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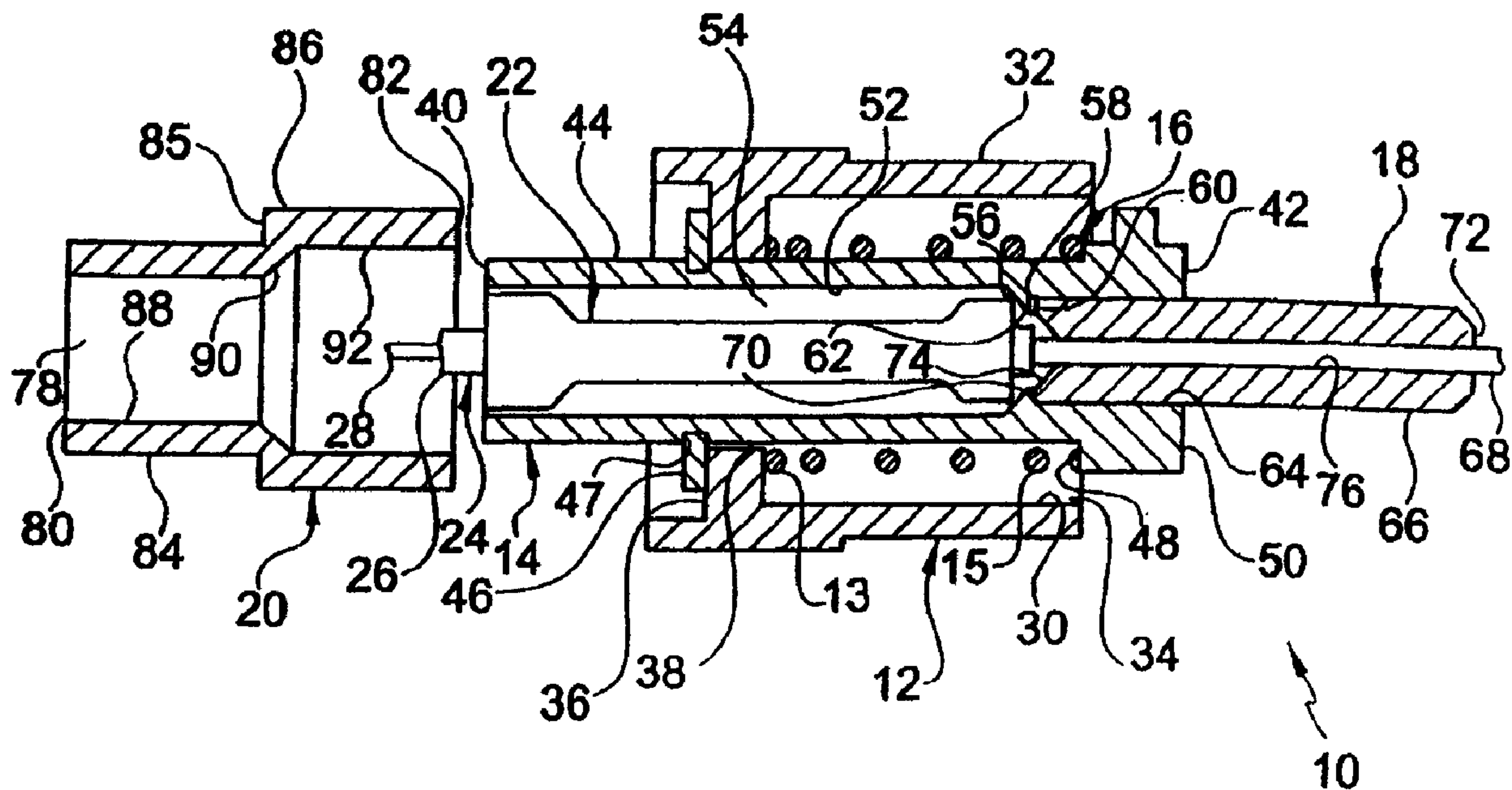
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(54) Titre : CONNECTEUR A ARRET DE TRACTION POUR CABLE A FIBRE OPTIQUE ET METHODE DE
FABRICATION DE CE CONNECTEUR

(54) Title: STRAIN RELIEF CONNECTOR FOR FIBER OPTIC CABLE AND METHOD OF MAKING SAME



(57) Abrégé/Abstract:

A strain relief connector, including an optical fiber, a cover enclosing the optical fiber. The cover has an inner surface, an outer surface, a first end and a second end, the first end having a tapered portion that extends radially outwardly. A sleeve surrounds the cover and has a first inner volume and a first interior shoulder, a portion of the outer surface of the tapered portion abuts the first interior shoulder. The sleeve and the cover are simultaneously compressed forming a compressed portion. The cover and the sleeve are deformed such that the cover substantially fills the first inner volume of the sleeve.

ABSTRACT

A strain relief connector, including an optical fiber, a cover enclosing the optical fiber. The cover has an inner surface, an outer surface, a first end and a second end, the first end having a tapered portion that extends radially outwardly. A sleeve surrounds the cover and has a first inner volume and a first interior shoulder, a portion of the outer surface of the tapered portion abuts the first interior shoulder. The sleeve and the cover are simultaneously compressed forming a compressed portion. The cover and the sleeve are deformed such that the cover substantially fills the first inner volume of the sleeve.

STRAIN RELIEF CONNECTOR FOR FIBER OPTIC CABLE AND METHOD OF MAKING SAME

Reference to Related Application

[0001] This application is related to PCT Application PCT US01/14436 entitled Strain Relief Connector for Fiber Optic Cable and Method of Making Same filed May 4, 2001, the subject matter of which may be referred to for further details, Canadian entry effected November 5, 2002, under file No. 2,408,185.

Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention relates to a non-adhesive strain relief connector for a fiber optic cable. More particularly, the present invention relates to an optical fiber and cover that are disposed within a metal sleeve, the cover having a tapered portion that positions the cover within the sleeve. The cover and sleeve are simultaneously compressed such that the cover substantially fills the inner volume of the compressed portion of the sleeve. The combination of the lengths and the widths of the cover and sleeve results in a large frictional surface between the sleeve and the cover providing a strong, reliable connection.

Background of the Invention

[0003] Strain relief connectors for fiber optic cables are common in the connector industry. Conventional strain relief connectors have a sleeve surrounding a light transmitting optical fiber or a plurality of light transmitting optical fibers. The optical fibers are generally surrounded or covered and protected by a jacket or buffer material formed from a plastic. The sleeve and the fiber optic cable are then crimped using a crimping tool into a hexagonal or round shape.

[0004] Conventional crimping methods do not allow adequate lateral flow of the jacket material, in other words, the jacket material does not substantially flow in a direction perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the crimp sleeve. A lack of lateral flow forces the buffer material to flow along the longitudinal axis of the crimp sleeve, producing longitudinal flow. Longitudinal flow places tension on the optical fiber, possibly causing damage to or failure of the optical fiber, or changing its optical characteristics.

[0005] In addition, conventional crimping methods have a crimp length that is short relative to the diameter of the jacket material. Generally, the length of the crimp is less than four times the buffer material diameter. This short length results in a small area of frictional contact between the inner surface of the crimp sleeve and the outer surface of the buffer material and may make failure of the connector more likely under tensile or thermal stress.

[0006] Furthermore, when assembling and crimping conventional connectors, it can be difficult to properly position the polymer cover within the metal tube or sleeve. Many conventional connectors allow the polymer cover to move longitudinally

relative to the sleeve. Also, since the polymer cover is generally disposed within the sleeve, it can be difficult to ascertain the exact location of the polymer cover relative to the sleeve.

[0007] Examples of prior art fiber optic cable crimp connectors are disclosed in the following U.S. Pat. Nos.: 3,655,275 to Seagraves; 4,738,504 to Jones; 5,140,662 to Kumar; 5,317,664 to Grabiec et al.; 5,418,874 to Carlisle et al.; 5,455,880 to Reid et al.

[0008] Thus, a continuing need exists for strain relief fiber optic connectors.

Summary

[0009] Accordingly, the present invention seeks to provide a strain relief connector for a fiber optic cable that has a relatively large frictional area between the inner surface of the crimp sleeve and the cover layer of the fiber optic cable for a strong reliable crimp connector.

[0010] Further, the present invention seeks to provide a strain relief connector for a fiber optic cable that has a crimped configuration that allows for substantial lateral flow of the cover layer, putting substantially no longitudinal pressure or strain on the optical fiber.

[0011] Still further, the present invention seeks to provide a strain relief connector for a fiber optic cable that has a crimp sleeve with a length that is long relative to the diameter of the cover layer, providing a large area of frictional engagement between the cover layer and crimp sleeve and the cover layer and optical fiber.

[0012] Yet another aspect of the present invention seeks to form a strain relief connector that has a cover, which can be optimally positioned within a sleeve.

[0013] Still yet further, the present invention seeks to provide a crimping tool and strain relief connector that provide optimal crimping of the sleeve and cover in the connector.

[0014] A further aspect of the present invention seeks to provide a strain relief connector comprising an optical fiber, and a cover enclosing the optical fiber. The cover has an inner surface, an outer surface, a length, a first end and a second end, the first end having a tapered portion that extends radially outwardly from the outer surface. A unitary sleeve completely circumferentially surrounds the cover along all of the length of the cover. The sleeve has a first inner volume and a first interior shoulder, a portion of the outer surface of the cover at the tapered portion abutting the first interior shoulder of the

sleeve. The sleeve and the cover can be simultaneously compressed forming a compressed portion, and the cover and the sleeve can be deformed such that the cover substantially fills the first inner volume of the sleeve.

[0015] A still further aspect of the present invention provides a strain relief connector kit for an optical fiber comprising an elastomeric cover adapted to surround the optical fiber, and having an outer surface, a length, a first end and a second end, the first end of the cover having a tapered portion that extends radially outwardly from the outer surface. A deformable unitary sleeve is adapted to completely circumferentially surround the cover along all of the length of the cover. The sleeve has a first interior shoulder, with a portion of the outer surface of the cover at the tapered portion being adapted to abut the first interior shoulder of the sleeve.

[0016] Other aspects, advantages and salient features of the invention will become apparent from the following detailed description, which, taken in conjunction with the annexed drawings, discloses preferred embodiments of the invention.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0017] Referring to the drawings which form a part of this disclosure:

[0018] FIG. 1 is a side elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to a first embodiment of the present invention.

[0019] FIG. 2 is an enlarged side elevational view of the fiber optic cable extending through the crimp sleeve illustrated in FIG. 1, a portion of the fiber optic cable and the crimp sleeve being compressed.

[0020] FIG. 3 is an end elevational view in section of the cable and sleeve taken along line 3-3 of FIG. 2.

[0021] FIG. 4 is a side elevational view of a die and the fiber optic cable extending through the crimp sleeve, illustrated in FIG. 2, prior to compression by the die.

[0022] FIG. 5 is an end elevational view in section of the cable, sleeve and die taken along line 5-5 of FIG. 4.

[0023] FIG. 6 is an enlarged end elevational view in section of the fiber optic cable disposed within the crimp sleeve of FIG. 5.

[0024] FIGS. 7a-d are side elevational views in section of a strain relief connector according to a second embodiment of the present invention having a fiber feed bushing inserted into the crimp sleeve.

[0025] FIG. 8 is a side elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to a third embodiment of the present invention, having an alignment ferrule inserted into the connector body.

[0026] FIG. 9 is a side elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to a fourth embodiment of the present invention having an alignment ferrule inside a crimp sleeve to align separate fiber optic cables.

[0027] FIG. 10 is an end elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to a fifth embodiment of the present invention having a V-groove element to align separate fiber optic cables.

[0028] FIG. 11 is an end elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to a sixth embodiment of the present invention having a plurality of fiber optic cables extending through a crimp sleeve prior to compression.

[0029] FIG. 12 is an end elevational view in section of the strain relief connector of FIG. 11 after being compressed by a die.

[0030] FIG. 13 is an end elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to a seventh embodiment of the present invention having a plurality of fiber optic cables extending in separate or connected crimp sleeves.

[0031] FIG. 14 is an end elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to an eighth embodiment of the present invention having a fiber optic cable

with a coating material and a buffer layer extending through a crimp sleeve, before being compressed.

[0032] FIG. 15 is an end elevational view in section of the strain relief connector of FIG. 14 after being compressed by a die.

[0033] FIG. 16 is an end elevational view in section of the strain relief connector of FIG. 14, wherein less force was used to compress the crimp sleeve then used in the connector of FIG. 15.

[0034] FIG. 17 is an end elevational view in section of the strain relief connector of FIG. 14, but with plurality of fiber optic cables extending through a crimp sleeve.

[0035] FIG. 18 is a side elevational view in section of strain relief connector according to a ninth embodiment of the present invention.

[0036] FIG. 19 is an enlarged side view in section of the sleeve for the strain relief connector of FIG. 18.

[0037] FIG. 20 is a side elevational view in section of the cover for the strain relief connector of FIG. 18.

[0038] FIG. 21 is a side elevational view in section the strain relief connector of FIG. 18 with an optical cable extending therethrough.

[0039] FIGS. 22a-22b are side elevational views in section of device forming the tapered end of the cover of FIG. 20 and of the tapered end formed thereby.

[0040] FIG. 23 is a side elevational view of another die configuration in section and the fiber optic cable extending through the crimp sleeve, illustrated in FIG. 18, prior to compression by the die.

[0041] FIG. 24 is an end elevational view in section of the cable, sleeve and die of Fig. 23.

[0042] FIG. 25 is a side elevational view of the cable, sleeve and die of Fig. 23, after compression by the die.

[0043] FIG. 26 is an end elevational view in section of the cable, sleeve and die of Fig. 25.

[0044] FIG. 27 is a side elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to a tenth embodiment of the present invention, having an alignment ferrule inserted into the sleeve.

[0045] FIG. 28 is a side elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to an eleventh embodiment of the present invention, having splice element connector two sleeves.

[0046] FIG. 29 is a side elevational view in section of a strain relief connector according to a twelfth embodiment of the present invention, having a fiber alignment member, prior to compression by a die.

Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiment

[0047] Referring initially to Figs 1-3, a strain relief connector 10 according to a first embodiment of the present invention has a securing member or mechanism 12 surrounding a deformable connector body 14. Spring 16 is inserted between the securing member 12 and the connector body 14. The connector body 14 surrounds a portion of an alignment ferrule 18 and is coupled to a crimp ring 20. A deformable crimp tube or sleeve 22 is disposed within the connector body and the deformable crimp tube 22 is coupled to a fiber optic cable 24 having a cover 26 surrounding an optical fiber 28.

[0048] The securing member 12 is preferably a tubular or round metal threaded or bayonet type nut known in the pertinent art, such as an FC or ST type connector or any other suitable connector. The securing member does not necessarily have to be tubular, round, or metal and may be any type of securing device that can be connected to the deformable connector body 14 receiving deformable crimp tube 22.

[0049] Preferably, the securing member 12 has cylindrical inner and outer surfaces 30 and 32, respectively, the inner surface 30 defining a through passageway 34. Additionally, adjacent the inner surface 30 the securing member has a cylindrical shoulder or stop 36 defining a hole 38. Cylindrical shoulder 36 extends around the entire circumference of inner surface 30 and defines a reduced diameter for a portion of through passageway 34.

[0050] Deformable connector body 14 is preferably a metal tubular body having first and second ends 40 and 42, respectively. As seen in Fig. 1, adjacent first open end 40 is cylindrical outer surface 44. Outer surface 44 extends substantially the length of connector body 14. Extending substantially perpendicular to and away from surface 44 is cylindrical removable washer or stop 46. Stop 46 extends substantially around the circumference of outer surface 44 and fits into groove 47. Outer surface 44 terminates at outwardly extending, rearwardly axial facing surface 48 of extension 50. Extension 50 terminates at second open end 42, forming an enlarged radial portion of connector body 14.

[0051] Cylindrical inner surface 52 of connector body 14 defines through passageway 54 and is adjacent frustoconical surface 56. Frustoconical surface 56 tapers toward cylindrical surface 58, which is adjacent forwardly facing axial surface 60. Surfaces 56, 58 and 60 form a cylindrical shoulder or stop 62, which forms a reduced radius for a portion of through passageway 54. Adjacent surface 60 is cylindrical surface 64 that has substantially the same diameter as inner surface 52 and terminates at second end 42.

[0052] Spring 16 is preferably a helical plastic or metal spring having first and second ends 13 and 15, respectively. Spring 16 is not necessarily helical and may be any suitable shape or material that would be capable of biasing either the body 14 or the securing member 12, relative to the other.

[0053] As shown in Fig. 1, alignment ferrule 18 is preferably a ceramic cylindrical tube having outer surface 66 and through passageway 68. Alignment ferrule 18 does not necessarily have to be ceramic and may be any suitable material and shape that would allow it to be coupled to the connector body 14 or the securing member 12. Preferably, ferrule 18 has a first open end 70 and a second open end 72. Inner frustoconical surface 74 extends from first end 70, tapering inward toward the center of ferrule 18. Cylindrical surface 76 is adjacent surface 74 and extends to second end 72.

[0054] Crimp ring 20 is preferably a metal cylindrical tube having through passageway 78 and first and second ends 80 and 82, respectively. However, ring 20

does not necessarily have to be metal and may be any suitable material and shape that would allow it to be coupled to the connector body 14. Cylindrical outer surface 84 extends from first open end 80 to one end of outwardly extending, rearwardly axially facing surface 85 and cylindrical surface 86 extends from the other end of surface 85 to second open end 82. Cylindrical inner surface 88 extends from first end 80 to frustoconical surface 90, which extends radially outwardly from surface 88 to cylindrical surface 92, surface 92 terminating at second end 82. Ring 20 facilitates coupling the connector body 14 to the sleeve 22.

[0055] As seen in Figs. 4-6, crimp sleeve 22 is preferably a relatively long deformable metal sleeve. The length of sleeve 22 is preferably at least five times the diameter of fiber optic cable 24 extending therethrough and is more preferably seven times the diameter of the cable 24. Crimp sleeve 22 has cylindrical inner and outer surfaces 94 and 96, respectively and initial inner and outer diameters, 98 and 100, respectively. The outer surface 96 is preferably a smooth substantially uniform surface extending from first open end 102 to second open end 104. Inner surface 94 may be either smooth or roughened to increase the coefficient of static friction thereon. As seen in Figs. 1 and 2, a fiber optic cable 24 extends through the sleeve 22.

[0056] As seen in Fig. 6, the fiber optic cable preferably includes of a glass optical fiber 28 having a 125 micron (0.125mm) outer diameter 106 surrounded by cover 26. However, the optical fiber may be any suitable diameter and any suitable material for propagating light, such as plastic or the like. The cover 26 is preferably a polymer tube formed from a thermoplastic elastomer material, such as HYTREL™ 6356. HYTREL forms a family of copolyester elastomers. Typical reactants from which the elastomers are derived are terephthalic acid, polytetramethylene glycol, and 1, 4-butanediol. This type of elastomer is highly resilient with a good resistance to flex fatigue at low and high temperatures, and is resistant to oils and chemicals. However, the cover may be any suitable material that may be compressed while simultaneously protecting the optical fiber it surrounds. The cover 26 has a 900 micron initial outer diameter 108, which is substantially smaller than the inner diameter 98 of sleeve 22.

Cover 26 surrounds optical fiber 28 and initial inner diameter 110 of cover 26 is substantially larger than the outer diameter of the optical fiber 28.

[0057] As seen in Figs. 2 and 3, sleeve 22 and cable 24 are compressed along a portion thereof. The deformed width of the crimp sleeve is substantially greater than the original un-crimped outside diameter. The deformed height of the crimp sleeve is substantially less than the original un-crimped outside diameter. As seen specifically in Fig. 3, the internal portion of the present invention produces substantial vertical compression of cover 26 of optical fiber cable 24, the cover substantially filling the entire inner volume of the compressed crimp portion of sleeve. This vertical compression produces unique cross sectional geometries of the crimp sleeve 22 and cover 26, each having a width in the horizontal plane substantially greater than the height in the vertical plane.

