excess of analyte ions and also co-extraction of counter-ions. This results in relatively high LDLs[17]. This limitation is overcome by using a second conditioning step in a low analyte concentration solution which removes the excess analyte and the co-extracted ions in the membrane. Even using the two step conditioning procedure presents some shortcomings at lower analyte concentrations. When the sample analyte concentration is higher than that in the solid-contact layer, analyte ions flux towards the solid-contact layer due to the concentration gradient. This in turn causes the depletion of analyte near the membrane surface which results in the so-called 'super-Nernstian' response. The ISE becomes non-responsive to further changes in analyte concentration below the super-Nernstian level.

To overcome these problems, several researchers have focused on controlling the transmembrane ionic flux to improve the LDLs[18, 21-24]. Traditional approaches for transmembrane ionic flux control is actualized through the application of an external current opposing the direction of the ionic flux through the ion-selective membrane. In doing so, the concentration of analyte in the sample is not depleted and a stable reading at very low concentrations is achieved. Although using this method has resulted in the improvement of LDL by over two orders of magnitude, it is not a very practical technique for on-site detection as the magnitude of external current to be applied is often unknown. Moreover, application of the wrong currents can cause ion flux reversal, i.e. ion flux from the internal filling solution to the sample, leading to sample contamination and membrane leaching.

A variant of ion selective electrodes is the ion selective field effect transistor (ISFET), where the metal gate electrode of a conventional field effect transistor is replaced with an ion selective membrane. ISFETs provide an in-built signal amplification feature, do not require the use of fragile glass bodies and are ideal for on-site sensing. However, ISFETs suffer from the same issues that plague the conventional ISE such as high LDL that hinder their use for monitoring of heavy metals. In this study, we apply the transmembrane ionic flux control approach to improve the LDL performance of ISFETs. To this end, we fabricated a dual sensing gated field effect transistor for the detection of Pb_{2+}. The results show a LDL improvement of two orders magnitude compared to the traditional one sensing gate ISFET. The improvement in LDL to 1 $\mu g\ L_{-1}$, which is below the W.H.O guideline limit, renders the sensor applicable for on-site Pb_{2+} monitoring. Furthermore, the system is analyzed using the Planck-Nernst-Poisson model to confirm the enhanced sensitivity.

2. Device structure and measurement techniques

Figure 1a & 1b show the two ISFET architectures compared in this study. In both cases, unit labeled TFT represents a thin film transistor fabricated on heavily doped Si substrate using thin film technology and n-type organic semiconductor. In **Figure 1a**, the unit labeled ISE is a Pb_{2+} SCISE assembled on a heavily doped Si substrate. The SCISE composed of a PVC matrix ISE, PEDOT: Cl conducting polymer solid contact layer. The heavily doped Si substrate of the TFT, which forms the bottom gate terminal, is connected to the heavily doped Si substrate of the ISE. A pseudo- reference electrode (Au probe wire) is immersed into the sample on the ISE. The gate voltage is supplied through the pseudo-reference electrode and the source-drain current is recorded from the terminals of the TFT. The change in analyte concentration is transduced into a threshold voltage shift. In **Figure 1b**, SP1 and SP2 represent 'sensing pad 1' and 'sensing pad 2'

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and are identical to ISE from Figure 1a. However in this setup, SP1 and SP2 are placed on a copper plate which puts them electrically in series. Samples with identical analyte concentrations are dropped on both SP1 and SP2. The gate voltage is supplied through the pseudo-reference electrode on SP1 while the pseudo-reference electrode on SP2 is connected to the bottom gate terminal of the TFT. The source-drain currents are recorded from the TFT terminals and the analyte concentration changes are reflected through a threshold voltage shifts. For further details on fabrication procedures, refer to the supplementary materials.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Experimental results

The n-channel TFT operates in accumulation mode. The TFT has a high-κ metal oxide dielectric layer which keeps a low threshold voltage of 0.3 V (see **Figure S4**). This is done in order to prevent the immersed pseudo-reference electrode, which supplies the gate voltage, from electrolyzing the sample.

