Removal of Dental Biofilms with an Ultrasonically-Activated Water Stream

Howlin R.P1,2, Fabbri S.3,Offin D.G.4, Symonds N.3, Kiang K.S.5, Knee R.J2, Yoganantham D.C.2, Webb J.S1,2,Birkin P.R.4, Leighton T.G.6,7, Stoodley P.3,8,9\*

1National Institute for Health Research Southampton Respiratory Biomedical Research Unit, Southampton Centre for Biomedical Research, University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust, Tremona Road, Southampton, SO16 6YD, U.K.

2Centre for Biological Sciences, Faculty of Natural and Environmental Sciences and Institute for Life Sciences, Building 85, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, U.K.

3National Centre for Advanced Tribology, Faculty of Engineering and Institute for Life Sciences, Building 7, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, U.K.

4Chemistry, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ. U.K.

5Southampton Nanofabrication Centre Electronics & Computer Science, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, U.K.

6Faculty of Engineering and the Environment, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, U.K.

7Institute of Sound and Vibration Research, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, U.K.

8Department of Orthopaedics, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210.

9Departments of Microbial Infection and Immunity and Orthopedics, Center for Microbial Interface Biology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210.

\*corresponding author:

Professor Paul Stoodley, PhD.

Departments of Microbial Infection and Immunity and Orthopedics,

Center for Microbial Interface Biology,

716 Biomedical Research Tower,

The Ohio State University,

460 West 12th Avenue,

Columbus,

OH 43210.

Tel: +1 614 292 7826

Email: pstoodley@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**

Acidogenic bacteria within dental plaque biofilms are the causative agents of caries. Consequently, maintenance of a healthy oral environment with efficient biofilm removal strategies is important in order to limit caries, as well as halting progression to gingivitis and periodontitis. Recently, a novel cleaning device has been described utilising an ultrasonically activated stream (UAS) to generate a cavitation cloud of bubbles in a freely flowing water stream which has demonstrated the capacity to be effective at biofilm removal.

In this study, UAS was evaluated for its ability to remove biofilms of the cariogenic pathogen *Streptococcus mutans* UA159, as well as *Actinomyces naeslundii* ATCC 12104 and *S. oralis* ATCC 9811, grown on glass slides, machine etched glass slides to generate a reproducible complex surface and artificial teeth from a typodont training model. Biofilm removal was assessed both visually and microscopically using high-speed videography, confocal laser scanning microscopy (CSLM) and scanning electron microscopy (SEM).

Analysis by CSLM demonstrated a statistically significant 99.9 % removal of *S. mutans* biofilms exposed to the UAS for 10 s, relative to both untreated control biofilms and biofilms exposed to the water stream alone without ultrasonic activation (P = <0.05). The water stream alone showed no statistical significant difference in removal compared to the untreated control (P = 0.24). High-speed videography demonstrated a rapid rate (151 mm2 in 1 s) of biofilm removal. The UAS was also highly effective at *S. mutans*, *A. naeslundii* and *S. oralis* biofilm removal from machine etched glass and *S. mutans* from typodont surfaces with complex topography as demonstrated by SEM.

Consequently, UAS technology represents a potentially effective method for biofilm removal and improved oral hygiene.

Keywords: Bacteria, Caries, Dental hygiene, Infection control, Microbiology, *Streptococcus mutans*.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The oral cavity provides an optimal environment for the colonisation and proliferation of a diverse array of microorganisms (Aas et al. 2005, Zaura et al. 2009). The most prevalent are bacteria which exist primarily as a biofilm, commonly known as dental plaque, on the tooth surface. The accumulation of dental biofilm plays a key role in the pathogenesis of a range of oral diseases, including gingivitis, periodontitis and caries (Aspiras et al. 2010).

*S. mutans* is a major cariogenic constituent of the supragingival biofilm due, in part, to its ability to grow and metabolise optimally at low pH (von Ohle et al. 2010). This gives it the ability to outcompete non-cariogenic commensal species thus altering microbial homeostasis in favour of the proliferation of acidogenic and aciduric microbial species and the establishment of a disease state (Marsh 2003, Lemos et al. 2013, Falsetta et al. 2012). The majority of control strategies, therefore, focus on preventing the proliferation of dental biofilm through frequent removal by mechanical oral hygiene procedures, usually in combination with chemical detrifrices (Brading and Marsh 2003, Forssten et al. 2010, Marsh 2010). However, even with good oral hygiene practices, such as regular brushing, flossing, water jets and high-velocity water drops, biofilms can still accumulate on hard to reach places on the tooth surface.

