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1	Application of percolation threshold to disintegration and dissolution of ibuprofen tablets
2	with different microcrystalline cellulose grades
3	
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ABSTRACT

19 This study investigated whether a step change in disintegration and dissolution behaviour 20 was observed for tablets prepared below and above a percolation threshold. The 21 percolation threshold investigated was previously calculated for ibuprofen/ microcrystalline 22 cellulose (MCC) blends using percolation theory and compression data (Queiroz et al., 23 2019). The influence of MCC grade (air stream dried versus spray dried) on differences 24 observed was also studied. Complementary to conventional disintegration and dissolution 25 testing, Raman imaging determined drug distribution within tablets, and in-line particle 26 video microscopy (PVM) and focused-beam reflectance measurement (FBRM) monitored 27 tablet disintegration. Tablets were prepared containing 0 to 30% w/w ibuprofen. Raman 28 imaging confirmed the percolation threshold by quantifying the number and equivalent 29 circular diameters of ibuprofen domains on tablet surfaces. Across the percolation threshold 30 a step change in dissolution behaviour occurred and tablets containing air stream dried MCC 31 showed slower disintegration and dissolution compared to tablets containing spray dried MCC. Dissolution measurements confirmed experimentally a percolation threshold, 32 33 determined using percolation theory and compression data. An increase in drug domains, 34 due to cluster formation, and less efficient tablet disintegration contributed to slower 35 ibuprofen release above the percolation threshold. Slower dissolution was measured for 36 tablets containing air

37 stream dried compared to spray dried MCC.

18

## 38 1. INTRODUCTION

39 Disintegration and dissolution profiles are critical quality attributes assessed to evaluate 40 drug release performance (Dressman and Krämer, 2005; Huang et al., 2011; Nickerson et al., 41 2018). Disintegration is often the rate determining step for drug release, particularly for poorly water soluble drugs (Caramella et al., 1988). Disintegration is the mechanical 42 43 fragmentation of the compressed tablet into small granules or agglomerates. Disintegration 44 is initiated by liquid penetration in the porous of the compact. Swelling is one of the most 45 accepted disintegration mechanisms, which is characterized by an enlargement of the particles that builds up pressure to fragment the tablet matrix (Markl and Zeitler, 2017). The 46 47 bonding mechanism during compression and the bonding surface area have a direct impact 48 on tablet disintegration. Swelling depends on an optimal tablet porosity, such that the liquid can enter the tablet matrix, however, the void spaces are too large enough to supress the 49 50 swelling action of disintegrants (Desai et al., 2016).

51 The application of modelling approaches to enhance product knowledge has been motivated by quality guidelines as an alternative to iterative testing approaches during 52 formulation development (International Council for Harmonisation, 2012, 2008, 2005a, 53 54 2005b; Kimura et al., 2013). The percolation threshold model has been used to explain how 55 particle-particle interactions of drug and diluents alters dissolution performance of formulations containing different drug loadings (Bonny and Leuenberger, 1993, 1991). In 56 57 this context, the percolation threshold is the drug loading in which clusters of the drug span throughout the entire volume of the tablet, i.e. an infinite cluster is formed. When this 58 59 cluster is formed properties of the blend may undergo significant changes (Leuenberger, 60 1999).

61 Previous studies determined the percolation threshold value from disintegration and 62 dissolution experimental data (Kimura et al., 2007a; Stillhart et al., 2017; Wenzel et al., 2017). These studies experimentally determined critical loadings at which disintegration 63 times undergo a step change. These were then assumed to be the percolation thresholds. 64 65 However, Kimura, Betz and Leuenberger, 2007 recommended further studies to investigate 66 if the change in disintegration behaviour was linked to the formation of the infinite cluster 67 described by the percolation threshold theory (Kimura et al., 2007b). Since these earlier 68 studies, technological advancements have provided novel techniques to study drug 69 distribution in tablets and tablet disintegration behaviour. These techniques can be key to providing data to support the percolation threshold concepts and the findings of previous 70 71 studies.

72 Spectral imaging techniques have been used to provide in depth information related to drug 73 distribution in pharmaceutical tablets. These techniques can be used to investigate the 74 cluster formation predicted by the percolation theory. Fourier transform infrared 75 spectroscopy (ATR-FTIR), X-ray diffraction (XRD), and Raman spectroscopy are the main 76 techniques employed (Chan et al., 2005; Kazarian and Ewing, 2013; Miller and Havrilla, 77 2005; Zhang et al., 2005). Among those, advancements in Raman instruments has enabled 78 the technique to rapidly map drug distribution in tablets. Raman imaging instruments have 79 been designed to capture rich spectroscopic data which can be translated to provide high-80 resolution chemical information for tablets (as low as 1  $\mu$ m per pixel) and require short 81 acquisition times (approx. 15 min for a tablet of 13 mm diameter) (Ali et al., 2013).

Focused Beam Reflectance Method (FBRM) and in-line Particle Video Microscopy (PVM) are
innovative techniques that can give real-time in-situ information regarding disintegration
and dissolution performance of tablets. FBRM has been used to monitor the rate and the

85 degree of change in the number of particles and particle structures in a process (Barrett et 86 al., 2011; Gregory, 2009; Simon et al., 2019; Zhong et al., 2020). Measurement of the solid particles using FBRM is performed without the need for sampling and performing off-line 87 88 analysis. The system gives particle count, dimension and shape information in real time by 89 monitoring changes in the system as they occur (Barrett and Glennon, 1999). PVM provides 90 real-time images of the system allowing the user to visually track changes in the solids over 91 time (Barrett and Glennon, 2002). The imaging window measures an area of approximately 92  $800 \ \mu m$  by  $1100 \ \mu m$ . PVM also records a Relative Backscatter Index (RBI) trend which can be 93 used to track changes in the shape and size of solid particles as well as changes in the solids concentration (Werner et al., 2017). RBI is comparable to turbidity monitoring. Increased 94 RBI indicates a larger amount of solids (Hartwig and Hass, 2018). As tablet disintegration 95 96 progresses the number of particles in the slurry increase as larger particles fragment. 97 Therefore, as disintegration proceeds, more particles are captured in the image and the RBI 98 increases.

