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Inductive link coupled miniature intra-cochlear elements

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(56) Related Art
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TITLE

Inductive Link Coupled Miniature Intra-Cochlear Elements

[0001] This application claims priority from U.S. Patent Application 13/767,033, filed February 14, 2013, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present invention relates to active signal devices used in neural implant systems such as cochlear implants.

BACKGROUND ART

[0003] Neural implant systems such as cochlear implants deliver stimulation signals to target neural tissue. For example, Figure 1 shows a cochlear implant arrangement where an implant electrode **100** penetrates through a cochleostomy opening **102** into a patient cochlea **101**. The intra-cochlear portion of the implant lead is referred to as the electrode array **103** and includes multiple stimulation contacts **104** that deliver electrical stimulation signals to auditory neural tissue within the cochlea **101**.

[0004] Existing commercial neural implant systems are based on the use of electrical stimulation signals, but there have been some recent proposals to stimulate nerves either optically or optically in combination with electrical stimulation. A light source can be generated locally in the vicinity of the nerve (e.g. by LEDs or micro-lasers), or it can be generated remotely and transported to the nerve (e.g., by optical fiber).

[0005] U.S. Patent Publication 20100174329 described a proposed arrangement for combined optical and electrical neural stimulation. The general ideas of such an arrangement were broadly discussed, but specific structural details of the optical stimulation arrangement were scant. For example, only fleeting mention was made of optical adjustment structures. Each optical stimulation contact was described as a single individual light source. WO 2007013891 also described an optical stimulation arrangement for cochlear implants but again seemed to offer little specific discussion of controlling the optics beyond suggesting that it might be useful to arrange some combination of a mirror, lens or prism. Optical stimulation of nerves was also discussed in US 20060129210 and US 20100114190, but again, some structural details are sketchy or unaddressed. US2012 0197374 described an

implant carrier member with optical stimulation contacts having multiple optical sub-elements to control the shape and direction of the optical stimulation field.

SUMMARY

- [0006]** Embodiments of the present invention are directed to an implantable stimulation device which includes
- a flexible carrier member having a proximal end coupled to an implanted cochlear implant signal processor and a distal electrode array portion with a plurality of stimulation contacts configured for implantation through a cochlear opening into a patient cochlea adjacent to target neural tissue;
 - a plurality of carrier wires embedded within the carrier member configured for conducting electrical signals from the implanted cochlear implant processor through the carrier member into the patient cochlea, each carrier wires having a distal end connected to a stimulation contact for delivering the electrical signals to the adjacent target neural tissue; and
 - at least one of the stimulation contacts comprising an active interface device embedded within the carrier member and including:
 - i. a hermetically sealed device housing without penetration by any electrical conductor;
 - ii. an active interface element within the device housing configured for processing the electrical signals,
 - iii. an inductive link arrangement configured to provide an electrical connection between the active interface element and a terminal end of one of the carrier wires to couple the electrical signals from the terminal end of the carrier wire into the hermetically sealed device housing to the active interface element, and
 - iv. an outer interface surface adjacent to the target neural tissue configured to provide a communication link between the adjacent target neural tissue and the active interface element.

[0007] The active interface device may be an optical stimulation device for delivering an optical stimulation signal to the adjacent target neural tissue, for example, a vertical cavity surface emitting laser (VCSEL) or a light emitting diode (LED). Or the active interface device may be an optical sensor device for sensing an optical condition of the adjacent

target neural tissue.

[0008] The inductive link arrangement may include an outer inductive coil outside the device housing connected to the terminal end of the carrier wire, and an inner inductive coil within the device housing connected to the active interface element and inductively linked to the outer inductive coil to provide the electrical connection between the active interface element and the terminal end of the carrier wire. In addition, the active interface device may include program control logic within the device housing for programmable control of the active interface element.

[0009] The device housing may be made of glass material. The carrier member also may include conventional stimulation contacts located at terminal ends of the carrier wires for delivering electrical stimulation signals to adjacent target neural tissue. The carrier member may have multiple active interface devices.