Studies have previously demonstrated that the passage of a water-air interface over a solid surface can entrain bacteria and provide effective biofilm cleaning (Gomez-Suarez et al. 2001, Parini and Pitt 2006). This can be achieved with the passage of a microbubble stream, occasionally combined with ultrasonic agitation, to generate significant surface tension and shear forces for mechanical based cleaning (Parini and Pitt 2005, Halford et al. 2012). Recently, a novel cleaning system has been developed which utilises the acoustic activation of bubbles within a free flow of water to generate an ultrasonically activated stream (UAS) (Leighton 2011). The forces acting on individual gas bubbles cause them to coalesce and move over the surface or be trapped within pits and fissures within the substratum (Leighton 1994, Doinikov 2001, Stricker et al. 2013) where the motion and cavitation dynamics of the bubbles create local shear and pressure, contributing to cleaning efficacy (Rooney 1970). This has been demonstrated in oral models (Leighton 1994, O'Leary et al. 1997, Lea et al. 2005) using standard dental ultrasonic equipment, but never with contact-free technologies such as UAS. Particularly with respect to the pits and recesses of a surface, the entrapment of dynamic gas bubbles produces highly effective cleaning that may not be achieved with a normal water stream (Offin et al. 2014). This study aims to evaluate the efficacy of UAS as a novel approach to dental biofilm removal.

**MATERIALS & METHODS**

***Bacteria & Biofilm Growth Conditions***

Overnight cultures of *Streptococcus mutans* UA159 (ATCC 700610), *Actinomyces naeslundii* ATCC 12104 and *Streptococcus oralis* ATCC 9811 were grown in brain heart infusion (BHI; Sigma-Aldrich) broth at 37 °C [for S. mutans, BHI was supplemented with 2 % sucrose (Sigma-Aldrich) and cultures were grown at 5 % CO2]. Each culture was diluted in fresh media to an optical density value corresponding to 106 colony forming units (CFU)/mL. The adjusted culture was used as an inoculum to assess UAS cleaning on a variety of increasingly complex surfaces with different roughness and material properties. Biofilms were grown on all surfaces for 72 h at 37 oC (with 5 % CO2 for *S. mutans* biofilm growth) in a humidified incubator with media changes performed every 24 h.

**The ultrasonically activated stream (UAS) device**

The data in this paper were taken using the benchtop prototype of the StarStreamTM UAS device (Leighton 2011) (Ultrawave Precision Ultrasonic Cleaning Equipment, Cardiff, UK). The device generates a stream of water at 2.1 L/min (± 0. 2 L/min) from a 10 mm diameter circular orifice, down which an ultrasonic field is projected. The device also creates bubble clouds which impinge on the sample and spread laterally, and clean from the shear they generate (Leighton 1994). Biofilms were positioned 1 cm downstream from the orifice and exposed to a continuous stream of UAS for 10 s at room temperature.

**Removal of biofilms from flat surfaces using an UAS.**

Glass slides were sterilised by autoclaving at 121 °C for 20 mins. The slides were immersed vertically in a tube containing 40 mL of a 106 CFU/ml culture of *S. mutans, A. naeslundii* and *S. oralis* biofilms grown as described above.

Following UAS exposure with the water stream positioned perpendicular to the surface, the slides were fluorescently stained with Live/Dead Baclight (Invitrogen) in the dark for 20 mins. Following a rinse in Hank’s buffered salt solution (HBSS; Sigma-Aldrich) for 5 s, the slides were imaged using an inverted Leica DMI600 SP5 confocal scanning laser microscope (CSLM; Leica Microsystems). Image analysis was carried out using the image analysis package COMSTAT (www.comstat.dk) (Heydorn et al. 2000). Assays were performed in duplicate (n=4 image stacks per repeat) and statistical analysis performed using the Mann-Whitney Rank Sum tests for non-normally distributed data and difference considered significant where P<0.05.