FBRM and PVM techniques are commonly used in crystallization studies (mass transfer from 99 100 solution to solid phase) (Barrett et al., 2011; Hartwig and Hass, 2018; Jiang et al., 2014; Liu 101 et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2011; Simon et al., 2019; Simone et al., 2015). FBRM has also 102 been utilized in previous studies for investigating tablet disintegration and dissolution 103 (Coutant et al., 2010; Han et al., 2009; Menning, 2016; Metzler et al., 2017). PVM has the 104 potential to monitor tablet disintegration and dissolution because changes in particle size 105 and shape in suspension are key features observed during tablet disintegration and 106 dissolution.

The aim of this study was to investigate if a step change in disintegration and dissolutionbehaviour was observed for tablets produced with drug loadings below and above a

109 predetermined percolation threshold. The percolation threshold of these systems was 110 determined in an earlier study using the physical principals of blending and compaction (Queiroz et al., 2019). The model system investigated was tablets produced from binary 111 112 blends of microcrystalline cellulose (MCC) and ibuprofen (IBU) at a range of ibuprofen mass 113 loadings. Tablets were prepared with two different MCC grades; one spray dried and one air 114 stream dried. The percolation threshold values determined were 19.08% w/w and 17.76% 115 w/w IBU for blends with air stream dried MCC and spray dried MCC, respectively (Queiroz et 116 al., 2019). A secondary study aim was to determine if the grade of MCC altered any changes 117 in disintegration and dissolution behaviour observed.

118 In the context of the previous and the present study, percolation threshold is a geometric phase transition in which the concentration of ibuprofen particles is high enough to form a 119 120 cluster that spans throughout the entire volume of the tablet. When this ibuprofen particle 121 cluster is formed, it is anticipated that a step change in properties of the blend will occur. 122 For example, a reduction in flow, compaction and dissolution would be anticipated with 123 ibuprofen particle cluster formation, as ibuprofen has poor flowability and compressibility 124 properties compared to MCC (Al-Karawi et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2008), and is considerably 125 more hydrophobic (Kawabata et al., 2011).

126 In addition to traditional pharmacopeial disintegration and dissolution techniques, process 127 analytical technologies (PAT) FBRM and PVM were employed to better understand tablet 128 disintegration behaviour, and hence its influence on drug dissolution. Building on the 129 application of Raman imaging to qualitatively identity clusters of ibuprofen particles 130 (Queiroz et al., 2019), the present study demonstrated how Raman spectroscopy can be 131 used to quantitatively determine the size and the number of ibuprofen clusters formed on 132 tablets surfaces and hence confirm the percolation threshold determined from compaction data. The MCC grades studied, have similar specifications; average particle size of 130 μm
and similar bulk density (0.28 - 0.33 g/mL for the air stream dried and 0.25 - 0.37 g/mL for
the spray dried). In the earlier study, Queiroz et al., reported morphological differences
between both grades: air stream dried showed bigger particles with needle shaped
geometry, while spray dried showed smaller particles with a more spherical-shaped
geometry (Queiroz et al., 2019).

139

#### 140 2. MATERIALS

Emcocel®90 (spray dried) and Vivapur®102 (air stream dried) were supplied by JRS Pharma 141 142 (Weissenborn, Germany) and ibuprofen by Kemprotec (Cumbria, UK). The two MCC 143 products studied were medium size standard grades with theoretical bulk density of 0.28 -144 0.33 g/mL for the air stream dried and 0.25 – 0.37 g/mL for the spray dried MCC. A range of 145 particulate and bulk powder properties of the batches of ibuprofen, air stream dried MCC 146 and spray dried MCC used in this study had been previously determined (Table 1) (Queiroz et al., 2019). Other materials used such as buffer components and HPLC mobile phase were 147 148 all supplied by Sigma Aldrich, Ireland.

Table 1. Particulate and bulk powder properties of Air stream dried<sup>®</sup>, Spray dried MCC<sup>®</sup>, and
 ibuprofen. Average values are shown ± standard deviation (Queiroz et al., 2019).

Property	Spray dried MCC <sup>®</sup>	Air stream dried®	Ibuprofen
D10 (μm) (n=5)	30.0 ± 0.25	31.1 ± 0.30	16.5 ± 0.08
D50 (μm) (n=5)	111.6 ± 0.73	$118.0 \pm 1.60$	54.9 ± 0.21
D90 (µm) (n=5)	236.8 ± 1.55	240.0 ± 2.17	129.0 ± 1.09
Surface area (m <sup>2</sup> /g) (n=3)	$1.32 \pm 0.01$	$1.37 \pm 0.01$	$0.22 \pm 0.02$
True density (g/cm <sup>3</sup> ) (n=10)	$1.58 \pm 0.00$	1.57± 0.00	$1.12 \pm 0.00$
Bulk density (g/cm <sup>3</sup> ) (n=3)	$0.33 \pm 0.00$	$0.31 \pm 0.00$	$0.36 \pm 0.01$

Relative density	0.21	0.20	0.32
Tapped density (g/cm <sup>3</sup> ) (n=3)	$0.43 \pm 0.01$	$0.40 \pm 0.00$	0.57± 0.01
Hausner Ratio	1.32	1.32	1.58
	(easy flowing)	(easy flowing)	(cohesive)
Flow function coefficient (n=3)	$7.0 \pm 0.91$	6.9 ± 0.00	$3.9 \pm 0.11$
	(easy flowing)	(easy flowing)	(cohesive)

# 152 **3. METHODS**

## 153 3.1 Tablet manufacture and characterization

Binary blends of MCC and IBU were prepared containing a range of IBU concentrations: 2.5, 5, 7.5, 10, 12.5, 15, 20, and 30 % w/w. Each blend, total weight 300 g, was prepared using a cube mixer KB 15 (Erweka, Heusenstamm, Germany) at 30 rpm for a duration of 30 min. Flat, round, 8 mm tablets were manufactured using a 10 punches Piccola rotary tablet press (Riva, Buenos Aires, Argentina) rotating at 20 rpm. The tablet hardness was controlled to 120 ± 10 N, tablet weight variation to 270 ± 10 mg, and the room air humidity to 50 ± 5 % and temperature to  $19 \pm 2$  °C.