[0058] Additionally, the volume of the deformed portion of the cover 26 is actually reduced from its original volume due to compression. The long length of the deformed portion of sleeve 22 is such that it constrains the flow of cover material in the axial direction due to friction with the internal surface of the crimp sleeve. Substantially all of the cover extends in a direction substantially perpendicular to the axial direction or a longitudinal axis of the optical fiber and the length of the sleeve, limiting tensile stress in the optical fiber in a longitudinal direction. This constraint of axial flow, in addition to the reduction in cover volume, produces increased local compression of cover material surrounding the glass fiber, as seen in Figure 3. The lateral flow of cover 26 also limits the effect of axial cover elongation from inducing excessive tensile stress into the optical fiber 28 in the longitudinal direction. The combination of reduced volume and constrained flow of cover 26 results in an increase in the local density of the cover 26. The increase in local density results in an increase in the local elastic modulus of the material in contact with the optical fiber 28, which contributes to an increase in pressure applied to the surface of the optical fiber. This increase in applied pressure, over a relatively long length of area on the optical fiber, increases the friction force required to move the optical fiber in the axial direction relative to the deformed crimp sleeve. The increased friction force and

subsequent resistance to axial movement of the optical fiber contributes to improved performance in tensile cable retention.

[0059] Additionally, the crimp may form a laterally central-portion (not shown) extending upwardly and downwardly from of sleeve 22 and cover 26 and, aligned vertically with the optical fiber, which are not compressed to the same extent as the remaining portions thereof. These central portions help maintain the centrality of the optical fiber 28 within the crimp sleeve 22 during the crimping process, and provide a slightly thicker region of cover 26 along both sides of the optical fiber in the vertical plane. These thicker, localized cover regions prevent the inner surface 96 of crimp sleeve 22 from contacting the glass fiber. This configuration adds an element of safety to the crimp technique described herein. It should be noted that any contact of metal to the optical fiber is undesirable, and could lead to fracture failure of the optical fiber.

[0060] To crimp sleeve 22 to cable 24, cable 24 is extended or inserted through sleeve 22. As seen in Fig. 4, sleeve 22 and cable 24 are then inserted into a long flat crimp die 114 having upper and lower jaws 116 and 118, respectively. As seen in Fig. 5, jaws 116 and 118 have a width that is substantially greater than the height thereof, permitting uninhibited lateral flow of sleeve 22 and cover 26. By applying the proper amount of pressure or designing the die 114 to be fully closed at the proper crimp height, the configuration of the die compressed crimp portion of the sleeve and the compressed portion of the fiber optic cable shown in Fig. 3 may be obtained.

Assembly

[0061] A portion of cover 26 is stripped away from the fiber optic cable 24, leaving an exposed portion 29 of optical fiber 28, as seen in Figs. 2 and 4. As described above, cable 24 is inserted into sleeve 22 and crimped. Sleeve 22 and cable 24 are then inserted into connector body 14, as seen in Fig. 1. Securing member 12, connector body 14, and spring 16 are a preassembled conventional item that is known to one skilled in the art. Optical fiber 28 enters ferrule 18 and extending therethrough and sleeve 22 abuts stop 62. The exposed portion 29 of optical fiber 28 extends

outward from alignment ferrule 18 after crimping to allow for cleaving and polishing flush to the end face. First end 40 of connector body 14 is then inserted into second open end 82 of ring 20 and coupled thereto by a conventional hex type crimp applied to surface 86. The hex crimp also coupling connector body 14 to sleeve 22, and further protecting sleeve 22 and fiber optic cable 24. However, it is possible to leave out one or a plurality of the above mentioned parts. For example, it is possible to couple the securing member 12 directly to the sleeve 22 using crimping or any other suitable methods, to connect the ferrule 18 directly to the sleeve 22 and/or to leave out the ring 20. In addition, it is possible to insert the fiber optic cable 26 directly into the connector body 14 and to crimp the connector body, as described below.

Embodiment of Figs. 7a-d

[0062] As seen in Figs. 7a-d, metal sleeve 122 is substantially similar to sleeve 22, however, sleeve 122 may have a fiber feed bushing 120 and elastomer tube or cover 121 inserted therein. Sleeve 122 also has cylindrical extensions 126 and 128 extending substantially perpendicular and outwardly from surface 130. Extensions 126 and 128 facilitate insertion and reception into connector body 14. In addition, sleeve 122 has a surface 132 defining a large through passageway 134. Surface 132 extends to frustoconical surface 136, which tapers inwardly and is adjacent cylindrical surface 138, which defines a small through passageway 139.

[0063] The bushing 120 has cylindrical inner and outer surfaces 154 and 156, respectively, inner surface 154 defining a through passageway 139. Outer surface 156 begins at first open end 160 extends to frustoconical surface 158, which terminates at second open end 162. Inner surface 154 extends from first end 160 to frustoconical surface 164, which is adjacent conical surface 166 defining through passageway 168.

[0064] The elastomer tube 121 is similar to cover 26 and surrounds a portion of an optical fiber or glass fiber 140, and has an inner and outer surface 146 and 148, inner surface 146 defining a through passageway 150. However, the cover 121 is a separate protective section and the fiber optic cable 142 has another cover or buffer portion 144 protecting the majority of the un-crimped or exposed portion of cable 142, a

portion of which is stripped away allowing the optical fiber 140 to extend through passageway 150.

[0065] The elastomer tube 121 and feed bushing 120 are secured within the crimp tube by adhesive, interference fit, or staking or slight deformation of the crimp tube to permit a suitable interference fit. The buffer portion 144 of the optical fiber cable 142 is received within the through passage way 139 of the feed bushing 120, frustoconical surface 158 abutting frustoconical surface 136 of sleeve 122 when inserted therein. The exposed optical fiber 140 is received within the through passageway 168 of feed bushing 120 and throughout elastomer tube 121. Through passageway 168 of the feed bushing 120 is preferably larger than the optical fiber and slightly less than the internal diameter of elastomer tube 121. The optical fiber also extends outward from elastomer tube 121, to be received by the alignment ferrule of a typical connector or splice, similar to Fig. 1. Preferably, the long flat crimp is applied, as described above, over the crimp tube portion only through which elastomer tube 121 is received. However, the feed bushing 120 disposed within the crimp sleeve 122 may also be crimped.

Embodiment of Fig. 8

[0066] As seen in Fig. 8, metal connector body 214 has a plastic or metal alignment ferrule 218, inserted therein, as described above. Ferrule 218 is substantially similar to ferrule 18 and the description of ferrule 18 is applicable to ferrule 218. In the present embodiment, body 214 has an inner cylindrical surface 224 adjacent first open end 226 defining a through passageway 228 therethrough. Surface 224 is adjacent axially facing outwardly extending surface 230 that extends to cylindrical surface 232, which terminates at second open end 234. Surface 232 defining a through passageway 236 that is larger in diameter than through passageway 228.

[0067] Ferrule 218 may be inserted though second end 234 and one end of ferrule 218 abutting surface 230. In this configuration, the crimp, using a long flat crimp die similar to die 114 shown in Figs. 4 and 5, is performed directly onto the connector

body 214. Disposed within the connector body prior to crimping may be an fiber optic cable 238 either with the buffered layer or optical fiber surrounded by a thermoplastic elastomer tube 240, as described above. The elastomer tube 240 configuration may have a fiber feed bushing as described above, to aid the insertion of optical fiber 242 into the elastomer tube 240.

Embodiment of Fig. 9 and 10

[0068] As seen in Fig. 9, the crimp method described above may be used to splice two axially aligned separate fiber optic cables together. A metal crimp sleeve 322 has inner and outer surfaces 324 and 326, surface 324 defining a uniform through passageway 328. A metal or plastic fiber alignment ferrule 330, similar to the alignment ferrules described above, however, having a inner frustoconical surfaces 332 and 334 on each open end 336 and 338, respectively, is positioned substantially equidistant from first and second ends 337 and 339 of sleeve 322, as shown in Fig. 9. Frustoconical surfaces 332 and 334 facilitate entering of optical fibers or exposed optical fibers 340 and 342 into each respective end of ferrule 318. Optical fibers 340 and 342 extend from respective fiber optic cables in a manner described above. The two optical fibers join together in physical contact or abut one another within the alignment ferrule at a point 343. The alignment ferrule may have optical refractive index matching gel to enhance optical transmission therethrough.

[0069] Disposed within each end of the deformable crimp tube 322 are thermoplastic elastomer tubes 344 and 346. The elastomer tubes are substantially similar to the elastomer tubes described above, and surround exposed optical fibers 340 and 342, onto which the long flat crimp is applied, in a similar manner as described above. The covers 352 and 354 of the fiber cables are not necessarily crimped in this embodiment. To aid the insertion of the fibers 340 and 342 through the elastomer tubes 344 and 346, fiber feed bushings 348 and 350 may be used by securing into the ends of the deformable crimp tube 322, as described above. Fiber feed bushings 348 and 350 are substantially similar to the feed bushings described above.

[0070] It is also possible to center the two optical fibers along a vertical axis, using a V-groove 353 in a non-deformable cylindrical member 356, as shown in Fig. 10. Cylinder member 356 is disposed within sleeve 322 similarly to ferrule 330, shown in Fig. 9 and functions in a substantially similar manner as ferrule 330, optic fibers contacting one another along a length of groove 353. Only one optical fiber 362 is shown, as it is understood that member 356 may splice two or more fiber optic cables together as described above. Preferably, cylindrical member 356 is formed from glass, although it can also be plastic or metal, and has an outer diameter 358 that is substantially smaller than the inner diameter 360 of the elastomer tube 354. Applied in the vertical plane, the flat crimp dies deform the crimp tube, thereby compressing the elastomer 354 over the adjoined optical fibers, forcing them into the V-groove 352. This force on the fibers in the groove produces a frictional force that resists axial movement or slippage of the fibers apart from each other. It is understood that the deformable crimp tube, elastomer, and V-groove element may be of circular or non-circular shape, or any shape permitting the use of a long flat crimp. The two exposed glass fibers join together in physical contact within the V-groove, where refractive index matching gel may be applied to enhance optical transmission therethrough.

Embodiment of Figs. 11-13

[0071] As seen in Fig. 11, sleeve 422, is initially oval in shape, in all other aspects, material and length, of sleeve 422 is substantially similar to sleeve 22. Extending through sleeve 422 are fiber optic cables 424 and 426, Cables 424 and 426 are substantially similar to cable 24, described above. It is understood that this configuration may apply to one, two, or more optical fibers disposed within either a single round or oval, or multiple round 423 and 425, as shown in Fig. 13, or oval tubes, either adjacent to one another or with spacing between.

[0072] Fig. 12 shows the crimped condition of the duplex fiber configuration, shown in Fig. 11. The internal diameter of the elastomer tube collapses in a manner to surround the optical fiber. The pressure of the elastomer surrounding the optical fiber is such that the retention strength of the fiber within the crimp will exceed prior

art strain relief connectors. The crimping and assembly methods are substantially similar to those described above.

Embodiment of Fig. 14-17

[0073] Crimp sleeve 522 is substantially similar to sleeve 22 described above. However, as shown in Fig. 14, the fiber optic cable 524 has an optical fiber 526 of a 125 micron (0.125mm) diameter 528. Surrounding the optical fiber is preferably an acrylate polymer coating 530 that has of a 250 micron (0.250mm) outside diameter 532. However, the coating may be any suitable polymer. Surrounding the polymer coating 530 is a buffer material or layer 534 of a 900 micron (900mm) outer diameter 536. Preferably the buffer layer is polyvinyl chloride (PVC), but may be any other suitable material. Similar the cover 26 above, outer diameter 536 of buffer layer 534 is substantially smaller than inner diameter 538 of sleeve 522.

[0074] The crimping method is substantially similar to the above described crimping method and results in the deformed width substantially greater than the deformed height. As seen in Fig. 15, the internal portion of the present embodiment produces substantial vertical compression of the buffer layer and coating of the optical fiber cable. This vertical compression imparted by the flat crimp die profile produces unique cross sectional geometries of the crimp sleeve 522, buffer layer 534, and coating material 530. The unique pattern of coating material displacement is such that the coating material flows in a divergent pattern relative to the glass optical fiber, the coating material substantially filling the entire inner volume of the compressed crimp portion of sleeve. The divergent pattern of the coating material 530 is such that two circular-segmented lobes 540 and 542 of bilateral symmetry are formed adjacent to the optical fiber in the horizontal plane, as seen in Fig. 15. The formation of the divergent, circular-segmented lobes 540 and 542 of coating material 530 permits the compressed buffer layer 534 to contact the optical fiber 526 along two separated arcuate areas on opposite sides of the glass fiber. This change in material contact can only be accomplished by the flat crimp technique. The amount of divergence of the coating material in the horizontal direction is dependent on the rigidity of the buffer

layer. Buffer materials of relatively high rigidity produce less horizontal divergence of the coating material.

[0075] According to calculations, the volume within the internal deformed portion of the buffer layer and coating material is actually reduced. For example, the percent reduction in aggregate volume of the buffer layer and coating material can be as much as 8%. The long length (as defined herein) of the deformed portion of this preferred embodiment is such that it constrains the flow of buffer material in the axial direction due to friction against the internal surface of the crimp sleeve. A drilled finish on the internal diameter of the undeformed crimp sleeve enhances this friction effect. This constraint of axial flow, in addition to the aggregate reduction in buffer layer and coating material volumes, produces increased local compression of buffer layer and coating material surrounding the glass fiber in Figure 15. Similar to the cover 26, described above, the combination of reduced volume and constrained flow of buffer layer and coating material results in an increase in the local density of the aggregate buffer layer and coating material and an increased friction force. The increased friction force and subsequent resistance to axial movement of the optical fiber contributes to improved performance in tensile cable retention tests.

[0076] Additionally similar to that described above, a portion of the internal radius of the crimp sleeve and a portion of the buffer layer in the crimped portion may remain slightly undeformed. These portions of the internal radius and buffer layer helps maintain the centrality of the optical fiber and prevent the deformed metal crimp sleeve internal surface from contacting the glass fiber.

[0077] Fig. 16 illustrates a further embodiment of fiber optic cable 624 and a sleeve 622. The cable 624 has an optical fiber 626 surrounded by a coating material 630, which is surrounded by a buffer layer 628 after crimping. In this embodiment, the deformed height is somewhat greater than as shown in Fig. 15, the displacement of the coating material 630 is less severe, due to the height of the crimp die, the amount of pressure exerted or the strength of the buffer layer. This deformation results in the coating material remaining in contact around the entire diameter of the glass optical fiber. The sleeve 622 and the methods of assembly and crimping are

substantially similar to those above.

[0078] As seen in Fig. 17, a plurality fiber optic cables 724 and 726 extend through sleeve 722. The buffer layers 728 and 729 of each fiber optic cable 732 and 734 flows in a manner which completely fills the oval shaped internal area of the crimp sleeve after crimping. The coating material 730 and 731 of each optical fiber 736 and 738 may deform into a pattern similar to that shown in Fig. 16, or in Fig. 15. The materials and method of crimping are similar to those described above.

Embodiments of Figs. 18-29

[0079] Figs. 18-21 illustrate another embodiment of a sleeve 822 and cover 826 that can be used in the strain relief connector generally shown in Fig. 1. Preferably, sleeve 822 and cover 826 take the place of sleeve 22 and cover 26, but sleeve 822 and cover 826 are not limited to this particular connector and can be used in other strain relief connectors, if desired.

[0080] As seen in Figs. 18 and 19, sleeve 822, in its initial configuration, is preferably a deformable metal sleeve, but may be any deformable material and does not necessarily need to be metal. Sleeve 822 has a first end 850, a second end 852 and a through passageway 854, extending from the first end to the second end. Sleeve 822 has an outer surface 856 with a first protrusion or exterior shoulder 858 and a second protrusion or exterior shoulder 860. Each shoulder 858 and 860, preferably extends substantially perpendicularly or radially outwardly from the outer surface. In other words, the shoulders are cylindrical protrusions that extend radially from the outer surface. First shoulder 858 is adjacent the first end 850, while second shoulder 860 is adjacent the second end 852.

[0081] Through passageway 854 begins at circular opening 862 in the first end 850 and is initially defined by an interior substantially cylindrical surface 864. Interior surface 864 is adjacent opening 862 and forms the largest diameter portion 866 of through passageway 854. Adjacent surface 864 is inwardly tapered surface 868. Surface 868 extends radially inwardly, and tapers in a direction away from first end 850 to reduce the diameter of through passageway 854 and to form a first interior

shoulder 870. Adjacent tapered surface 868 is a substantially cylindrical interior surface 872. Inwardly tapered surface 874 is adjacent surface 872 and extends radially inwardly, further reducing the diameter of through passageway 854 and forming a second interior shoulder 876. Adjacent surface 874 is a substantially cylindrical interior surface 878, defining the smallest diameter portion 880 of the through passageway 854. Surface 878 is adjacent substantially cylindrical opening 882 in second end 852 of the sleeve 822. Interior shoulders 870 and 876 are preferably positioned in the general area of the exterior shoulders 858 and 860, respectively, for proper placement of the sleeve in a die compression device, as described in more detail below.

[0082] As seen in Figs. 18 and 20, cover 826 is a polymer tube formed from a thermoplastic elastomer material, such as HYTREL, as described above for cover 26. Cover 826 is preferably substantially cylindrical for most of its length between a first end 884 and a second end 886. A through passageway 888 extends from the first end to the second end. First end 884 has a flared or tapered portion 890 that extends radially outwardly, forming a substantially frustoconical opening 896 in the first end that is larger at one end than the substantially cylindrical opening 898 in the second end. Cover 826 has an outer surface 892 and an inner surface 894, the inner surface defining the through passageway 888.

[0083] As seen in Figs. 22a-22b, the tapered portion of cover 826 is formed using a substantially cylindrical high temperature probe 904. Probe 904 has a frustoconical or tapered portion 906 with a radiused tip 908, and a stop surface 910. Initially the probe 904 is inserted into opening 896 in the second end 884 of the cover 826. Since the cover 826 is a thermoplastic material, the second end 884 expands and is stretched as the tapered portion 806 of the probe 904 is pushed into the through passageway 888. When the second end 884 of the cover contacts stop surface 910, the probe is withdrawn, and the tapered portion 890 is formed. This method of forming the tapered portion is the preferred embodiment. The tapered portion can be formed in any manner desired, such as originally molded or stretched in any other process known in the art.

[0084] The interior surface 894 at the tapered portion can be used to guide optical fiber 900 into the through passageway 888. Through passageway 888 is substantially cylindrical outside of flared portion 890 and is sized and configured to allow an optical fiber 900 to extend therethrough, as seen in Fig. 21. The interior diameter of cover 826 as defined by surface 888 has a substantially larger transverse diameter than the exterior diameter of optical fiber 900 (Fig. 21). The interior diameter of sleeve 822 is, in turn, substantially larger than the exterior diameter of cover 826 (Fig. 21). Preferably, the respective diameters of the optical fiber, the cover and the sleeve allow for space between each element when initially assembled.

[0085] Although the exterior of the cover is generally smaller in diameter than the interior of the sleeve, as seen in Fig. 18, the interior shoulders 870 and 876 taper inwardly toward end 852 as described above, allowing the cover to be correctly and precisely fitted therein, by engagement therewith. The outer surface 892 of the cover at the tapered portion 890 abuts or contacts the first interior shoulder 870, preventing the cover from extending farther into the interior of the sleeve. Additionally, second end 886 of the cover 826 abuts the second interior shoulder 876, which also prevents the cover from extending too far through the through passageway 854. Either shoulder alone would prevent undesired lateral movement or over insertion of the cover within the sleeve; however, the redundancy and design of the cover and sleeve ensure that the cover is properly placed in the sleeve. As a further measure for proper fitting and retention, the outer surface 892 at the first end 884 of the cover, at the largest diameter of the tapered portion 890 forms an interference fit with the interior surface 864 of the sleeve 822.

[0086] Furthermore, as shown in Fig. 21, when buffer layer 902 is disposed within the sleeve 822 and the flared portion of the cover 822, the buffered layer can act as further strain relief. For example, when the cover and sleeve are compressed the cover will lengthen and extend toward the buffer layer. This extension of the cover and contact with the buffer layer will create an interference or frictional fit between the cover and the buffer layer, which will assume some tension under strain.

