Fluid Management as a Strategic Enabler in Biopharmaceutical Manufacturing

In cell and gene therapy manufacturing, a contamination event during fill-finish doesn't just cost product; it can cost months of patient wait time. The fluid path that carried the material there is rarely where post-mortems start, but it's where it should. Fluid management has long been treated as an operational support function, necessary but not strategic. That framing is changing, and for good reason.

This shift to a strategic role is advantageous in the context of aggressive investment in advanced biologics, increasing regulatory scrutiny and a growing emphasis on speed-to-market without compromising control or quality. In this environment, integrated fluid management systems, whether standard, configurable or engineered-to-order, play a pivotal role, helping manufacturers bridge from development and commercialisation while enabling more robust, flexible operations.

The Evolving Demands of Bioprocessing Operations

From monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) and antibody-drug conjugates (ADCs) to cell and gene therapies, each therapeutic modality introduces unique processing requirements. Biologics can have varying sensitivity to shear forces, temperature fluctuations and material interactions, which place new demands on fluid handling systems. At the same time, manufacturers need to scale processes more quickly and efficiently.

The traditional bioproduction model, where fluid management approaches are adapted or re-engineered at each stage of scale-up, is no longer practical or sustainable in such a highly competitive environment. Instead, there is a growing need for systems that speed transition from development to GMP manufacturing, maintaining process integrity at every step and meeting the specific needs of different molecules and workflows.

Integrated fluid management systems are designed to address these challenges by bringing together peristaltic pumps, single-use assemblies, systems, connectors and control elements into cohesive platforms. The result is not only greater operational efficiency and scalability but also improved process understanding and control.

Designing for Integration Across the Workflow

One of the most important considerations in developing integrated fluid management systems is the need to support the full bioprocessing workflow. Upstream, downstream and fill-finish operations each have distinct requirements and historically, fluid handling solutions would be optimised for individual steps rather than the process as a whole.

To address this, modern fluid management systems are being engineered to unify these workflows into a cohesive framework. This means implementing systems that can accommodate a range of process conditions without requiring extensive customisation at each stage. It also means ensuring that fluid paths remain consistent and controlled as the feedstream advances through the process, reducing variability and enhancing reproducibility. There is a greater need for data to be collected and shared through central orchestration systems.

Flexible, Process-Centric System Design

While technical performance is critical, adoption ultimately depends on usability. Manufacturing environments are fast-paced and highly regulated, leaving little room for overly complex systems that are not user-friendly. Recognising this, a key priority in the development of integrated fluid management solutions must be process-centric design.

This includes a focus on ease of setup and intuitive interfaces. Systems should minimise the number of manual interventions required, reducing the potential for error while also improving efficiency. Standardised connections and simplified assembly processes all contribute to faster changeovers and more consistent execution.

Process-centric design also facilitates scale-up. Systems with consistent user interfaces across scales can significantly reduce training time and help ensure that processes are executed correctly, regardless of operator experience.

In addition to the differences across therapeutic modalities, no two biomanufacturing facilities are exactly alike. Differences in layout, scale and digital maturity can present significant challenges when implementing new technologies. Rigid, one-size-fits-all fluid management solutions can be difficult to integrate and may require costly modifications to existing infrastructure.

Flexibility in the design of an integrated fluid management system is key to overcoming this challenge. Whether the system components are standard, configurable or engineered to order, the final solution must meet specific process requirements and facility constraints. This flexible approach also supports scalability, making it easier to expand capacity or introduce new processes without starting from scratch.

This is not a theoretical concern. Extractables and leachables from poorly validated tubing or connectors have derailed regulatory submissions and, in some cases, required reformulation late in development, an expensive problem to solve under time pressure. In single-use systems, where every material in the fluid path is in direct contact with the product, early and rigorous compatibility assessment is a prerequisite, not an afterthought.

Ensuring Material Compatibility

As biologics become more sophisticated, so too do the challenges associated with material compatibility. Interactions

Integrated fluid management solutions for bioprocessing production, featuring connected equipment and sterile transfer systems for scalable manufacturing workflows.

between process fluids and system components, such as tubing, connectors and seals, can impact product quality, particularly for sensitive or high-value therapies.

To address this, attention to the selection and validation of materials used in fluid management systems is essential. This includes evaluating compatibility across a wide range of formulations, as well as assessing factors such as extractables and leachables.