Tablet porosity was determined using Equation 1. Tablet envelope density was determined
dividing the mass by the volume of each tablet. The blend true density values were
previously determined (Queiroz et al., 2019).

$$Porosity = 100 \times \left[1 - \left(\frac{tablet\ envelope\ density}{blend\ true\ density}\right)\right]$$
(Equation 1)

164 3.2 Raman imaging analysis of tablet surface

Drug and excipient distributions on external surfaces and surfaces of internal sections of
 tablets were investigated by Raman imaging analysis using a RA802 Pharmaceutical analyser

167 (Renishaw, New Mills, UK). First, reference spectra of air stream dried MCC, spray dried 168 MCC, and ibuprofen were acquired. Then, tablets of the blends of ibuprofen and MCC were 169 screened using the StreamLineTM fast imaging method that acquired around 76,000 spectra 170 over the entire surface of each tablet, with a pixel size of 10um/20um, and those spectra 171 were averaged to a single resulting spectrum. The total time of measurement for each 172 individual tablet was 15 min. Images of the drug distribution on the surface of the tablet were generated by non-negative least squares (NNLS) component analysis. Domains of each 173 174 substance were determined based on the reference spectra acquired for the pure 175 substances. Domains of each substance in the generated images were analysed using Particle Analysis in Renishaw's WiRE software. This software resolves the image domains 176 177 and determines particle metrics. The numbers of domains of ibuprofen on the entire surface 178 of each tablet and their average equivalent circle diameters were determined.

Principal component analysis (PCA) was performed using the average spectra obtained from Raman imaging analysis. Unscrambler X (Camo Analytics, Oslo, Norway) was used to perform the PCA with full cross validation, using the algorithm Singular Value Decomposition (SVN).

#### 183 3.3 Disintegration analysis

In vitro disintegration time was determined in water at 37 °C ± 2 °C, using a tablet disintegration tester ZT42 (Erweka, Edison, USA) which complies with Ph. Eur. 2.9.1 (Disintegration of tablets and capsules) (Council of Europe, 2019). Each tablet was placed inside of one basket which were continuously and automatically agitated vertically in the disintegration medium. The disintegration process was observed until the tablets

disintegrated into small enough particles that could escape the basket so that no substantialmaterial remained in the basket. Analysis was performed in triplicate.

191 3.4 FBRM and PVM analysis

FBRM (FBRM G600) and PVM (PVM V19) (Mettler Toledo, Leicester, England) were used to monitor tablet disintegration using a Mettler Toledo Easymax<sup>™</sup> 102 system. The disintegration medium was phosphate buffer (pH 7.2). The system used consisted of 100 mL glass vessels with automated internal temperature and agitation control. System specific PTFE (polytetrafluoroethylene) lids allowed for integration of the FBRM and PVM probes. A visual check of the system was possible through an inspection window at the front of the system.

The working volume of the system was 50 mL. Experiments were performed at 37 °C and the agitation rate was 250 rpm using an upward pumping, pitch blade impeller for a minimum of 10 minutes after the tablet was added to the vessel. The powder or tablet was added to the glass vessel under agitation. PVM and FBRM monitoring was performed throughout the duration of the experiment; FBRM data was recorded every 2 seconds and two PVM images were recorded every second.

205 3.5 Dissolution studies

The dissolution studies were carried out using a DT 600 dissolution tester of Ph. Eur. 2.9.3 (paddle) (Erweka, Edison, USA). A volume of 500 mL of phosphate buffer pH 7.2 equilibrated at 37 °C was used as the dissolution medium and the paddle rotation was kept at 50 rpm. Solubility of ibuprofen in the given conditions is 3.74 mg/ml (Dabbagh and Taghipour, 2007). The experiment was conducted using sink conditions; the theoretical concentration of lbuprofen in the dissolution medium following complete dissolution of 30 % w/w ibuprofen tablets was 0.16 mg/ml. Following addition of the tablet sample to the dissolution medium,
samples of 0.5 ml volume were withdrawn at 1, 5, 15, 30, 60 and 120, 180, and 240 min
intervals in order to determine the dissolution profiles. An additional sample was taken at
the 24 h time point to determine the total amount of drug in each tablet tested. At the 24 h
time point the tablet had completely disintegrated and complete IBU dissolution was
assumed.

All samples were filtered with 0.45 µm filter and 0.5 mL of fresh, pre-warmed medium was immediately added to the system in order to correct the volume to the sample volume withdrawn. Samples were analysed by HPLC. The % cumulative amount IBU released was calculated and plotted against time.

HPLC analysis was performed using an Agilent 1200 series HPLC system with an UV/Vis detector (Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, USA). A reversed-phase column (Gemini C-18, 250 × 4 mm x 5  $\mu$ m, Phenomenex Ltd. UK), mobile phase of acetronitrile and water (60:40, pH adjusted to 2.5) at a flow rate of 1.5 ml/min and injection volume of 20  $\mu$ L were employed. The wavelength for Ibuprofen detection was set at 215 nm and retention time was 7 min.

#### 228 4. RESULTS

#### 229 4.1 Tablet Characterisation

The average content of ibuprofen was determined for all tablets analysed and compared to the theoretical content (Table 2). Greatest variance between actual and theoretical content was measured for the 30 % w/w ibuprofen loading. Drug content uniformity was also determined with the percentage relative standard deviation less than 7 % for all drug loading. Tablet porosity was also determined (Table 2) as it can influence tablet disintegration and dissolution (Ibrahim, 1985; Yassin et al., 2015). Porosity of tablets
decreased as ibuprofen content increased. The porosity of tablets containing spray dried
MCC was slightly greater than tablets containing the air stream dried MCC at all drug
loadings except for 15%.