[0010] The target neural tissue may be auditory neural tissue and the stimulation device may be a cochlear implant device. Or the target neural tissue may be vestibular neural tissue and the stimulation device may be a vestibular implant device.

[0011] Advantages and other features of the invention will become apparent from the following drawing, description and claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0012] Figure 1 shows a cochlear implant stimulation arrangement.

[0013] Figure 2 shows a side view of an implantable stimulation device according to one or more embodiments of the present invention.

[0014] Figure 3 shows a side view of an implantable stimulation device according to another embodiment of the present invention.

[0015] Figure 4 shows greater structural detail of the active interface device according to an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0016] One challenge with implanting active devices such as optical devices into patient tissue such as into the cochlea is to provide for proper packaging of the device. For safety reasons the device packaging needs to hermetically enclose the active element, be suitable for miniaturization, fulfill biocompatibility requirements and ensure device reliability. Electrically, it is important to avoid developing unintended dc currents between the device and the adjacent tissue and also to avoid short circuits especially for multiple power lines on device surfaces. And for optical devices which detect or emit electromagnetic radiation, the device package needs to be of a material of suitable transparency. Most conventional implant packaging materials are not optically transparent. Some polymer materials might be transparent, but these are problematic with regards to the hermeticity requirements.

[0017] Figure 2 shows a side view of an implantable stimulation device according to one or more embodiments of the present invention which is directed to an implantable stimulation device **200** which includes a flexible carrier member **201** for implantation adjacent to target neural tissue. The target neural tissue may be auditory neural tissue and the stimulation device may be a cochlear implant device. Or the target neural tissue may be vestibular neural tissue and the stimulation device may be a vestibular implant device. Typically for applications such as a cochlear implant, the carrier member **201** is made of very flexible polymer material to minimize trauma to the tissue into which it is inserted. Multiple carrier wires **202** are embedded within the carrier member **201** for conducting electrical signals between the distal wire ends and a proximal implanted processor (not shown).

[0018] One or more active interface devices **203** also are held within the carrier member **201** with an outer interface surface **205** that is positioned adjacent to the target neural tissue and which provides a communication link with the adjacent target neural tissue. In the embodiment shown in Fig. 2, the carrier member **201** contains multiple active interface devices **203**. In some embodiments, the carrier member **201** also may include conventional electrical stimulation contacts located at terminal ends of some of the carrier wires **202** for delivering conventional electrical stimulation signals to adjacent target neural tissue. For example, in some embodiments, the basal end of the carrier member **201** may have

conventional electrical stimulation contacts and the apical end of the carrier member **201** may have one or more active interface devices **203**.

[0019] Figure 3 shows a side view of an implantable stimulation device **200** having a single common ground wire **300** that provides a common ground/circuit return path for multiple carrier wires **202** and multiple interface devices **203**. In other embodiments, there may be two wires per interface device, significantly more wires overall in the entire implantable stimulation device **200** than for using a single common ground wire **300**. Minimizing the total number of wires by using a single common ground wire **300** maximizes the flexibility of the carrier member **201**. More generally, the interfaces devices may be grouped together in groups of two or three which share a common ground wire. thus an embodiment with nine interface devices **203** might have three common ground wires **301**, each providing a circuit return path for a grouping of three interface devices **203**, with the interface devices **203** in each such grouping being sequentially stimulated. This compromise avoids a current limit on the ground wire **301** while still minimizing the number of overall wires and thereby maintaining flexibility of the carrier member **201**.

[0020] Figure 4 shows greater structural detail of the active interface device **203** according to a specific embodiment of the present invention. The active interface device **203** includes a hermetically sealed device housing **402** without any penetration by any electrical conductor, and an active interface element **401** is within the device housing **402**. The active interface device **203** specifically may be a hermetically enclosed optical stimulation device for delivering an optical stimulation signal to the adjacent target neural tissue so that, for example, the active interface element **401** may specifically be a vertical cavity surface emitting laser (VCSEL) or a light emitting diode (LED).

