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DESCRIPTION

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] The present disclosure generally relates to egg processing devices. More particularly, the present disclosure relates to an egg lifting device capable of lifting eggs contained within an egg flat or container, and associated transfer systems and methods.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Various mechanical egg processing systems are used to process avian eggs within a poultry hatchery facility. Such mechanical egg processing systems may include, for example, a transfer system for transferring eggs from a tray associated with a setter incubator (commonly referred to as a "flat") to a container associated with a hatcher incubator (commonly referred to as a "hatching basket"). In other instances, an example of such mechanical egg processing systems may include an egg removal system for removing certain eggs from the flats. In the case of egg removal systems, it is common practice to remove non-live eggs from live eggs to increase available incubator space, to reduce the risk of contamination, and to save vaccine costs related to *in ovo* inoculations.

[0003] Conventionally, eggs designated as non-live are removed by hand or via an automated egg removal device. Automated egg removal devices may conventionally employ suction-type lifting devices as disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 4,681,063 to Hebrank, U.S. Patent No. 5,017,003 to Keromnes et al., or U.S. Patent No. 7,083,208 to Ilich.

[0004] However, such suction-type lifting devices may typically employ vacuum systems that require additional mechanisms and power requirements to function. Furthermore, such suction-type lifting devices may be difficult to maintain and clean, particularly after engaging an egg that explodes due to bacterial build-up within the egg. Additionally, the polymer-based suction cup may become deformed about the lip area after continuous use, thereby affecting the suction and lifting ability of the lifting device. In addition, the suction-type lifting devices do not straighten eggs oriented at an angle in the egg flat. Other transfer systems that do not use suction are described in WO20015/120230, GB 689 173, EP 0 517 342, US 2 177 595 and WO 2015/044547.

[0005] Accordingly, it would be desirable to provide an egg lifting device and associated transfer system capable of lifting eggs in a simplified manner while also improving the ease of maintenance of such a device, and further providing the additional function of straightening eggs oriented off-axis. Furthermore, it would be desirable to provide an associated method that would simplify and facilitate improved lifting and transfer of eggs.

BRIEF SUMMARY

[0006] The above and other needs are met by aspects of the present disclosure which, according to the invention, provides an egg transfer system as defined in claim 1, having a first securing arrangement configured to engage and deflect about an egg such that the egg is capable of being seated within the first securing arrangement. A second securing arrangement is opposingly positioned with respect to the first securing arrangement, the second securing arrangement being configured to engage and deflect about an egg such that the egg is capable of being seated within the second securing arrangement. The first and second securing arrangements are configured to interact through relative movement with respect to one another, such interaction thereby causing an egg to be transferred therebetween.

[0007] Another aspect provides an egg processing system having a frame and a head operably engaged with the frame and configured to ascend and descend. A plurality of egg lifting devices is operably engaged with the head. Each egg lifting device has a first securing arrangement configured to engage and deflect about an egg such that an egg is capable of being seated within the respective lifting device. A plurality of pedestals is opposingly positioned with respect to the egg lifting devices. Each pedestal has a second securing arrangement opposingly positioned with respect to the first securing arrangement, the second securing arrangement being configured to engage and deflect about an egg such that the egg is capable of being seated within the second securing arrangement. The first and second securing arrangements are configured to interact through relative movement of the head, such interaction thereby causing an egg to be transferred therebetween.

[0008] Yet a method of transferring eggs according to the invention is defined in claim 4. The method comprises descending an egg lifting device having a first securing arrangement to interact with an egg positioned within a second securing arrangement opposingly positioned with respect to the first securing arrangement. The method further comprises contacting the first securing arrangement of the egg lifting device with the egg. The method further comprises seating the egg within the first securing arrangement by deflecting the securing arrangement about the egg. The method further comprises ascending the lifting device so as to lift the egg from the second securing arrangement.

[0009] Still another aspect provides an egg lifting device having a body and a securing arrangement extending from the body. The securing arrangement is configured to engage and deflect about an egg such that the egg is capable of being seated within the securing arrangement for lifting thereof. The securing arrangement has a plurality of looped wire members formed of a flexible shape-memory material. The looped wire members have a pair of leg portions extending from the body and are integrally connected by a flared arcuate end portion that flares out away from an internal space defined by the looped wire members.

[0010] Thus, various aspects of the present disclosure provide advantages, as otherwise

detailed herein.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] Having thus described various embodiments of the present disclosure in general terms, reference will now be made to the accompanying drawings, which are not necessarily drawn to scale, and wherein:

FIG. 1 is a perspective schematic view of an egg removal system capable of implementing a plurality of egg lifting devices, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 2 is a front view of an egg lifting device, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 3 is a magnified view of a portion of an egg lifting device, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 4 is a magnified view of a portion of an egg lifting device engaging an egg, according to one aspect of the present disclosure

FIG. 5 is a front view of a plurality of egg lifting devices in position to remove one or more eggs from an egg flat, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 6 illustrates an egg lifting/releasing sequence in which an egg lifting device removes an egg from an egg flat, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 7 is a front view of a prior art suction-type lifting device in position to remove an egg from an egg flat, wherein the egg is oriented off-axis;

FIG. 8 is a front view of the prior art suction-type lifting device in FIG. 7 after removing the egg from the egg flat;

FIG. 9 is a front view of an egg lifting device in position to remove an egg from an egg flat, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 10 is a front view of the egg lifting device in FIG. 9 after removing the egg from the egg flat;

FIGS. 11-13 are various schematic views of a securing arrangement for an egg lifting device, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 14 is a perspective schematic view of a head having a plurality of egg lifting devices, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 15 is a perspective view of a manual egg removal device having plurality of egg lifting devices for removing eggs from an egg flat, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 16 is a perspective schematic view of an egg removal system implementing a plurality of

egg lifting devices, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 17 is a front view of an egg transfer system implementing a plurality of egg lifting devices, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 18 is a partial front view of an egg transfer system implementing a plurality of egg lifting devices, illustrating an egg in a secured position;

FIG. 19 is a partial front view of an egg transfer system implementing a plurality of egg lifting devices, illustrating an egg in a partially released position;

FIG. 20 is a front view of an egg transport system, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 21 is a schematic view of a multiple-lane track system of an egg transport system, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 22 is a front view of an egg transport system implemented in conjunction with an egg support assembly, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 23 illustrates an egg carried by an egg lifting device being positioned for interaction with an egg processing device, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 24 is a perspective schematic view of an egg transport system, wherein an egg lifting device coupled to a track system transports an egg, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 25 is a schematic view of an egg transport system capable of routing eggs along various tracks according to an identified characteristic thereof, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 26 is a schematic view of an egg transport system capable of sorting eggs according to gender, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIGS. 27 and 28 are perspective schematic views of an egg removal system capable of implementing a plurality of egg lifting devices, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 29 illustrates an egg lifting device having resilient members each with a flared arcuate end portion, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 30 illustrates the egg lifting device of FIG. 29 with some of the resilient members removed for illustrative purposes;

FIGS. 31-34 illustrate various configurations of the resilient members of the egg lifting device, according to various aspects of the present disclosure;

FIG. 35 illustrates an egg releasing sequence in which an egg transfer system transfers an egg, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 36 is a perspective schematic view of a pair of securing arrangements opposingly positioned to facilitate transfer of eggs therebetween, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 37 illustrates an egg releasing sequence in which an egg transfer system transfers an egg, according to one aspect of the present disclosure;

FIG. 38 illustrates an egg lifting sequence in which an egg transfer system transfers an egg, according to one aspect of the present disclosure; and

FIG. 39 illustrates an egg lifting sequence in which an egg transfer system transfers an egg, according to one aspect of the present disclosure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DISCLOSURE

[0012] Various aspects of the present disclosure now will be described more fully hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which some, but not all aspects of the disclosure are shown. Indeed, this disclosure may be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited to the aspects set forth herein; rather, these aspects are provided so that this disclosure will satisfy applicable legal requirements. Like numbers refer to like elements throughout.

[0013] The present disclosure is directed to devices, systems and methods for lifting eggs. According to some aspects, the present disclosure provides vacuum-less/suction-less means for lifting eggs. The terms vacuum-less/suction-less refer to the lack of vacuum or suction needed to interact with an egg in order to lift said egg. Instead, aspects of the present disclosure provide physical engagement means for securing and lifting an egg. Such vacuum-less/suction-less aspects of the present disclosure provide many advantages, including simplifying the means for lifting eggs, improving ease of maintenance, and improving reliability.

[0014] FIGS. 1, 16 and 17 illustrate automated egg processing systems. FIGS. 1 and 16 illustrate egg removal systems 100. According to the particular aspect shown in FIG. 1, the egg removal system 100 is capable of removing and/or transferring eggs. Aspects of the present disclosure, however, are not limited to the illustrated egg removal system 100 of FIG. 1. Aspects of the present disclosure may be implemented on any system or apparatus in which lifting of eggs is desired. For example, aspects of the present disclosure may be implemented on an egg transfer system (FIG. 17) used to transfer eggs from a setter incubator tray (a so-called "egg flat") to a hatch incubator tray (a so-called "hatching basket").

[0015] As shown in FIG. 1, the egg removal system 100 may be particularly adapted for removing eggs positioned within an egg flat 30 (FIG. 5), which includes a plurality of receptacles for individually receiving and maintaining eggs in a generally vertical orientation.

Examples of suitable commercial flats include, but are not limited to, a "CHICKMASTER 54" flat, a "JAMESWAY 42" flat and a "JAMESWAY 84" flat (in each case, the number indicates the number of eggs carried by the flat). Using the egg removal system 100, all or selected eggs may be removed from the egg flat when positioned below an egg remover head 200.

[0016] According to some aspects, the egg removal system 100 may include a frame 110 and a conveyor assembly 112 provided to move egg flats in an automated manner through the egg removal system 100 to a removal position. The conveyor assembly 112 may include a guide rail system configured to receive and guide egg flats to the removal position. The conveyor assembly 112 may further include appropriate stop elements, sensors, belts, endless loops, motors, etc. for proper indexing and positioning of egg flats within the egg removal system 100. In some instances, egg flats may be manually advanced through the egg removal system 100.

[0017] Eggs entering the egg removal system 100 via egg flats may have varying classification characteristics. For example, egg flats may include eggs that are classifiable based on viability, pathogen content, genetic analysis, or combinations thereof. As such, eggs are passed through an egg classifier system to generate a classification for each egg contained in an egg flat. Such eggs may be classified as viable or non-viable (i.e., those eggs not containing a viable embryo according to the egg classifier system), wherein the non-viable eggs may be further subclassified as, for example, infertile, rotten, or dead eggs. Exemplary egg classifier systems may be capable of classifying the eggs by using, for example, candling techniques (opacity, infrared, NIR, etc.), assaying techniques, or other known and suitable classification methods, processes, or techniques. After classification, the eggs may be removed accordingly from the egg flat using the egg removal system 100 according to the identified classification, such as, for example, removing non-viable eggs from the egg flat.

[0018] As shown in FIG. 1, the egg removal system 100 may include the egg remover head 200 coupled to the frame 110. As shown in FIG. 14, the egg remover head 200 may include a plurality of egg lifting devices 500 capable of selectively or non-selectively removing eggs from the egg flat 30. In some instances, the egg remover head 200 may include a stationary plate 220 to which the egg lifting devices 500 are secured, coupled, or otherwise engaged, as shown in FIG. 5. According to some aspects, the stationary plate 220 may define a plurality of holes for receiving the egg lifting devices 500. In some instances, the egg lifting devices 500 may be selectively or individually controlled. That is, the egg lifting devices 500 may be selectively deployed such that interaction thereof with respective eggs may be selectively controlled. For example, the egg lifting device 500 may be configured to selectively engaging respective eggs such that only those eggs identified as a first subset (e.g., as live or viable) of eggs are contacted for removal or transfer from the egg flat. In such instances, a second subset (e.g., non-live or non-viable) of eggs may remain in the egg flat for further processing without contact from any of the egg lifting devices 500.

[0019] According to some aspects, the conveyor assembly 112 may transport eggs stored in the egg flat past the egg classifier system so that each egg passes therethrough such that data (egg classification status) may be generated for each egg. The data collected by the egg

classifier system may be provided to a controller for processing and storing data associated with each egg. The controller may then be capable of generating a selectable removal signal to send to the egg lifting devices 500 so that individual egg lifting devices 500 (or subsets of egg lifting devices 500) are separately and individually deployed at various positions according to the classification status for each egg based on the data collected by the egg classifier system.