Theoretical drug	Theoretical drug		<mark>Air st</mark> ı	ream dried N	ИСС		Spray	y dried MCC	)
concentration	content	Actual	drug c	ontent	Porosity	Actual	drug co	ontent	Porosity
<mark>(% w/w)</mark>	(mg)		(mg)		(%)		(mg)		(%)
2.5 %	6.75	6.63	±	2.60 %	30.3	6.82	±	<b>1.57 %</b>	32.3
5 %	13.50	13.40	±	2.21 %	30.9	13.17	±	<mark>2.79 %</mark>	31.1
10 %	27.00	27.33	±	2.81 %	28.5	27.06	±	1.38 %	29.7
15 %	40.50	41.68	±	1.78 %	28.6	41.94	±	5.02 %	28.5
20 %	54.00	54.13	±	4.26 %	26.1	<mark>55.04</mark>	±	<mark>2.01 %</mark>	28.4
30 %	81.00	78.33	±	6.77 %	23.1	85.34	±	<mark>2.00 %</mark>	24.10

# 240 Table 2. Tablet ibuprofen theoretical and average actual content ± % relative standard deviation (n=5), blend true density and tablet porosity

Commented [CA1]: New table with True Density of blends

#### 242 4.2 Raman imaging analysis of tablet surface

Raman spectroscopy did not show differences between the characteristic bands of the MCC tablets (air stream dried and spray dried MCC only), indicating similar chemical identity of microcrystalline cellulose between grades. In respect to the ibuprofen loading, spectral peaks related to ibuprofen increased in intensity when ibuprofen loading was increased (Figure 1).

248 Raman images for tablets of all drug loadings were previously published (Queiroz et al., 249 2019). In this study the number of ibuprofen domains on surfaces of each tablet was 250 determined from these Raman images, as described in section 3.2 The number of ibuprofen 251 domains decreases for the tablets with drug loading above 15 % w/w (Table 3), despite an 252 increase in the overall intensity peaks related to ibuprofen (Figure 1). Above the percolation 253 threshold the domains of ibuprofen start to connect to the neighbouring ibuprofen 254 domains. Thus, one single domain with larger area is counted, instead of numerous smaller 255 neighbouring domains. In the case of the compacted tablets, it results in a change in the 256 drug distribution from dispersion of drug particles in a matrix of MCC (large number of small 257 drug domains) to distribution of MCC in a matrix of drug (smaller number of larger drug 258 domains). The resulting larger domains where characterized by continuously increased 259 equivalent circular diameter of ibuprofen domains with a more pronounced increase 260 between the concentrations of 15% and 20% w/w ibuprofen (Table 3). These results build 261 on the results in the earlier study which qualitatively confirmed the percolation threshold 262 values determined by visual appearance, which can be subjective. In this study the 263 quantitative data obtained related to the number and size of ibuprofen domains provides a 264 less subjective confirmation of the percolation threshold value. It is important to consider

# 265 the presence of these larger clusters of drug as they can alter the tablet disintegration and



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Raman shift (cm<sup>-1</sup>)

- 270 %, (e) 10 %, (f) 7.5 %, (g) 5 %, (h) 2.5 %, and (i) 0 % ibuprofen w/w. Vertical lines indicate
- 271 characteristic peaks of ibuprofen.
- 272

Table 3. The number of ibuprofen domains (N) and the equivalent circular diameter (ECD) of ibuprofen domains on the surface of Spray dried MCC<sup>®</sup> and Air stream dried<sup>®</sup> tablets containing a range of ibuprofen loadings (2.5 to 30% w/w ibuprofen). The number of domains (N) and the equivalent circular diameter values were determined from images generated using Raman image analysis.

% w/w		Air stream dried®	Spray dried MCC®		
Ibunrofen	N	ECD of ibuprofen domains	N	ECD of ibuprofen domains	
Buptoten		(μm)		(μm)	
2.5 %	158	69.2	130	62.0	
5 %	264	70.4	218	59.6	
7.5%	264	76.7	343	74.4	
10 %	462	79.5	475	71.8	
12.5%	377	74.3	469	77.1	
15 %	513	90.5	483	88.6	
20 %	377	103.5	376	103.4	
30 %	112	153.7	72	138.9	

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PCA analysis of Raman spectra of the surface of tablets showed that the first principal 279 280 component (PC-1) captured the effect of drug loading, while the second principal 281 component (PC-2) captured variability within the samples due to both MCC grade and due 282 to ibuprofen drug loading. The scores plot showed samples that are similar or different from 283 each other, i.e. samples geometrically located at distance are dissimilar to each other while 284 neighbouring samples are similar (Figure 2a). PC-1 and PC-2 explained 88% and 7% of the 285 variance captured by the model, respectively. Raman shifts of 93, 142.8, 639, 748, 835, 1184, 1209, and 1610 cm<sup>-1</sup> were the variables that mostly contributed to discriminate the 286 samples along the first component of the model (PC-1) (Figure 2b). Those bands are 287