[0087] As with the embodiments described above, this embodiment of sleeve and

cover is crimped by a die compress crimp device or tool 910, shown in Figs 23-26. The crimp device 910 has an upper crimp portion or die 912 and a lower crimp portion or die 914. The upper crimp die 910 has a crimp surface 916, which is substantially planar. The first end 913 of the first crimp die has a first shoulder or recessed portion 916 therein and the second end 918 has a second shoulder or recessed portion 920 therein. Since each recessed portion is substantially similar, only recessed portion 916 will be discussed in detail. Recessed portion 916 is semi-cylindrical (Fig. 24) and defined by a radially inwardly facing semi-cylindrical surface 922 and a radially extending vertical surface 924. Vertical surface 924 is adjacent crimp surface 916 and is substantially perpendicular thereto. The corner of vertical surface 924 and crimp surface 916 defines a first end or edge 926. Similarly, the vertical surface of recessed portion 920 defines a second end or edge 928. Furthermore, at the sides of first crimp die 912 are recessed portions 930 and 932, which are for lateral alignment of the crimp dies, as discussed in more detail below. As seen in Fig. 24, recessed portions 930 and 932 are formed by angled surfaces 934 and 936 and by horizontal surfaces 938 and 940.

[0088] Lower crimp die 914 has a planar crimp surface 942, which is recessed from the rest of the crimp die. Additionally, die 914 has a first end 941 with a first shoulder or recessed portion 944 and a second end 943 with second shoulder or recessed portion 946. Each recessed portion is substantially semi-cylindrical. Since each recessed portion is substantially similar, only portion 944 will be described in detail. As shown in Fig. 23, recessed portion 944 is defined by radially inwardly facing semi-cylindrical surface 948 and a radially extending vertical surface 950. Vertical surface 950 is adjacent crimp surface 942 and is substantially perpendicular thereto. The corner of vertical surface 950 and crimp surface 942 defines a first end or edge 952. Similarly, the vertical surface of recessed portion 946 defines a second end or edge 954. Furthermore, two protrusions or extensions 954 and 956 extend from the sides of die 914 for lateral alignment of the crimp dies. Protrusions 954 and 956 are defined by angled surfaces 958 and 960, respectively, and horizontal surfaces 962 and 964, respectively.

[0089] It is noted that the semi-cylindrical recessed portions described for the dies 912 and 914 is only a preferred embodiment and the recessed portions do not necessarily need to be semi-cylindrical and can be any shape desired.

[0090] To crimp the sleeve 822, the cover 826 and the optical fiber 900 are placed between the crimp dies 912 and 914. The simultaneous compression of the deformable portion of the sleeve and the cover is achieved preferably by aligning the sleeve with surface 942 of die 914, the vertical surfaces of each recessed portion 944 and 946 on die 914 and the surface 916 on die 912. However, the sleeve can be aligned with any of the surfaces desired to achieve the desired result. For example, the sleeve can be aligned with the vertical surfaces of die 912.

[0091] Prior to crimping, the combination of the sleeve 822, the cover 926 and the optical fiber 900 is placed on die 914 with first external shoulder 858 being positioned in recessed portion 944 and second external shoulder 860 being positioned in recessed portion 946. The vertical surfaces of each recessed portion are spaced relative to each other to fit with the shoulders of the sleeve 822 and properly fit the sleeve therein. In other words, the shoulders and recessed portions are properly configured so that the majority of the sleeve and cover are aligned and properly compressed. As stated above, the internal shoulders and the external shoulders of the sleeve are configured for alignment of the cover within the sleeve.

[0092] Once the sleeve 822 is properly positioned on the second die 914, the first die 912 is moved in the direction of the sleeve. Crimp surfaces 916 and 942 are generally aligned and parallel and then forcefully compress the sleeve portion. The height of the compression is governed by the depth of the recessed surface 942. The semi-cylindrical recessed portions in the first die 912 allow the first and second shoulders of the sleeve to avoid any compression forces.

[0093] As the dies engage the sleeve, the alignment of the dies is maintained by the combination of protrusions 954 and 956 and the recessions 930 and 932. These protrusions and recessions interlock and maintain the alignment of both the crimp surfaces 916 and 942 and the recessed portions 918 and 944 and 920 and 946. Additionally, these protrusions and recessions maintain lateral alignment of the upper

and lower dies which is important to prevent shearing of the optical fiber in the crimp sleeve. Lateral misalignment of the two dies can cause uneven compression of the sleeve, resulting in potential fracture of the crimped optical fiber.

[0094] The result of the die compressed sleeve and cover is that the cover substantially fills an inner volume of the sleeve, which allows for an large frictional area between the sleeve and cover, as described above. The resulting product is similar to that of Fig. 3 and any description of the benefits and structure of the embodiments discussed above is applicable to this embodiment.

[0095] Furthermore, as shown in Fig. 27, a metal or plastic alignment ferrule 966 can be placed in the second end 978 of the sleeve. Ferrule 966 is substantially similar to ferrule 18 and the description of ferrule 18 is applicable to ferrule 966. In the present embodiment, sleeve 822a has an inner cylindrical surface 968 adjacent first open end 970 defining a through passageway 972 therethrough. Surface 968 is adjacent axially facing outwardly extending surface 976 that extends to cylindrical surface 978, which extends to tapered surface 868a, as discussed above for sleeve 822. Second open end 671 is similar to end 850 of sleeve 822.

[0096] Ferrule 218 may be inserted though second end 978 and one end of ferrule 966 abutting surface 976. Ferrule 966 has a through passageway 977 for the passage of an optical fiber. Disposed within the connector body prior to crimping may be an fiber optic cable 238 either with the buffered layer or optical fiber surrounded by a thermoplastic elastomer tube 240, as described above.

[0097] Fig. 28 shows two sleeves having a similar configuration as sleeve 822a; however, positioned in the second ends 978 of the sleeves 822a and 822b is a splice element 980. Splice element 980 is preferably formed from ceramic or glass, but can be any suitable material and is substantially cylindrical. Through passageway 982 extends from open ended first end 984 to open ended second end 986. Through passageway 982 is defined by an inwardly tapered surface 988 which extends from the first end to cylindrical surface 990 and then to oppositely tapered surface 992, which is adjacent second end 986. Splice element 980 allows two different sleeves 822a and 822b to be coupled together.

[0098] Fig. 29 shows a cover 826a disposed within a sleeve 822c that is configured to receive a fiber alignment member 1000. An optical fiber 900 extends through the cover and sleeve as described above. Cover 826a and sleeve 822c are substantially similar to cover 826 and sleeve 822 described above, except that end 1002 of sleeve 822c is configured to receive the end of alignment member 1000. More specifically, end 1002 has a U-shaped recessed portion 1004 therein. Recessed portion 1004 is defined by two axially facing surfaces 1006 and 1008 and inwardly radially facing surface 1010.

[0099] Alignment member 1000 has a first open end 1012, a second open end 1014 and a through passageway 1016 extending from the first end to the second end. Adjacent first end, through passageway 1016 is defined by a substantially cylindrical inner surface 1018, which extends to outwardly tapered surface 1020. Tapered surface 1020 is adjacent substantially cylindrical inner surface 1022, which extends to the second end 1014. A pre-polished fiber stud is positioned within through passageway 1016 adjacent the first end and is affixed to surface 1018 using adhesive. Optical fiber 900 preferably mates with the glass fiber cleaved end face 1026 and is affixed thereto using an index-matching gel.

[00100] While specific embodiments have been chosen to illustrate the invention, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes and modifications can be made therein without departing from the scope of the invention as defined in the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

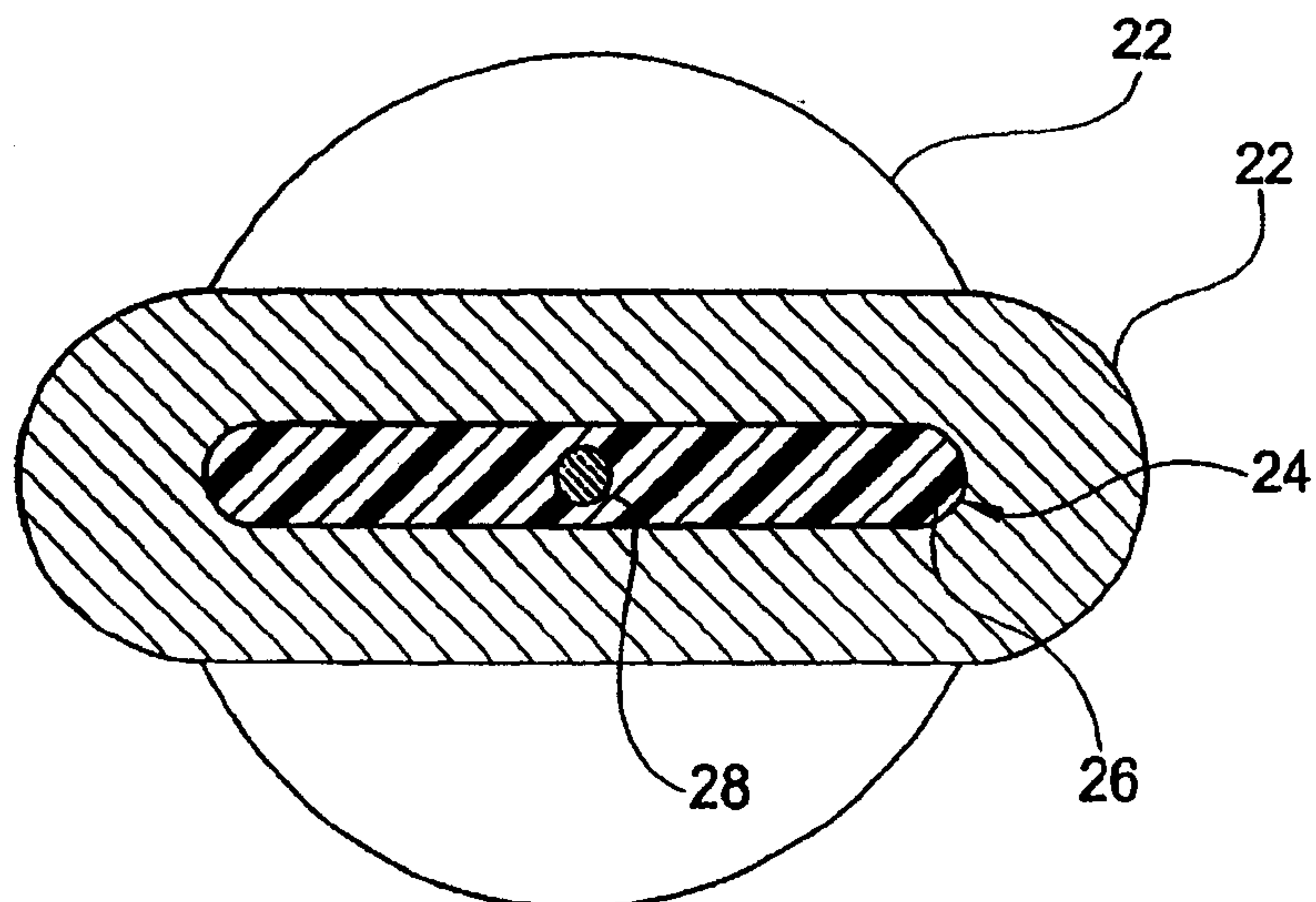
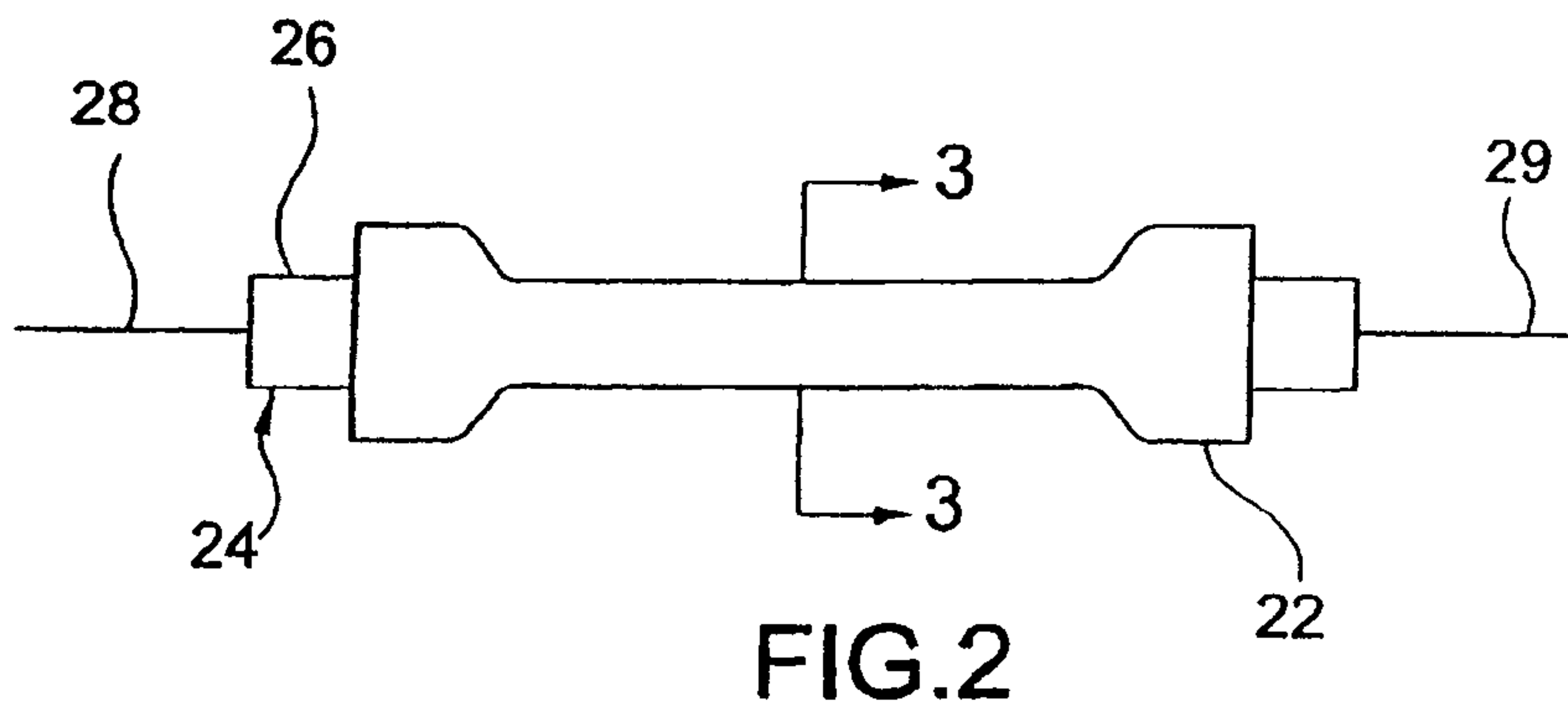
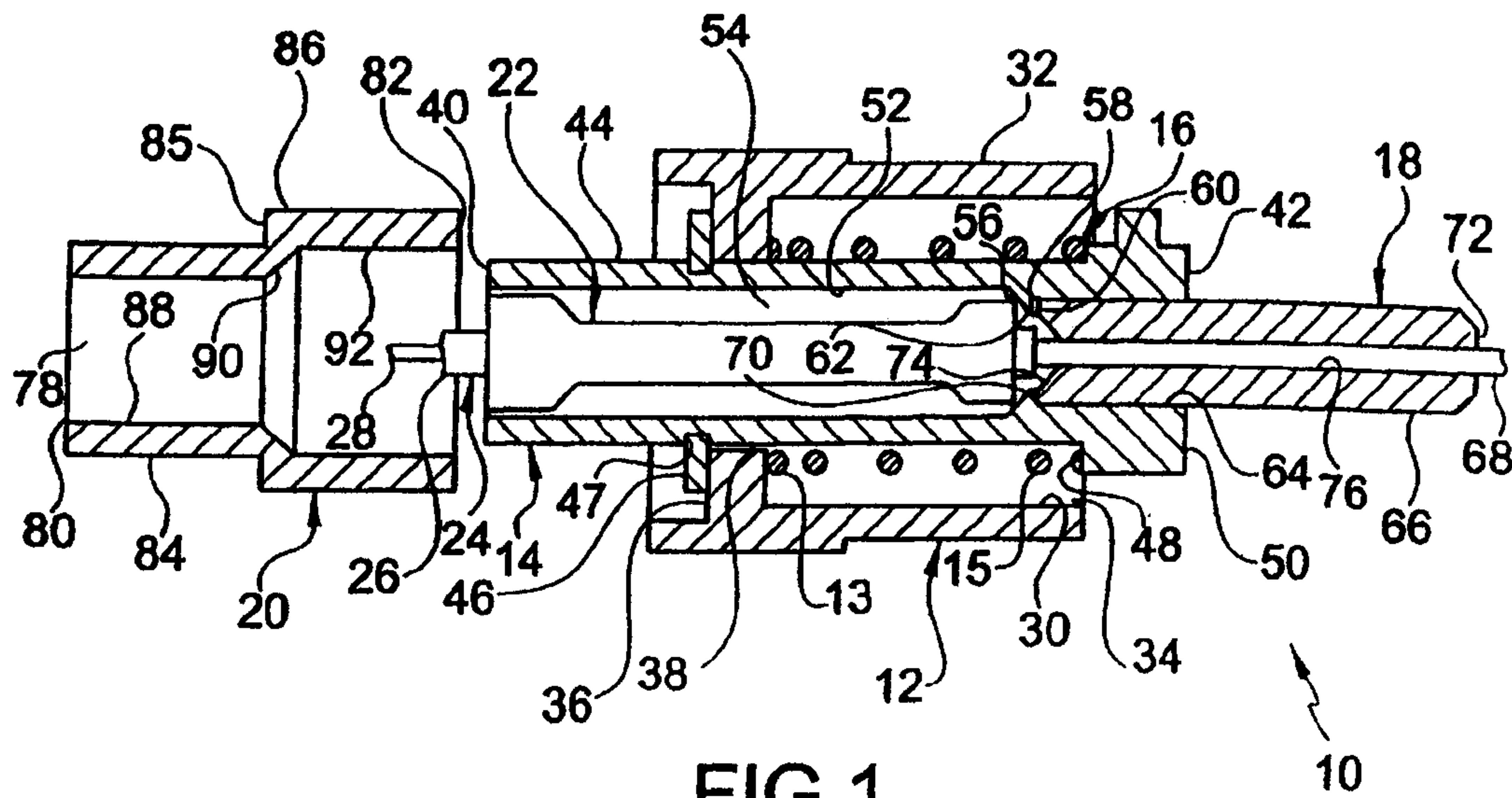
1. A strain relief connector, comprising:
 - an optical fiber;
 - a cover enclosing said optical fiber, and having an inner surface, an outer surface, a length, a first end and a second end, said first end having a tapered portion that extends radially outwardly from said outer surface; and
 - a unitary sleeve completely circumferentially surrounding said cover along all of said length of said cover, said sleeve having a first inner volume and a first interior shoulder, a portion of the outer surface at said tapered portion abutting said first interior shoulder;whereby said sleeve and said cover can be simultaneously compressed forming a compressed portion, and said cover and said sleeve can be deformed such that said cover substantially fills said first inner volume of said sleeve.
2. A strain relief connector according to claim 1, wherein said sleeve has a second interior shoulder, and said second end abuts said second interior shoulder.
3. A strain relief connector according to claim 2, wherein said first and second interior shoulders are tapered inwardly.
4. A strain relief connector according to claim 2, wherein said sleeve has first and second radially extending exterior shoulders, said first and second exterior shoulders are positioned in the same general axial position as said first and second interior shoulders, respectively.
5. A strain relief connector according to claim 1, wherein said cover is a continuous elastomeric material between said optical fiber and said sleeve, and substantially all of said cover extends in a direction substantially perpendicular to said length of said sleeve in said compressed portion.

6. A strain relief connector according to claim 1, wherein said sleeve has a first inner surface, defining a first inner diameter and a second inner surface, defining a second inner diameter, said first inner diameter being larger than said second inner diameter.
7. A strain relief connector according to claim 6, wherein a portion of said outer surface at said first end of said cover frictionally engages said first inner surface.
8. A strain relief connector, comprising:
 - an optical fiber;
 - an elastomeric cover surrounding said optical fiber, and having an outer surface, a length, a first end and a second end, said first end having a tapered portion extending radially outwardly from an outer surface of said cover; and
 - a deformable unitary sleeve completely circumferentially surrounding said cover along all of said length of said cover, said sleeve having an inner volume and a first interior shoulder, a portion of the outer surface at said tapered portion abutting said first interior shoulder.
9. A strain relief connector according to claim 8, wherein said sleeve has a second interior shoulder, and said second end abuts said second interior shoulder.
10. A strain relief connector according to claim 9, wherein said first and second interior shoulders are tapered inwardly.
11. A strain relief connector according to claim 9, wherein said sleeve has first and second radially extending exterior shoulders, said first and second exterior shoulders are positioned in the same general axial position as said first and second interior shoulders, respectively.
12. A strain relief connector according to claim 8, wherein said sleeve has a first inner surface, defining a first inner diameter and a second inner surface, defining a second inner diameter, said first inner diameter being larger than said second inner diameter.