By ensuring that material selection is a key factor for consideration, drug manufacturers reduce the risk of unintended interactions and ensure that product integrity is maintained throughout the process. This is especially important in single-use systems, where materials are in direct contact with the product.

The Path to Digital Connectivity

While physical integration is a critical first step, truly integrated fluid management requires digital connectivity. New fluid handling solutions incorporate sensors that monitor key parameters such as flow rate, pressure and temperature in real time. When connected to broader digital ecosystems, such as manufacturing execution systems (MES) and supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) platforms, this data can provide valuable insights into process performance.

Single-use assembly designed for closed fluid transfer in bioprocessing production

This real-time monitoring enables more proactive decision-making, allowing operators to identify and address issues before they impact product quality. It also supports advanced analytics and predictive maintenance, helping manufacturers optimise processes and reduce downtime.

However, achieving true digital connectivity will require continued progress in areas such as data standardisation and interoperability. Systems must be able to communicate seamlessly with one another, avoiding the creation of data silos that limit the value of integration.

Bridging Innovation and Implementation

While the strategic value of integrated fluid management is increasingly clear, successful implementation relies on flawless execution. Even the most advanced systems must operate within the constraints of real-world manufacturing environments, tight timelines, evolving regulatory expectations and the need to maintain uninterrupted production.

One of the most critical success factors is early alignment between development and manufacturing teams. Fluid

Peristaltic pump system with tubing setup for precise fluid transfer

ISO-certified technician assembling a filtration assembly in a controlled cleanroom environment.

management decisions made during process design, pump selection, tubing materials and connector standards constrain what is possible at GMP scale. Revisiting those decisions under timeline pressure is costly. Getting them right early is not. That requires a partner who can engage at the process level, not just supply hardware and consumables. Avantor's approach integrates fluid handling hardware, application engineering, materials validation and digital connectivity support into a single engagement, reducing the coordination burden on manufacturers and enabling faster, lower-risk transitions from development to commercial production.

Fluid Management as a Strategic Priority

The evolution of fluid management reflects a new vision of biopharmaceutical manufacturing. Rather than focusing on individual unit operations, there is growing recognition of the importance of end-to-end process integration. By transforming fluid handling from a fragmented, operational task into an integrated, strategic capability, the industry is better positioned to support the development and delivery of next-generation therapies.

In this context, fluid management is no longer just about moving feedstreams from one point to another. It is about enabling consistent, controlled and scalable processes that can meet the demands of increasingly complex modalities. The cost of poor fluid management is no longer just operational inefficiency; it shows up in programme timelines and product quality data.

To realise this potential, manufacturers must move beyond a tactical approach and proactively design fluid management strategies aligned to their specific molecules, processes and facility constraints. Doing so not only improves process robustness but also strengthens overall control strategies, which is an increasingly critical factor in regulatory submissions and success.

For stakeholders across the value chain, from process engineers and manufacturing leaders to quality and regulatory teams, the implications are clear. Investment in integrated, flexible and digitally enabled fluid management systems can drive faster scale-up, improved product quality and greater operational efficiency.

As the industry continues to explore new types of therapeutic modalities and grapple with imperatives to increase speed, reduce risk and contain costs, the importance of robust, integrated infrastructure will only grow. Fluid management, once an afterthought, is now a strategic lever.

The opportunity for leveraging integrated fluid management as a strategic solution lies in building systems that meet today's needs and can adapt to the therapies and technologies of tomorrow. Biopharmaceutical companies that prioritise integration, usability, flexibility and material compatibility will be best positioned to gain a significant advantage.

Integrated single-use bioprocessing solution featuring a peristaltic pump, sterile tubing assembly and 2D bag for controlled fluid transfer

Jerry Keybl

Jerry Keybl is Senior Vice President and General Manager of Avantor's Masterflex® Fluid Management business, where he leads end-to-end strategy, operations and execution across a portfolio serving life sciences, research and industrial applications. Prior to this, he served as Senior Vice President of Biopharma Products and Strategy at Avantor, where he oversaw the bioprocessing portfolio and drove alignment across product innovation, commercialisation and long-term growth initiatives. He previously held product management, marketing, and strategy roles at MilliporeSigma, with a focus on cell and gene therapies, and served as a Project Leader at the Boston Consulting Group.