Before the acquisition of the calibration curve, the ISE, SP1 & SP2 were pre-conditioned in a 2-step process:

i) At least 12 hours in a 1 g L^{-1} (1000 ppm) $Pb(NO_3)_2$ (2% HNO_3) solution;

ii) At least 24 hours in a 10 µg L^{-1} (10 ppb) $Pb(NO_3)_2$ (2% HNO_3) solution.

The first step was undertaken to saturate the membrane with Pb(II) ion while the second step was undertaken to remove the excess $Pb(NO_3)_2$ co-extracted into the membrane and reduce the transmembrane fluxes out of the membrane[15, 17].

The results from the calibration test are presented in **Figure 2**. The voltage was swept from 0 to 1 V in the single sensing gate ISFET and from 0 to 3 V in the dual sensing gate ISFET. This was done as the I_{DS} of single sensing gate ISFET becomes unstable beyond 1.5 V. However, in the

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case of the dual sensing gate model as 1V is less than the threshold voltage, the voltage was scanned from 0-3V. As shown in **Figure 2a**, in the single sensing gate model, the increase in concentration produces a decrease in threshold gate voltage. This is in agreement with previous studies where the threshold voltage of the n-channel OFET decreases as the concentration of the cation analyte increases[25]. Additionally, distinguishable transfer curves from the 0 µg L-1 are observed only after the Pb_{2+} concentration is increased to 100 µg L-1, making 100 µg L-1 the LDL for this model. For the dual sensing gate model, the relationship between the normalized threshold voltage and the analyte concentration is inversed (**Figure 2b**). This is due to polarity reversal of the electrode supplying the voltage to the bottom gate of the TFT. In addition, the dual sensing gate model yields distinguishable transfer curves between 0 and 1 µg L-1 which makes 1 µg L-1 Pb_{2+} the LDL of this setup.

The calibration curve, as a function of the normalized threshold voltage, is presented in **Figure 2c**. For the single sensing gate model, there is no difference in threshold voltage between 0 µg L-1 and 10 µg L-1. This is possibly due to the 'super-Nernstian' behavior which is observed as a steep slope between 10 and 100 µg L-1 in the calibration curve. The threshold voltage starts decreasing with increasing concentration beyond 100 µg L-1. The linear slope of the calibration curve between 100 and 1000 µg L-1 (the working range) is 54 decade-1. Meanwhile, the linear slope in the dual sensing gate model is 500 decade-1. The calibration curve is linear between the 1 and 1000 µg L-1. So, the dual sensing gate ISFET has a LDL two orders of magnitude lower than the single sensing gate ISFET. In addition, the sensitivity of the dual sensing gate ISFET is 10 times better than that of the single sensing gate ISFET.

3.2 Modelling using the PNP model.

For simplicity, we restrict our consideration on a one-dimensional space with three intervals in each of the two ion-selective electrodes. We then study the 1-D Nernst-Planck equation which

characterizes the change rate of ion concentration $c_i(x, t)$ with respect to the spatial gradient of the ion flux:

$$J_i(x,t) = -D_i \left[\frac{\partial c_i(x,t)}{\partial x} + \frac{F}{RT} z_i c_i(x,t) E(x,t) \right] \tag{1}$$

Here, D_i and z_i denote the diffusion coefficient and valence of i-th ion, respectively. F, R and T correspond to the Faraday's constant, the universal gas constant, and the absolute temperature, respectively. $E(x, t)$ is the electric field which is to be solved from the Poisson equation:

$$\varepsilon_r \frac{\partial E(x,t)}{\partial x} = P(x,t) \tag{2}$$

where ε_r is the relative permittivity and $P(x, t) = \Sigma z_i c_i(x, t)$ is the charge density. The electric potential (φ) can be simply obtained by an integration of the following equation:

$$-\frac{d\varphi(x,t)}{dx} = E(x,t) \tag{3}$$

In the sample solution, there are two movable ions: p_{2+} and $n-$ (representing Pb_{2+} and NO_{3-}); while in the membrane, the concentration of negative ion is constant everywhere and can be treated as a fixed charge. In the conducting polymer, the electric field and electric potential are assumed to be constants. The boundary conditions and jump conditions are given as follows (see **Figure 3**):

1. In the far end of sample solution B1/B8, we assume fixed electroneutral ion concentrations and zero electric field.

2. Between sample and membrane B2/B7, we assume that the flux of negative ion is zero, the flux of positive ion is continuous, and the electric field is proportional to the reciprocal of permittivity.