[0021] In some embodiments, the active interface device **203** may include a sensor device for sensing one or more conditions of the adjacent target neural tissue such as light intensity, temperature and/or humidity, in which case the active interface element **401** includes a sensor element. For example, the active interface device **203** may be a photo-detector sensor that measures the optical transparency of cochlear fluid adjacent to the outer interface surface **205** to detect the murkiness of the cochlear fluid to adaptively adjust the intensity of optical stimulation (and/or account for aging effects on the structural elements such as

LEDs).

[0022] An inductive link arrangement **403** provides an electrical connection between the active interface element **401** and a terminal end of one of the carrier wires **202** (and a common return line **405**) without penetrating the device housing **402** in order to communicate electrical signals, for example power and/or information signals for or from the active interface element **401**. In the embodiment shown in Fig. 4, the inductive link arrangement **403** includes an outer inductive coil outside the device housing **402** connected to the terminal end of the carrier wire **202** (and the common return line **405**) and an inner inductive coil within the device housing **402** connected to the active interface element **401**. Rather than just planar inductive coils, in some embodiments, the inductive link arrangement **403** may have an outer coil that entirely surrounds the active interface device **203** in a solenoid type winding that leaves open top and bottom regions.

[0023] In any case, the position of the coils in the inductive link arrangement **403** should be fixed so as to not require any kind of alignment optimization adjustments, for example, by molding polymer material **404** around the outer coil of the inductive link arrangement **403** to hold it in place against the device housing **402**. In the embodiment shown in Fig. 4, the structures within the device housing **402** also are embedded in polymer material **404**.

[0024] In addition, the active interface device **203** shown in Fig. 3 also includes optional program control logic **406** within the device housing **402** for programmable control of the active interface element **401** as well as a current regulator/limiter, and/or a circuit capacitance also contained in the block labeled **406**. Such program control logic **406** may provide, for example, one or more programming modes for operation of the active interface device **203**, especially where there may be multiple light sources and/or active interface devices **203** to be controlled. The program control logic **406** may be an integral part of the active interface device **203**, for example, the active interface device **203** and the program control logic **306** may be on a common silicon substrate.

[0025] It is important that the material used for the device housing **402** (or at least its outer surface **205**) be both optically transparent and allow the penetration of magnetic fields, for example, using glass compounds. But one general problem with molding of materials such

as glass around electronic circuits is the heat needed to melt the mold material, which can damage or destroy the electrical elements. Thus a standard packaging assembly procedure may be more favorable which assembles the active interface element **401**, the inner inductive coil and any other device circuit elements within an assembly of planar housing surfaces which can be sealed by various specific means such as glass frit bonding, laser welding and/or electric bonding.

[0026] Although various exemplary embodiments of the invention have been disclosed, it should be apparent to those skilled in the art that various changes and modifications can be made which will achieve some of the advantages of the invention without departing from the true scope of the invention.

[0027] It is to be understood that, if any prior art is referred to herein, such reference does not constitute an admission that such prior art forms a part of the common general knowledge in the art, in Australia or any other country.

[0028] In the claims that follow and in the preceding description of the invention, except where the context requires otherwise due to express language or necessary implication, the word “comprise” or variations such as “comprises” or “comprising” is used in an inclusive sense, i.e. to specify the presence of the stated features but not to preclude the presence or addition of further features in various embodiments of the invention.

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CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A stimulation device comprising:
 - a flexible carrier member having a proximal end coupled to an implanted cochlear implant signal processor and a distal electrode array portion with a plurality of stimulation contacts configured for implantation through a cochlear opening into a patient cochlea adjacent to target neural tissue;
 - a plurality of carrier wires embedded within the carrier member configured for conducting electrical signals from the implanted cochlear implant processor through the carrier member into the patient cochlea, each carrier wires having a distal end connected to a stimulation contact for delivering the electrical signals to the adjacent target neural tissue; and
 - at least one of the stimulation contacts comprising an active interface device embedded within the carrier member and including:
 - i. a hermetically sealed device housing without penetration by any electrical conductor;
 - ii. an active interface element within the device housing configured for processing the electrical signals,
 - iii. an inductive link arrangement configured to provide an electrical connection between the active interface element and a terminal end of one of the carrier wires to couple the electrical signals from the terminal end of the carrier wire into the hermetically sealed device housing to the active interface element, and
 - iv. an outer interface surface adjacent to the target neural tissue configured to provide a communication link between the adjacent target neural tissue and the active interface element.