288	characteristic of ibuprofen (Sütő et al., 2016) and they were not observed in the spectra of
289	the tablets containing pure MCC (Figure 1). As stated previously, these peak heights
290	increased with the increase in drug loading. The PCA model showed that tablets containing
291	air stream dried MCC differed from tablets containing spray dried MCC along PC-2. Loadings
292	of PC-2 contained peaks assigned to both, ibuprofen and MCC. PC-2 also showed an
293	upwards shifting of the baseline reduction in Raman shift. Both chemical and physical
294	attributes of the tablets may explain this variability in Raman spectra. Differences in tablet
295	porosity was observed with increase in drug loading and between MCC grades, Table 2.
296	Raman spectra can show stronger intensities for samples for more compacted (less porous)
297	samples due to an increased number of scattering molecules that will produce a Raman
297 298	samples due to an increased number of scattering molecules that will produce a Raman signal (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vibspec.2018.10.011). The upwards shift may also be due to Raman
297 298 299	samples due to an increased number of scattering molecules that will produce a Raman signal (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vibspec.2018.10.011). The upwards shift may also be due to Raman fluorescence, which is a material-dependant phenomenon; fluorescence is phenomena
297 298 299 300	samples due to an increased number of scattering molecules that will produce a Raman signal (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vibspec.2018.10.011). The upwards shift may also be due to Raman fluorescence, which is a material-dependant phenomenon; fluorescence is phenomena intrinsic to MCC. Microcrystalline cellulose is known to be fluorescent mainly due to the
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297 298 299 300 301 302	samples due to an increased number of scattering molecules that will produce a Raman signal (https://doi.org/10.1016/jwibspec.2018.10.011). The upwards shift may also be due to Raman fluorescence, which is a material-dependant phenomenon; fluorescence is phenomena intrinsic to MCC. Microcrystalline cellulose is known to be fluorescent mainly due to the presence of lignin (Castellan et al., 2007). Variance related to ibuprofen peaks (e.g. at the shifts 835 and 1610 cm <sup>-1</sup> ) and the main characteristic Raman bands assigned to cellulose
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297 298 299 300 301 302 303 303	samples due to an increased number of scattering molecules that will produce a Raman signal (https://doi.org/10.1016/jvibspec.2018.10.011). The upwards shift may also be due to Raman fluorescence, which is a material-dependant phenomenon; fluorescence is phenomena intrinsic to MCC. Microcrystalline cellulose is known to be fluorescent mainly due to the presence of lignin (Castellan et al., 2007). Variance related to ibuprofen peaks (e.g. at the shifts 835 and 1610 cm <sup>-1</sup> ) and the main characteristic Raman bands assigned to cellulose (e.g. at 1096 cm <sup>-1</sup> and within the region 275-550 cm <sup>-1</sup> ) (Wiley and Atalla, 1987) are also present in the loadings of PC-2. The region of 275-550 cm <sup>-1</sup> is known to hold crystallinity

Commented [CA2]: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vibspec.2 018.10.011 Gomez et al 306 samples along PC-2 may be an indication that the differences between the spray dried and

307 the air stream dried MCC grades included crystallinity, lignin content, and compact density.





#### 313 4.3 Disintegration and Dissolution

Tablet disintegration using Ph. Eur. 2.9.1 disintegration apparatus showed that all tablets had completely disintegrated in less than 5 min. Differences between tablets containing different drug loadings or MCC grades could not be accurately determined. The tablets investigated contain a high percentage in mass of MCC, which is highly hydroscopic and a noted disintegrant (Rowe et al., 2009). Thus, disintegration happened fast independently of the MCC grade.

320 The results of the Ph. Eur. 2.9.3 dissolution study showed that increased ibuprofen 321 concentration had a negative impact on the dissolution behaviour of Ibuprofen/MCC tablets 322 (Figure 3). The effect of ibuprofen loading on drug dissolution was evident for ibuprofen 323 concentrations above the percolation threshold, 20 and 30 %w/w of ibuprofen; time to 324 achieve 100% ibuprofen release increased significantly (Figure 4). Tablets containing the air 325 stream dried MCC showed statistically significantly greater times to achieve 100% ibuprofen 326 release for all drug loadings in comparison to tablets containing the spray dried MCC. 327 Tablets containing 30% w/w IBU and air stream dried MCC did not reach %100 release in 328 240 min. Complete release was confirmed after 24h. It is also interesting to note the step 329 change in time to reach 100% cumulative drug release between 2.5 and 5% drug loading (air stream dried MCC) and 2.5 and 7.5% drug loading (spray dried MCC respectively) (Figure 4). 330 331 This change in dissolution behaviour is not related to a percolation threshold of ibuprofen in 332 the MCC matrix but may be due to other factors such a differences in porosity influencing 333 disintegration behaviour (Desai et al., 2016) and hence dissolution.



Figure 4. Dissolution profiles of tablets containing (A) Spray dried MCC<sup>®</sup> and (B) Air stream
dried<sup>®</sup> and different ibuprofen w/w/ loadings (2.5 to 30% w/w). Dissolution was performed
in phosphate buffer pH 7.2 at 37°C. Average values shown with y-error bars indicating
standard deviation, n= 5.

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Figure 4. Time to reach 100% ibuprofen release during dissolution of tablets containing 342 spray dried and airs stream dried microcrystalline cellulose grades and different ibuprofen 343 344 w/w/ loadings (2.5 to 30% w/w). Tablets containing air stream dried MCC and 30% w/w of 345 ibuprofen did not reach %100 release in 240 min. However, complete release was confirmed 346 after 24h. Dissolution was performed in phosphate buffer pH 7.2 at 37°C. Average values 347 shown with y-error bars indicating standard deviation, n= 5.

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#### 349 4.4 FBRM monitoring

350 FBRM was used as a PAT tool to determine if tablet disintegration played a role in the 351 differences observed between dissolution of tablets containing air stream dried and spray 352 dried MCC grades with increasing drug loading. Two aspects were investigated: the 353 differences among tablets below and above the percolation threshold and the differences 354 between both MCC grades. This analysis was complementary to the pharmacopoeial disintegration test which was not able to capture differences regarding these two aspects. 355 356 As mentioned previously, FBRM gives particle count, dimension information in real-time

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(Barrett and Glennon, 1999). It was hoped that the ibuprofen clusters observed in the
tablets by Raman imaging could be observed in the disintegration medium and potentially
explain the differences in dissolution observed between tablets containing spray dried and
air stream dried MCC grades at different drug loadings.

Initially, disintegration monitored by FBRM was performed using spray dried and air stream dried MCC tablets without ibuprofen to determine differences in disintegration due to MCC grade. Both tablets displayed very similar behaviour with a sharp increase in particle counts upon addition of the tablet to the phosphate buffer pH 7.2. Figure 5 shows that the counts vs time profile for the two MCC grades were very similar, indicating that the tablets disintegrated at the same rate.