[0020] In other instances, the egg processing apparatus 100 may include the egg remover head 200 coupled to the frame 110 and configured to move vertically for interacting with eggs contained within an egg flat 30 when in a removal position beneath the egg remover head 200. The egg remover head 200 may be pneumatically or electrically driven to move vertically for facilitating interaction with eggs in the egg flat. In some instances, the egg processing head 200 may be lowered and raised pneumatically using a transfer cylinder (not shown) in fluid communication with a pneumatic system, as known by those of skill in the art. In some instances, the egg remover head 200 may be capable of lateral or horizontal movement outside the conveyor assembly 112 and/or the removal position. In other instances, the egg remover head 200 may be capable of arcuate movement using, for example, a servo motor 202 (FIG. 16). In such instances where the egg remover head 200 is movable, the egg lifting devices 500 may be fixed to the egg remover head 200 such that the egg lifting devices 500 are not individually or separately deployed for engaging the eggs. Instead, all eggs in the egg flat would be engaged by the various egg lifting devices 500 moved by the egg remover head 200. However, when the egg lifting devices 500 are individually or selectively controlled, the egg remover head 200 may still be capable of movement for various reasons, including transporting the eggs removed from the egg flat to some other location.

[0021] Referring now to FIGS. 2-4, the egg removal system 100 may be configured to engage or contact eggs for removal thereof from the egg flat using an egg lifting device 500. According to some aspects, as also shown in FIGS. 11-13, the egg lifting device 500 may include a body 502 and a securing arrangement 550. In some instances, the securing arrangement 550 may extend from the body 502, wherein the body 502 acts as a stem from which the securing arrangement 550 projects. The body 502 may be of unitary construction with the securing arrangement 550, while in other instances the body 502 may be discrete from the securing arrangement 550.

[0022] The securing arrangement 550 may be configured to secure an egg to the egg lifting device 500 using physical contact and interaction such that the egg may be lifted or removed from the egg flat. In this regard, the securing arrangement 550 may act in a suction-less or vacuum-less manner for lifting eggs. The securing arrangement 550 is capable of deflecting about the egg as the securing arrangement 550 advances or descends upon the egg such that the egg becomes seated within or otherwise secured to the securing arrangement. In this regard, the securing arrangement may be formed of deflecting means or deflective members capable of deflecting about the egg and along the contours thereof, wherein the egg is secured within the securing arrangement without mechanical actuation of the deflecting means or deflective members to grasp the egg. According to the invention, the securing arrangement 550 is open-ended so as to facilitate deflection of the securing arrangement 550 about the

egg.

[0023] The securing arrangement 550 may be of unitary construction, while in some instances it may be formed of discrete components cooperating to form the securing arrangement 550. According to some aspects, the securing arrangement 550 may be formed of a pliant, flexible or resilient material so as to allow the securing arrangement 550 to deflect about the egg when coming into contact therewith. In this manner, the securing arrangement 550 may remain in frictional contact with the egg at various points thereon in a resistive or interference fit manner that allows the egg to be lifted from the egg flat.

[0024] The securing arrangement 550 may be constructed from various materials that exhibit such deflective, elastic, or resilient qualities, such as, for example, resilient materials, elastic materials, super-elastic materials, pseudo-elastic materials, and shape memory materials. In some instances, the egg orienting accommodation may be constructed of a shape-memory material (e.g., shape memory alloy or shape memory polymer) that have the ability to return from a deformed state (temporary shape) to their original (permanent) shape induced by an external stimulus such as temperature change. In other instances, the securing arrangement 550 may be constructed of a super-elastic alloy (e.g., nickel titanium (nitinol)) that when deformed returns to its pre-deformed shape without external stimulus. When mechanically loaded, a super-elastic alloy deforms reversibly to very high strains (up to 10%) by the creation of a stress-induced phase. When the load is removed, the new phase becomes unstable and the material regains its original shape. Such super-elastic materials, pseudo-elastic materials, and shape memory materials provide the benefit of resisting fatigue, an important factor when considering the quantity of eggs processed through the system 100. In some instances, the securing arrangement 550 may be constructed of metal alloys (e.g., stainless steel) or polymer components, or combinations thereof.

[0025] Initial engagement with an egg may be based on the natural elasticity or memory tension of the securing arrangement 550. In this regard, after initial engagement with the egg, the securing arrangement 550 holds the egg, and therefore does not require constant mechanical tension to hold the egg.

[0026] The securing arrangement 550 may have various shapes, forms, or structures that permit the securing arrangement 550 to lift an egg using physical contact and engagement therewith as the means for lifting the egg. According to one particular aspect, the securing arrangement 550 may be formed from a plurality of resilient members 560 extending from the body 502. The resilient members 560 may cooperate to form an open-ended arrangement that allows an end of the egg to be easily received within the securing arrangement 550. In some instances, the resilient members 560 may be in the form of wire loops forming a pliant wire structure in which to seat or secure the egg. Regardless of the form the securing arrangement 550 takes, the egg lifting device 500 may be capable of lifting the egg from the egg flat by means of physical contact and without suction. In some instances, the various resilient members 560 may be integrally formed, while in other instances the resilient members 560 may be discrete components. The resilient members 560 may be capable of bending

elastically to accommodate eggs of varying size. In this regards, the securing arrangement 550 may provide automatic and passive gripping means. The resilient members 560 may follow the contour of the egg to grip the egg as the resilient members are advanced on the egg.

[0027] According to some aspects, the egg lifting device 500 may include an actuator 520 capable of raising/ascending and lowering/descending the securing arrangement 550. In some instances, the actuator 520 may be a linear actuator such as, for example, a pneumatically controlled cylinder. In instances where the egg lifting devices 500 are selectively controlled, each actuator 520 may be capable of receiving a signal indicating the egg classification status of respective eggs in the egg flat 30 such that the actuators 520 may be selectively actuated, thereby facilitating engagement or contact of certain select egg lifting devices 500 with respective eggs. By selectively actuating the actuators 520, interaction of components of the egg lifting device 500 with non-live or otherwise undesirable eggs may be advantageously avoided.

[0028] According to some aspects, as shown in FIGS. 2-4, the egg lifting device 500 may include a release device 575 configured to release the egg from the egg lifting device 500. In some instances, the release device 575 may include a release member 580 capable of contacting the egg to force the egg out of engagement with the egg lifting device 500. The release member 580 may include a shaft or rod 582 and a flange 584, wherein the flange 584 contacts the egg for release. While the contact portion of the release device 575 is illustrated as a flange, it will be understood that the contact portion (i.e., the portion physically contacting the egg to apply force thereto) may be of various shapes, sizes and configurations, such as, for example, a spring 580 (FIG. 14). Further, the contact portion may be formed of resilient material that lessens the impact forces of the release device 575 against the egg. In some instances, the egg to be lifted may include a hole at the end thereof due to previous egg processing procedures (e.g., punching a hole in an egg with a needle or punch such that a treatment substance may be injected into the egg). As such, the contact portion of the release device 575 may be configured such that the contact points thereof against the egg may be outside the hole, such as, for example, in circumferential manner. Further, in order to prevent impact at or near the hole, the contact portion may have a concave surface facing the egg, wherein the outer rim of the contact portion contacts the egg to limit cracking thereof by limiting the forces applied at or near the hole.

[0029] In some instances, the release member 580 may be biased using a biasing member. A release actuator may be provided to actuate the release member 580 to push the egg from the securing arrangement 550. For example, the release member 580 may be spring loaded, which may be actuated by the release actuator. According to some aspects, the release actuator may be pneumatically operated. The force applied by the release device 575 on the egg causes the egg to move downward, thereby deflecting the resilient members 560 outwardly such that the egg may be released from the securing arrangement 550.

[0030] In some instances, the securing arrangement 550 may be constructed of shape-memory materials in which the release mechanism for releasing eggs from the egg lifting

device 500 may be accomplished by providing an electrical current or a temperature change to the securing arrangement 550 such that the egg is released according to a memory release protocol.

[0031] In some instances, as shown in FIG. 5, an egg support assembly 700 may be provided for raising the eggs from the egg flat such that the securing arrangement 550 is capable of fully securing the eggs therein, without obstruction from the egg flat 30. The egg flat 30 may typically be open-ended such that each egg receptacle 40 includes a hole through which the egg may be raised from underneath. In this regard, the eggs may be raised from underneath the egg flat by the egg support assembly 700, while the egg lifting devices 500 lift and remove the eggs from above the egg flat. That is, the egg support assembly 700 may operate and be positioned beneath the egg flat, while the egg lifting devices 500 operate and are positioned above the egg flats. In this manner, the egg support assembly 700 provides support to the eggs such that the securing arrangement 550 may be advanced about the eggs for securing thereof. According to some aspects, the egg support assembly 700 may include a plurality of pedestals 710 for individually raising the eggs from each respective egg receptacle 40. In this manner, the eggs may be raised separately with respect to one another.

[0032] In operation, as shown in FIG. 5, an egg flat 30 containing eggs 1 may be conveyed to the removal position beneath the egg remover head 200. In some instances, the egg remover head 200 may be capable of processing multiple egg flats 30 at a time.

[0033] FIG. 6 illustrates an exemplary sequence for removing an egg 1 from a receptacle 40 of an egg flat 30 using an egg lifting device 500 and then releasing the egg 1 therefrom. As shown, the egg lifting device 500 begins at a fully raised, retracted or ascended position. The egg lifting device 500 may then advance or descend to engage the egg 1 at which point the securing arrangement 550 contacts the egg and begins to deflect. The securing arrangement 550 may be further advanced to a fully descended position until the egg 1 is fully seated therein or secured thereto for removal. The egg lifting device 500 may then be raised, retracted or otherwise ascended so as to remove the egg 1 from the receptacle 40. Thereafter, the release member 580 of the release device 575 may be actuated to contact the egg 1, thereby pushing the egg 1 out of engagement with the securing arrangement 550. The released egg 1 may then be captured or transported accordingly.

[0034] Furthermore, as shown in FIGS. 9 and 10, the egg lifting device 500 may advantageously facilitate straightening of eggs when received therein. That is, eggs oriented off-axis within the egg flat may be straightened due to the forces exerted on the egg by the securing arrangement 550 when engaging the egg. In contrast, as shown in FIGS. 7 and 8, prior art suction-type devices maintain the orientation of the egg as positioned within the egg flat. It may be desirable to straighten or vertically align eggs automatically using the egg lifting device 500 for further processing of such eggs. For example, the eggs may be returned to an egg flat for injection of the eggs with a treatment substance in which case it may be desirable to have the eggs vertically aligned along the longitudinal axis of the egg within the egg flat.

[0035] FIG. 15 illustrates a manual egg remover device 300. In this instance, the body 502 may be formed as a plate 302 in which the securing arrangements 500 are coupled thereto. The manual egg remover device 300 may have a handle 310 for an operator to hold the device 300. The release devices 575 may be coupled to a connector 315 configured to move toward and away from the plate 302 such that the release devices 575 may interact with the eggs 1 for releasing the eggs therefrom.

[0036] FIGS. 18 and 19 illustrate the manner in which an egg 1 may be gently released into a hatching basket positioned on an egg transfer system 100. As shown, a first plate 160 may be configured to move relative to a second plate 170 such that when the first plate 160 moves toward the second plate 170, the stationary release device 575 interacts with the egg 1 to push the egg 1 out of the securing arrangement 550. In this regard the head 200 may be lowered such that the egg 1 is slightly contacting or almost contacting the hatching basket, so as to limit the distance the egg 1 may travel to contact the hatching basket. Subsequently, the first plate 160, having the lifting devices 500 coupled thereto, may ascend proximate to the second plate 170. Accordingly, the stationary release device 575 may remain in a fixed position, thereby contacting the egg and forcing the egg 1 out of the securing arrangement 550 and into the hatching basket.

[0037] FIGS. 20-26 illustrate various aspects of an egg transport system 800 capable of implementing the egg lifting devices 500 along a track system 802. The egg transport system 800 may facilitate adaptable and/or customized processing to meet various egg processing needs. In this regard, the egg lifting devices 500 as adapted to the egg transport system 800 may perform any number of functions, including, for example, acting as conveyor, egg flat, egg removers, locators, or storage. To that end, the egg lifting devices 500 may remove typical design/process constraints caused by egg flat type and handling, thereby decreasing design complexity and associated cost. In some instances, each egg lifting device 500 may allow each egg to be picked up once from the egg flat in the beginning of processing and remain riding until the drop-off at the final destination, such as the hatching basket.

[0038] Still in some instances, the egg lifting devices 500 as implemented in the egg transport system 800 may be used to store or hold eggs in an incubator, whether a setter or hatcher incubator. In this regard, the egg transport system 800 may direct eggs within the incubators where the eggs remain in the egg lifting devices 500 and are stored for incubation. This may eliminate the need for carts/trolleys that are currently used to move egg flats / hatching baskets in and out of the incubators. Additionally, each egg may be carried by an egg lifting device 500 to a cooler room until moving to the incubators. The egg transport system 800 may be configured to allow for tilting of the eggs within the incubators. Further, the egg transport system 800 may be configured to circulate eggs within the incubators to assist with even heat distribution.