Additionally, *S. mutans* biofilms were also grown in 9 cm, pre-sterilised petri dishes as described above. The UAS device was positioned centrally over the petri dish and the biofilm exposed to UAS action or the water stream alone without ultrasonic activation with the water flow perpendicular to the surface. Representative photographs were taken for observation of gross biofilm removal. Each assay was performed in duplicate.

**High-speed camera assessment of *S. mutans* removal using an UAS from an interproximal (IP) space model**

In order to simulate the IP-space of the teeth, two *S. mutans* biofilm-colonised slides were placed inside a rectangular plastic holder in parallel with a gap of 1 mm. The IP-space holder was then placed under the device and a high-speed camera (1000 f/s; Motion Pro X3) equipped with a Nikon 105 mm f/2.8 VR G lens was used to capture the removal of the biofilm due to the UAS and the water stream alone without ultrasonic activation. In this assay, the water flow was run parallel to the biofilm. Representative videos can be found in the supplemental appendix. Each experiment was performed in duplicate. High-speed videos were post-processed with ImageJ software. *S. mutans* biofilm clearance zone (CZ) was quantified by measuring the CZ area (ACZ) in each frame every 300 ms. Then, the averaged ACZ values (n=2) with the relative SD were plotted as a function of the time. Statistical analysis was performed using an unpaired T test to compare normally distributed data means and difference considered significant where P<0.05.

**Surface roughness following UAS exposure**

Glass slides and hydroxyapatite (HA) coupons were exposed to the UAS for 10 s and 10 min continuously under the same conditions described above. Following exposure, the surface profiles were measured two dimensionally using the contact tracing system provided by the Taylor Hobson Talysurf 120L. The evaluation lengths were set at 5 and 40 mm, for the HA coupons and glass slide respectively, with a measurement speed of 0.5mm/s. The primary raw data was filtered following the rules and procedures given in BS EN ISO 4288:1998. The characteristic wavelength of the profile filter λc was set at 0.8 and 0.08mm for the HA coupons and glass slides respectively. Surface roughness (Ra/µm) was determined in experimental triplicate and statistical analysis was performed using an unpaired T test to compare normally distributed data means and difference considered significant where P<0.05.

**Removal of biofilm from artificial rough surface using an UAS.**

Using a Loadpoint Microace 3 dicing saw, micro-grooves were cut into standard microscope glass slides to a uniform depth of 150 µm to a lattice configuration (period spacing: 500 µm by 760 µm, 760 µm by 1 mm and 500 µm by 1 mm). The glass slides were then reduced in size to 15 mm x 15 mm using the dicing saw and rinsed in acetone and isopropanol to remove any organic residues, followed by dehydration at 200 °C for 30 mins using a conventional oven. Following autoclaving at 121 °C for 20 mins to sterilise, the slides were immersed in 4 mL of 106 CFU/mL and *S. mutans*, *A. naeslundii* and *S. oralis* biofilms grown as described previously.

Following exposure to the UAS or water stream alone with the water flow positioned perpendicular to the surface, the slides were immersed in a primary fixative of 0.15 M sodium cacodylate buffer (pH 7.2) containing 3 % glutaraldehyde and 0.15 % Alcian blue 8GX for 24 h at 4 °C. A 1 h rinse in 0.15 M cacodylate buffer was performed at room temperature and the biofilms were then post-fixed in a secondary fixative containing 1 % osmium tetraoxide in 0.15 M cacodylate buffer (pH 7.2) for 1 h. Following a further 1 h rinse in cacodylate buffer, the biofilms were dehydrated through an ascending ethanol series [50, 70, 80, 95 and 100 % (twice)] prior to critical point drying and gold-palladium sputter coating and imaged using an FEI Quanta 200 Scanning Electron Microscope.