Figure 5. Focused Beam Reflectance Measurement (FBRM) counts 1-1000 μm versus time
for tablets containing air stream dried and spray dried MCC in phosphate buffer pH 7.2, and
temperature of 37 °C.

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Figure 6 shows the FBRM total counts vs time for ibuprofen tablets added to the disintegration medium for the first 30 minutes. For all tablets there is a rapid increase in counts for the first 7 minutes approximately, indicating that, as with the tablets of air 375 stream dried and spray dried MCC without ibuprofen, tablet disintegration began 376 immediately upon addition of the tablet to the medium for all ibuprofen loadings. A similar 377 profile is seen for each tablet of spray dried MCC regardless of ibuprofen loading. The 378 counts increased sharply in the first 30 seconds after addition to the medium and then 379 continued to increase at a slower rate for the following minutes.



 $\begin{array}{rl} 381 & \mbox{Figure 6. Focused Beam Reflectance Measurement (FBRM) total particle counts (counts 1 1000 \ \mum) versus time for tablet containing (A) the spray dried MCC and (C) the air stream$ dried MCC and a range of ibuprofen loading (% w/w) in phosphate buffer pH 7.2 and $temperature of 37 °C. \\ \end{array}$ 

Overall, air stream dried MCC tablets had a much less consistent total counts profile over time for different drug loading, in comparison to spray dried MCC tablets. When the different ibuprofen loadings were compared, the loadings of 20 % and 30 % w/w ibuprofen showed different profiles compared to lower drug loadings. For 20 % and 30 % w/w ibuprofen, a sharp increase in total counts was observed upon addition of tablet and followed by a rapid decrease. For tablets of air stream dried MCC at greater ibuprofen loadings the total count was lower after 5 minutes compared to lower tablet loadings.

The total counts profiles for tablets containing air stream dried MCC was also lower in comparison to tablets containing spray dried MCC, for all ibuprofen loadings (Figure 7). These differences were more pronounced above the percolation threshold > 15% ibuprofen.







Figure 3. Focused Beam Reflectance Measurement (FBRM) total counts over time for
Vivapur<sup>®</sup> and Emcocel<sup>®</sup> tablets containing ibuprofen (A) 7.5 %, (B) 15 %, (C) 20 %, and (D)
30% w/w in phosphate buffer pH 7.2 and temperature of 37 °C.

Due to the variability in the number of counts for each tablet a relative increase in FBRM counts was measured for each tablet to enable comparison between tablets. Figure 8 shows the time necessary to reach 50, 60, 70, 80, 90% total counts. All tablets were tracked for 30 minutes. Thus, the total counts of 100% were considered the total counts at 30 min. The overall trend showed a longer time for tablets containing air stream dried MCC compared to spray dried MCC, indicating a slower disintegration rate.



Figure 8. Time to reach percentage of total particle counts measured by FBRM for tablets
after containing (A) spray dried and (B) air stream dried microcrystalline cellulose grades
and different ibuprofen w/w/ loadings (2.5 to 30% w/w) disintegrating in phosphate buffer
pH 7.2 at 37°C. Percentages expressed relative to total particle counts at 30 mins considered
100%.

417	An indication of particle size distribution following disintegration was obtained from the
418	FBRM chord length distributions and square weighted chord length distributions (SQWT).
419	Representative tablets with 12.5, 15 % w/w, and 30 % w/w ibuprofen loadings after 5

420 minutes of dissolution are shown in Figure 9 for the spray dried and air stream dried MCC 421 grades. CLD and SQWCLD for all drug loadings investigated are available in the 422 supplementary material. These distributions are automatically generated for the user by the 423 iC FBRM software. The CLD is comparable to a particle size distribution. This is the number 424 of chord lengths recorded in the measurement scan time in vs the chord length. The 425 SQWCLD is useful for visual comparison of systems by emphasising differences in the course 426 counts (100 - 1000  $\mu$ m). This is achieved by applying a channel (size intervals or bins) 427 specific weight  $w_i$  to counts  $n_i$ . The weighted channels  $y_i$  are obtained via:

$$y_i = w_i \cdot n_i$$
 (Equation 2)

428 The weights  $w_i$  are obtained from the channel midpoints  $M_i$  via:

$$w_i = \frac{M_i^{\gamma}}{\sum_{j=1}^N M_j^{\gamma}} \cdot N$$
 (Equation 3)

429 Where  $\gamma$  is 2 for the square weight, N is the number of channels, which was 90 in this study,

430 i = 1, 2, ..., N and j =1, 2, ..., N.



Figure 9. Focused Beam Reflectance Measurement (FBRM) chord length distributions and
square weighted chord length distributions for Spray dried MCC<sup>®</sup> (spray dried MCC) and Air
stream dried<sup>®</sup> (air stream dried MCC) tablets with ibuprofen loading (A) 12.5 %, (B) 15%,
and (C) 30 % w/w, 5 minutes after addition to the disintegration medium, phosphate buffer
pH 7.2 and temperature of 37 °C.

436 Coarse counts account for a much larger proportion of the mass of material compared with 437 fine counts (1-10  $\mu$ m). While the CLDs for both systems have a similar shape profile the 438 increased number of total counts and shorter chord length counts was evident for the spray 439 dried compared to the air stream dried MCC. Fine counts may be related to disaggregation 440 of MCC particles which is composed of cellulose fibrils agglomerated into larger particles 441 (Queiroz et al., 2019.) When the square weighted CLDs are compared there is a distinct shift 442 to the right for air stream dried, highlighting the increased particle size present 5 minutes 443 after the tablet addition to the buffer. An increase in fine counts (1-10  $\mu$ m) present in the 444 spray dried MCC system suggested that tablets of the spray dried MCC disintegrated more effectively than tablets of the air stream dried MCC at a 30 % w/w ibuprofen loading. For 445 446 loading below the percolation threshold, a similar trend was seen although the shift to the 447 right for air stream dried in the square weighted CLD is less pronounced. This is exemplified 448 by 12.5 % w/w ibuprofen tablets in Figure 9.