[0039] Once loaded onto the egg transport system 800, the eggs may be carried by the egg lifting devices 500 to various processing stations or modules, such as, for example, egg identification, egg removal, egg injection, egg sampling, egg holding, egg heating, egg cleaning

or sanitizing, egg stacking, egg sorting, egg backfilling, egg arranging (according to egg flats), egg transfer, egg sealing, or any other egg processing.

[0040] In some instances, the egg lifting devices 500 may be capable of tilting the egg to present the egg for injection at a target site. For instance, the eggs may be tilted by the egg lifting devices 500 such that the air cell is presented for injection.

[0041] As shown in FIG. 20, each egg lifting device 500 may include a tracking identifier 515, such as a barcode or RFID tag for tracking each egg lifting device 500 and respective egg carried thereby. Such a feature may allow for manual intervention at any time on demand for a specific egg lifting device 500 and egg. Thus, each egg may be accurately tracked through the process and data related thereto collected along the way for data processing and analysis.

[0042] According to one aspect, as shown in FIG. 21, the egg transport system 800 may include the track system 802 having a plurality of tracks 805 forming a multiple-lane system. The tracks 805 may be varied or narrowed with respect to one another as needed for processing. For example, the tracks 805 may be narrowed to correspond with an egg flat 30 such that eggs may be removed from the egg flat 30. Additionally, the egg lifting devices 500 may be staggered with respect to one another across the tracks 805 so as to correspond with the egg receptacles 40 of the egg flat 30. As such, the egg transport system 800 may be easily adapted to remove eggs from any egg flat type.

[0043] FIG. 22 illustrates the use of an egg support assembly 700 to lift or raise the eggs 1 from the egg flat 30 such that the securing arrangements 550 are able to secure the eggs 1 thereto, as previously described herein.

[0044] According to some aspects, the egg transport system 800 may include a drive assembly 820 for moving the egg lifting devices 500 along the track system 802. Each egg lifting device 500 may be coupled to the drive assembly 820 to facilitate movement of the eggs throughout the egg transport system 800. The drive assembly 820 may include any actuators, means or mechanism for moving the egg lifting devices along the track system 802 and individual tracks 805 thereof. For example, the drive assembly 820 may include comprises any of a chain, belt, magnetic drive assembly, linear drive assembly or other drive functional means.

[0045] FIG. 23 illustrates a sampling process in which the egg lifting device 500 carries an egg 1 to a sampling station having a processing device 900 capable of extracting a sample from the egg 1. As shown, the egg 1 may be carried to the processing device 900, wherein the pedestal 710 of the egg support assembly 700 is moved to support the egg 1 during the sample extraction process. Subsequently, the processing device 900 extends within the egg lifting device 500 in a co-axial manner and pierces the egg so as to enter the egg for extracting a sample. With the sample extracted, the egg lifting device 500 may be transported away for further processing or holding. An assay plate/tray or sample receiving medium 950 may be moved beneath the processing device 900 to receive the sample, for example, in an assay well

952.

[0046] According to some aspects of the present disclosure, the egg lifting device 500 may include one or more sample receiving segments for receiving a sample from the egg 1 carried thereby, as shown in FIG. 24. For example, the body 502 may be engaged with the track 805, wherein the body 502 defines a receptacle 504 for receiving a sample. In some instances, a disposable well 506 may be provided. Still in other instances, a sample receiving medium 508, such as filter paper, may be provided on the egg lifting device 500 for receiving a sample from the egg 1 carried thereby. In this regard, rather than using multiple large assay trays, the egg lifting devices 500 may be used as an individual assay tray. To that end, the processing device 900 may extract a sample from the egg 1 and then deposit the sample onto the egg lifting device 500 such that each egg lifting device 500 carries a sample from the egg it holds. Thereafter, the egg lifting devices 500 may be moved to an assay station for assay processing steps (heating, denature, reagent dispense, etc.) and/or incubation. In this regard, no separate egg holding/assay station may be needed, and associated physical movement, control, and communication may be eliminated. In other instances, the sample carried by the egg lifting device 500 may be directly processed separately from the egg with respect to the assay, wherein, for example, a collimated lens is used to focus heat from a heat lamp onto each sample. Cooling of the sample may be implemented in a similar fashion directed toward the sample itself.

[0047] In some instances, the egg transport system 800 may be configured to sort eggs according to an identified characteristic determined for each egg. For example, each egg may be identified according to gender as being male, female, or unknown and sorted accordingly. As shown in FIG. 25, each track 805 may include a plurality of branches for directing eggs 1 along varying routes according to an identified characteristic such as gender. The tracking identifier 515 may be used to determine which branch each egg 1 should follow. That is, after the egg 1 is determined to have a characteristic it is tracked through the system 800 with such information. As shown in FIG. 25, the egg lifting devices 500 and respective eggs 1 may be routed to a first branch 812 for female-identified eggs, a second branch 814 for male-identified eggs, or a third branch 816 for unknown eggs (male/female not determined) for appropriate processing. As shown in FIG. 26, the first branch 812 of each track 805 may transport the female eggs to a first processing station 880 (e.g., egg injection station), while the second branch 814 of each track 805 may transport the male-identified eggs to a second processing station 885 (e.g., egg injection station). In some instances, unknown eggs may be re-routed through the system for additional analysis in determining the characteristic of interest.

[0048] As shown in FIGS. 27 and 28, the egg remover head 200 may include a plurality of egg lifting devices 500 capable of removing eggs from the egg flat 30 and thereafter releasing the eggs. In some instances, the egg remover head 200 may include a plate 260 to which the egg lifting devices 500 are movably connected or coupled such that the egg lifting devices are capable of moving vertically, as shown in FIGS. 27 and 28. According to some aspects, the plate 260 may define a plurality of holes 262 for receiving the egg lifting devices 500. In some instances, the egg lifting devices 500 may be selectively or individually controlled. That is, the

egg lifting devices 500 may be selectively deployed such that interaction thereof with respective eggs may be selectively controlled. Further, a release system 270 may be coupled to the plate 260 in a fixed manner such that movement of the plate 260 also causes corresponding movement of the release system 270. The release system 270 may include a pair of arms 272 extending from the plate 260, with a crossbar 274 connecting the arms. The crossbar 274 may include or have attached thereto a plurality of release members 580 such as, for example, biasing members (e.g., springs) to interact with the eggs. The release members 580 may be correspondingly positioned and aligned with a respective egg lifting device 500. As the egg lifting devices 500 move relative to the plate 260, an egg may be received within or released from the egg lifting device 500. As shown in FIG. 28, the egg lifting device 500 is in an extended position such that an egg may be received therewithin by lifting from an egg flat. As shown in FIG. 27, the egg lifting device 500 is in a retracted position in which an egg previously contained within the egg lifting device 500 has contacted the stationary crossbar 274 and respective release member 580 such that the egg is physically forced out of engagement with the egg lifting device 500.

[0049] As previously described, the resilient members 560 may cooperate to form an open-ended arrangement that allows an end of the egg to be easily received within the securing arrangement 550. In some instances, as shown in FIGS. 29 and 30, the resilient members 560 may extend from the body 502 in a loop shape. In one aspect, each resilient member 560 may include a pair of leg portions 562 extending from the body 502. The leg portions 562 may be integrally connected as a continuous piece of wire material to an arcuate end portion 564 defining a radius of curvature of the looped resilient member 560. In some instances, the arcuate end portion 564 may flare or otherwise deflect outward, as shown in FIG. 30 (showing only one resilient member 560 for illustrative clarity), from an internal seating area or compartment defined and formed by the resilient members. The flaring of the arcuate end portion 564 allows for an egg to be more easily seated within the securing arrangement 550, which may be beneficial in limiting incidences of egg cracking. Moreover, in some instances, the leg portions 562 may be arcuately extend from the body 502 so as to provide a bulge in the resilient member 560 that substantially corresponds to the shape of the egg, as shown in FIGS. 29 and 30. However, it is noted that the resilient members 560 may function appropriately in a configuration in which the bulge is not included, as shown in FIGS. 11-13, where the leg portions 562 extend perpendicular from the body 502.

[0050] FIGS. 31-34 illustrate various examples of configurations for the looped resilient member 560. The height H of the looped resilient member 560 is shown from the arcuate end portion 564 to the end of the leg portions 562. In some instances, the height H may be in the range of about 2.5cm to about 13cm. The width W of the looped resilient member 560 is shown as the largest open part of the loop. In some instances, the width W may be in the range of about 1cm to about 5cm. The angle A is shown from the two ends of the leg portions 562 inward (FIG. 34) to about 30 degrees outward (FIG. 33). The radius of curvature R of the arcuate end portion 564 may be, according to some aspects, in the range of about 0.5cm to about 5cm. The cross sectional diameter of the wire used to form the resilient member 560 may be in the range of about 0.6mm to about 1.5mm.

[0051] FIGS. 35-39 illustrate an egg transfer system 600 according to the claimed invention in which a first securing arrangement 550 of an egg lifting device 500 is positioned opposite to a second securing arrangement 550 of a pedestal 650 for transferring eggs therebetween. This of course may be configured as a plurality of egg lifting devices 500 and pedestals 650 with opposingly positioned securing arrangements, for meeting throughput requirements. It was discovered that using looped resilient members 560 allows for an egg to be transferred between the first and second securing arrangements when interacting with one another, thereby eliminating the need to push the egg out of engagement with securing arrangement 550, as shown in FIGS. 37-39. Thus, many mechanical and/or pneumatic components may be advantageously eliminated from the egg transfer process. However, in some instances, the egg may be pushed out of engagement with the first securing arrangement 550, as shown in FIG. 35.

[0052] As shown in FIG. 35, an egg 1 secured within the first securing arrangement 550 of the egg lifting device 500 may be forced out of engagement with the looped resilient members 560 thereof via actuation of the release device 575. In this regard, the egg 1 may be transferred to the second securing arrangement 550 of the pedestal 650. The looped resilient members 560 of the second securing arrangement 550 may facilitate a soft landing for the egg 1 so as to limit incidences of cracking. In some instances, a bumper 675 may be provided to limit the distance the egg 1 may travel within the second securing arrangement 550. As can be seen, the egg 1 may or may not contact the bumper 675, depending on the size of the egg seated therein.

[0053] FIG. 36 illustrates one example of the first and second securing arrangements being positioned in an opposing manner. Such a configuration allows for simple, quick, efficient and cost-effective transferring of an egg for various purposes, such as, for example, egg sorting.

[0054] FIG. 37 illustrates transferring of an egg 1 from the first securing arrangement 550 (shown as above the second securing arrangement 550) to the below positioned second securing arrangement 550. As shown, the first securing arrangement 550 may be lowered / descended to interact with the second securing arrangement 550. Thereafter, the first securing arrangement 550 is raised / ascended and the egg 1 remains seated in the second securing arrangement 550, without the need for a release device to force the egg 1 out of engagement with the first securing arrangement 550.

[0055] FIG. 38 illustrates the lifting and transfer of an egg 1 from the second securing arrangement 550 to the above positioned first securing arrangement 550. As shown, the first securing arrangement 550 may be lowered / descended to interact with the second securing arrangement 550. Thereafter, the first securing arrangement 550 is raised / ascended and the egg 1 is lifted and seated within the first securing arrangement 550, without the need for a pusher device to push the egg 1 out of engagement with the second securing arrangement 550.

[0056] FIG. 39 illustrates the lifting and transfer of an egg 1 from the second securing arrangement 550 to the above positioned first securing arrangement 550. As shown, the first securing arrangement 550 may be lowered / descended to interact with the second securing arrangement 550. Thereafter, the first securing arrangement 550 is raised / ascended and the egg 1 is lifted and seated within the first securing arrangement 550, without the need for a pusher device to push the egg 1 out of engagement with the second securing arrangement 550. As shown in FIG. 39, in some instances the first securing arrangement 550 may have a biasing member (e.g., a spring) or bumper 675 (FIG. 35).