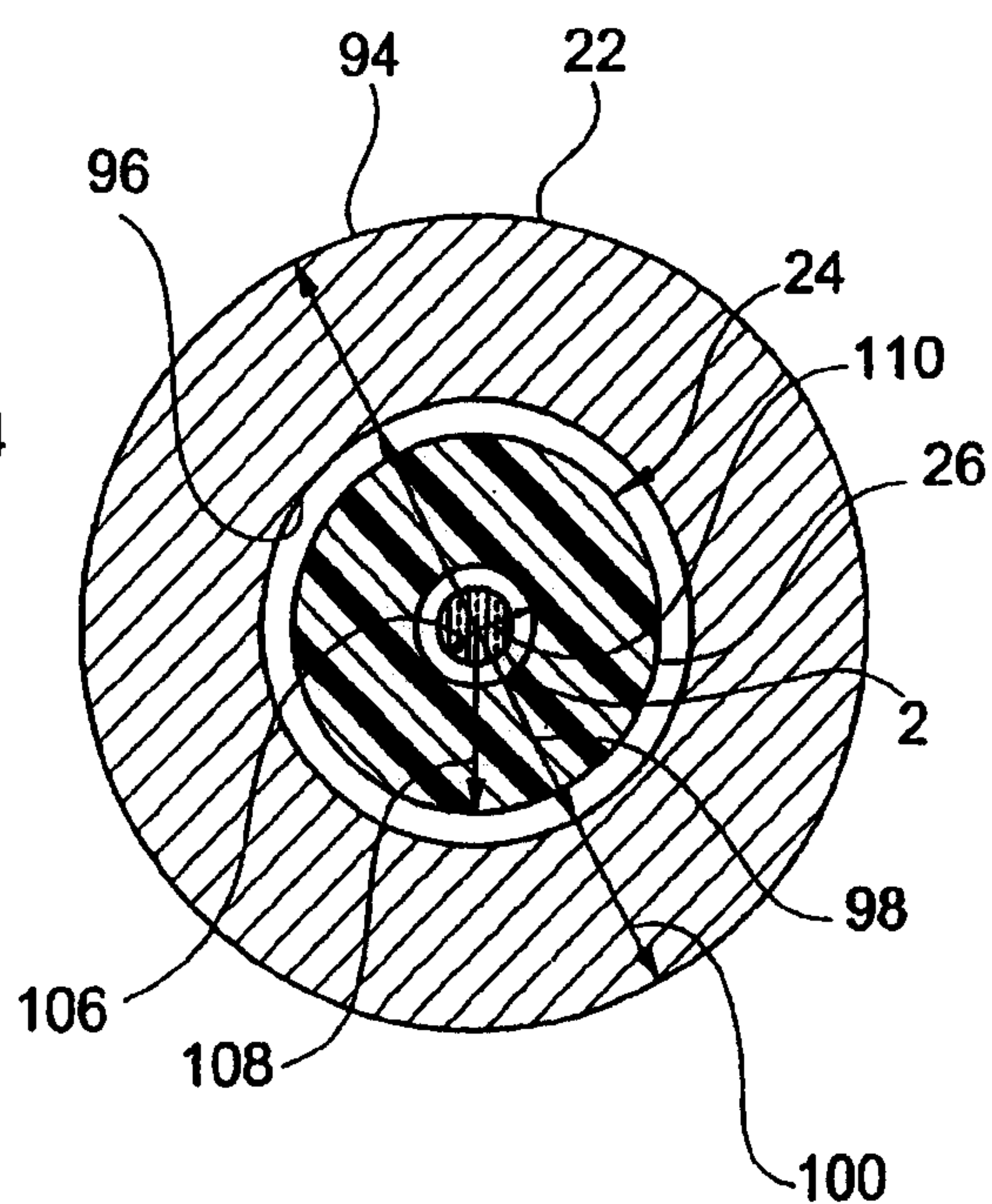
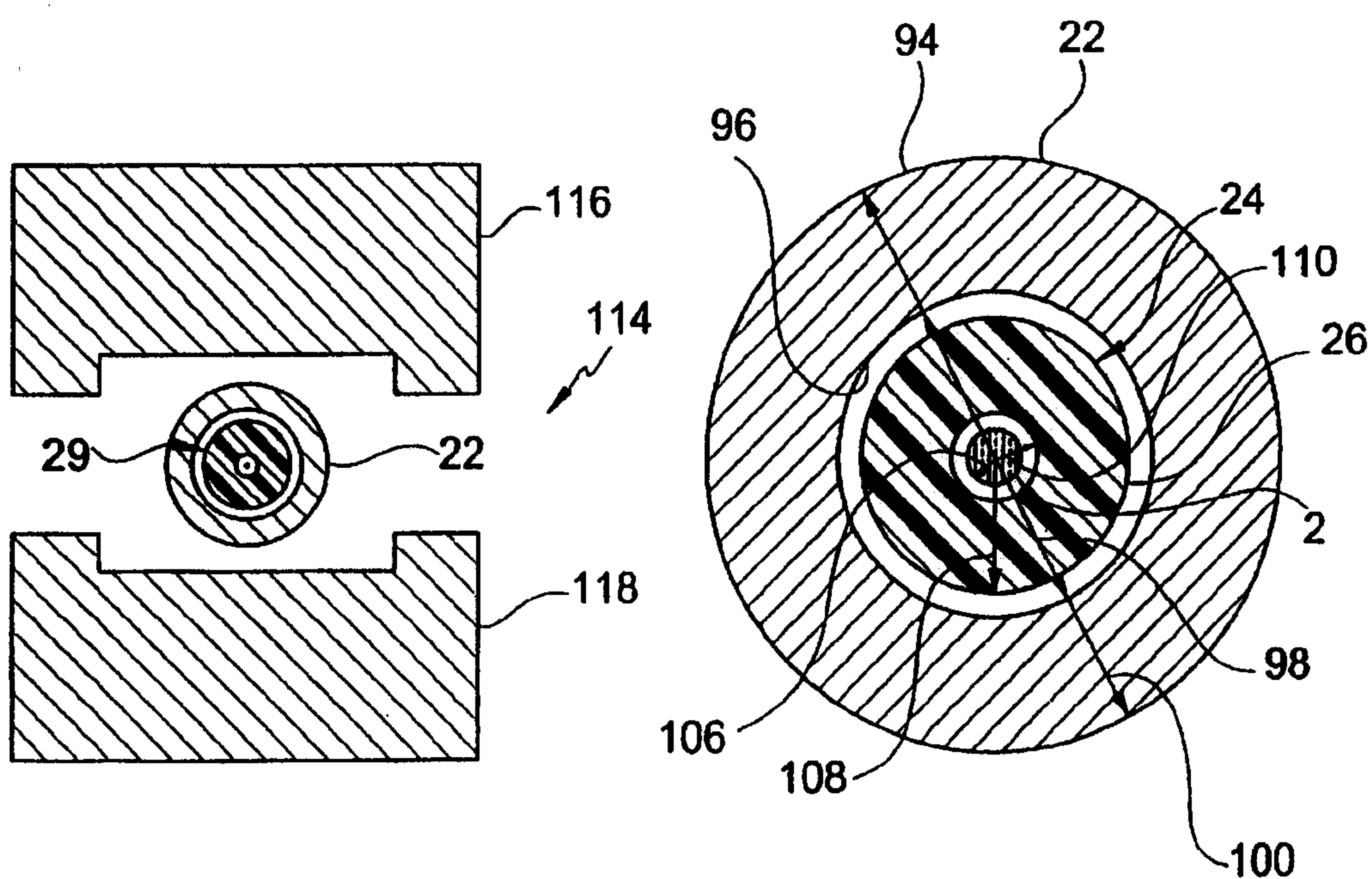
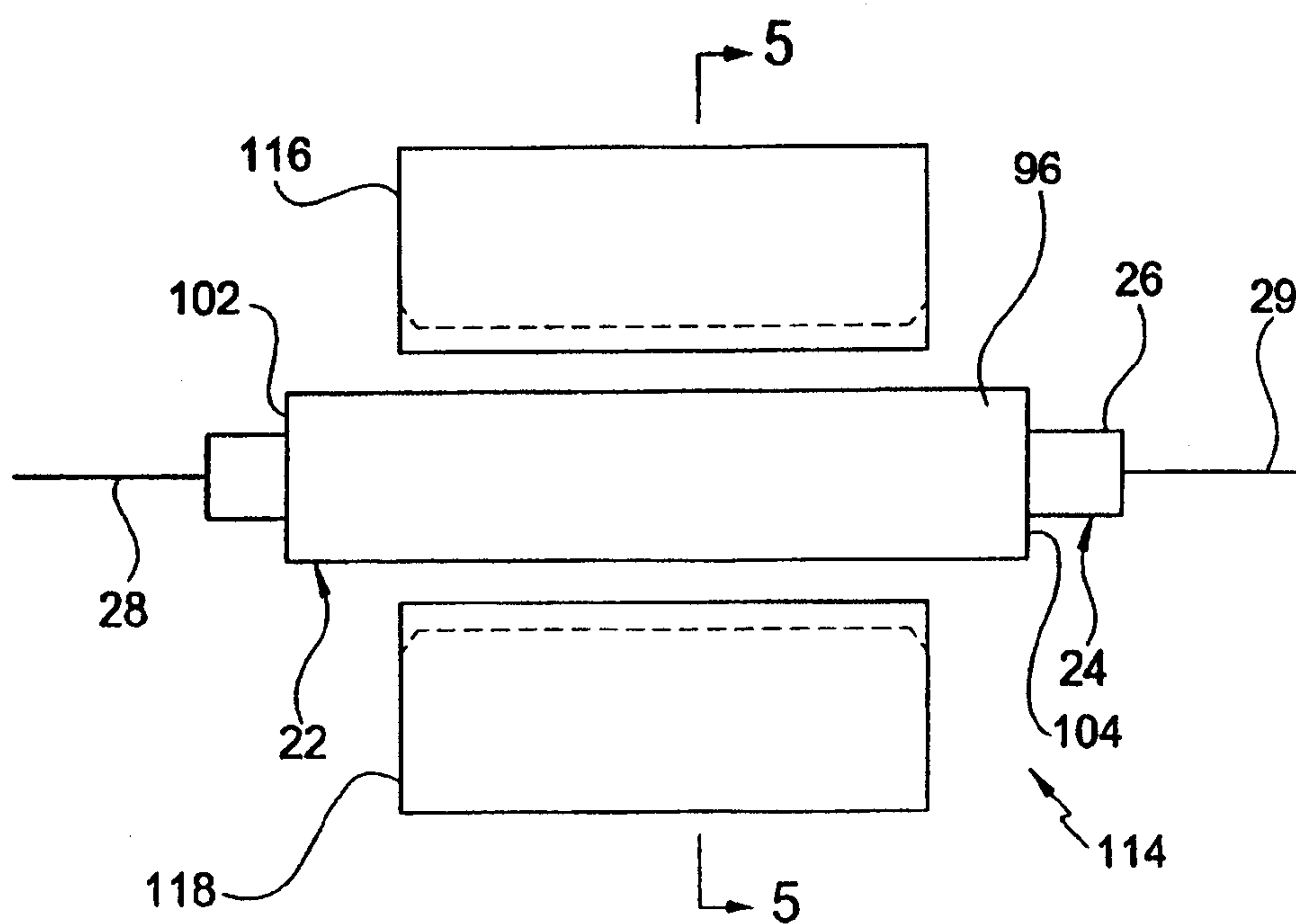
13. A strain relief connector according to claim 12, wherein a portion of said outer surface at said first end of said cover frictionally engages said first inner surface.
14. A strain relief connector according to claim 8, wherein said sleeve and said cover are adapted to be compressed and deformed such that said cover substantially fills said inner volume of said sleeve.
15. A strain relief connector kit for an optical fiber, comprising:
 - an elastomeric cover adapted to surround the optical fiber, and having an outer surface, a length, a first end and a second end, said first end having a tapered portion that extends radially outwardly from said outer surface; and
 - a deformable unitary sleeve adapted to completely circumferentially surround said cover along all of said length of said cover, said sleeve having a first interior shoulder, a portion of the outer surface at said tapered portion adapted to abut said first interior shoulder.
16. A strain relief connector kit according to claim 15, wherein said sleeve has a second interior shoulder, and said second end is adapted to abut said second interior shoulder.
17. A strain relief connector kit according to claim 16, wherein said first and second interior shoulders are tapered inwardly.
18. A strain relief connector kit according to claim 16, wherein said sleeve has first and second radially extending exterior shoulders, said first and second exterior shoulders are positioned in the same general axial position as said first and second interior shoulders, respectively.
19. A strain relief connector kit according to claim 15, wherein said sleeve has a first inner surface defining a first inner diameter, and a second inner surface defining a second inner diameter, said first inner diameter being larger than said second inner diameter.

20. A strain relief connector kit according to claim 19, wherein a portion of said outer surface at said first end of said cover is adapted to frictionally engage said first inner surface.

21. A strain relief connector kit according to claim 15, wherein said sleeve has an inner volume, and said sleeve and said cover are adapted to be compressed and deformed such that said cover substantially fills said inner volume of said sleeve.

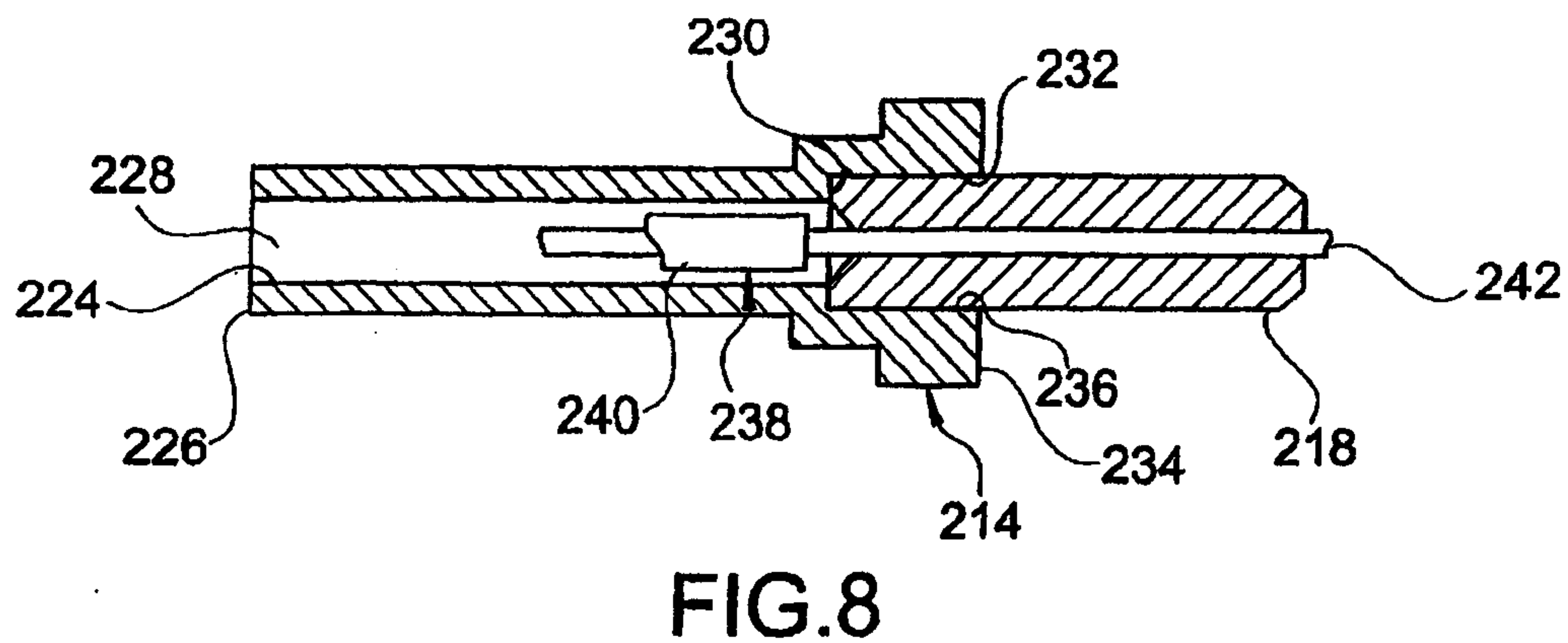
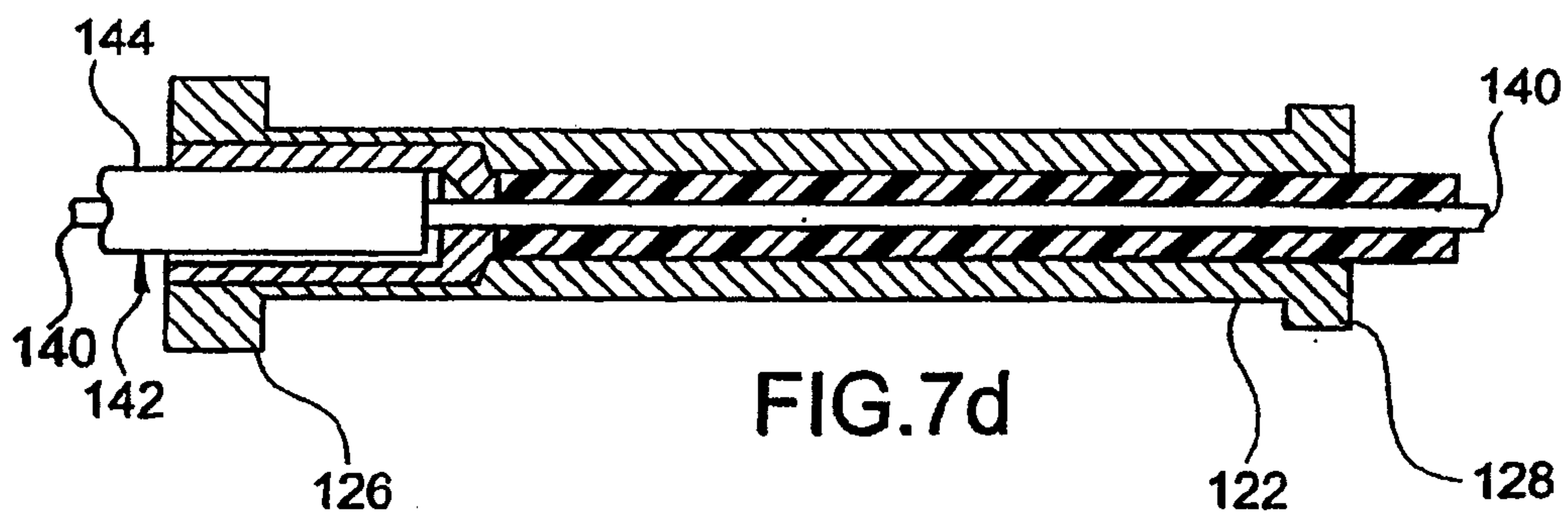
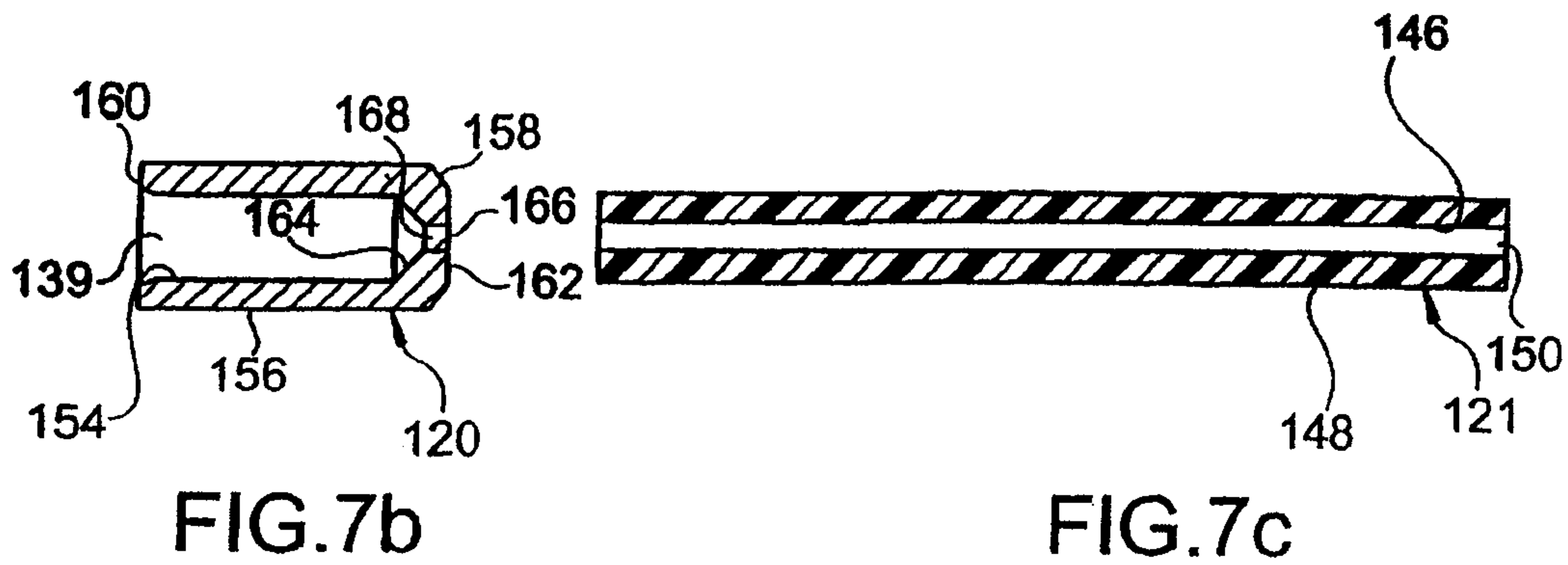
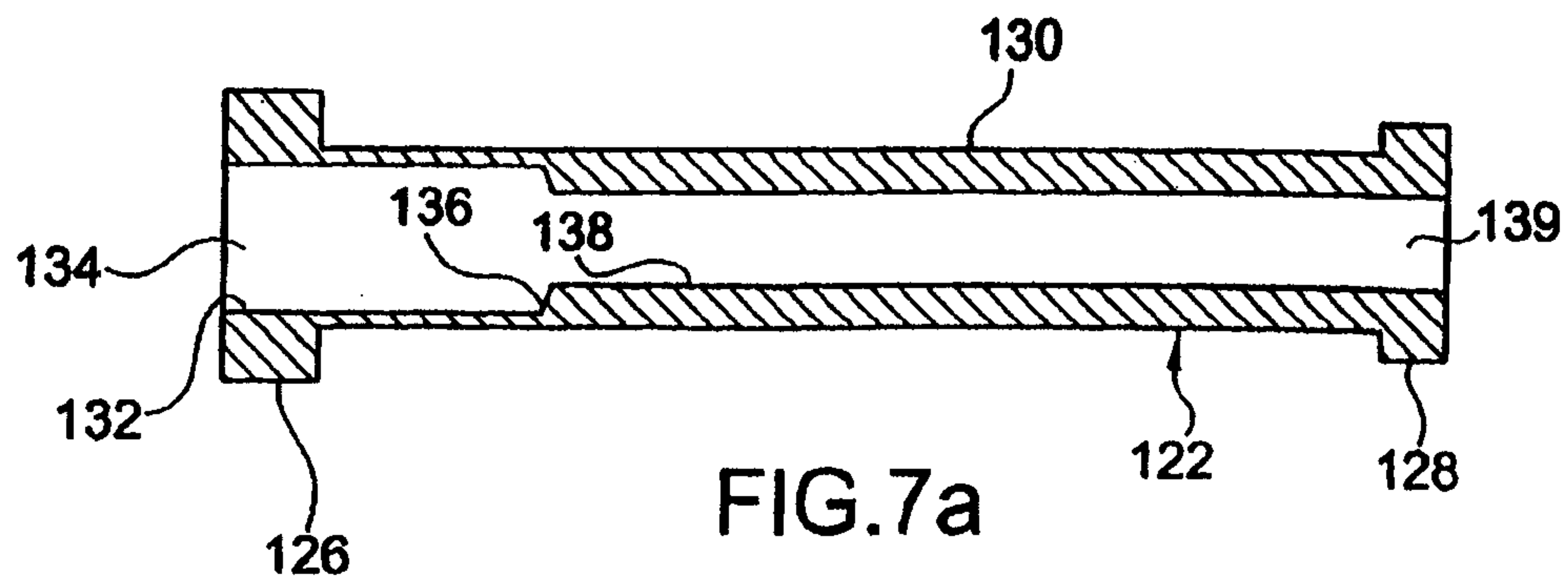