2. The stimulation device according to claim 1, wherein the active interface device is an optical stimulation device configured to deliver an optical stimulation signal to the adjacent target neural tissue.

3. The stimulation device according to claim 2, wherein the active interface element includes a vertical cavity surface emitting laser (VCSEL).

4. The stimulation device according to claim 2, wherein the active interface element includes a light emitting diode (LED).
5. The stimulation device according to claim 1, wherein the active interface device includes a sensor device configured to sense a condition of the adjacent target neural tissue.
6. The stimulation device according to claim 5, wherein the sensor device is an optical sensor configured to sense an optical condition of the adjacent target neural tissue.
7. The stimulation device according to claim 1, wherein the inductive link arrangement includes:
 - i. an outer inductive coil outside the device housing connected to the terminal end of the carrier wire, and
 - ii. an inner inductive coil within the device housing connected to the active interface element and inductively linked to the outer inductive coil to provide the electrical connection between the active interface element and the terminal end of the carrier wire.
8. The stimulation device according to claim 1, wherein the active interface device further comprises:
 - program control logic within the device housing configured to provide programmable control of the active interface element.
9. The stimulation device according to claim 1, wherein the device housing is made of glass material.

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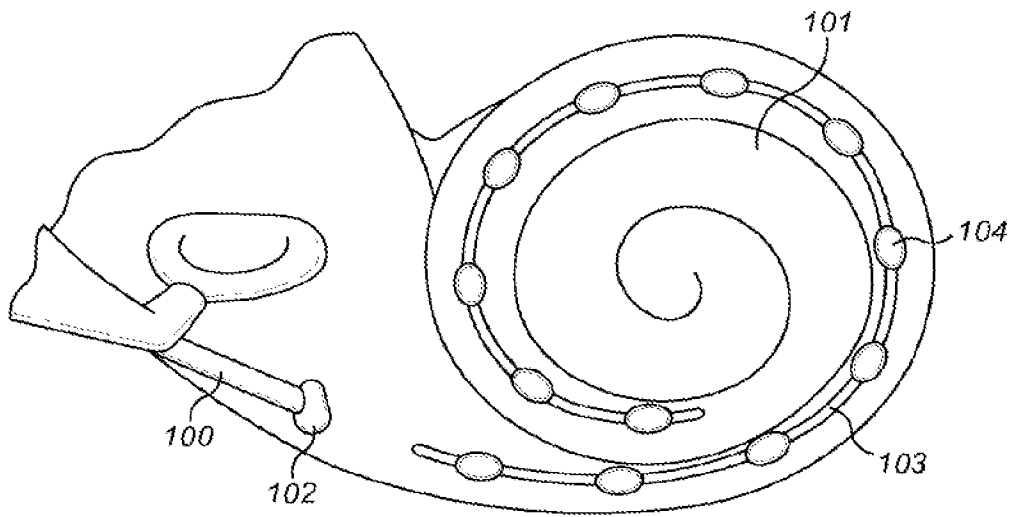