[0057] It was also discovered that the alignment of the looped resilient members 560 on the opposingly positioned first and second securing arrangements 550 determines whether the egg transfer will be effectuated. In this regard, when the looped resilient members 560 of the opposing securing arrangements 550 are in corresponding alignment, as shown in FIG. 37-39, the transfer of the egg is effectuated. However, if the opposing securing arrangements 550 are not aligned, then the egg transfer will not be effectuated. Accordingly, the first and/or second securing arrangements 550 could be rotated to provide a selectable transfer feature. That is, if it is determined that an egg should not be transferred, then one of the first and second securing arrangements 550 could be rotated about its central axis such that the looped resilient members 560 are not aligned, thereby inhibiting transfer of the egg. As shown in FIGS. 37-39, the looped resilient members 560 of the first securing arrangement 550 (shown above the second securing arrangement 550) move within the interior compartment defined by the second securing arrangement 550 such that the looped resilient members 560 of the second securing arrangement 550 are exterior to the looped resilient members 560 of the first securing arrangement 550, thus allowing for the gripping/lifting or releasing of the egg.

[0058] Many modifications and other aspects of the present disclosure set forth herein will come to mind to one skilled in the art to which this disclosure pertains having the benefit of the teachings presented in the foregoing descriptions and the associated drawings. For example, the egg lifting device 500 may be adapted or modified to rotate so as to rotate the egg or otherwise orient at various angles with respect to vertical for achieving a desired purpose such as, for example, manipulating an air cell (air pocket) within the egg for injection or sampling purposes. Therefore, it is to be understood that the present disclosure is not to be limited to the specific aspects disclosed and that modifications and other aspects are intended to be included within the scope of the appended claims. Although specific terms are employed herein, they are used in a generic and descriptive sense only and not for purposes of limitation.

REFERENCES CITED IN THE DESCRIPTION

Cited references

This list of references cited by the applicant is for the reader's convenience only. It does not form part of the European patent document. Even though great care has been taken in compiling the references, errors or omissions cannot be excluded and the EPO disclaims all liability in this regard.

Patent documents cited in the description

- US4681063A [0003]
- US5017003A [0003]
- US7083208B [0003]
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- EP0517342A [0004]
- US2177595A [0004]
- WO2015044547A [0004]

P a t e n t k r a v

1. System til overførsel af fugleæg (600), omfattende:

en første fastholdelsesanordning (550), der er indrettet til at gå i indgreb med og afbøje omkring et æg, således at ægget kan indsættes i den første fastholdelsesanordning (550);

en anden fastholdelsesanordning (550), der er anbragt modsat i forhold til den første fastholdelsesanordning (550), hvor den første og den anden fastholdelsesanordning (550) hver omfatter en flerhed af sløjfeformede eftergivelige elementer (560), der samvirker til dannelse af en anordning med åben ende, gennem hvilken ægget kan optages, hvor den første og den anden fastholdelsesanordning (550) er indrettet til at interagere gennem relativ bevægelse i forhold til hinanden, hvor en sådan interaktion derved bevirker, at et æg overføres derimellem,

kendetegnet ved at den anden fastholdelsesanordning (550) er indrettet til at gå i indgreb med og afbøje omkring et æg, således at ægget kan indsættes i den anden fastholdelsesanordning (550); og hvor ægget overføres mellem den første og den anden anordning i den ene eller den anden retning uden mekanisk aktivering af de sløjfeformede eftergivelige elementer (560).

2. System til overførsel af æg ifølge krav 1, hvor de eftergivelige elementer (560) er dannet af et fleksibelt formhukommelsesmateriale.

3. System til overførsel af æg ifølge krav 1, yderligere omfattende en frigivelsesindretning (575), der er indrettet til at frigive ægget fra mindst en af den første og den anden fastholdelsesanordning (550).

4. Fremgangsmåde til overførsel af fugleæg med et system til overførsel af fugleæg (600) ifølge krav 1, hvilken fremgangsmåde omfatter:

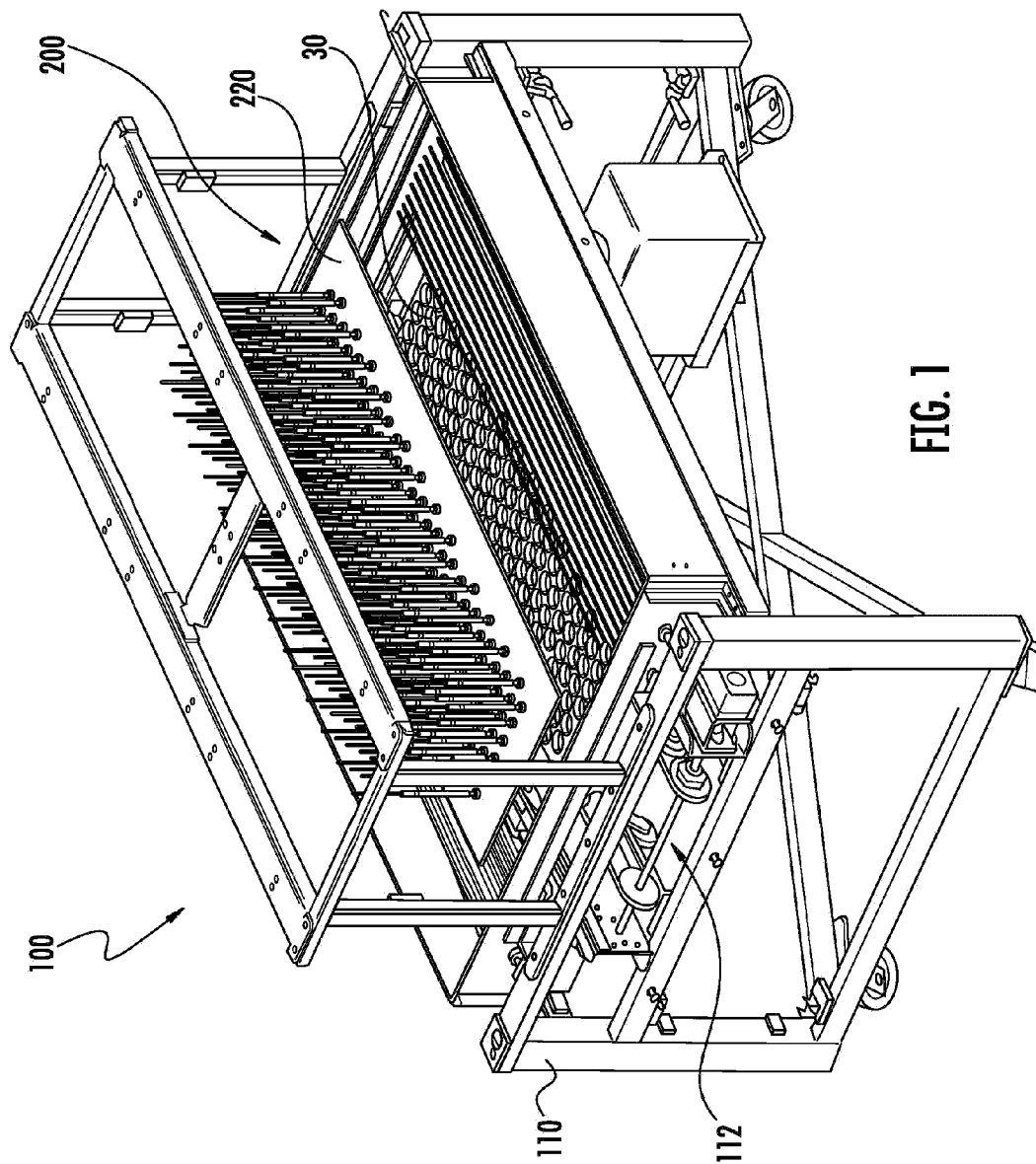
at nedsænke en ægløfteindretning (500) med en første fastholdelsesanordning (550) for at interagere med et æg, der er anbragt i en anden fastholdelsesanordning (550), der er anbragt modsat i forhold til den første fastholdelsesanordning (550), hvor hver af den første og den anden fastholdelsesanordning (550) har en flerhed af sløjfeformede eftergivelige elementer (560), der

samvirker til dannelse af en anordning med åben ende, gennem hvilken ægget kan optages;

at bringe den første fastholdelsesanordning (550) af ægløfteindretningen (500) i kontakt med ægget;

- 5 at indsætte ægget i den første fastholdelsesanordning (550) uden mekanisk aktivering af de eftergivelige elementer (560) ved at afbøje den første fastholdelsesanordning (550) omkring ægget; og
- at hæve løfteindretningen (500), således at ægget løftes fra den anden fastholdelsesanordning (550).

DRAWINGS



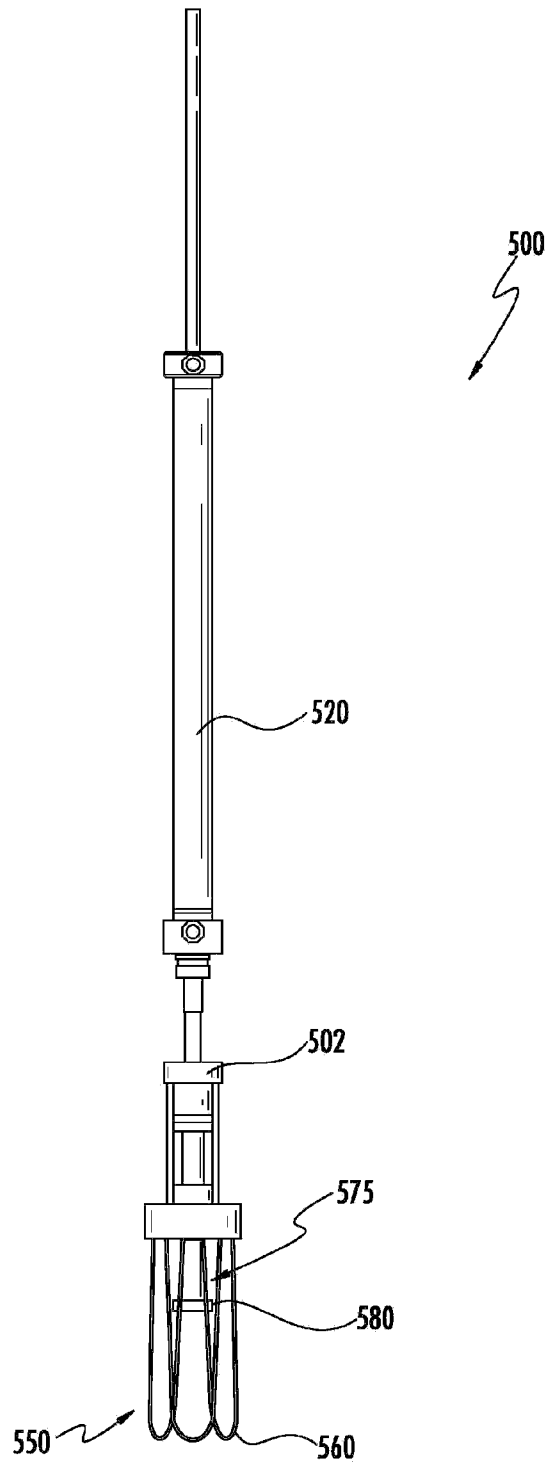
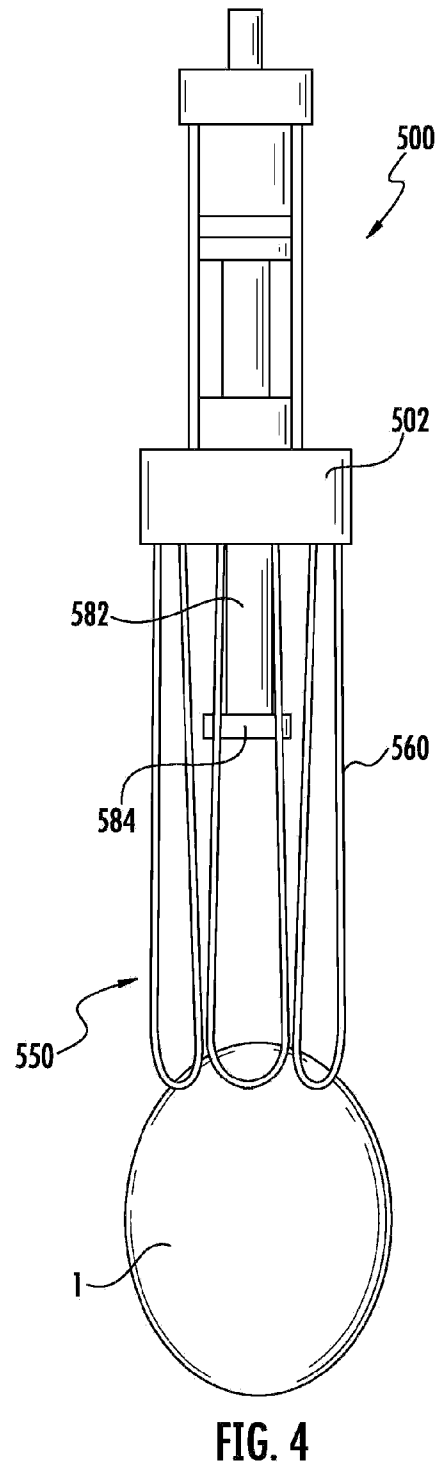
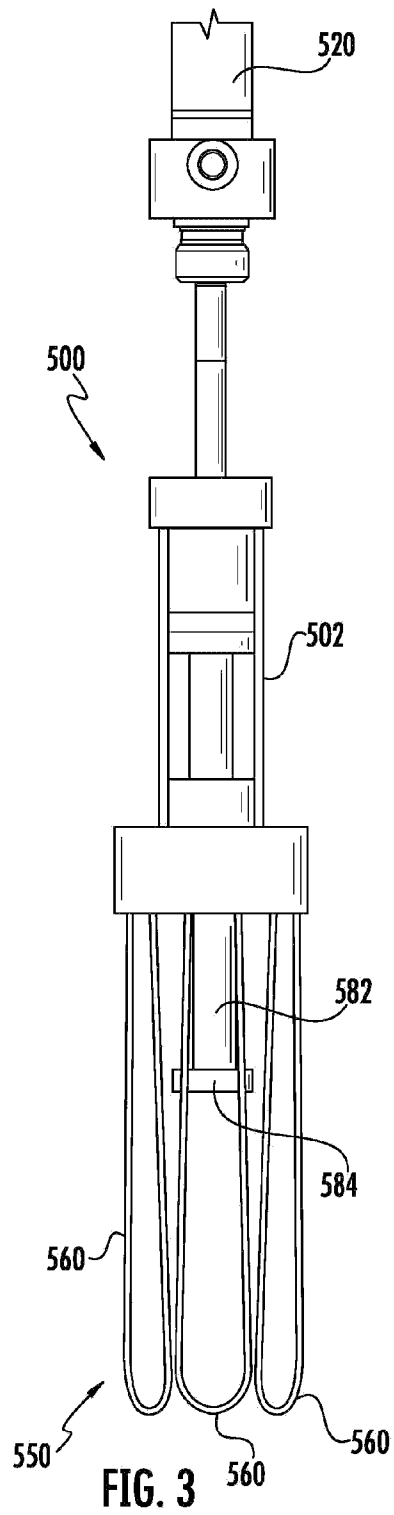