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Sheet 3 of 11



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Sheet 4 of 11

Jon A. LUTZEN ET AL
 Serial No. 10/115,428
 Page 4 of 11

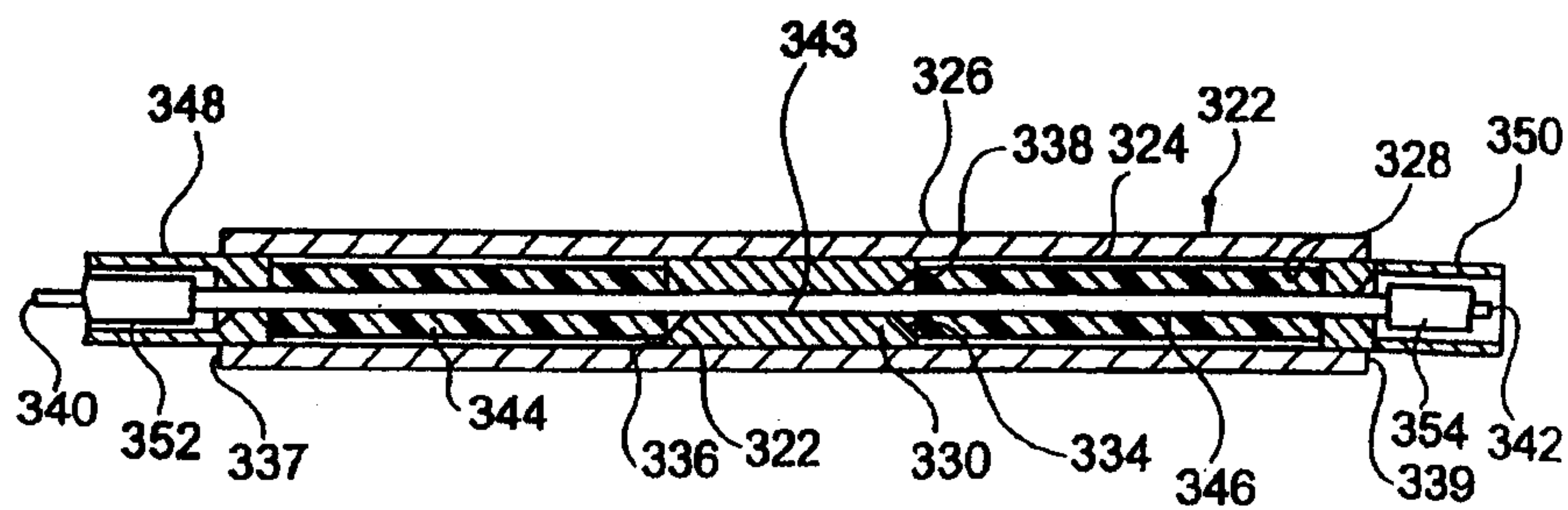


FIG. 9

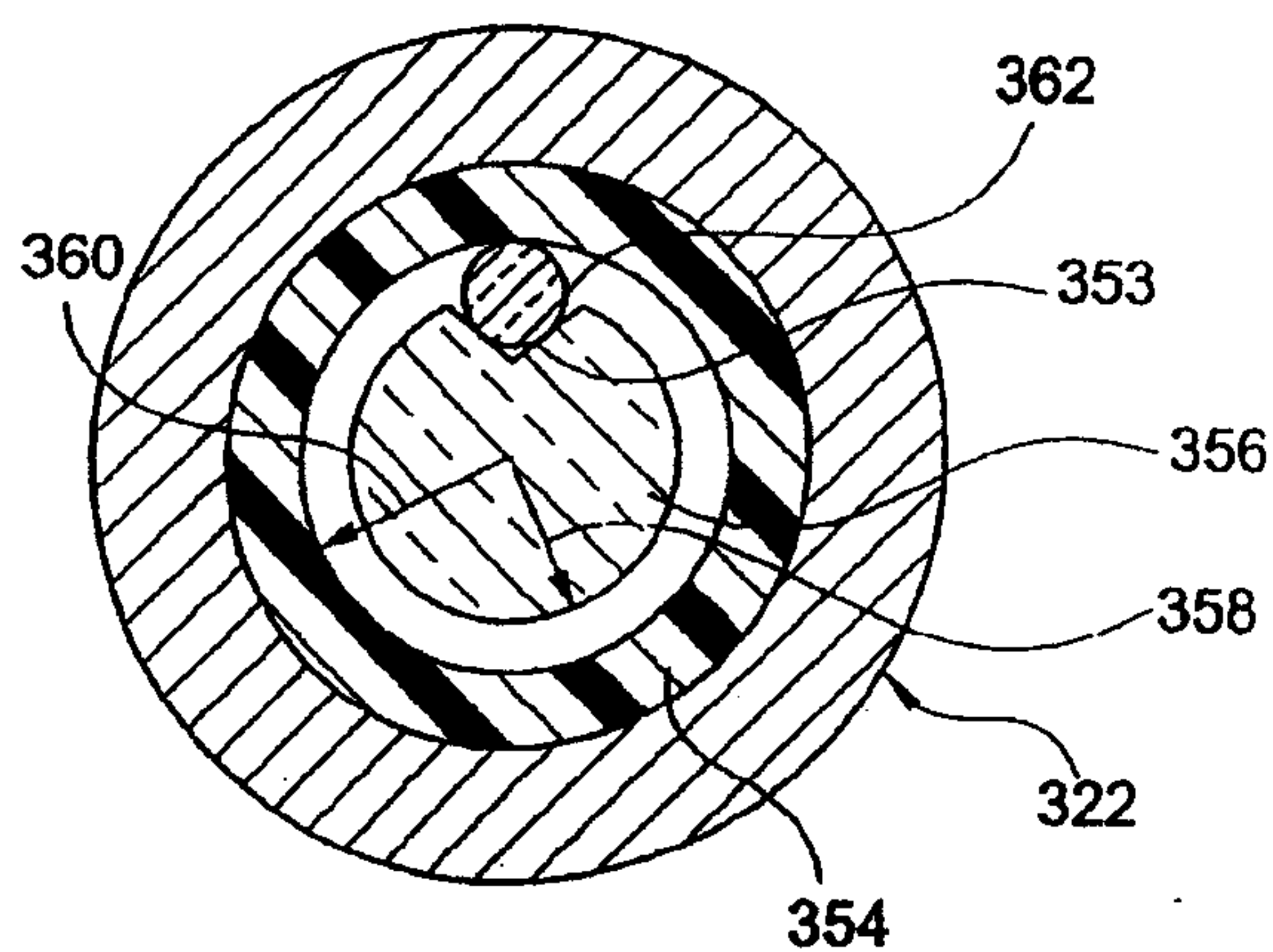


FIG. 10

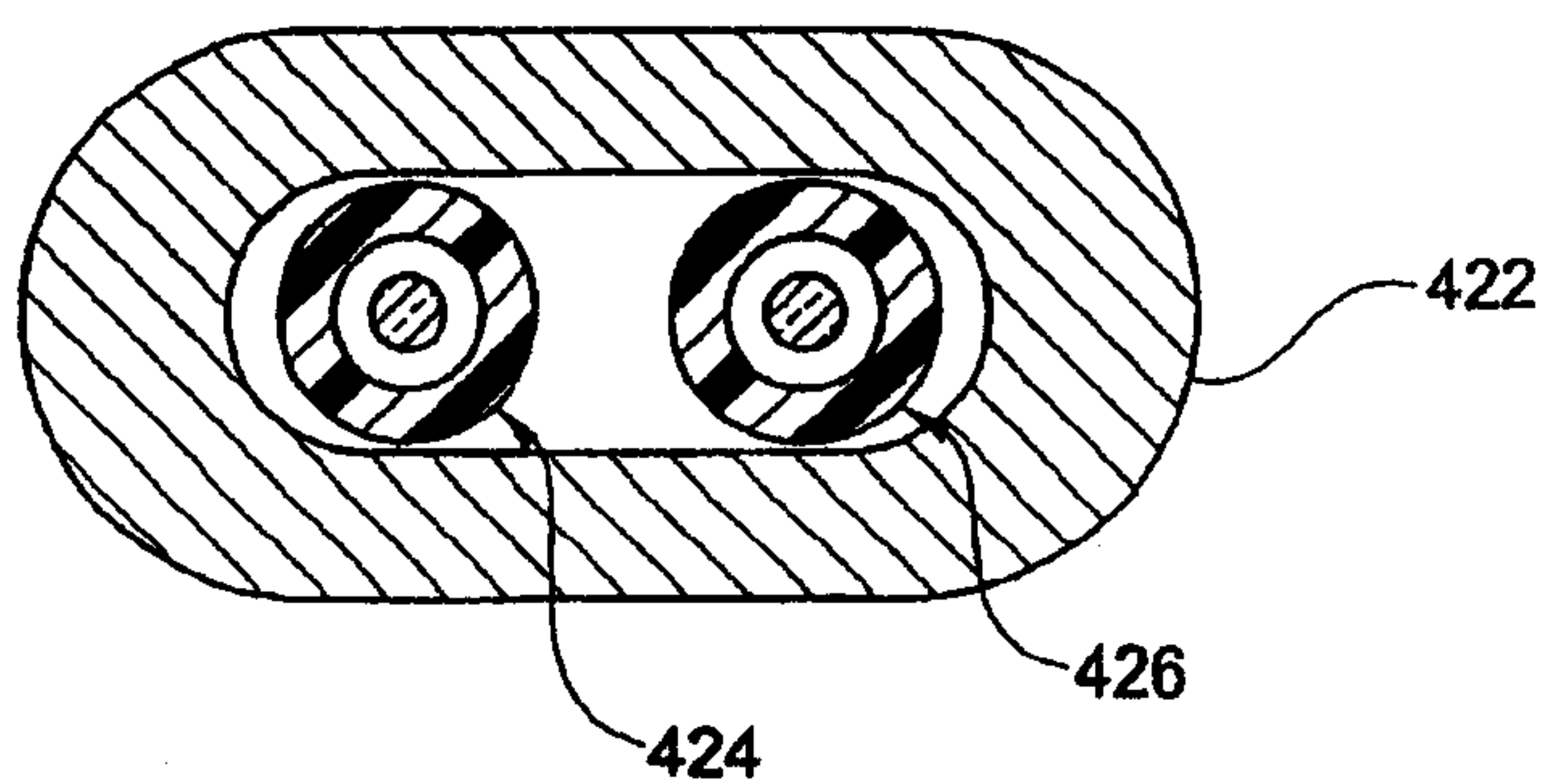


FIG. 11

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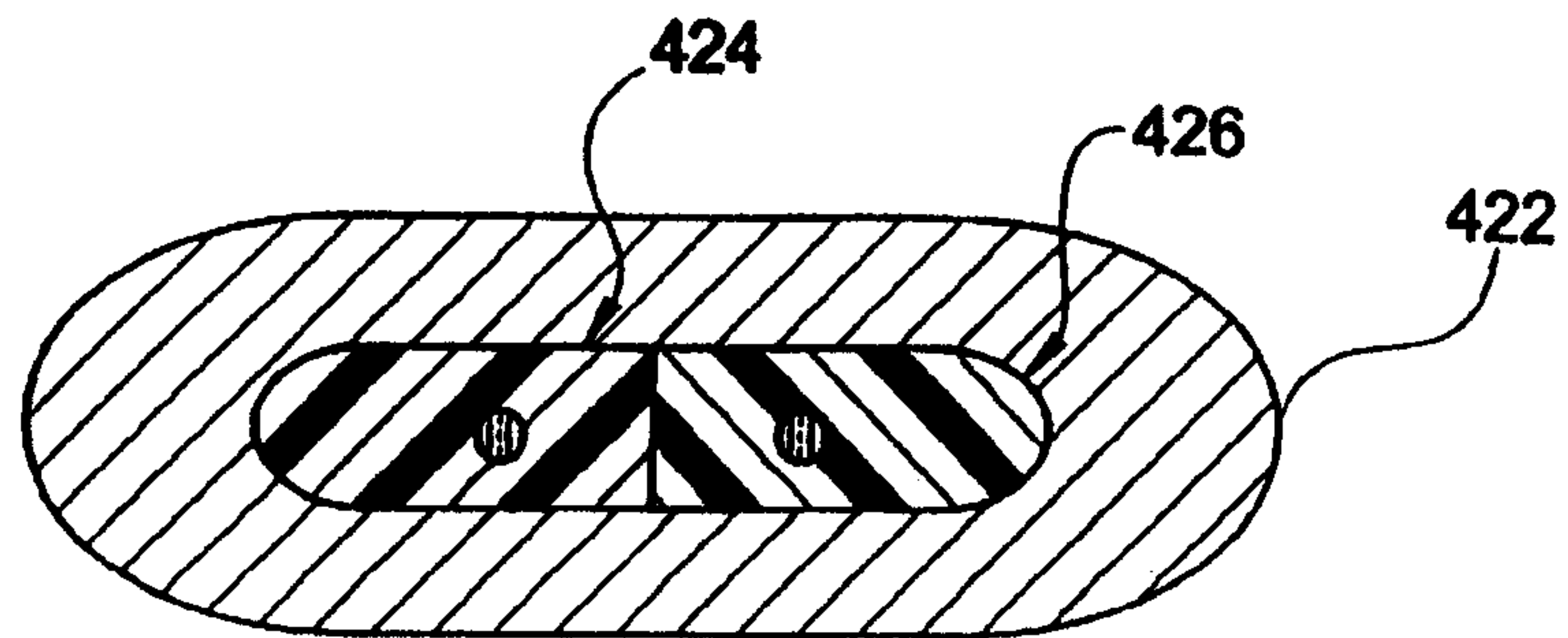