3. Between membrane and conducting polymer B3/B6, we assume no flux in positive ion. In numerical simulation, we fix the electric potential and choose different ion concentrations on the boundary B1, and solve the electric potentials on B3 (single sensing gate potential) and B8 (dual sensing gate potential) respectively. The numerical simulation was carried out using MATLAB.

The parameters for the numerical simulation are given in **Table 1**.

3.2.1 Results from numerical simulation

The distribution of p_{2+} and n_- ions within the system are shown in **Figure 4a**. As expected, the electro-neutrality condition is observed everywhere except in Debye layer at the solution/membrane and the membrane/conductor interfaces. The time dependent electric potential developed at the gate terminal in the one sensing gate model (Ψ_1) and the dual sensing gate model (Ψ_2) are presented in **Figure 4b**. The calibration curve for p_{2+} ion is extracted in terms of Ψ at steady state is presented in **Figure 4c**. The average slope developed by the single sensing gate is 0.35 arb. units decade$_{-1}$ while the average slope value of the dual sensing gate is -0.65 arb. units decade$_{-1}$. This enhanced sensitivity especially at lower concentrations can be more easily distinguished via a field effect transistor.

Intuitively, it is expected that the dual sensing gate arrangement, upon symmetrically placing in series; the net potential change should be zero. However, there is an asymmetricity in the electric field in the two sensor pads. This is because the gate voltage is applied to only one sensing pad whereas the other sensing pad is connected to a floating electrode. This difference in electric field results in the response from the dual sensing gate sensor.

The enhanced sensitivity of the dual sensing gate model can be explained by similar studies in which an ion-selective membrane is biased by small currents to control the depletion of analyte ions near the surface of the membrane [18, 21-24]. The direction of the applied current opposes the

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ion flux. Due to this, the analyte ions in the sample solution near the membrane surface are not depleted as much thereby avoiding the super-Nernstian response. In the study by Michalska et al.[24], a small current in the nano ampere range is applied against the flux of ions from the sample towards the solid contact resulting in the reduction of the slope of the analyte concentration gradient within the membrane. Thus, the depletion of ions from near the membrane surface is prevented and a lower limit is achieved. The practical limitation of this method is that the current required to achieve the lower detection limit is unknown a priori. With our method described here, this problem is overcome. The coupling of two sensing gates allows for the suppression of ion-flux through a 'self-balanced' method.

To prove this proposed mechanism, the surface potential of the membrane is measured using Kelvin probe force microscopy (KPFM). The results of the KPFM study are presented in **Figure 5a-d**. Since this technique is not sensitive to changes in surface potential in the μg L^{-1} range, we used Pb$_{2+}$ solutions mg L^{-1} range instead. The surface potential of the ISM with 10 mg L^{-1} is +32.1 mV in the single sensing gate model while it decreases to -159.0 mV in the dual sensing gate model. Similarly, for 1000 mg L^{-1}, the average surface potential decreases from +72.7 mV in the single sensing gate model to +47.5 mV in the dual sensing gate model. The reduction of electric potential at the surface of the membrane is caused by the reduction of ion flux [24]. The mechanism schematic of the explanation is illustrated in **Figure 5e-f**. In this figure, the complexation and de-complexation of the mobile cation and the ionophore are represented by the forward and reverse reactions respectively. Application of a voltage (which is represented by a green arrow in **Figure 5f**) in the opposite direction to that of the ion flux caused by the forward reaction, results in the suppression of the analyte ion depletion from the surface of the ion-

selective membrane. This voltage is a result of the forward reaction at the second ion-selective membrane in the dual sensing gate model.

4. Conclusion

Experimentally, we demonstrate a detection limit of 1 µg L^{-1} using the dual gated structure and it is well within the W.H.O guideline limit of 10 µg L^{-1}. This unique sensor design is modelled by numerically solving the Planck-Nernst-Poisson equations. The solutions give insights into mechanisms behind the low detection limit of this sensor. We believe the reason behind the improvement in LDL lies primarily in suppression of the membrane fluxes due to the coupling of membrane potentials. Additionally, PNP model results reveal that on the dual sensing gate ISFET, the sensitivity of sensor increases by a factor of ~10. The experimental implementation agreed in principle with the results of the numerical simulations.