FIG. 2



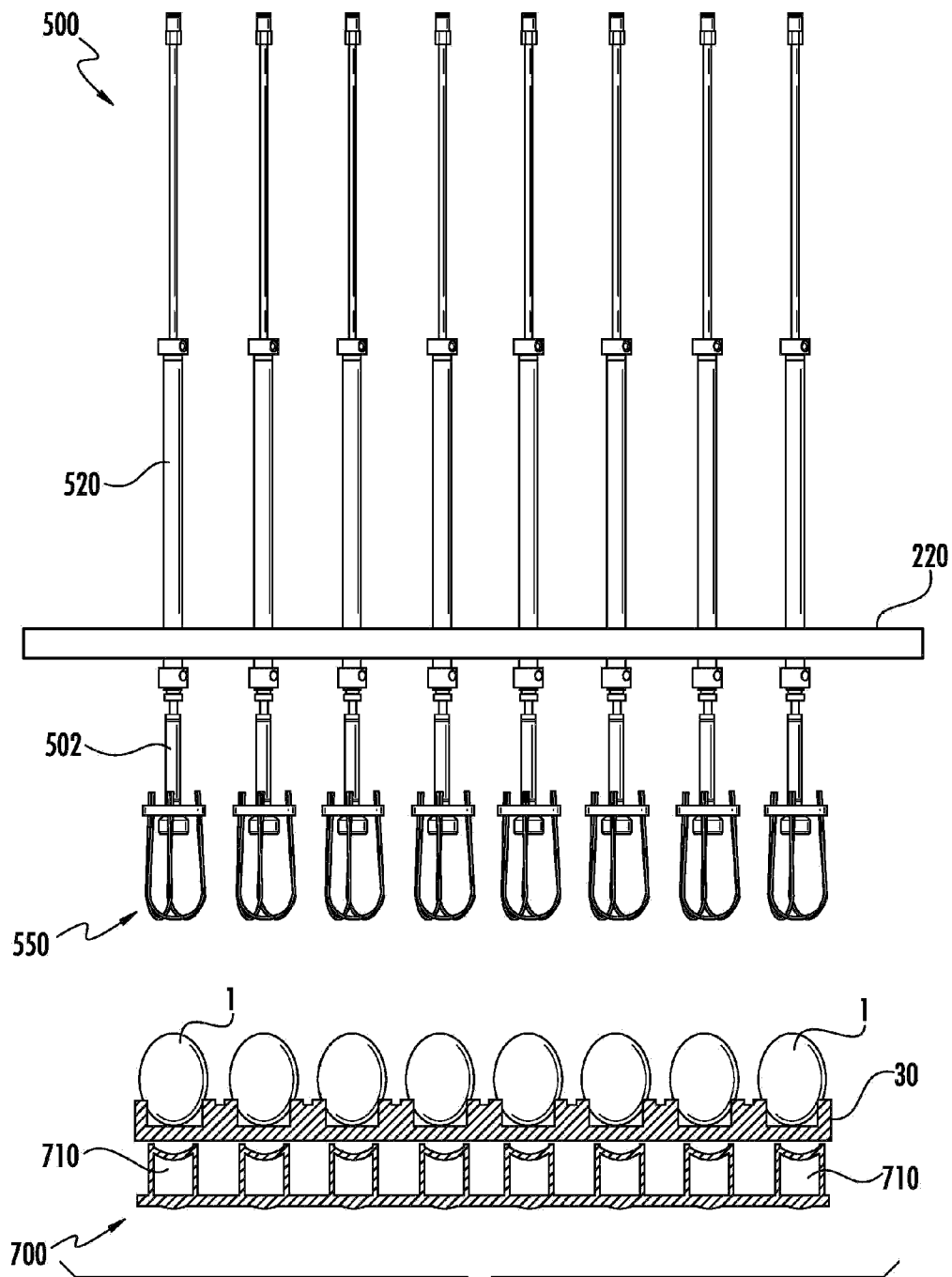


FIG. 5

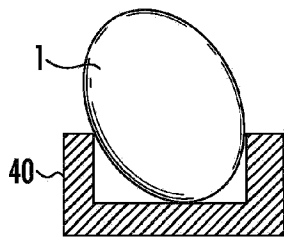
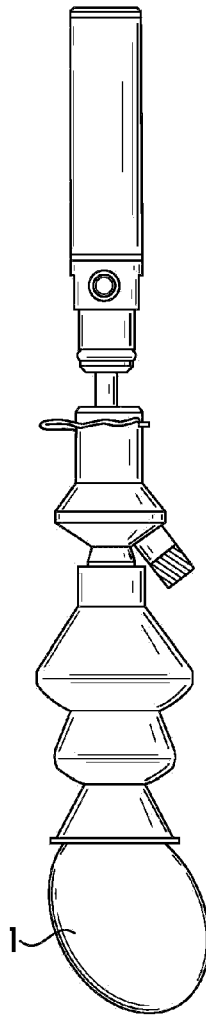
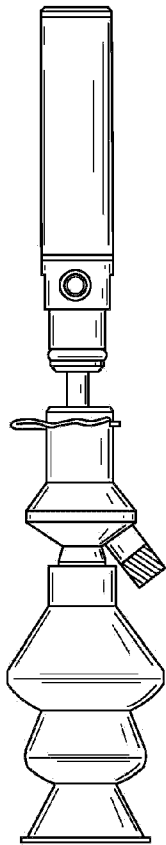


FIG. 7
(PRIOR ART)

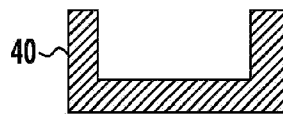


FIG. 8
(PRIOR ART)

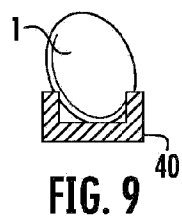
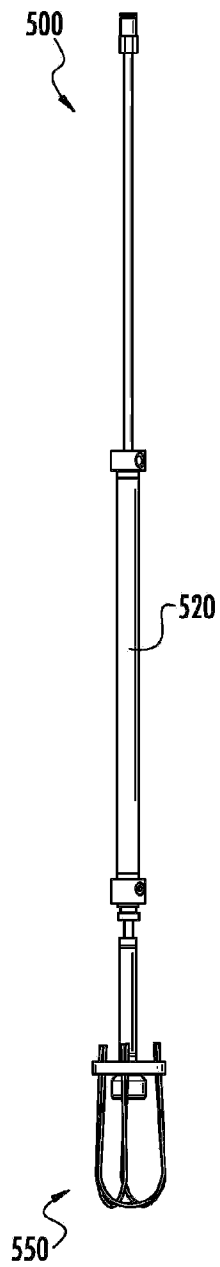


FIG. 9

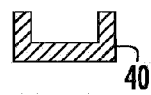
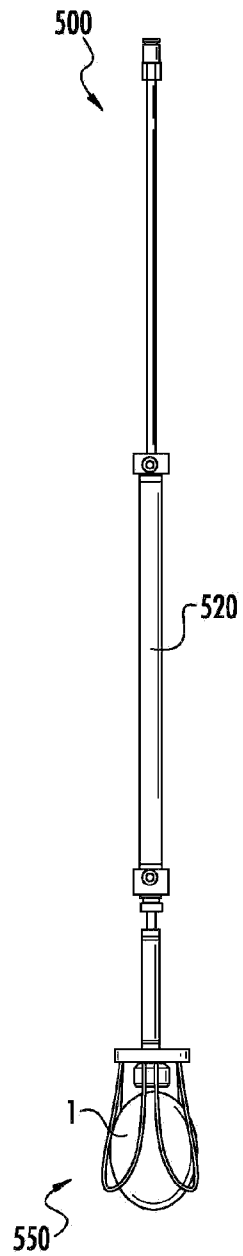
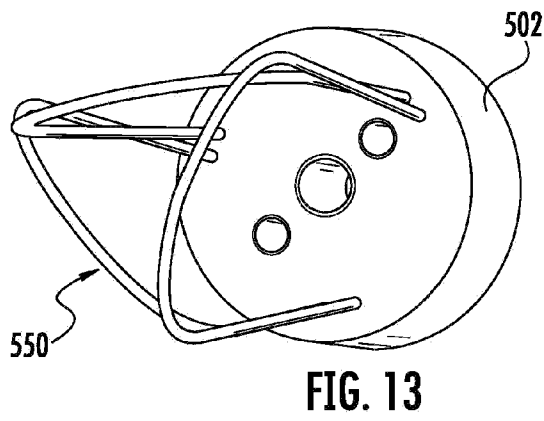
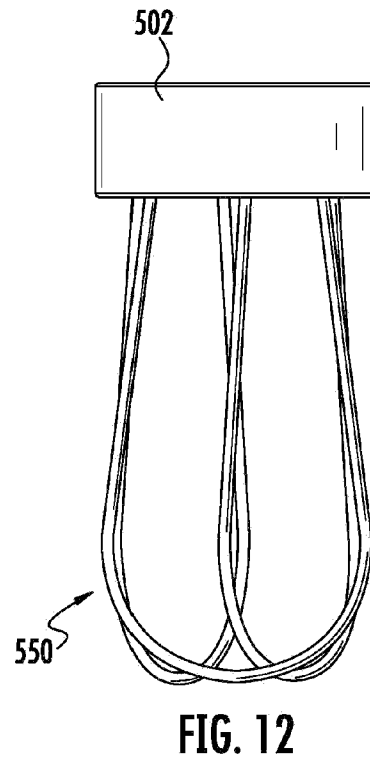
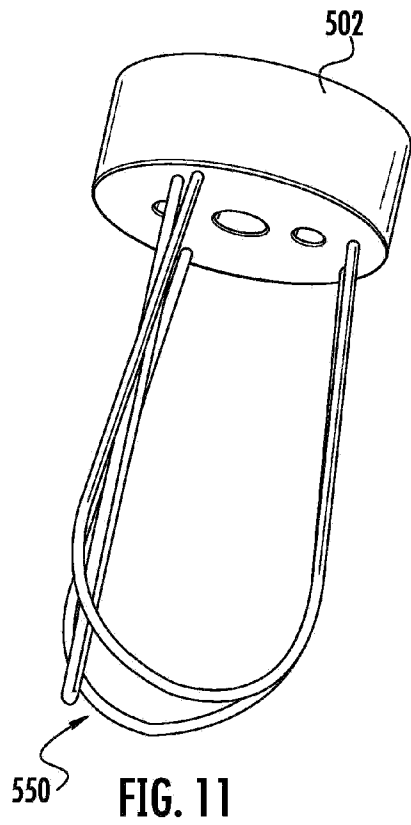
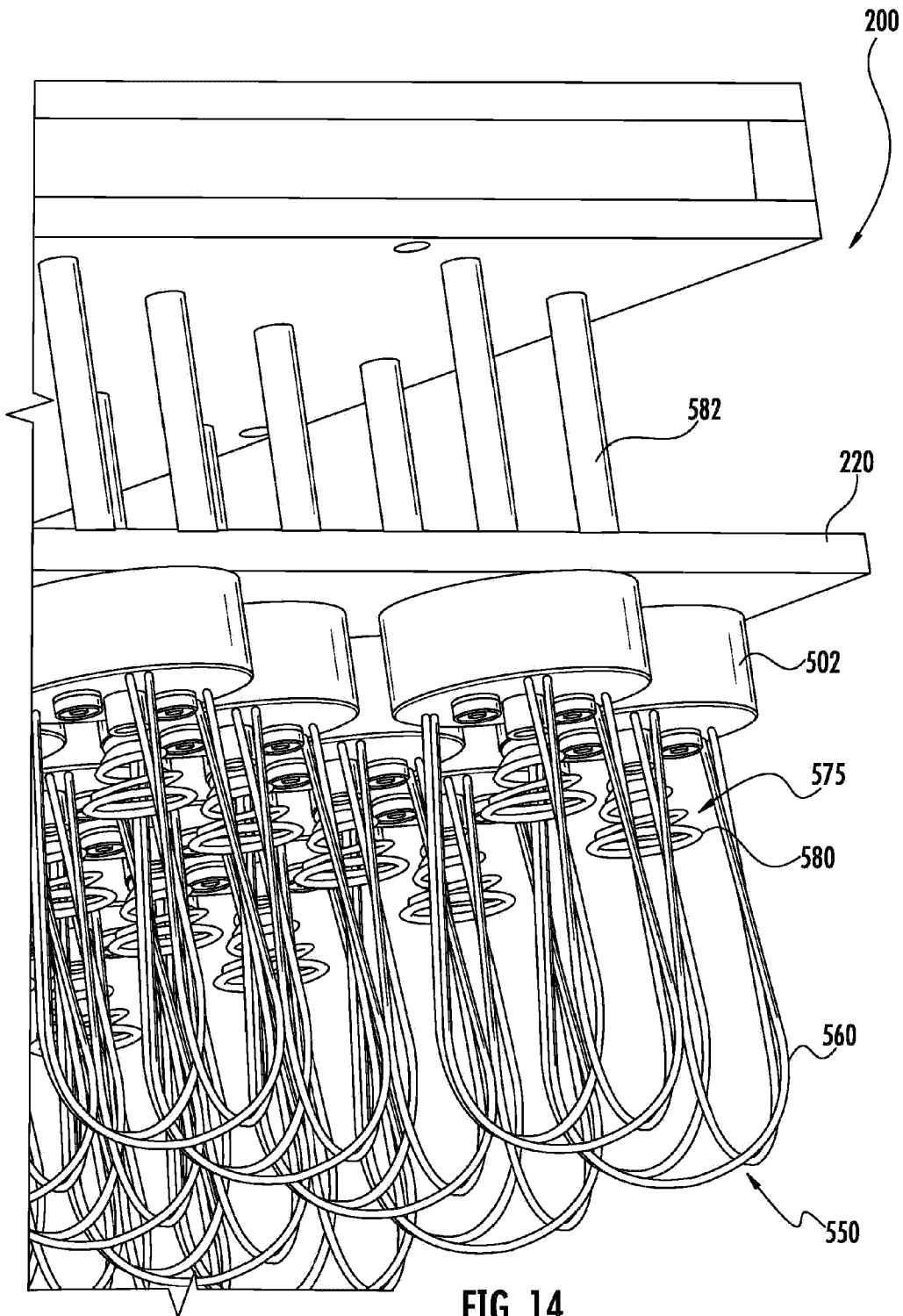