FIG. 12

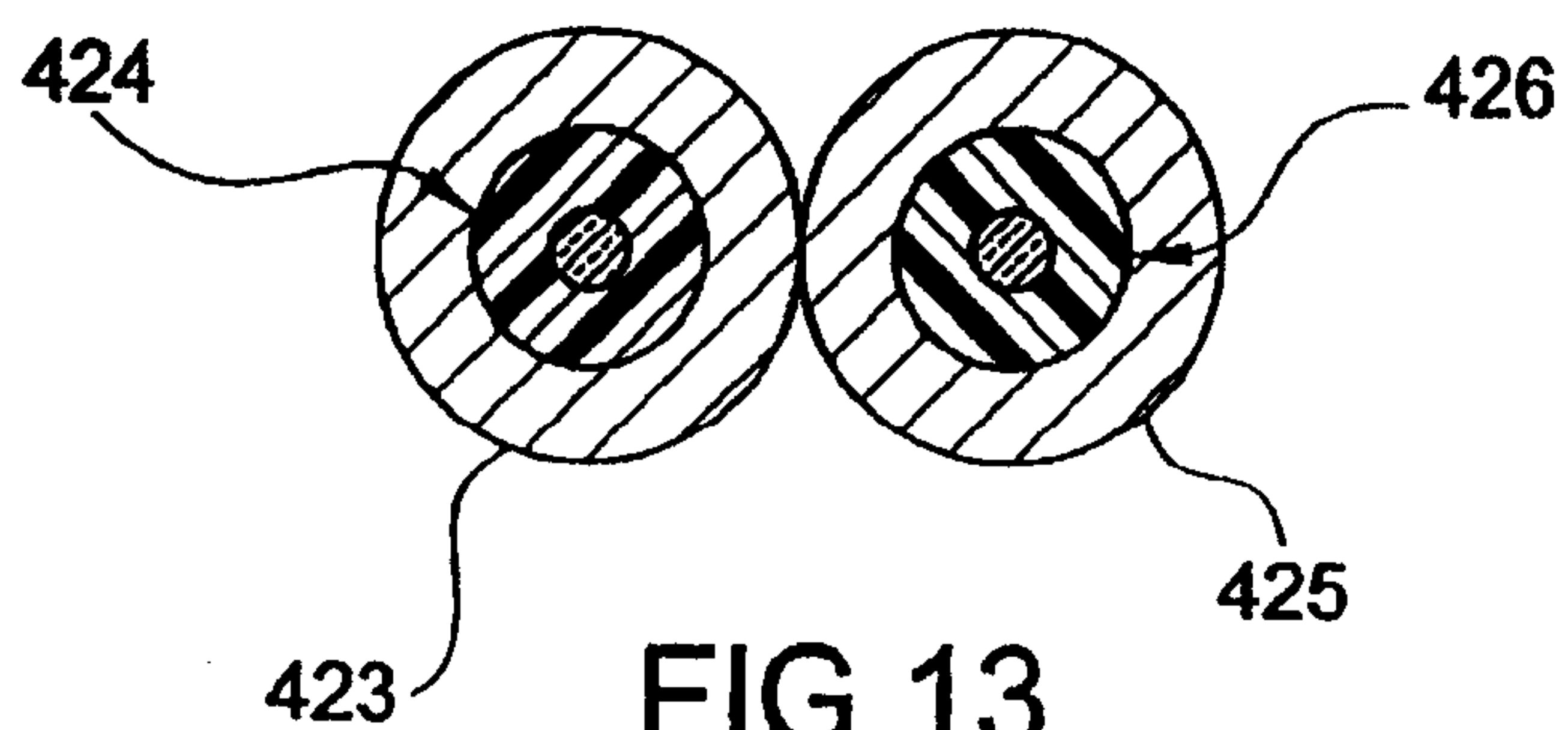


FIG. 13

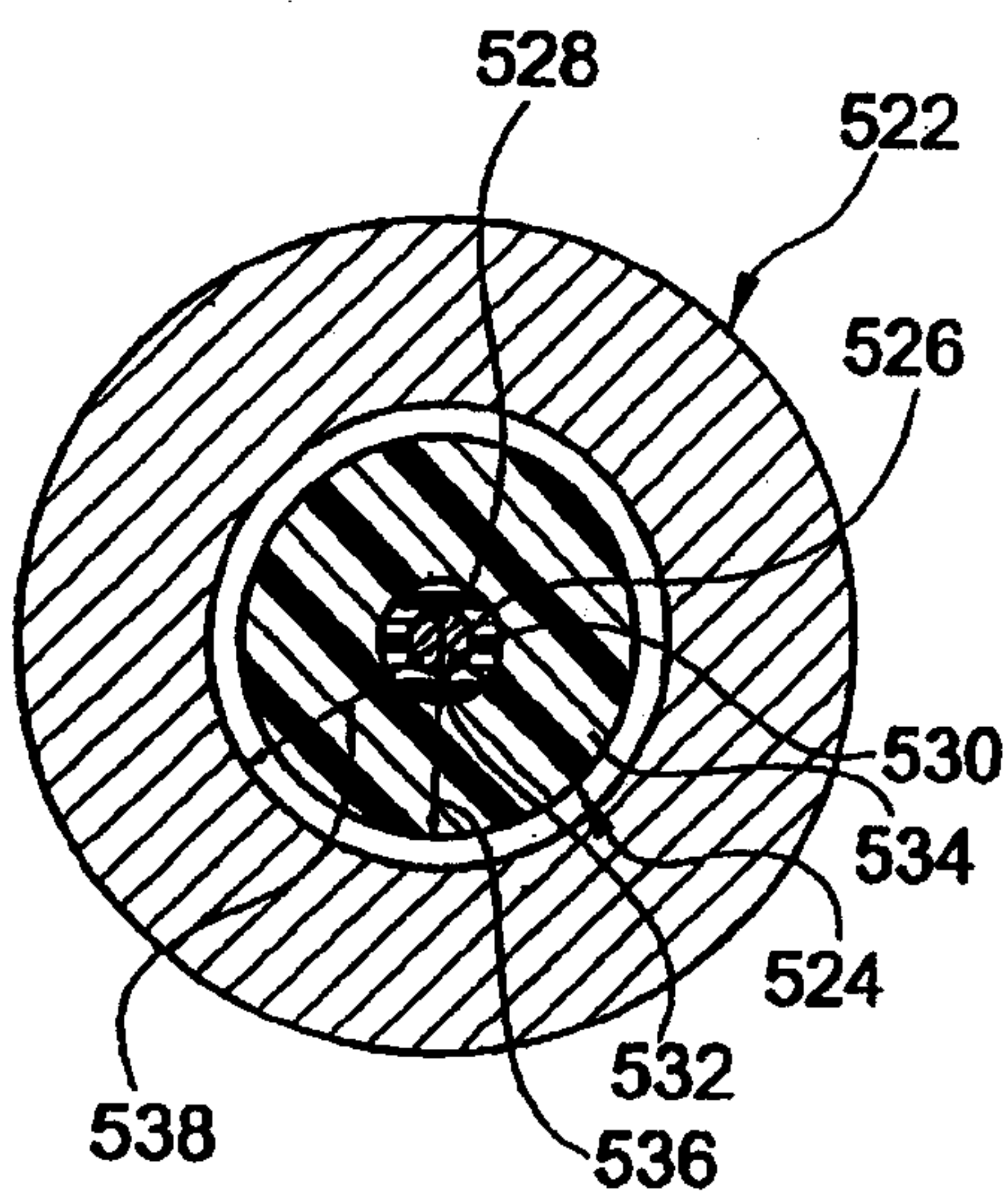


FIG. 14

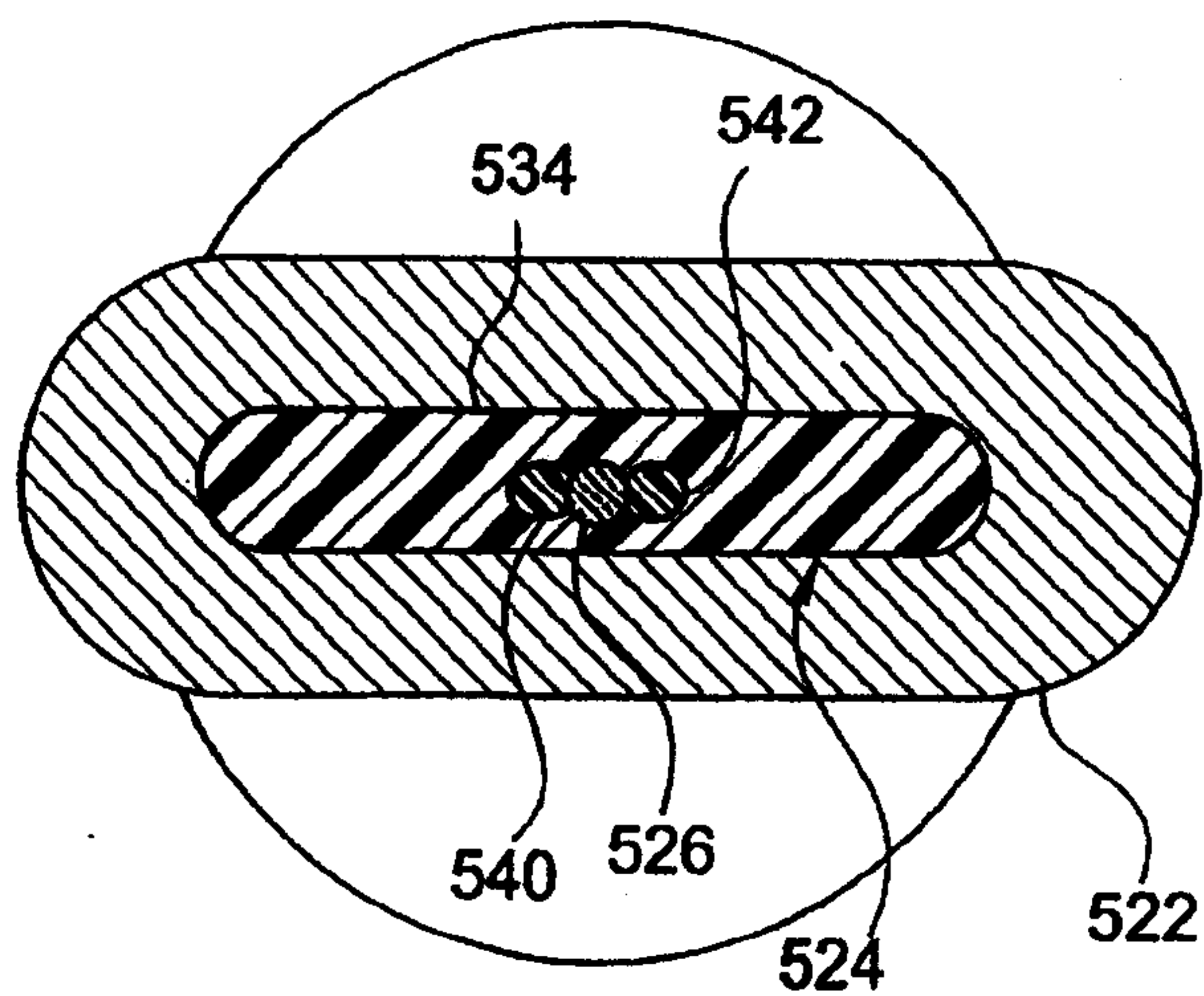


FIG. 15

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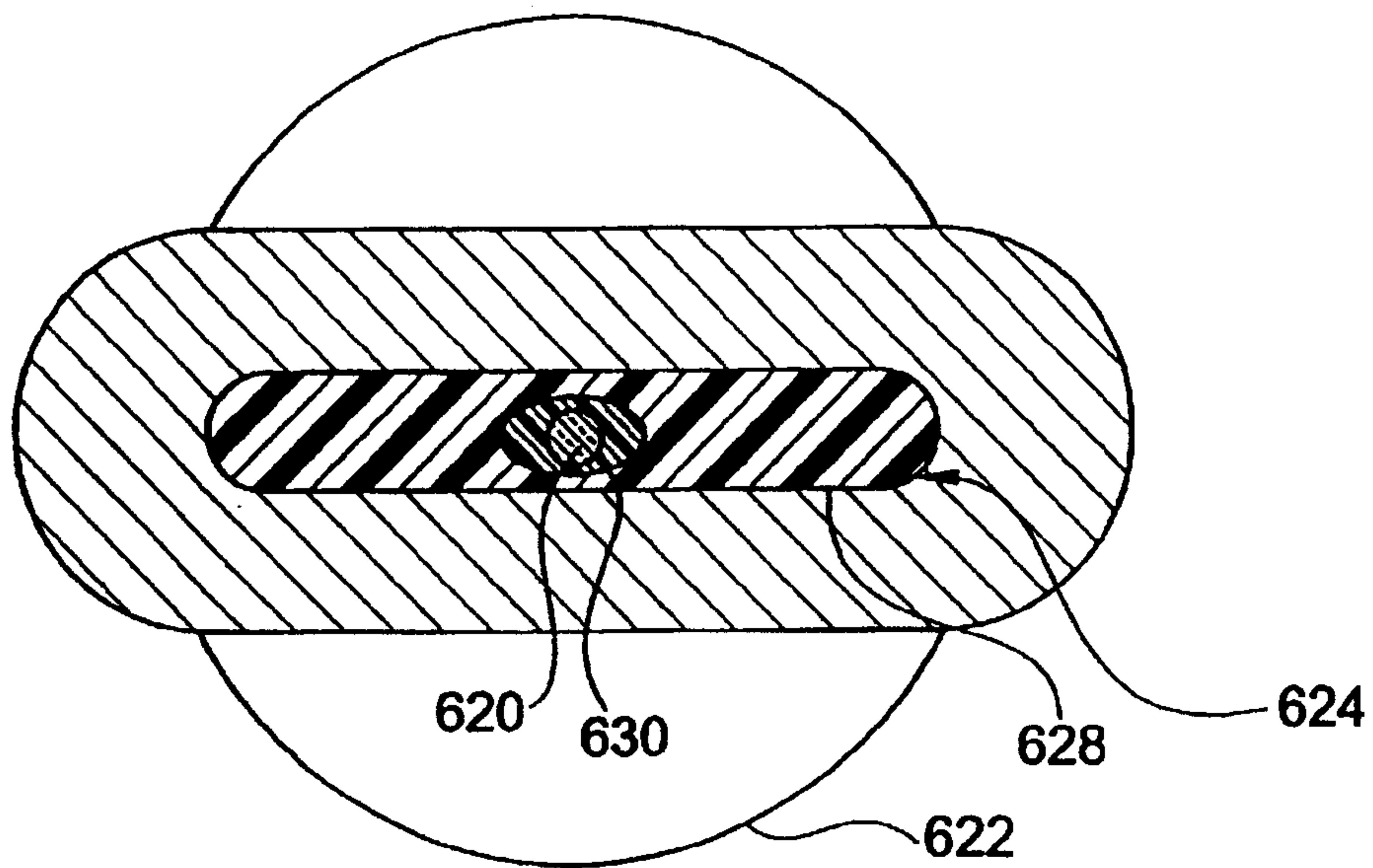


FIG. 16

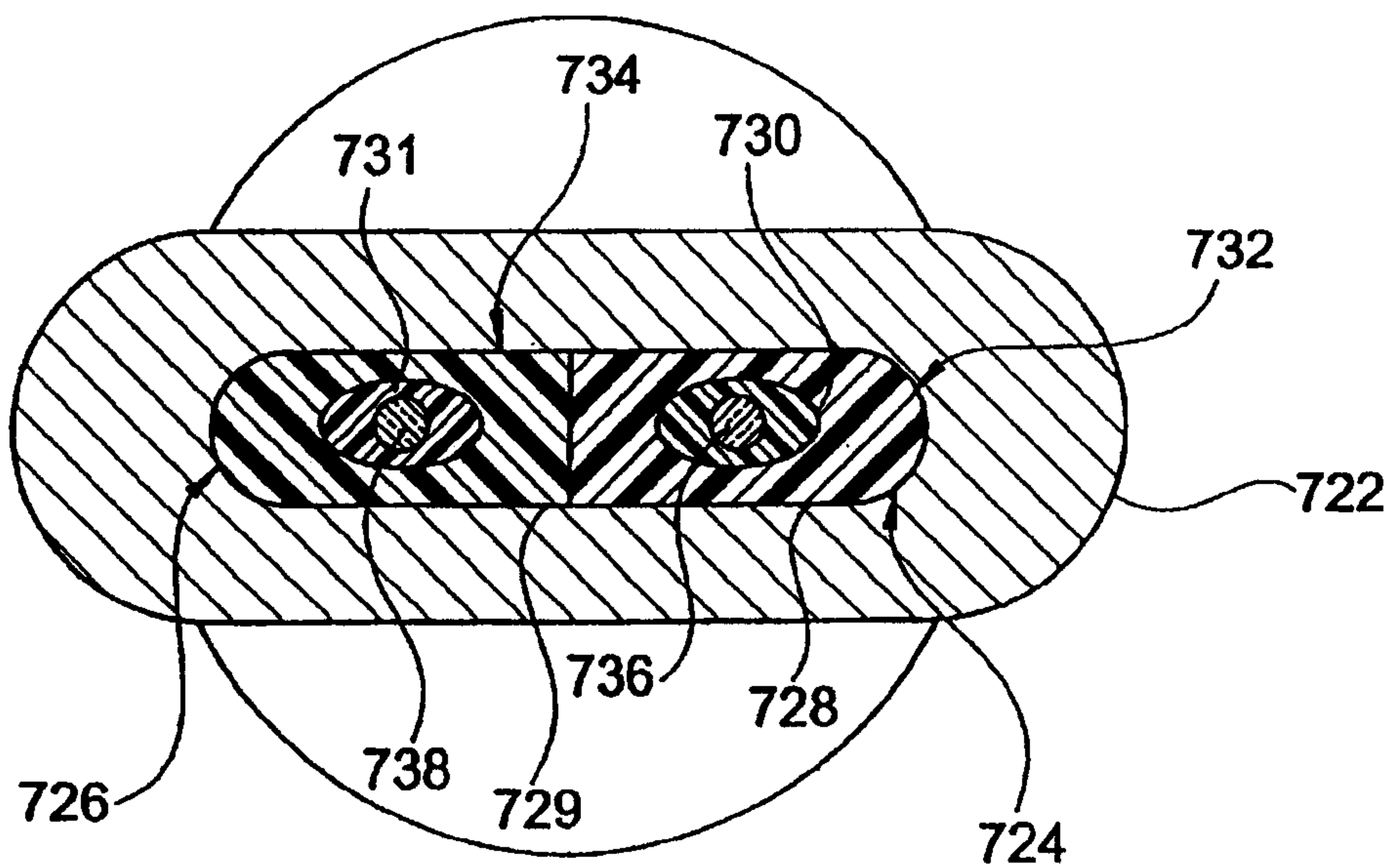


FIG. 17

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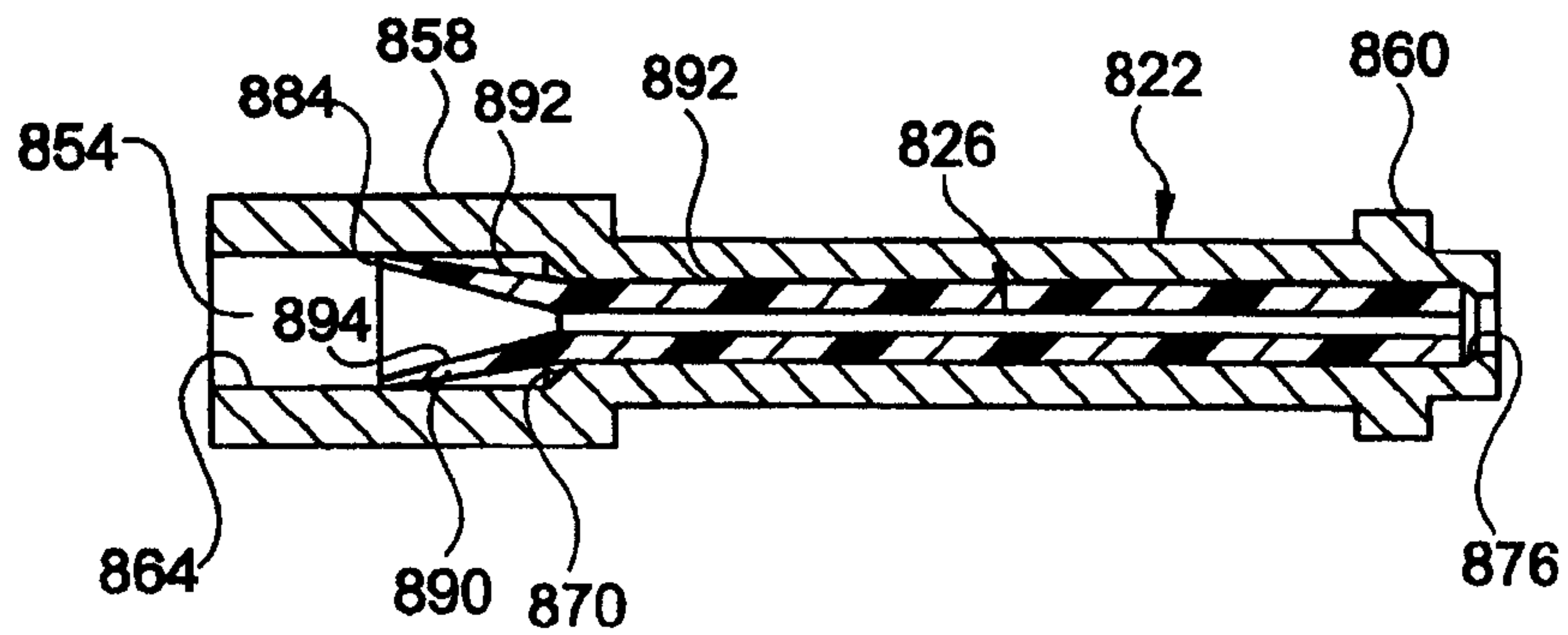