Being based on robust non-aptasensor FET technology, we believe that this sensor fulfills the requirements (i.e. low detection limit, high sensitivity, non-fragile, etc.) to be used as an on-site pre-screener complementary to the conventional laboratory-based analytical techniques.

Supporting Information
The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: xxx.

Materials, methods for fabrication, methods for testing, OFET transfer characteristics, Selectivity vs. Cu^{2+}.

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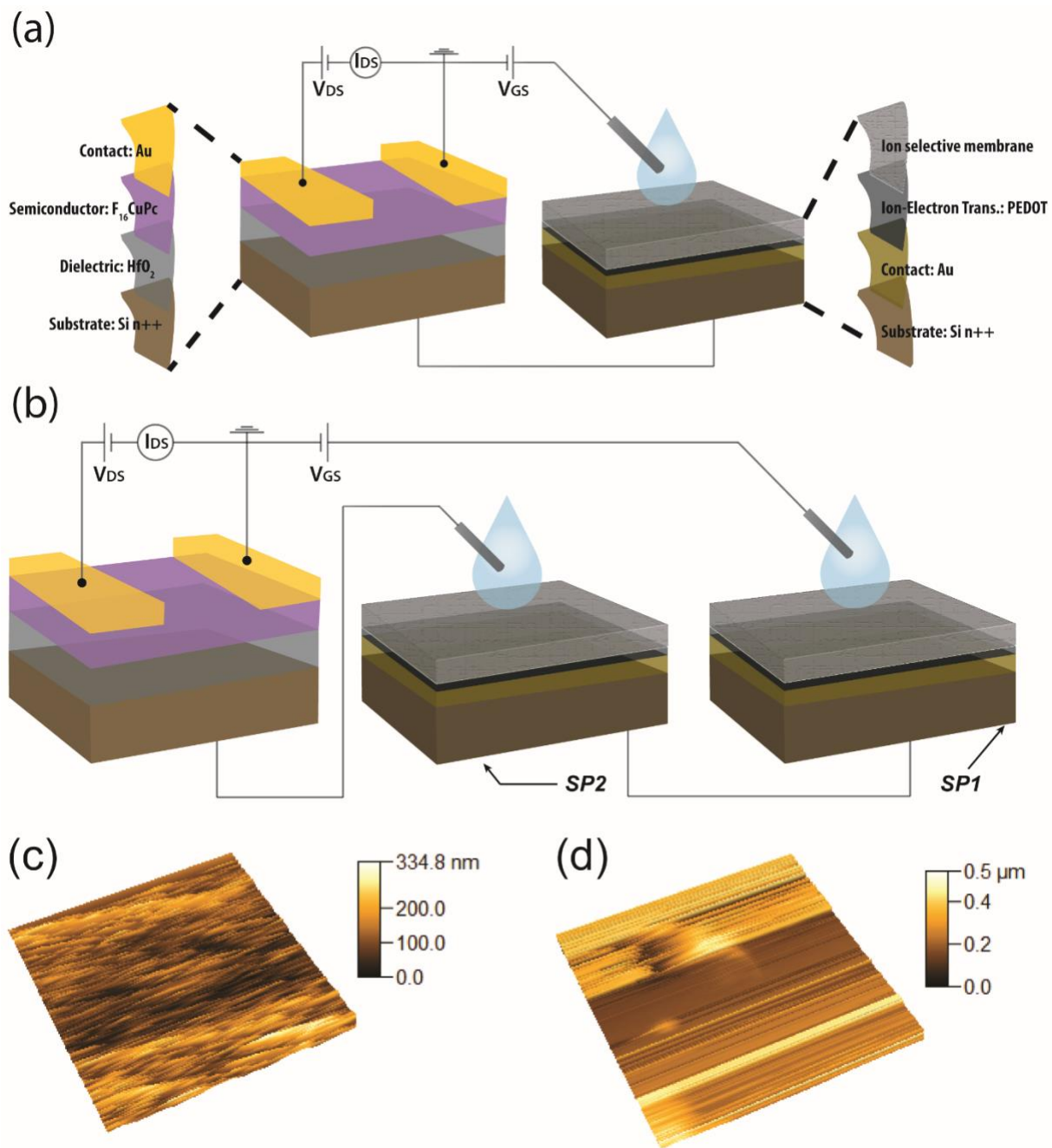