FIG. 10





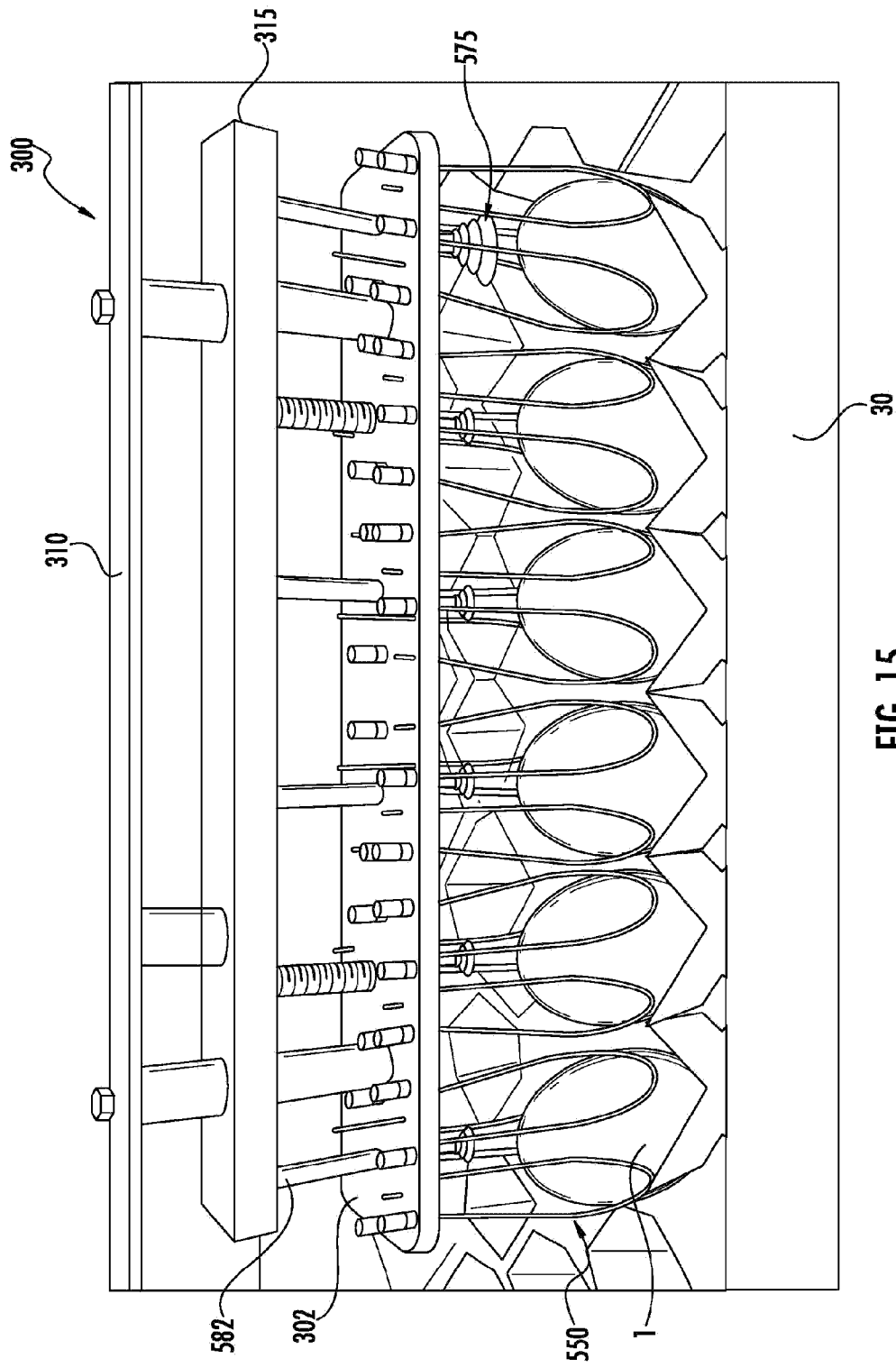
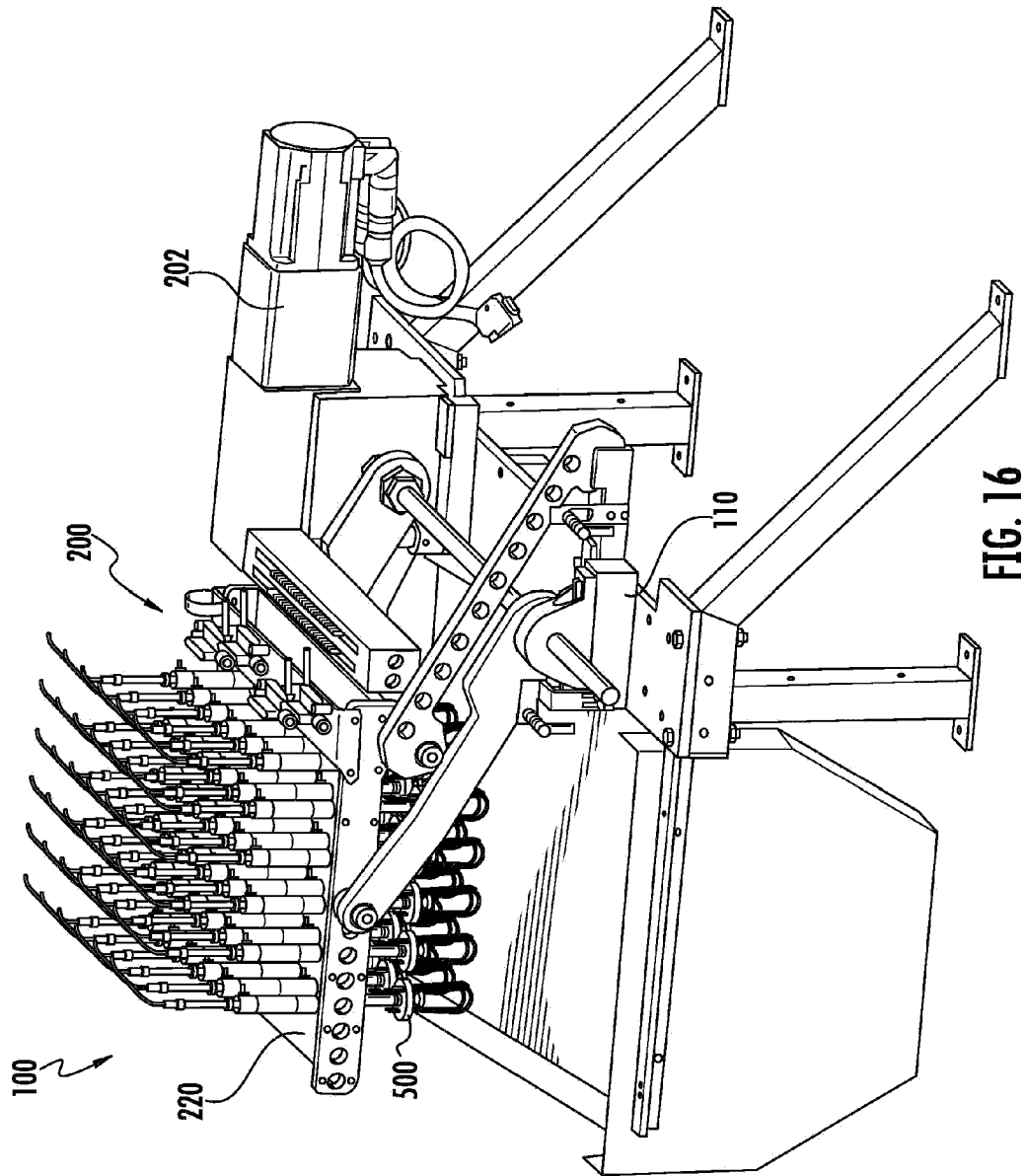
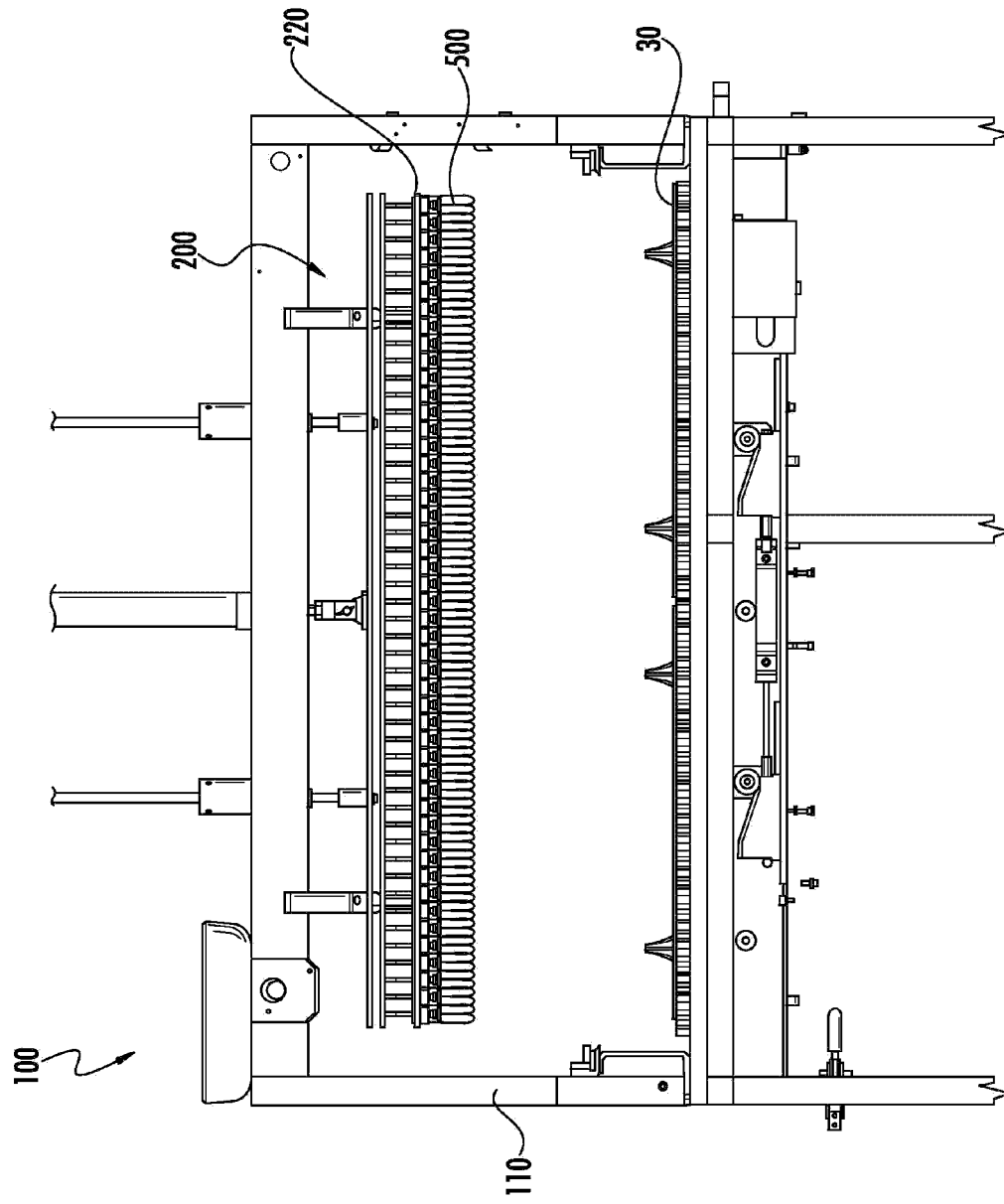
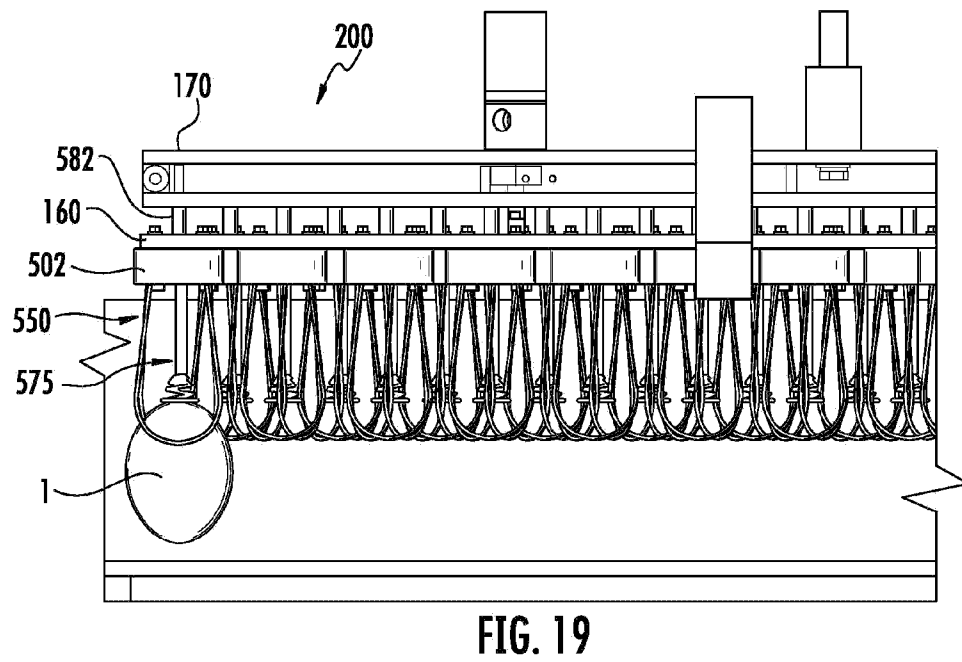
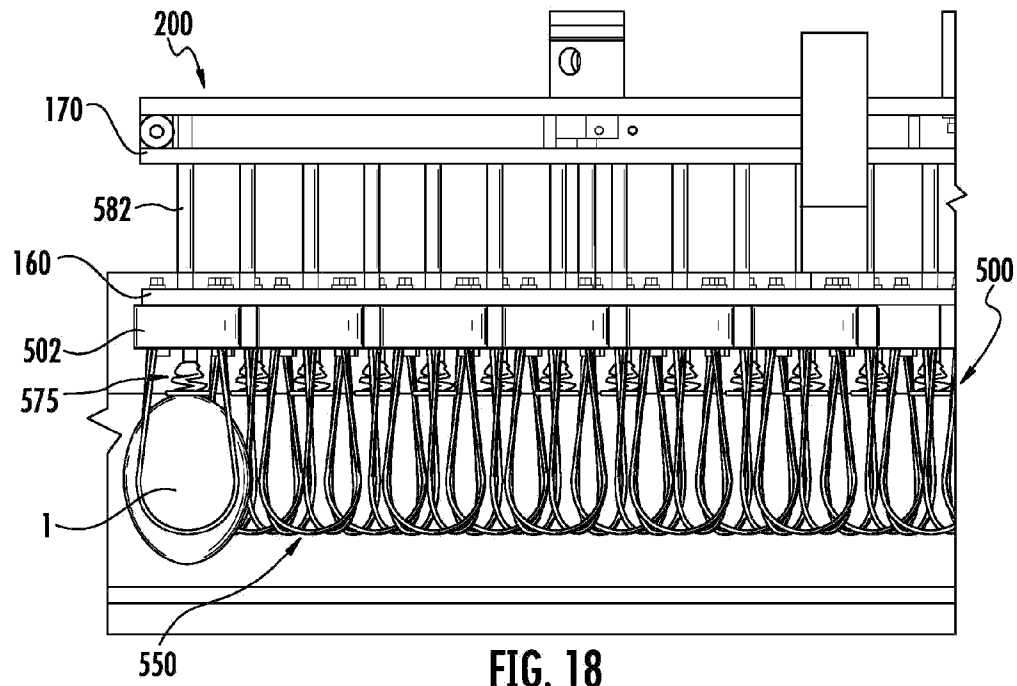