**Removal of *S. mutans* biofilms from a typodont model using an UAS.**

To recreate a realistic anatomical geometry of patient dental architecture *in vitro*, *S. mutans* biofilms were grown on the molars of a training typodont (A-PZ periodontal dental model 4030025, Frasaco GmbH)(Rmaile et al. 2014). The typodont teeth were autoclave sterilized and immersed in 5 mL of a 106 CFU/mL culture of *S. mutans* and biofilms grown as described previously. After this time, the teeth were removed using sterile tweezers and repositioned into the typodont and exposed to the UAS and water stream alone without ultrasonic activation with the water flow positioned perpendicular to the tooth crown. Following this, the teeth were removed from the typodont and immersed in 0.5 % crystal violet (Sigma-Aldrich) for 10 mins. Post-staining, the surface was dipped and gently rinsed in deionised water to remove excess stain prior to photographing to observed gross biofilm removal. To visualise removal from the teeth at the micro-scale, subsequent repeats were performed where the teeth were fixed as described above for SEM.

**RESULTS**

Gross *S. mutans* biofilm removal from petri dishes was demonstrated as a larger (50.8 cm2) zone of clearing from the centre of the plate covering almost the entire plate diameter following 10 s exposure to the UAS, relative to the water stream alone without ultrasonic activation (3.5 cm2; Figure 1A). The water stream alone showed no removal of biofilm from the centre of the plate at the initial water stream impact site and was indistinguishable from untreated controls. Biofilm removal with the water stream alone was only noted at the edge of the plate, possibly due to water streaming around the plate edge.

A more detailed inspection by confocal microscopy showed that the UAS was significantly more effective at removing biofilms grown on simple flat surfaces (Figure 1B) than the water stream alone. COMSTAT analysis of *S. mutans* biofilm removal showed that water stream treatment alone caused a 0.10 log reduction (20.7%) in biomass from 21.8 µm3/µm2 to 17.3 µm3/µm2 and a 0.17 log reduction (33.8%) in average thickness from 25.3 µm to 16.7 µm, although these reductions were not statistically different (P=0.24). The UAS caused a further 2.3 log reduction in biomass to 0.08 µm3/µm2 (99.5% reduction compared to the untreated control) and a 2.9 log reduction in thickness to 0.02 µm (99.9% reduction) which was statistically significant (P=0.002). Similarly, the water stream alone was unable to elicit a statistically significant reduction of *A. naeslundii* biofilms (P=0.645) compared to the control, while biofilm removal with the UAS was significantly greater than the water stream alone (P=<0.001). However, the water stream alone, without UAS activation, resulted in a significant reduction in mean *S. oralis* biofilm mass relative to controls (P=0.001), equivalent to a 99.95 % reduction suggesting weak surface attachment of *S. oralis* in this assay.

Further analysis using a high-speed camera of *S. mutans* biofilm removal from glass slides in a model mimicking the interproximal space showed a more rapid rate of biofilm removal during 0-3 s of UAS exposure relative to the water stream alone (Figure 2, P=<0.5, n=2). Within the first second of exposure, the biofilm clearance zone area (ACZ) was 151 mm2, relative to 80 mm2 with the water stream alone. The ACZ after a period of 3 s was 139.5 mm2 (±32.03 mm2, n=2) and 430.4 (±50.34 mm2, n=2) for the water stream alone and the UAS respectively. Representative high-speed camera videos can be found in the supplemental appendix.

Analysis of the effect of a UAS on the underlying substratum was determined by 10 s and 10 min exposure to glass slides (used in Figure 1 & 2) and hydroxyapatite coupons (HA; Figure 3). Exposure of glass slides to the UAS had no significant effect on Ra relative to the control (10 s: P= 0.246; 10 min: P= 0.468). There was also no statistically significant difference in Ra relative to controls of HA coupons exposed to the UAS for 10 s (P=0.544). However, a 10 min exposure did elicit a significant increase in Ra (P=0.011) from 0.72 to 1.15; equivalent to a 62.5 % increase in surface Ra.

To further evaluate the effectiveness of UAS biofilm removal from a more complex surface, rough surfaces were created with various micro-groove configurations and *S. mutans*, *A. naeslundii* and *S. oralis* biofilms grown to demonstrate broad spectrum bacterial species removal. Scanning electron microscopy imaging following exposure to the water stream alone without ultrasonic activation showed no difference in residual biofilm relative to untreated controls (Figure 4). However, a dramatic reduction in residual biofilm of all three bacterial strains was observed following treatment with the UAS relative to the water stream and untreated controls with the rough surface showing no reduction in the efficacy of UAS mediated removal compared to previous assays on flat surfaces. Importantly, for *S. oralis,* this is in contrast to Figure 1 where the water stream alone was highly effective at biofilm removal, confirming UAS efficacy of hard to clean surfaces where the water stream alone was inefficient.