The plots of chord length distributions at different time points during disintegration for each individual tablet were generated (supplementary data) and selected tablets shown in Figure 10. The increase in counts over time happens similarly across all chord lengths for a same tablet, i.e. the distribution did not show a shape change at different time points. Interestingly, the increase in count is clearly more significant up to 5 min. After that, the change is counts is comparatively very small.

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Figure 10. Focused Beam Reflectance Measurement (FBRM) chord length distributions for tablets with ibuprofen loadings of 12.5 %, 15%, and 30 % w/w and (A, C, and D) Spray dried MCC<sup>®</sup> (spray dried MCC) and (B, D, and F) Air stream dried<sup>®</sup> (air stream dried MCC), respectively, at different times after addition to the disintegration medium, phosphate buffer pH 7.2 and temperature of 37 °C. This analysis is available for tablets at all drug loadings in the supplementary material.

Based on the results shown in Figure 11, the cumulative drug release at 5 min was plotted
against IBU concentration in order to investigate the differences in drug release below and
above the threshold following tablet disintegration (Figure 5). Interestingly, after 5 min time

466	point the pharmacopeial disintegration tested showed complete disintegration. Similar
467	graphical approaches have been previously used to determine the percolation threshold
468	from disintegration and dissolution (Kimura et al., 2007a; Wenzel et al., 2017).
469	Cumulative release decreased sharply from 2.5 to 15% w/w of ibuprofen loading. However,
470	at drug loadings above the percolation threshold (20% w/w and 30% w/w IBU) the reduction
471	in drug release with increase in drug loading was decreased. Tablets containing the air
472	stream dried MCC showed significantly lower drug release for all drug loadings in
473	comparison to tablets containing the spray dried MCC. These findings showed the change in
474	dissolution behaviour at drug concentrations above and below the predicted percolation
475	threshold following tablet disintegration.



Figure 11. Estimation of percolation threshold based on the dissolution cumulative release
of ibuprofen from the tablets containing (A) air stream dried and (B) spray dried
microcrystalline cellulose, at 5 min of dissolution. The time of 5 minutes was chosen as all
tablets had disintegrated at 5 min based on FBRM results.

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# 486 4.5 PVM analysis

487 PVM analysis was performed to provide real-time images of particles in dissolution medium during tablet disintegration. Besides the images, PVM relative backscatter index was used as 488 489 a quantitative measure of disintegration. Initially, images were collected using the PVM 490 probe for ibuprofen powder and both MCC only tablets in buffer. The ibuprofen particles had a distinct rod-shaped habit (Figure 12a). Dispersed ibuprofen powder was present as 491 492 both discrete particles and aggregates. The ibuprofen particles appeared to be between 100 493 and 300  $\mu m$  in length and 30 and 50  $\mu m$  in width. When compared with the particle size for 494 the dry powder from laser diffraction (Table 1), where the D50 was 55  $\mu$ m, it appears that 495 larger ibuprofen particles in the PVM images may be aggregates.

496 PVM images of the disintegrated spray dried MCC tablet (Figure 12b) indicated that fine 497 material was present along with uniform distinct particles having a rough surface. Images of 498 disintegrated air stream dried MCC tablet (Figure 12c) are similar to spray dried MCC. These 499 images would support the presence of fine particles observed during FBRM analysis, Figures 500 9 and 10. These appeared to be rod shaped particles present which are similar in 501 appearance to the ibuprofen particles.





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508 Side by side comparison of PVM images of disintegrated tablets containing spray dried and 509 air stream dried MCC with equivalent ibuprofen loading showed that it is difficult to 510 distinguish definite differences between the two systems. One difference noted was that air 511 stream dried tablets showed more elongated particles (Figure 13). There are rod shaped 512 particles present in the air stream dried suspension (Figure 12), hence it was not possible to 513 distinguish whether this rod-shaped material following the 15% w/w ibuprofen tablet 514 disintegration is ibuprofen or MCC.

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519 Relative Backscatter Index (RBI) measured by PVM is the relationship between the incident 520 and the detected light. As disintegration progresses the number of particles in the media 521 increases due to fragmentation of larger particles to smaller particles and RBI increases. The 522 change in the PVM RBI versus time during disintegration does indicate differences for 523 tablets containing 20% and 30% ibuprofen loading tablets compared to tablets containing 524 lower ibuprofen loadings (Figure 14). For ibuprofen loadings below the percolation 525 threshold the RBI for both spray dried and air stream dried MCC tablets was similar. RBI increased to a greater extent for the spray dried MCC tablets with increased drug loadings 526 527 compared to air stream dried MCC (Figure 14d). The air stream dried MCC tablets with a 20 and 30% w/w ibuprofen has a significantly lower final RBI during disintegration. 528



Figure 14. Relative Backscatter Index (RBI) vs time following disintegration of Spray dried
MCC<sup>®</sup> and Air stream dried<sup>®</sup> tablets (A) 0% w/w, (B) 15% w/w, (C) 20% w/w and (D) 30%
w/w ibuprofen in phosphate buffer pH7.2 and temperature of 37 °C.

# 534 5. DISCUSSION

The research presented was conducted to better understand whether a percolation threshold determined from compaction data can translate to experimental tablet disintegration and dissolution data and the effect of the presence of a critical drug load (percolation threshold) on tablet disintegration and drug dissolution.

539 Previous studies determined a percolation threshold value from disintegration and
540 dissolution experimental data (Kimura et al., 2007a; Stillhart et al., 2017; Wenzel et al.,
541 2017). The earlier study was focused on predicting mathematically and confirming

experimentally the existence of a percolation threshold from a blend properties and compaction behaviour perspective. In the present study, disintegration and dissolution experiments were carried out to experimentally to confirm the percolation threshold, which had been predicted using an statistical hybrid model (Queiroz et al., 2019).