FIG. 15







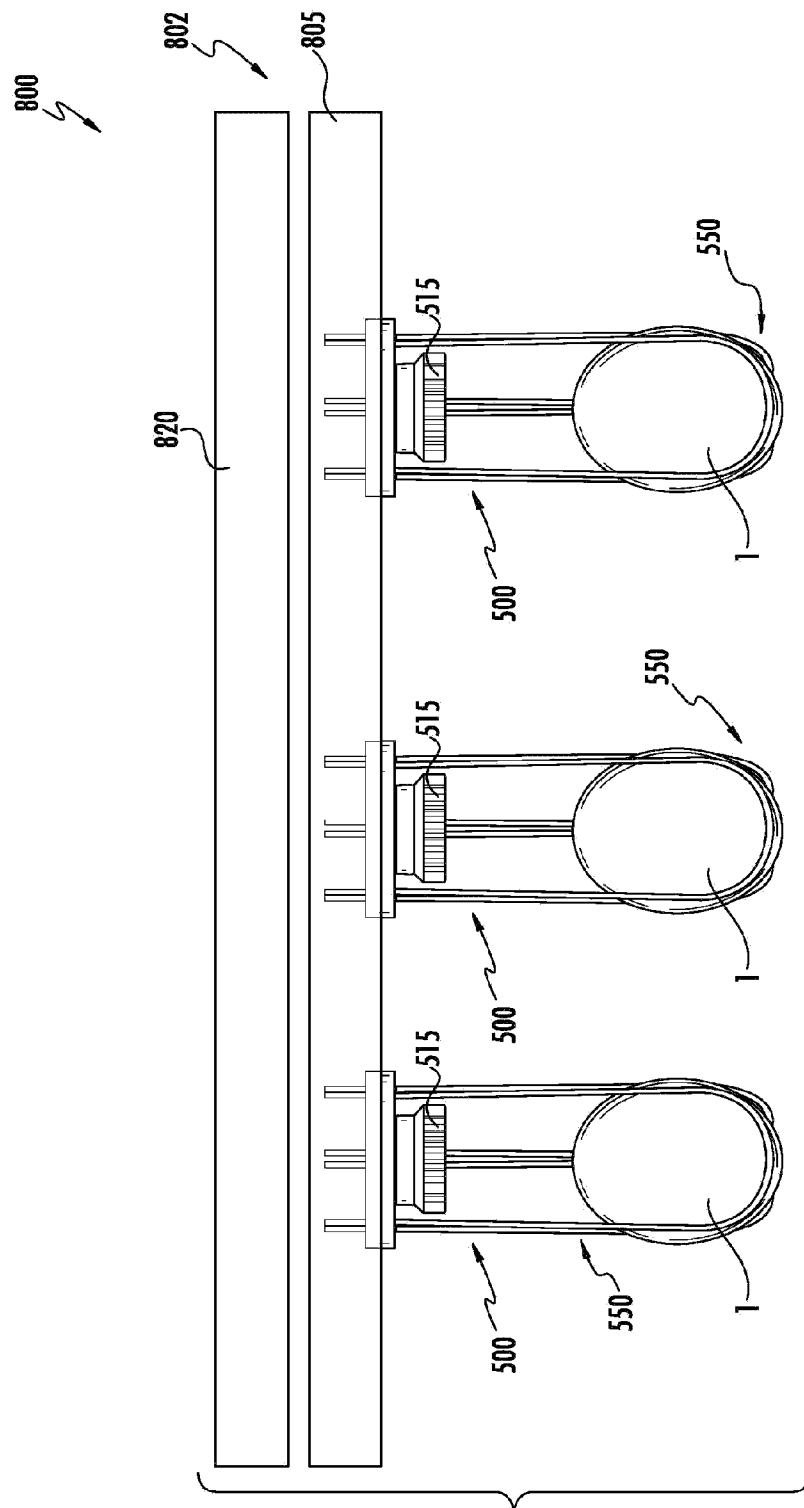


FIG. 20

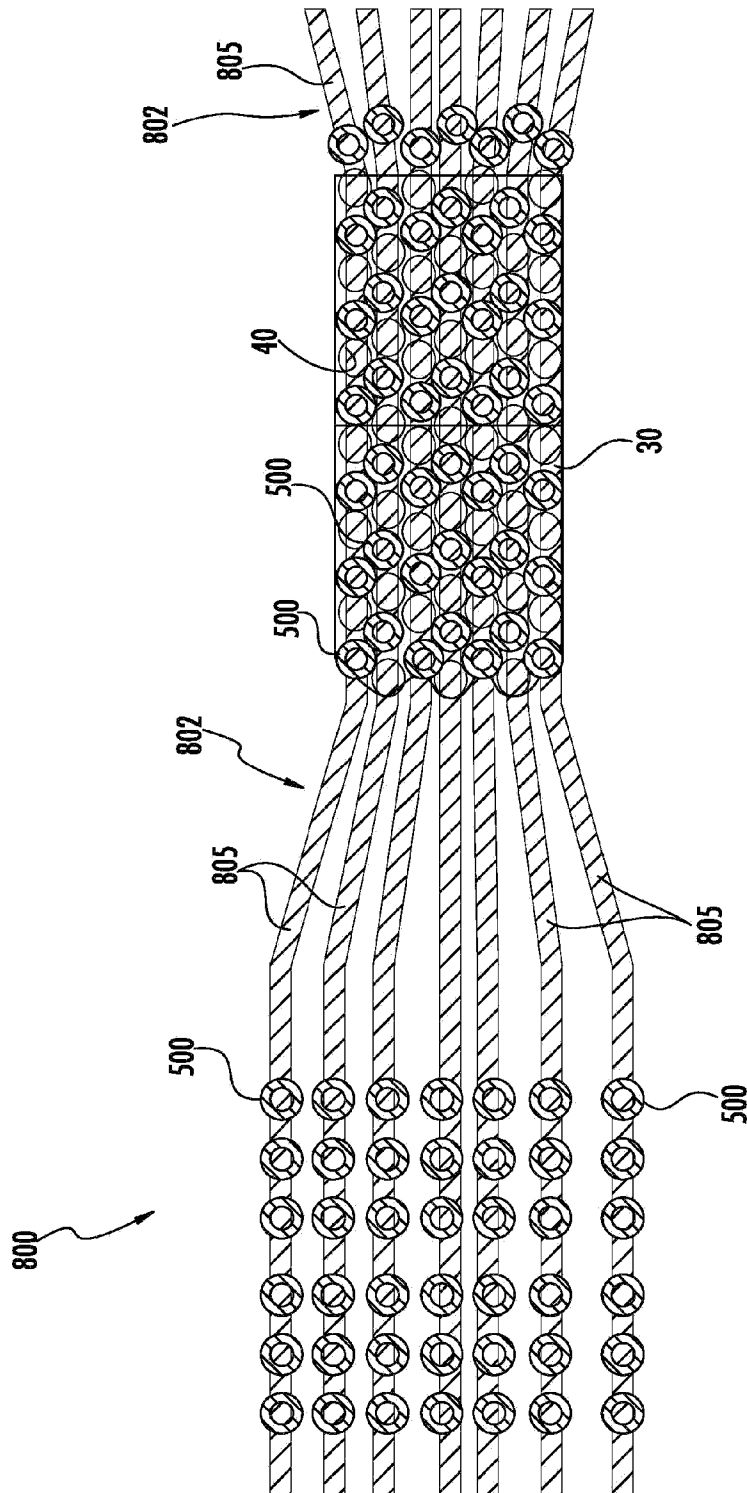


FIG. 21