Figure 1: **(a)** Conventional single sensing gate field effect transistor. **(b)** Dual-sensing gate field effect transistor. 3D height profiles of the surface of the **(c)** PEDOT layer **(d)** Pb_{2+} ion-selective membrane (inset: Atomic force microscopy of the surfaces).
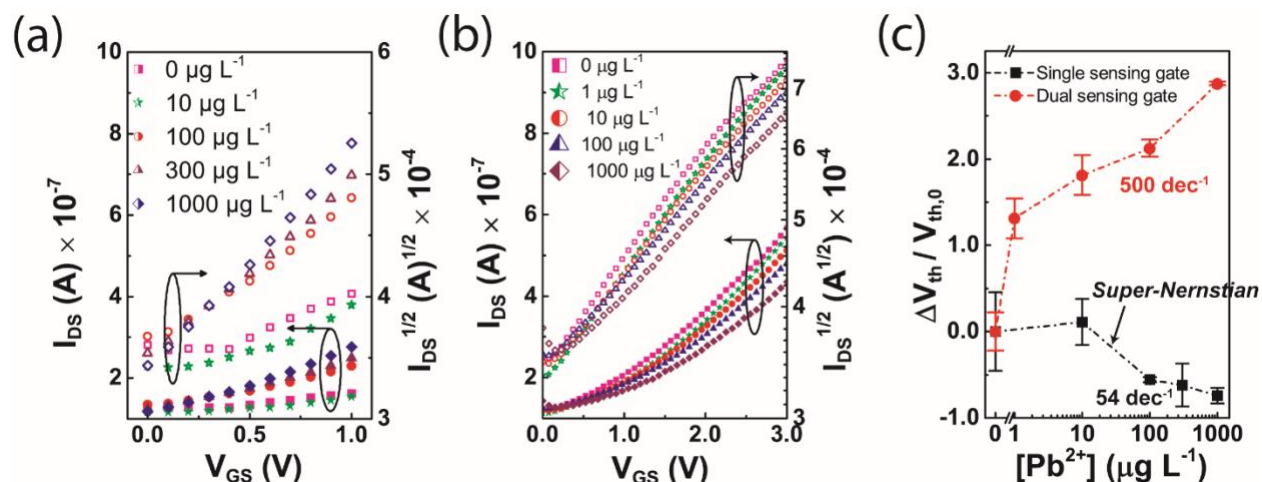
Figure 2. Experimental results. **(a)** TFT transfer curves for different concentrations of Pb_{2+} ranging from 0 to 1000 µg L_{-1} in the single sensing gate. **(b)** TFT transfer curves for different concentrations of Pb_{2+} ranging from 0 to 1000 µg L_{-1} in the dual sensing gate. **(c)** Calibration curve, as a function of normalized threshold voltage, of Pb_{2+} for both models.
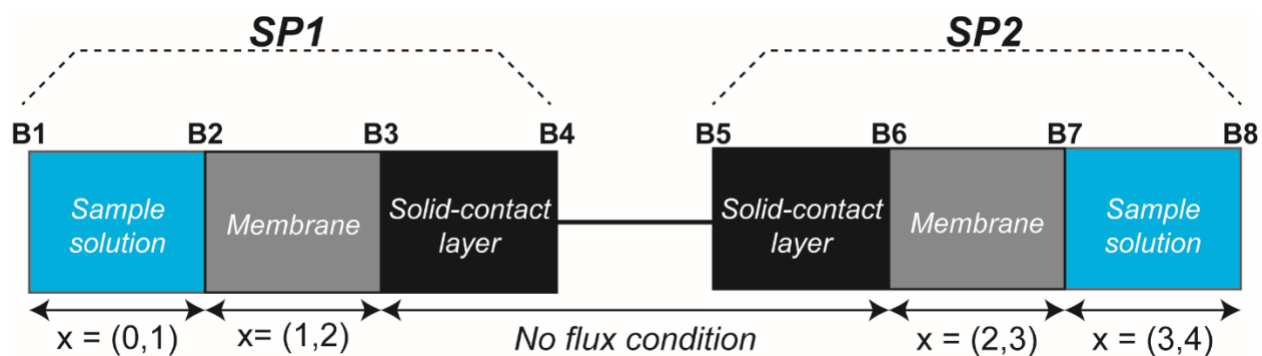