Similarly, the UAS was also effective at removing biofilm from teeth in a typodont training model representing a realistic patient dental architecture (Figure 5). Crystal violet (CV) staining to assess gross biofilm removal again showed no noticeable difference between the water stream alone and control treatment groups with a marked reduction in CV staining noted on teeth exposed to the UAS. Critically, SEM analysis of the teeth was performed to look at micro-scale removal of *S. mutans* biofilm with only occasional single cells visible in the exposed areas. In contrast, the water stream alone showed comparable residual biofilm to the untreated control.

**DISCUSSION**

As a key cariogenic species and a major risk factor for early childhood caries and future caries development, as well as its propensity to form biofilms, both *in vitro* and *in vivo* in the oral cavity, *S. mutans* was chosen as the model organism for the study (García-Godoy and Hicks 2008), in addition to *A. naeslundii* and *S. oralis* to demonstrate broad spectrum biofilm cleaning. Relative to a water stream flow of 2.1 L/min (±0.2 L/min), ultrasonic activation of the same stream at the same flow rate demonstrated a greater efficiency and rate of biofilm removal from a variety of increasingly complex surfaces including, importantly, machine-etched slides to provide a consistent “rough” surface and molar teeth from a typodont model. Crucially, typodont model teeth effectively reproduce the normal dental architecture, including the complexity of the crown fissures where mechanical biofilm removal is more challenging and, combined with the IP space, are the most at-risk sites for caries development (Rugg-Gunn 2013).

UAS in a free water stream has several key and beneficial features which make it effective at biofilm removal (Leighton 2011). Firstly, effective cleaning can be achieved through pure water alone under ambient conditions and does not require chemical additives or the generation of high temperature. This is of added benefit as the lack of antimicrobial additives reduces the risk of antibiotic resistance developing and the risk to patient health due to the high doses of antimicrobials sometimes required to clear oral biofilm infections (Larsen and Fiehn 1996, Shani et al. 2000). Instead, the effectiveness of the UAS is achieved due to the utilisation of the ultrasonically-induced bubble activity and shear (Leighton 2011). Whilst it is known that, for some substrates and some bacterial species, the simple proximity of the passage of a nearby gas bubble, for example rising under buoyancy, can cause detachment (Gomez-Suarez et al. 2001), in this study it is the ultrasonically induced volume and shape oscillations in the bubbles, and the associated shear, which produces the significant removal effect (Leighton 2011). Importantly, since the activated bubbles are in a free water stream, no direct contact between the device and the oral surface is required, facilitating access to hard to reach places. Secondly, the acoustic field causes the bubbles to move to crevices and such surface structures, preferentially cleaning features that are normally more difficult to clean (Leighton 1994, Offin et al. 2014). Consequently, due to the complex oral cavity topography, this approach has the potential to greatly contribute to improved oral hygiene. Thirdly, the area of biofilm removal in this study was relevant in the context of dental hygiene and was achieved over the relatively short time period of a few seconds. Importantly, the removal efficacy of laboratory grown biofilms by UAS was similar to that of microburst technology in which high velocity micro water drops generate high enough fluid shear to remove significant amounts of biofilm in the same interproximal space model used in this study (Rmaile et al. 2014). Additionally, whilst not required for efficacy in this study, additives to the water reservoir, such as fluoride with proven anticaries properties, may further enhance not just the immediate cleaning efficacy but also long term oral hygiene (Aspiras et al. 2010). Previous studies have shown the potential for sonic brushing to be an effective cleaning and fluoride delivery method and, due to the high biofilm penetration of the UAS, it is possible that UAS may achieve similar, inter-biofilm fluoride concentrations in residual biomass (Sjogren et al. 2004).