546 Dissolution testing confirmed the presence of the percolation threshold in the region 547 previously reported. The change in behaviour above the percolation threshold was observed 548 during dissolution; % drug released at 5 min following tablet disintegration (Figure 11) and 549 time to achieve complete dissolution (Figure 4). Blends above the percolation threshold 550 showed slower dissolution profiles. Kimura, Betz and Leuenberger, 2007 also revealed a decreased disintegration performance above the critical loading of a poorly water-soluble 551 drug. In the case of tablets containing MCC and ibuprofen, it was hypothesised that the 552 553 connected MCC particles would form the water-conducting clusters promoting 554 disintegration. Above the threshold predicted a continuous cluster of ibuprofen particles is 555 formed. Relative to MCC, ibuprofen is poorly water soluble, and the formation of continuous ibuprofen clusters would decrease disintegration. Thus, the explanation for the 556 reduction in dissolution above the percolation threshold can be attributed to the combined 557 558 effect of decreased drug surface area to mass due to the presence of continuous clusters 559 evidenced by Raman imaging and a change in the disintegration process.

In this study, Raman imaging and image domain analysis were combined to confirm percolation threshold in pharmaceutical tablets. The methodology developed confirmed the percolation threshold previously predicted for the binary blend investigated (Queiroz et al., 2019) by an increasing number of drug cluster up to the percolation threshold and reduction above due to the formation of continuous clusters. For the drug loading above 15%, the number of ibuprofen domains dramatically decreased, and their equivalent circle diameter increased which confirms the cluster formation and would contribute to a slower rate ofibuprofen dissolution due to a reduced surface area to mass ratio.

568 The influence of the presence of continuous ibuprofen clusters on tablet disintegration was 569 difficult to establish by pharmacopoeial disintegration testing. However, the use of FBRM 570 and PVM to determine the tablet disintegration behaviour with respect to drug loading 571 demonstrated a change in behaviour above the percolation threshold, particularly for 572 tablets containing air stream dried MCC (Figures 7 and 14). PVM images of disintegration 573 showed an omnidirectional enlargement of particles prior fragmentation of the tablet. This 574 is a typical behaviour of immediate-release tablets and characterizes the swelling 575 disintegration mechanism (Caramella et al., 1988). The dissolution of the disintegrated particles could not be observed by FBRM nor PVM due to similarity in morphology of the 576 577 disaggregated MCC particles and ibuprofen particles (Figure 13) and the insoluble nature of 578 MCC in the disintegration medium. However, it may be possible to monitor drug dissolution 579 for formulations with high drug loadings and soluble excipients, such as lactose, using PVM 580 and FBRM techniques.

581 The secondary objective of this study was to investigate the influence of MCC grade on 582 disintegration and dissolution behaviour relative to the percolation threshold. Despite the 583 MCC grades having similar bulk properties, the interaction of each grade with the model 584 drug ibuprofen resulted in differing dissolution behaviour. In all cases, the tablets containing 585 the air stream dried grade showed slower disintegration and dissolution rates. Air stream 586 dried MCC tablets showed a reduction in disintegration rate above the percolation threshold 587 value while spray dried MCC did not (Figure 6 and 14). These tablets resulted in the slower 588 dissolution rates (Figure 4) across all drug loading. Tablets produced from the air stream 589 dried MCC grade were slightly less porous (Table 2). Tablet porosity is a function of drug 590 loading and for poorly compressible drugs reduced above the percolation threshold value, 591 but also a dependent on the grade of MCC employed (Queiroz et al., 2019). Differences in 592 MCC crystallinity has also been related to lower swelling of MCC; polymers with less dense 593 crystalline regions were observed to swell more as they are more accessible for the water 594 molecules and the cohesive forces between the chain segments are weaker in comparison 595 to the crystalline domains (Desai et al., 2016; Schott, 1992). Further studies are required to 596 determine the exact mechanisms causing in the reduced dissolution rates for tablets 597 containing air stream dried MCC compared to the spray dried grade.

It was challenging to discriminate between the effects of tablet porosity and percolation threshold in relation to tablet disintegration. The compaction parameters and bonding mechanism of particles during compaction directly impact tablet porosity, the ingress of the disintegration medium, MCC swelling and hence tablet disintegration (Yassin et al., 2015). Despite confounding differences observed in tablet porosity in this study, a clear step change in dissolution behaviour was observed for tablets with drug loadings above the percolation threshold.

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#### 606 6. CONCLUSIONS

Dissolution data showed that a percolation threshold value previously determined for ibuprofen/MCC binary blends, from compaction data, translated to tablet dissolution data. Slower ibuprofen dissolution behaviour was observed for tablets above the predetermined percolation threshold level and confirmed the presence of the percolation threshold relevant to dissolution. In addition, slower dissolution was observed for all tablets containing an air stream dried MCC grade compared to a spray dried MCC grade. FBRM and 613 PVM showed less efficient disintegration above the percolation threshold for tablets 614 containing air stream dried MCC. The results experimentally demonstrate that both larger 615 drug domains, quantified by Raman imaging, and a less efficient tablet disintegration (in the 616 case of air stream dried MCC) measured by FBRM and PVM contributed to slower ibuprofen 617 dissolution profiles above the percolation threshold.

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Figure SM-1. Dissolution profiles of tablets containing spray dried MCC (Emcocel®) (solid
line) and air stream dried MCC (Vivapur®) (dashed line) containing ibuprofen (a) 2.5 %, (b) 5
%, (c) 7.5 %, (d) 10 %, (e) 12.5 %, (f) 15 %, (g) 20 %, and (h) 30 % w/w. Dashed and solid lines
correspond to air stream and spray dried MCCs, respectively. Dissolution was performed in
phosphate buffer pH 7.2 at 37°C. Average values shown with y-error bars indicating
standard deviation, n= 5.





Figure SM-2. Focused Beam Reflectance Measurement (FBRM) chord length distributions for
tablets with ibuprofen loadings of 2.5 % - 30 % w/w spray dried MCC (Emcocel®) and air
stream dried MCC (Vivapur®), respectively, at different time ponts after addition to the
disintegration medium, phosphate buffer pH 7.2 and temperature of 37 °C.