FIG. 18

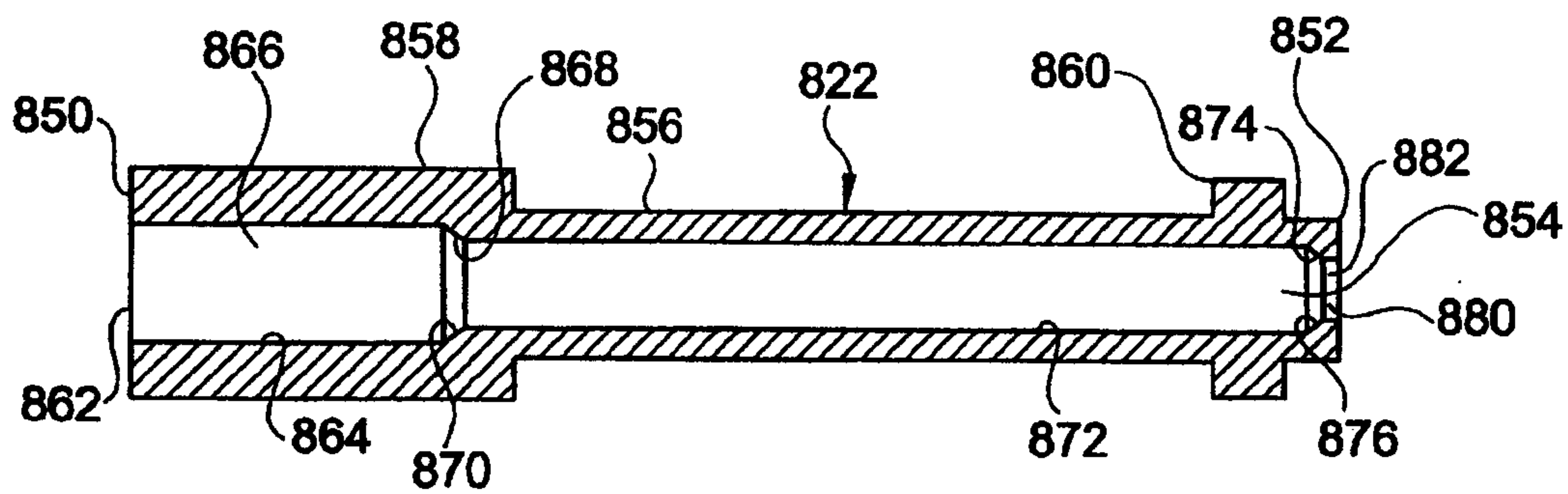


FIG. 19

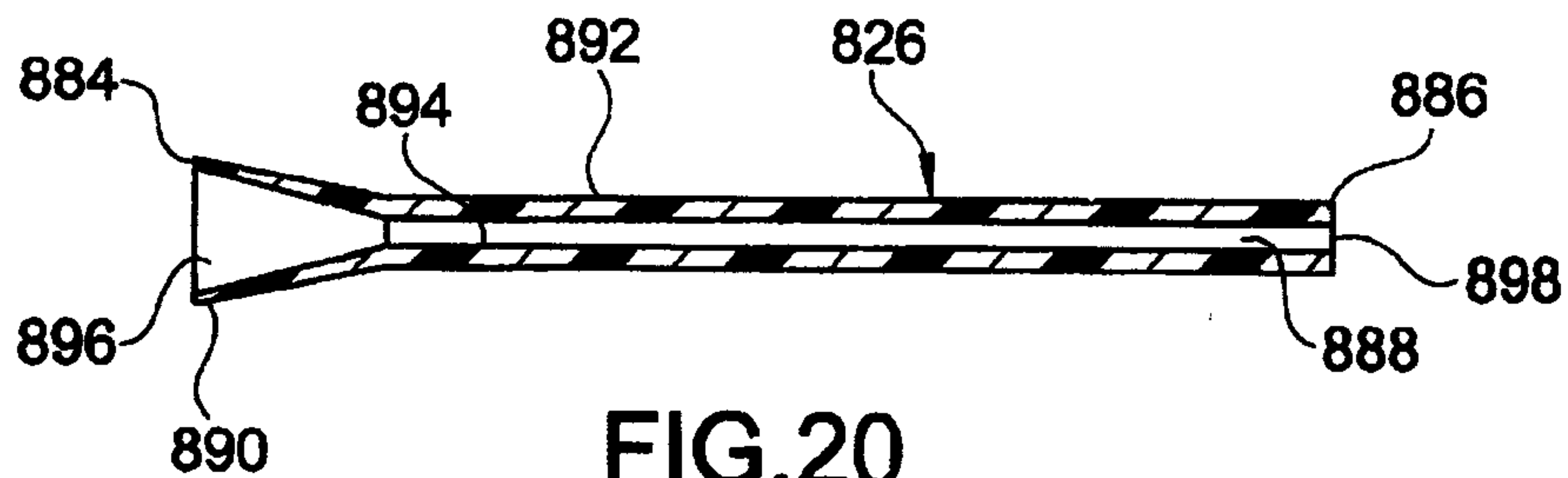


FIG. 20

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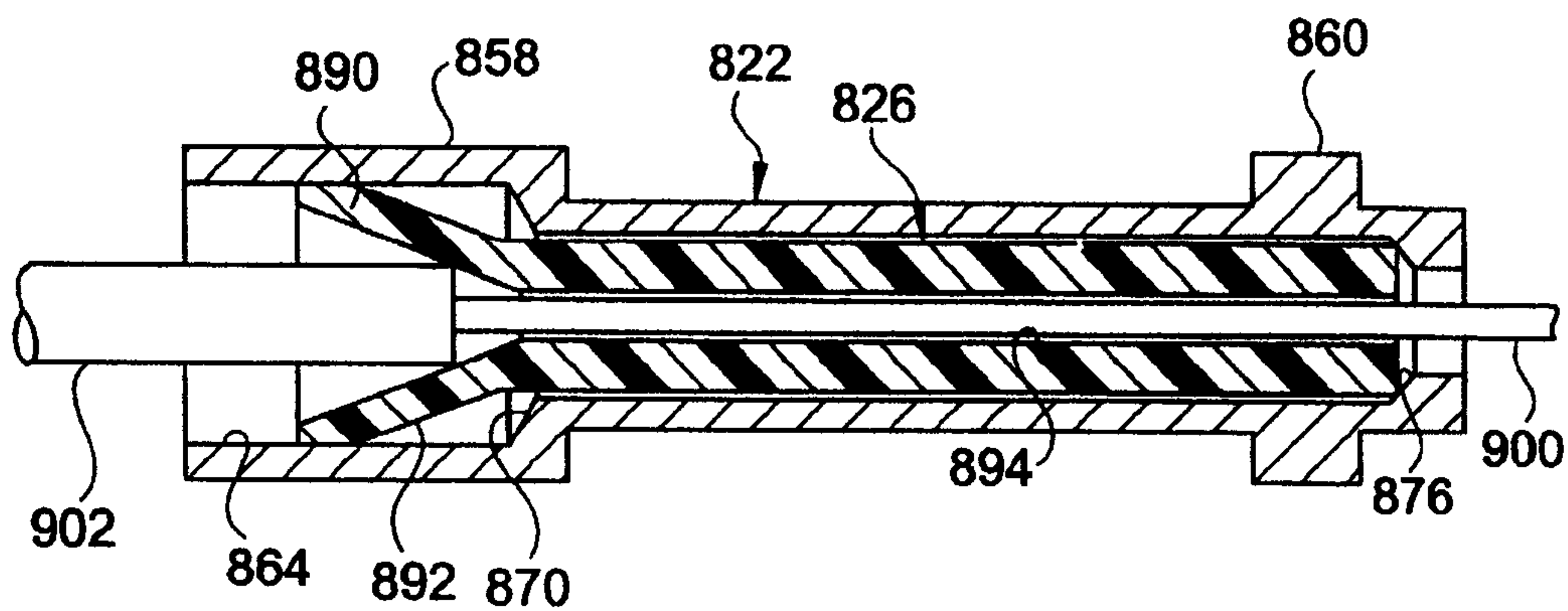


FIG. 21

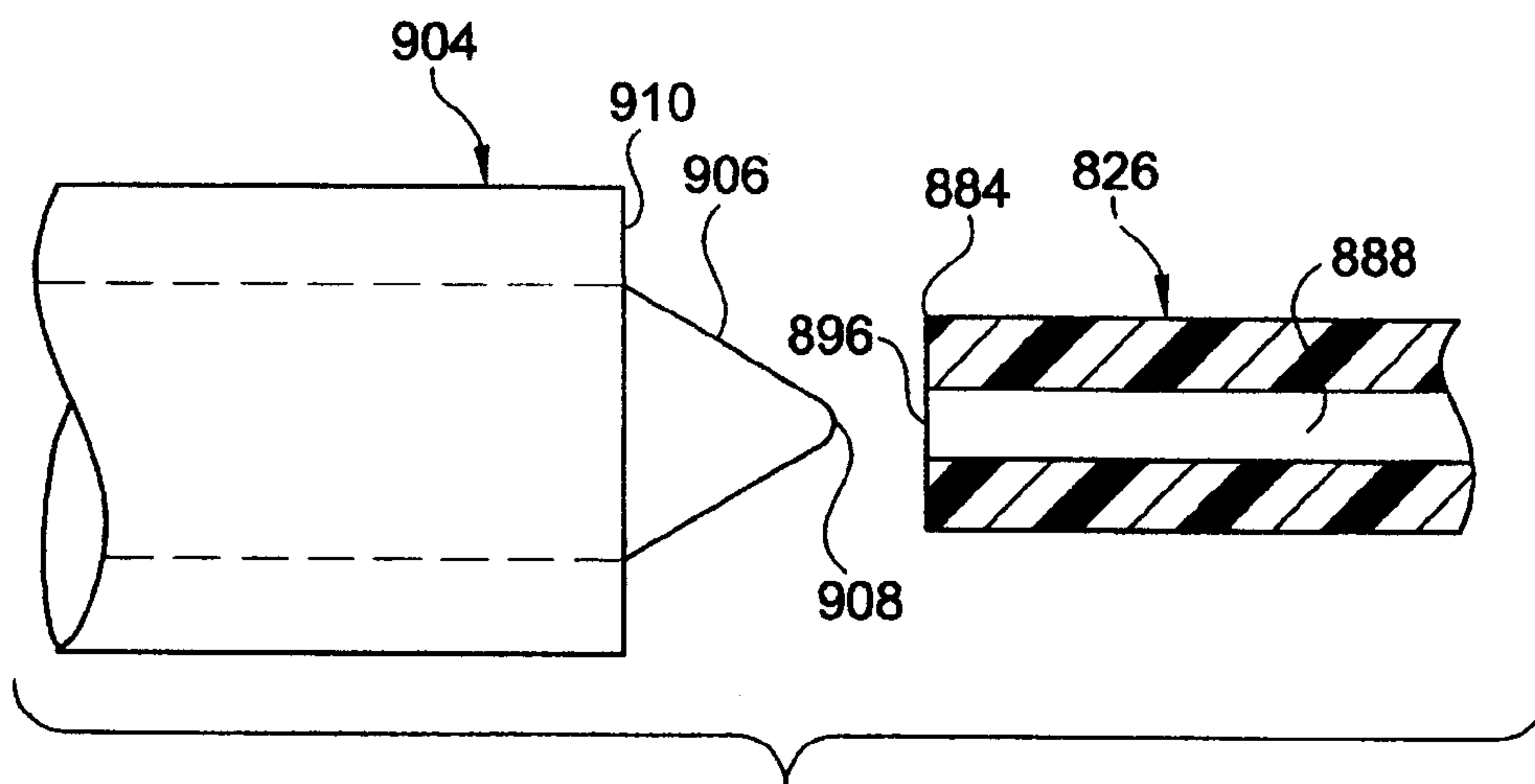


FIG. 22a

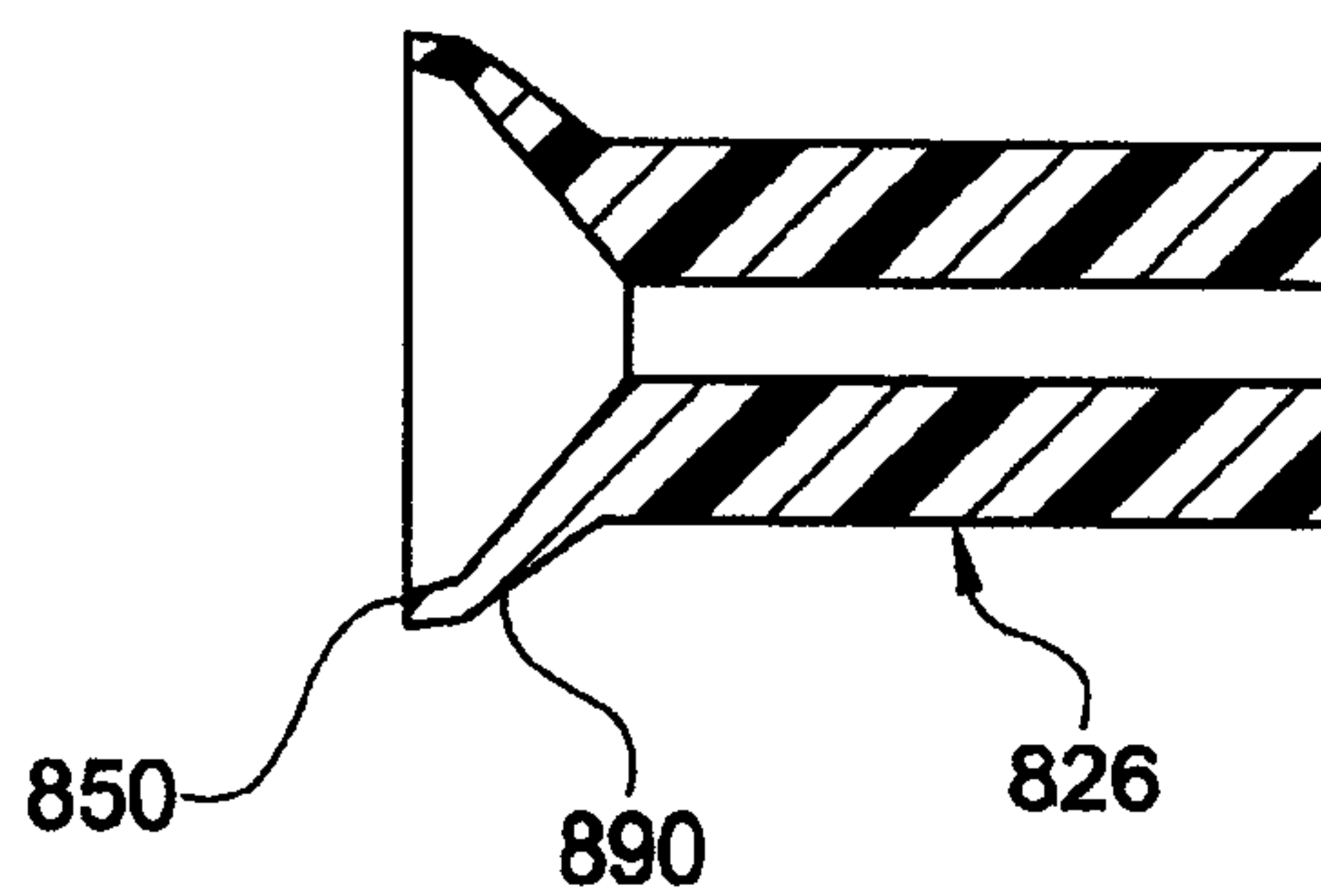
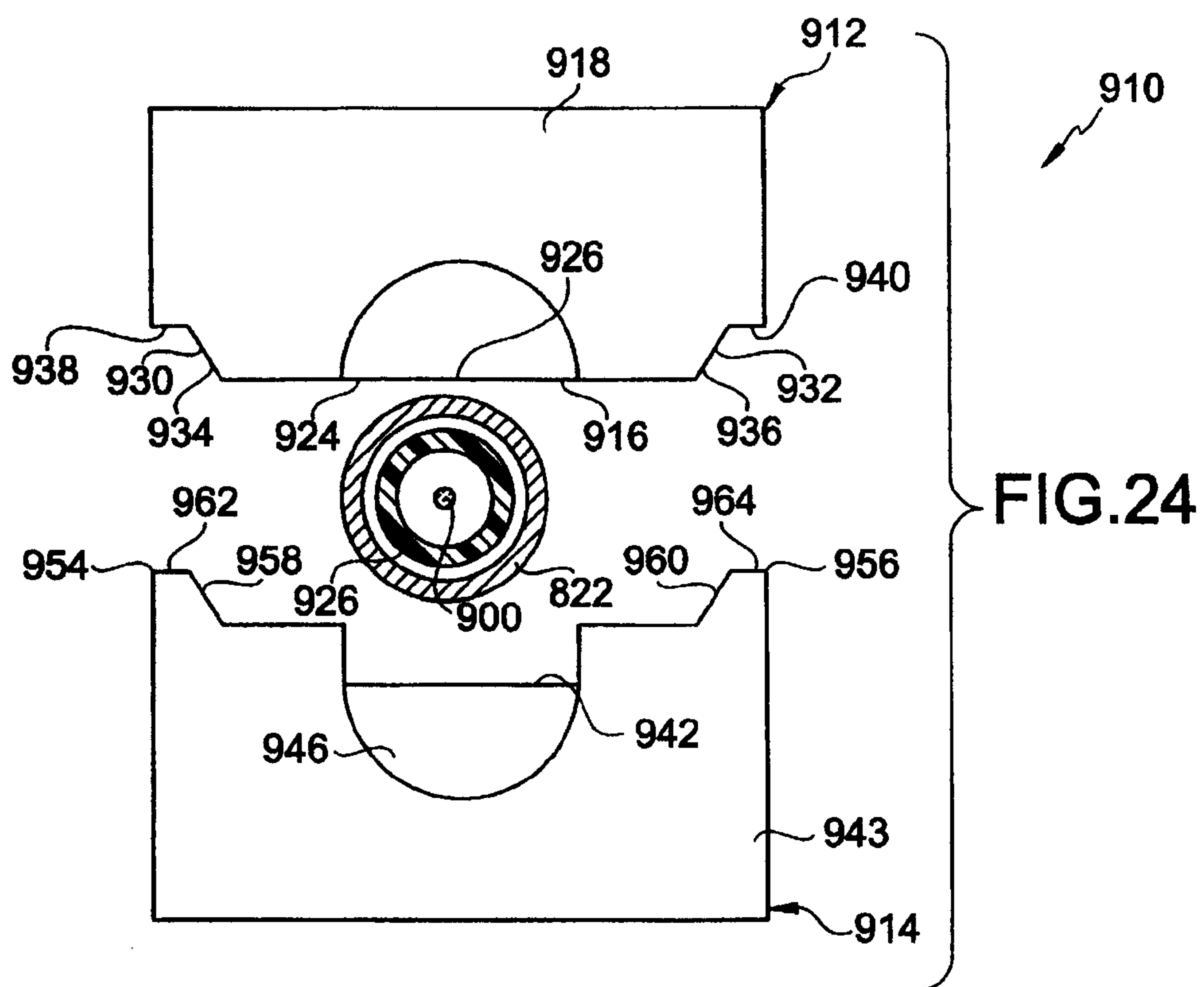
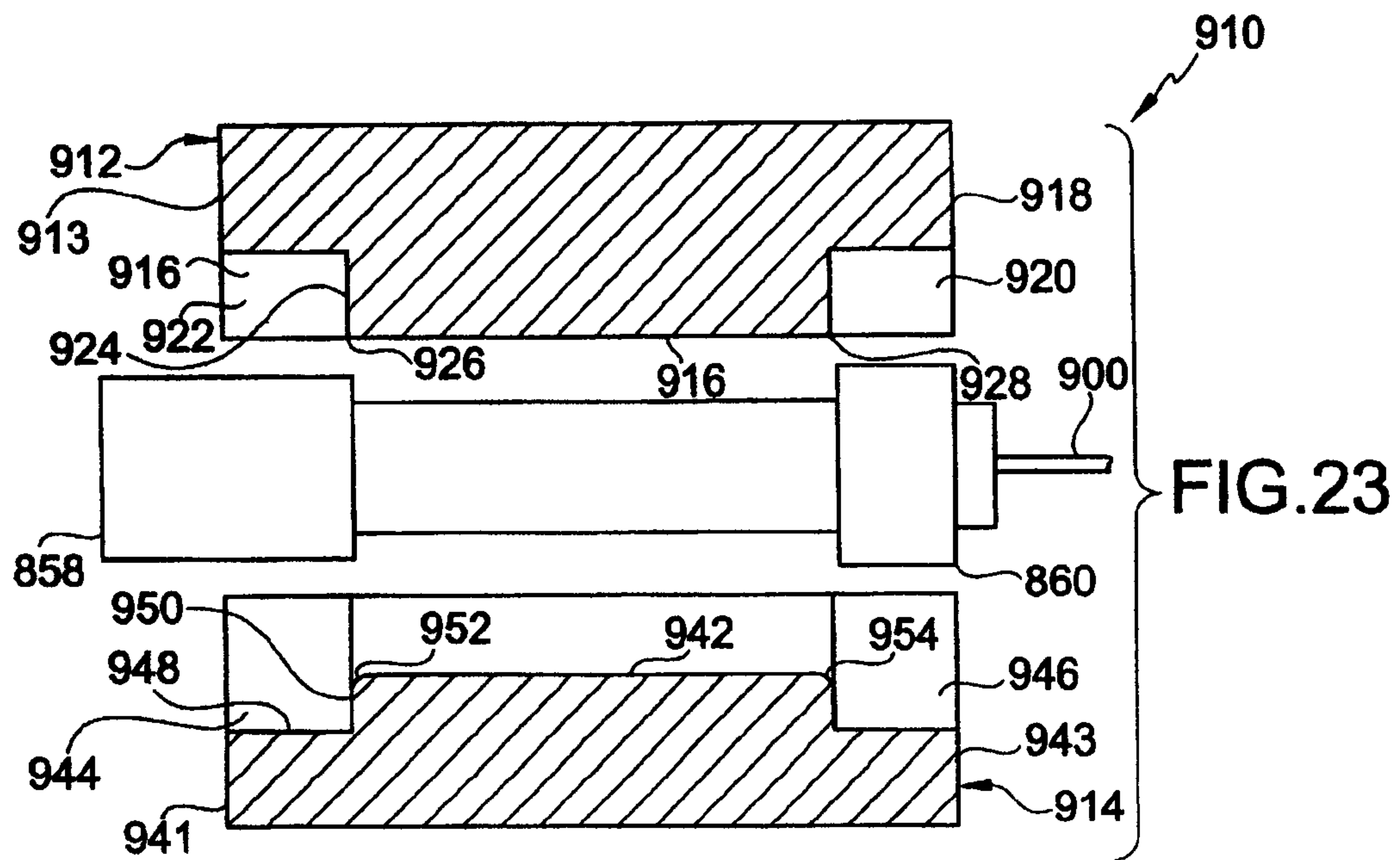