However, there are issues that will need to be addressed regarding application of UAS to oral healthcare. Future work should address the influence of different surface materials (eg. dental enamel and dentin) on UAS efficacy. Additionally, the influence of the pellicle and salivary coating of a surface on UAS mediated biofilm clearance needs to be assessed. Existing studies suggest that salivary mucins such as MUC5B decrease surface attachment and biofilm formation of *S. mutans* and so UAS removal could be enhanced with a more representative oral environment (Frenkel and Ribbeck. 2015). Careful consideration and future work will also be needed to assess the potential for tissue damage to the surrounding gingiva, but it is expected that these can be overcome by optimising exposure time and power output to settings capable of maintaining the efficacy of the device and alleviating the risk of damage to the surrounding tissue. This is corroborated by data from this study where effective biofilm removal without a detrimental effect to the substratum was observed at short exposure times (10 s). Longer exposure times of 10 min did cause an increase in surface roughness on a hydroxyapatite surface; however this should be put into context of other studies where exposure of 2 min to toothbrushing using certain dentrifices produced a much greater surface abrasion than observed with a 10 min UAS exposure (Pascaretti-Grizon et al. 2013). Additionally, while the flow rate of 2.1 L/min used in this study provides good surface area coverage, there is the issue of requiring relatively large volumes of water, thus miniaturization would be desirable. The current flow rate is higher than commercially available continuous or pulsed water irrigation shear based removal devices which generally operate on the order of a few hundreds of mL/min (Rmaile et al. 2014). Importantly however the use of a UAS represents a potentially practical and effective method for oral biofilm removal with the capacity to improve oral hygiene.

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**FIGURE LEGENDS**

**Figure 1.** Removal of oral biofilms using an ultrasonically activated water stream (U.A.S.). **A)** Images show the zone of clearing of *S. mutans* UA159 biofilms grown in petri dishes following 10 s exposure using the water stream alone without ultrasonic activation and the UAS, relative to an untreated control. In both cases, the water stream was positioned in the centre of the plate. **B)** Representative CSLM images of residual *S. mutans* UA159 biofilms following exposure to the UAS and water stream alone for 10 s, relative to an untreated control following Live/Dead Baclight fluorescent staining. Scales bars: 25 µm. **C)** Graph shows COMSTAT analysis of residual mean biofilm mass with standard error bars of *Streptococcus mutans* UA159, *Actinomyces naeslundii* ATCC 12104 and *Streptococcus oralis* ATCC 9811 biofilms following 10 s exposure to the UAS and the water stream alone as identified by Live/Dead Baclight fluorescent staining and confocal scanning laser microscopy (CSLM; n=8 with assay performed in duplicate). \* and \*\* indicate corresponding data showing a statistically significant difference (P=<0.01).

**Figure 2.** High-speed camera (1000 f/s) imaging of *S. mutans* UA159 biofilm removal, using a UAS and water stream alone, from glass slides placed in an interproximal space model. Images show representative frames from the high-speed camera at 0 and 3 second intervals. Scale bars: 5 mm. Graph shows the mean area of biofilm clearance against time following high-speed camera imaging of *S. mutans* biofilm removal using the UAS and water stream alone. Data points represent the mean of duplicate experimental repeats with standard error bars. \* and \*\* representing data ranges of 0 – 1 s and 0 – 3 s showing statistically significant difference (P<0.5).

**Figure 3.** Surface profile (Ra/µm) following exposure of glass and hydroxyapatite surfaces to an UAS for 10 s and 10 min. Data represent the mean of assays performed in experimental triplicate with standard deviation bars. Data points represent the mean of duplicate experimental repeats with standard error bars. \* represents data showing a statistically significant difference (P<0.5).

**Figure 4.** Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) imaging of residual *S. mutans* UA159, *A. naeslundii* ATCC 12104 and *S. oralis* ATCC 9811 biofilms, grown on machine etched glass slides to artificially and reproducibly mimic a rough surface, following exposure to the UAS and water stream alone for 10 s, relative to untreated controls. Scale bars: 500 µm.

**Figure 5.** Representative images showing removal of *S. mutans* UA159 biofilms from molar teeth in a typodont training model, following 10 s exposure to the UAS and water stream alone, relative to untreated controls. Left hand column panels show total residual biomass (blue/purple) as identified by crystal violet staining. Remaining panels show increasingly higher magnification scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images of the crown surface. White arrows indicate residual *S. mutans* biofilm on low magnification images.