FIG. 1

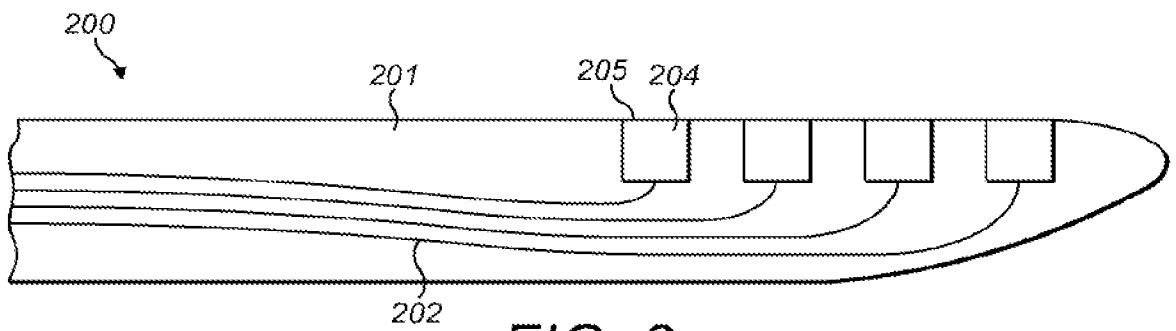


FIG. 2

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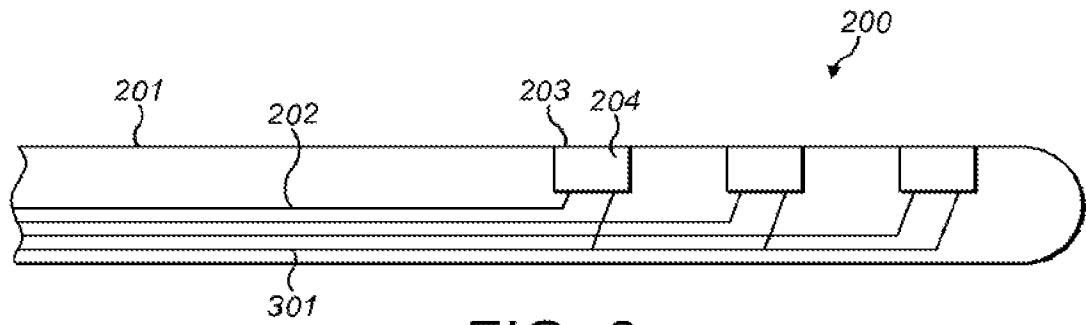


FIG. 3

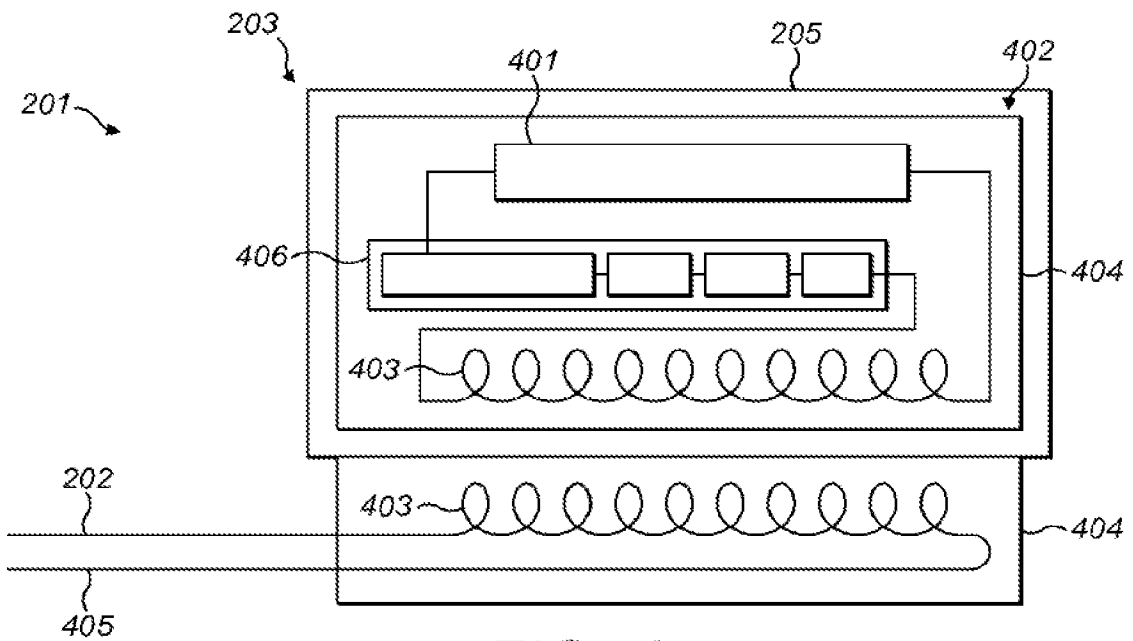


FIG. 4

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