FIG. 22b

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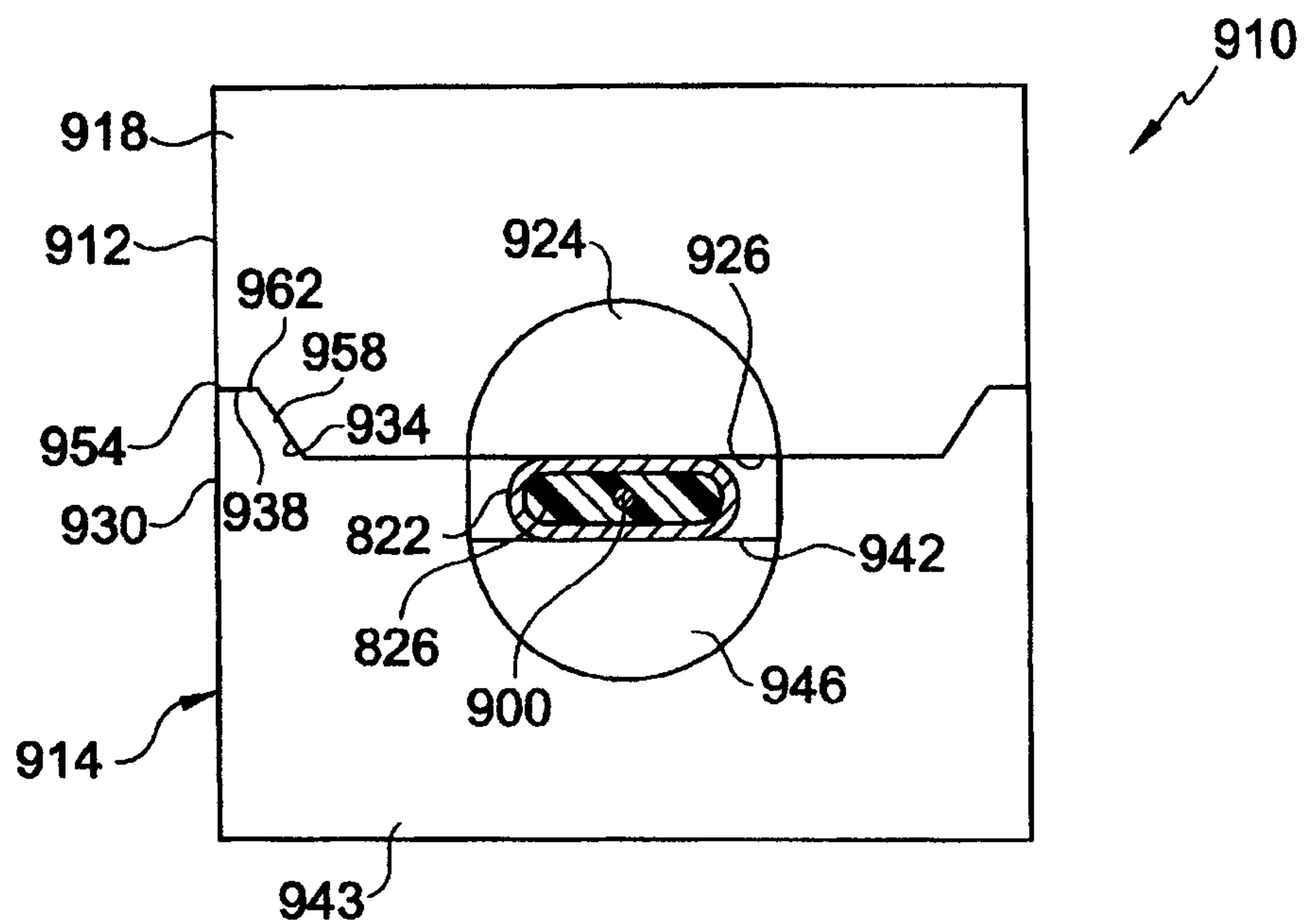


FIG. 25

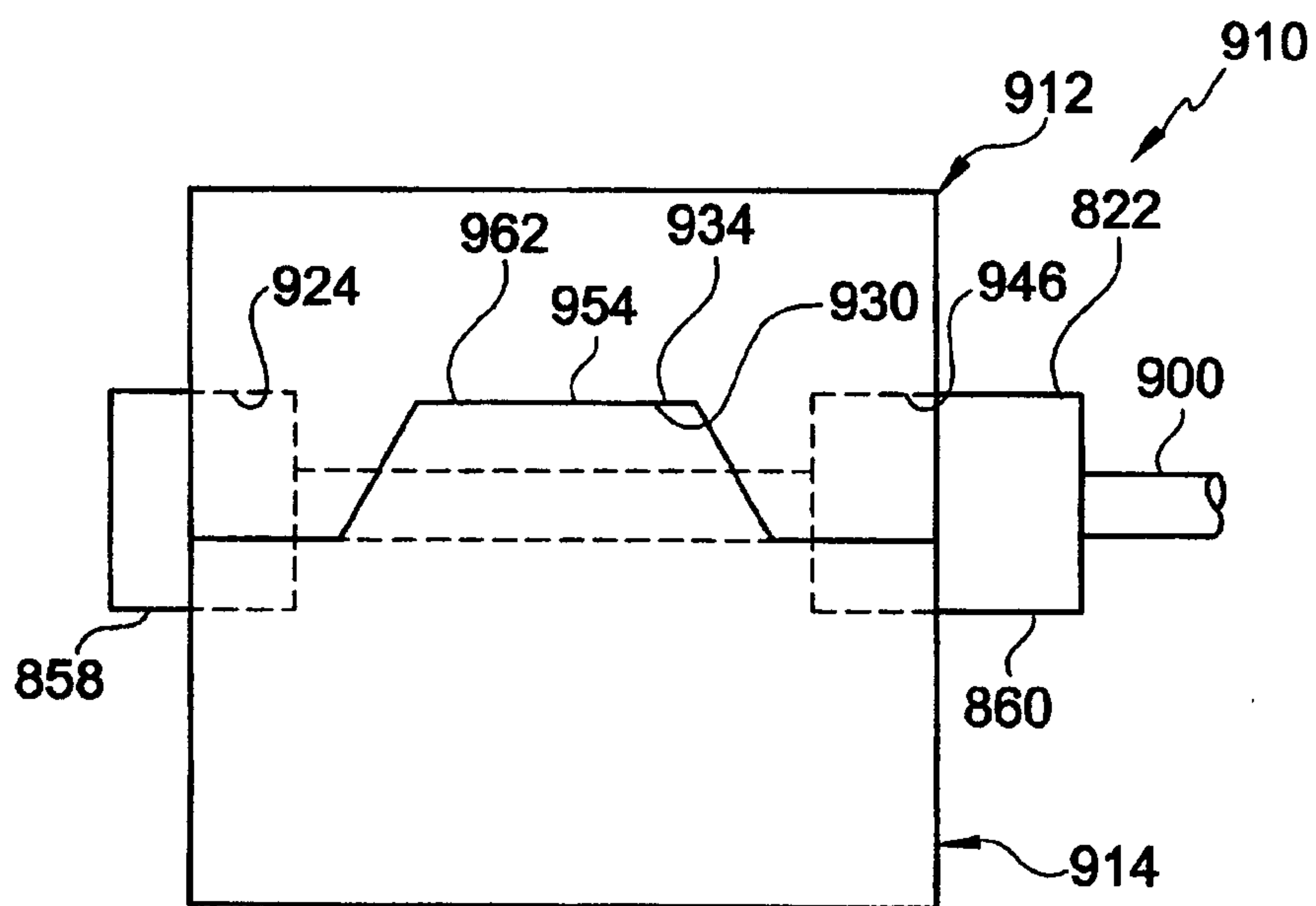


FIG. 26

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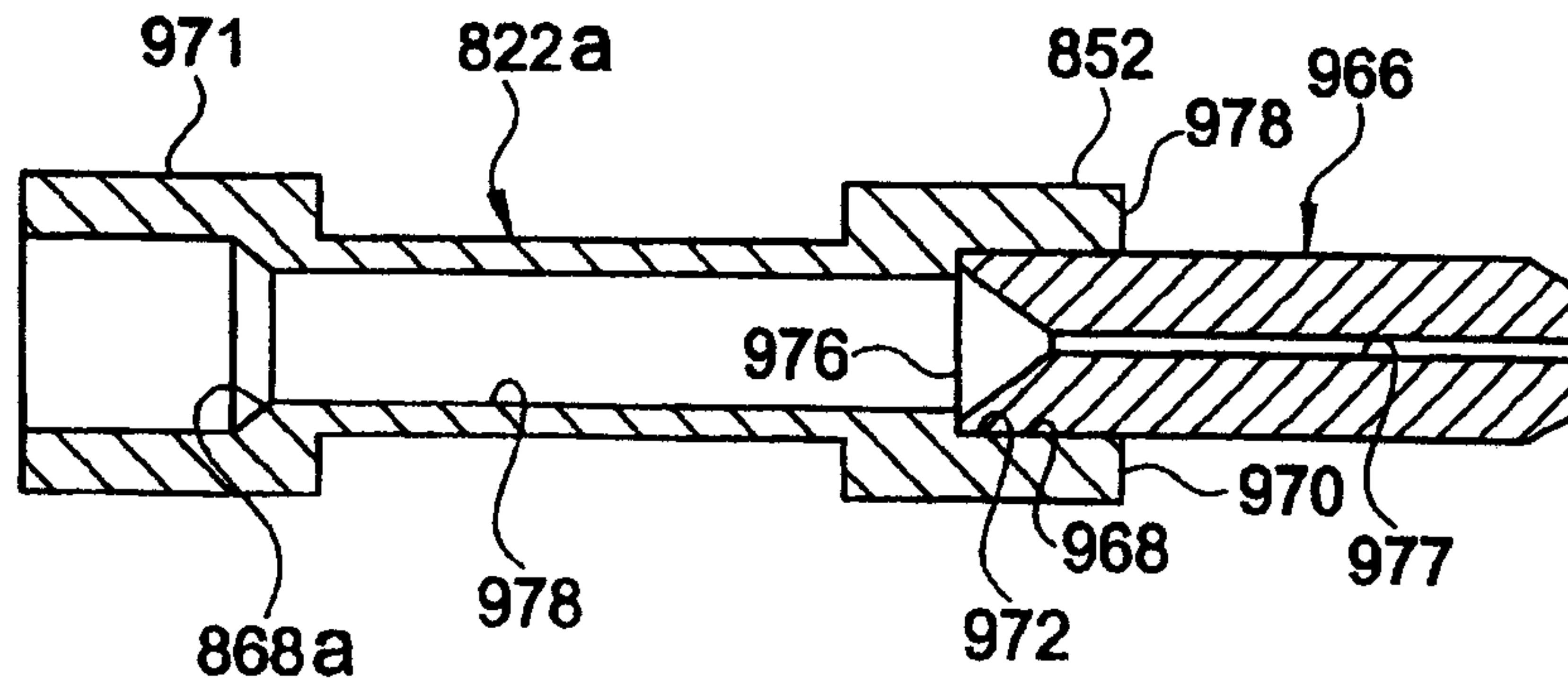


FIG. 27

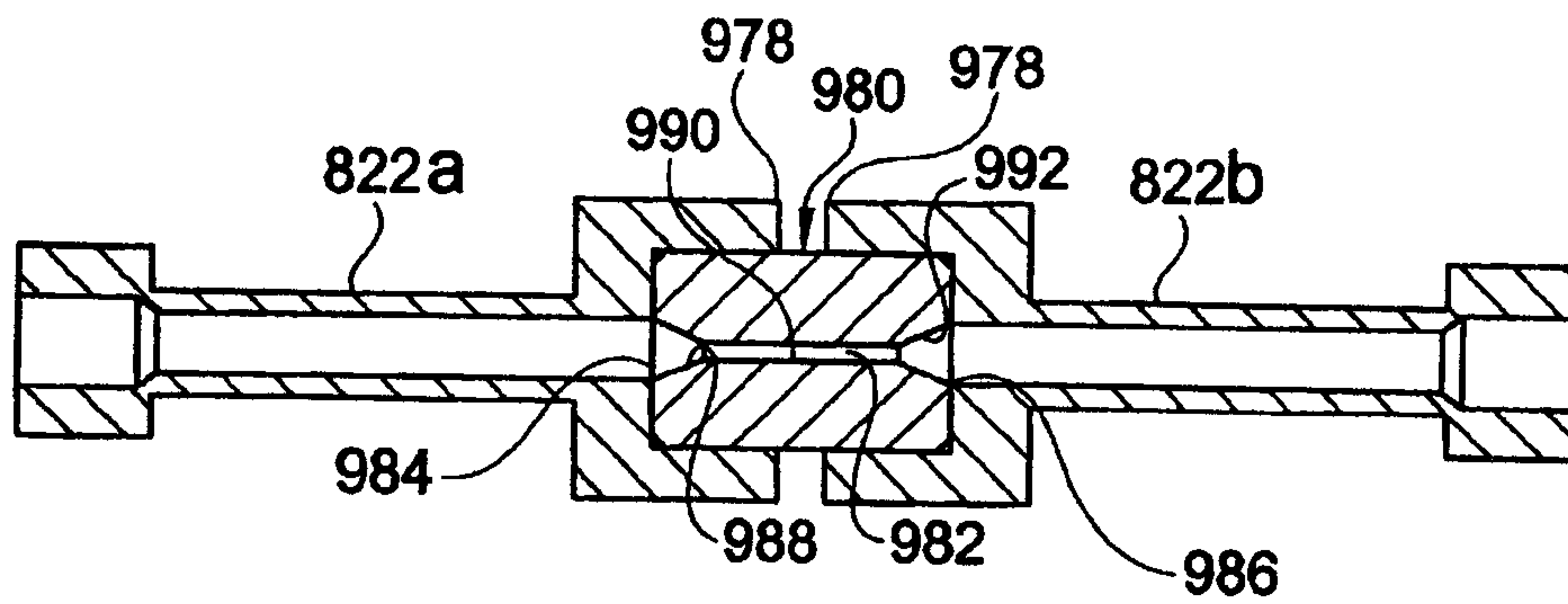


FIG. 28

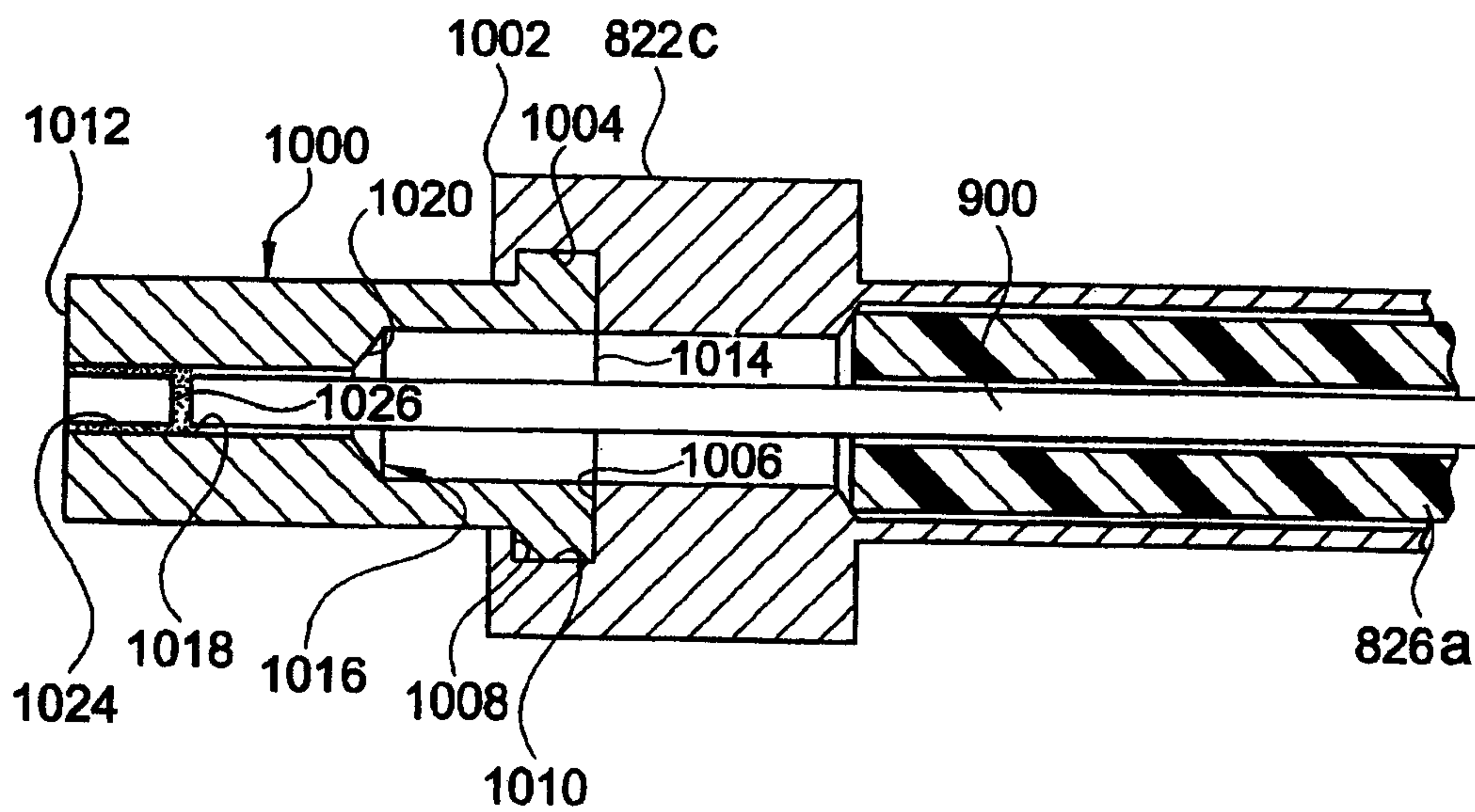


FIG. 29

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