Figure 3. Schematic depiction of the 1-D model numerically solved using PNP equation. B1-B8 describes the boundaries between the layers of the SCISEs.
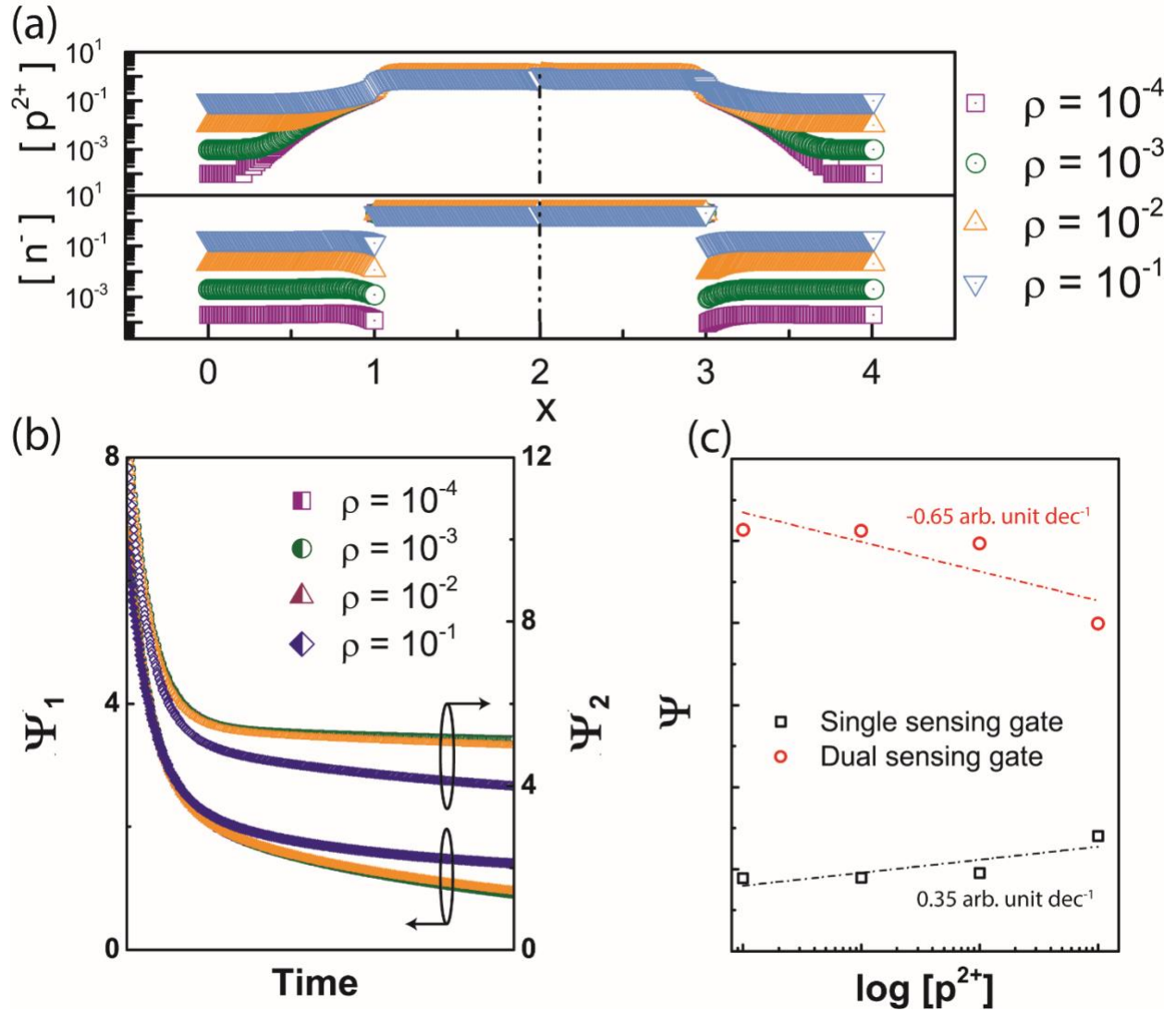
Figure 4. Numerical simulation data. **(a)** The concentration profiles for the p_{2+} and n_- across the system for four logarithmically increasing bulk concentrations. The dashed line in the middle represents the layers between B3 to B6 connecting the two sensing gates. **(b)** Time dependent electric potentials for the single sensing gate (Ψ_1) and the dual sensing gate (Ψ_2) systems for 4 logarithmically increasing concentrations. **(c)** Steady-state (t=2000 time steps) electric potentials (Ψ) vs corresponding p_{2+} concentrations i.e. calibration curves for single and dual sensing gate models.
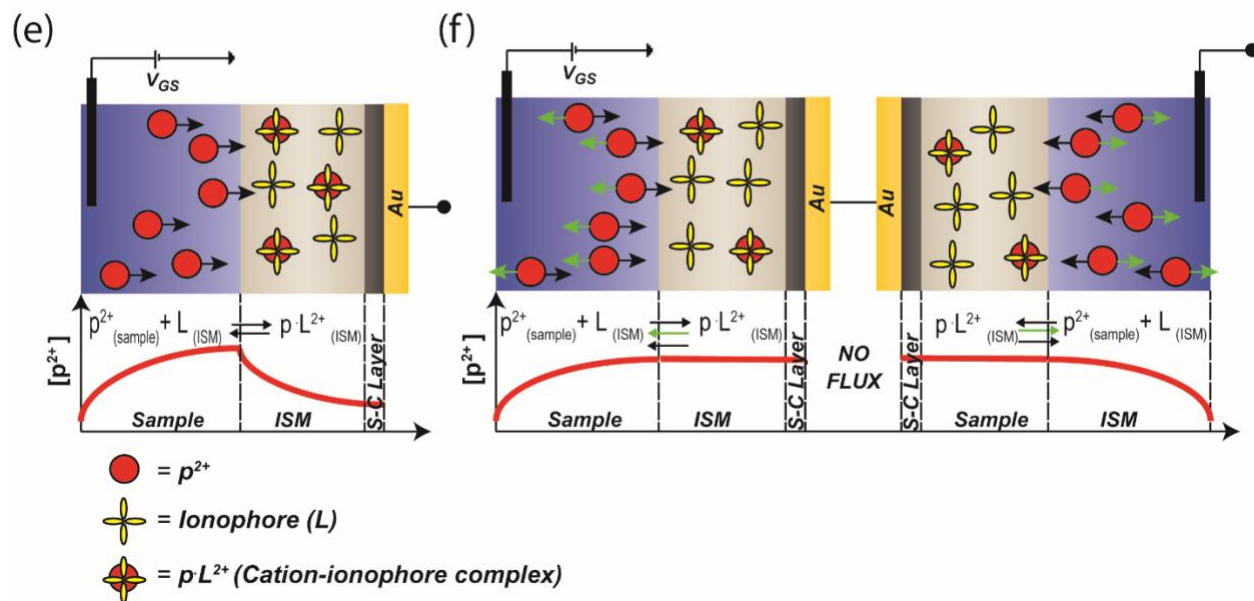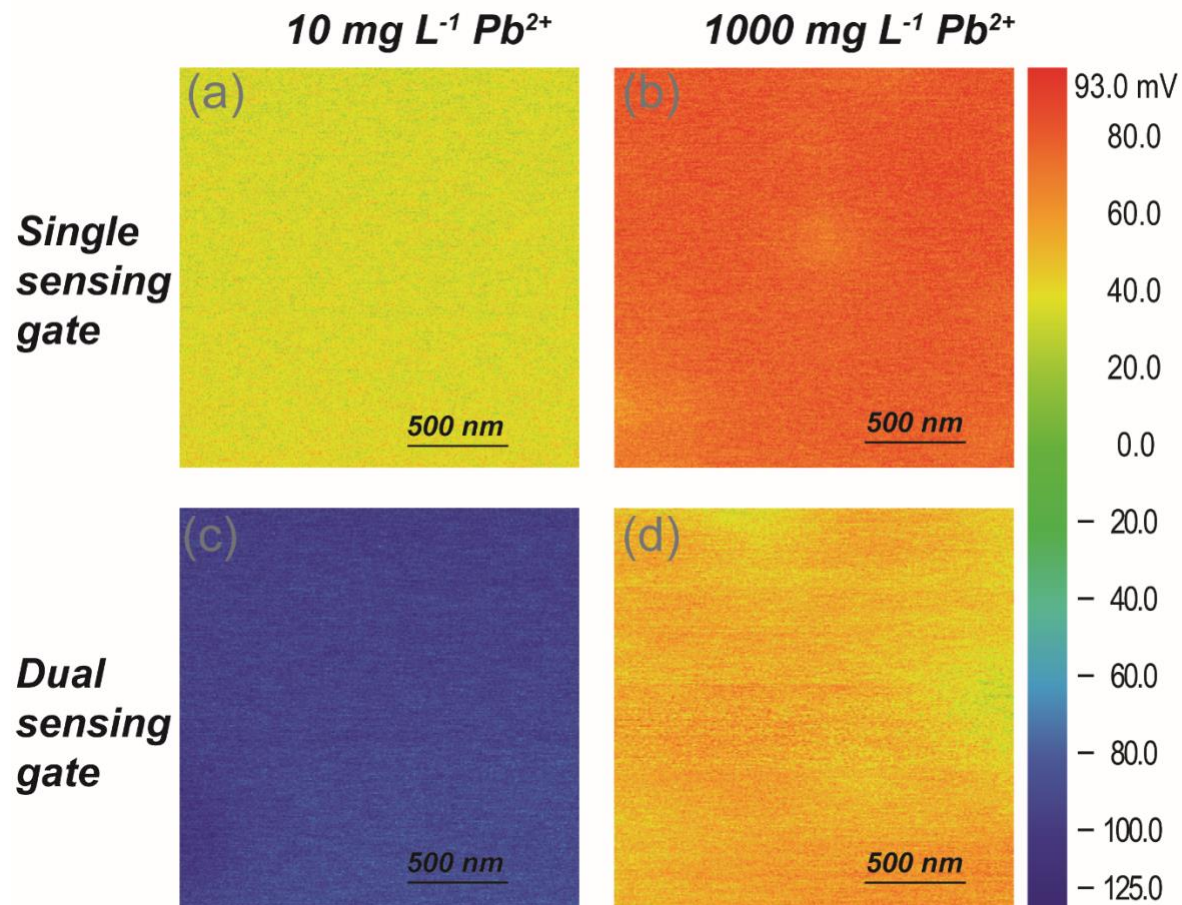
Figure 5. KPFM of ISM in single sensing gate model exposed to **(a)** 10 mg L-1 Pb2+ solution **(b)** 1000 mg L-1 Pb2+ solution. KPFM of ISM in dual sensing gate model exposed to **(c)** 10 mg L-1

Pb$_{2+}$ solution **(d)** 1000 mg L$_{-1}$ Pb$_{2+}$ solution. Schematic of mechanism. The illustration of concentration profile of the p$_{2+}$ ion in **(e)** single sensing gate model **(f)** dual sensing gate model as a function of position. ISM is the ion selective membrane. The effect of potential of the second gate on the first gate is represented by a green arrow on the p$_{2+}$ ions in **f**.

Table 1. Parameters used in numerical simulation.

Parameter	Value
p$_{2+}$ Charge number (z_p)	+2
n$_-$ charge number (z_n)	-1
Sample solution ε_r	0.1
Membrane ε_r	0.05
Electric potential φ (B1)	3
Electric field E(B1)	0
p$_{2+}$- concentration	See footnote$_{a)}$
n$_-$ –concentration	See footnote$_{a)}$
Electric potential φ – Initial value	0

$_{a)}$ The numerical simulation study was performed for four logarithmically increasing bulk concentrations of p$_{2+}$ and n$_-$