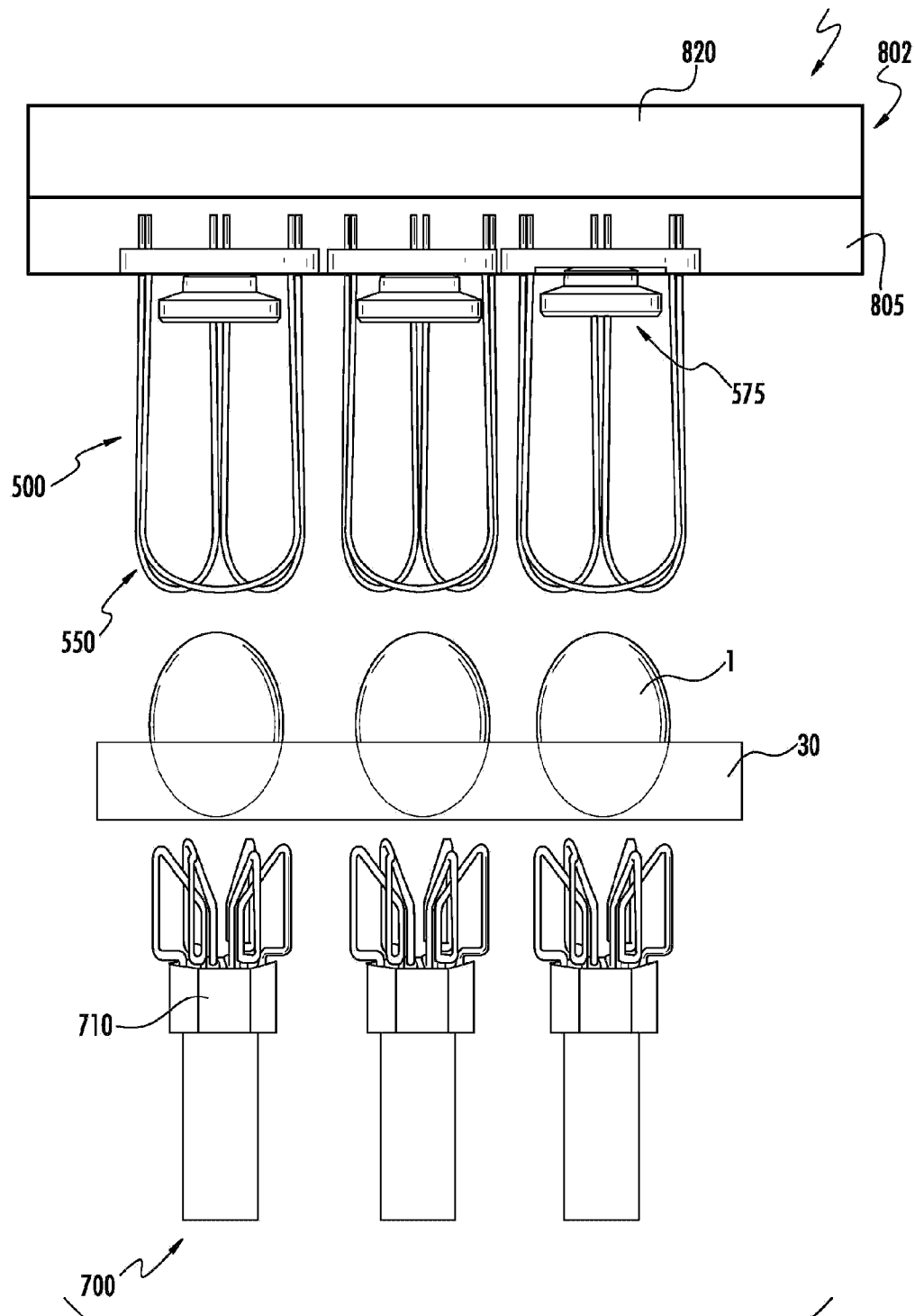
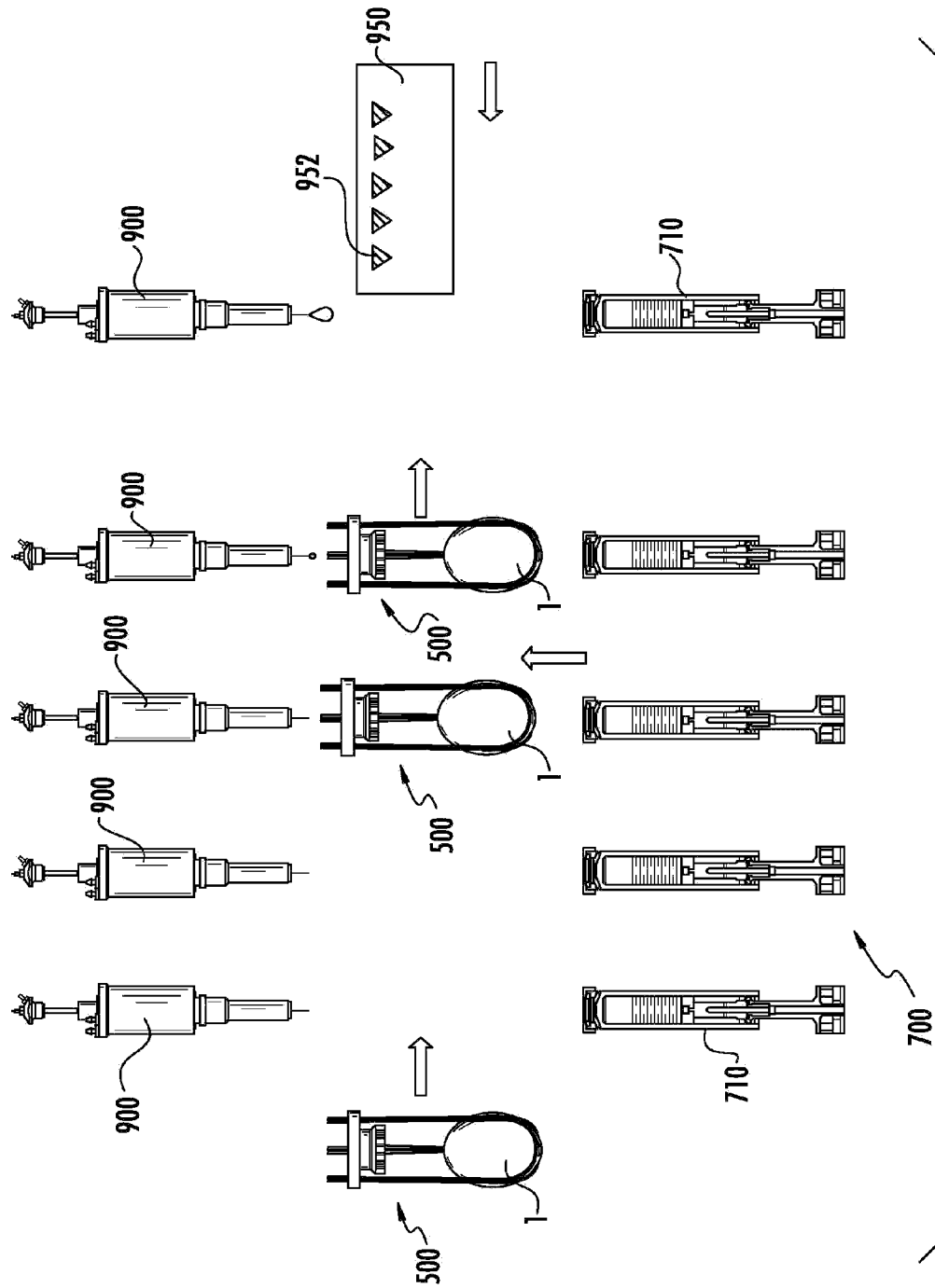
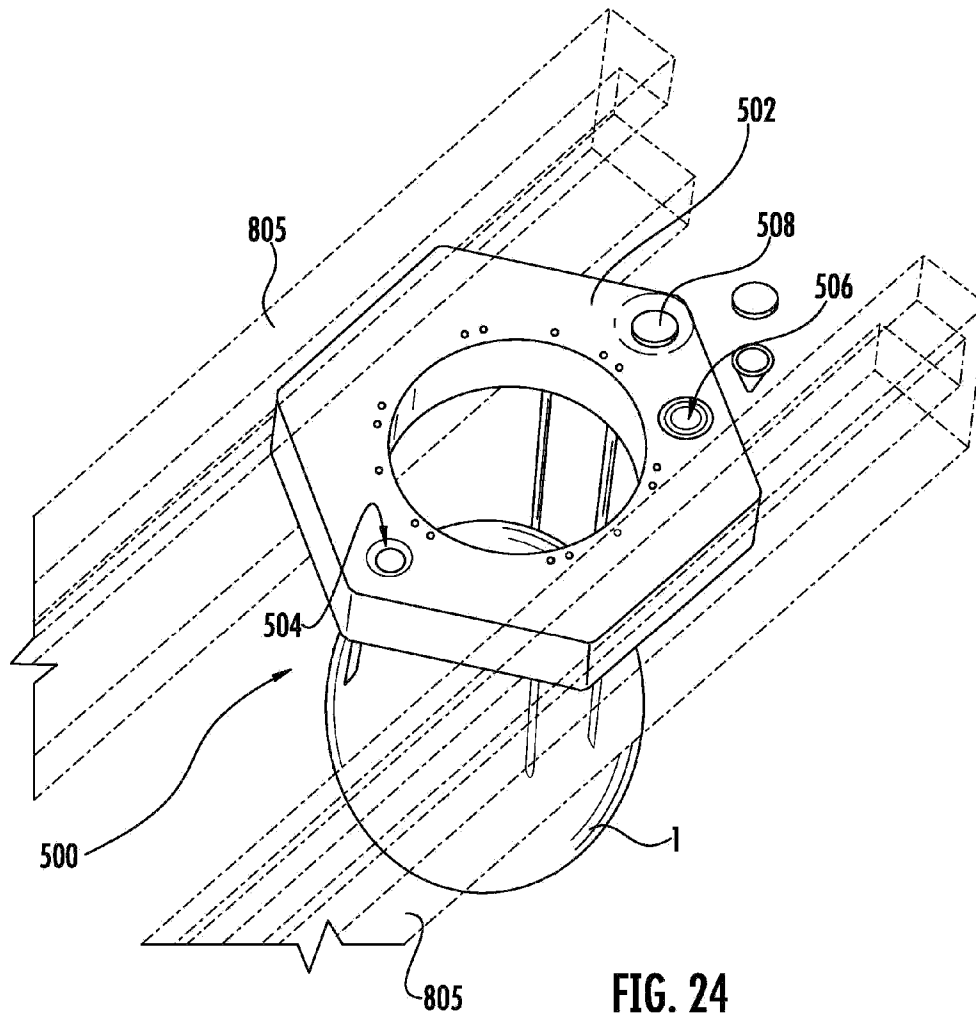


FIG. 22





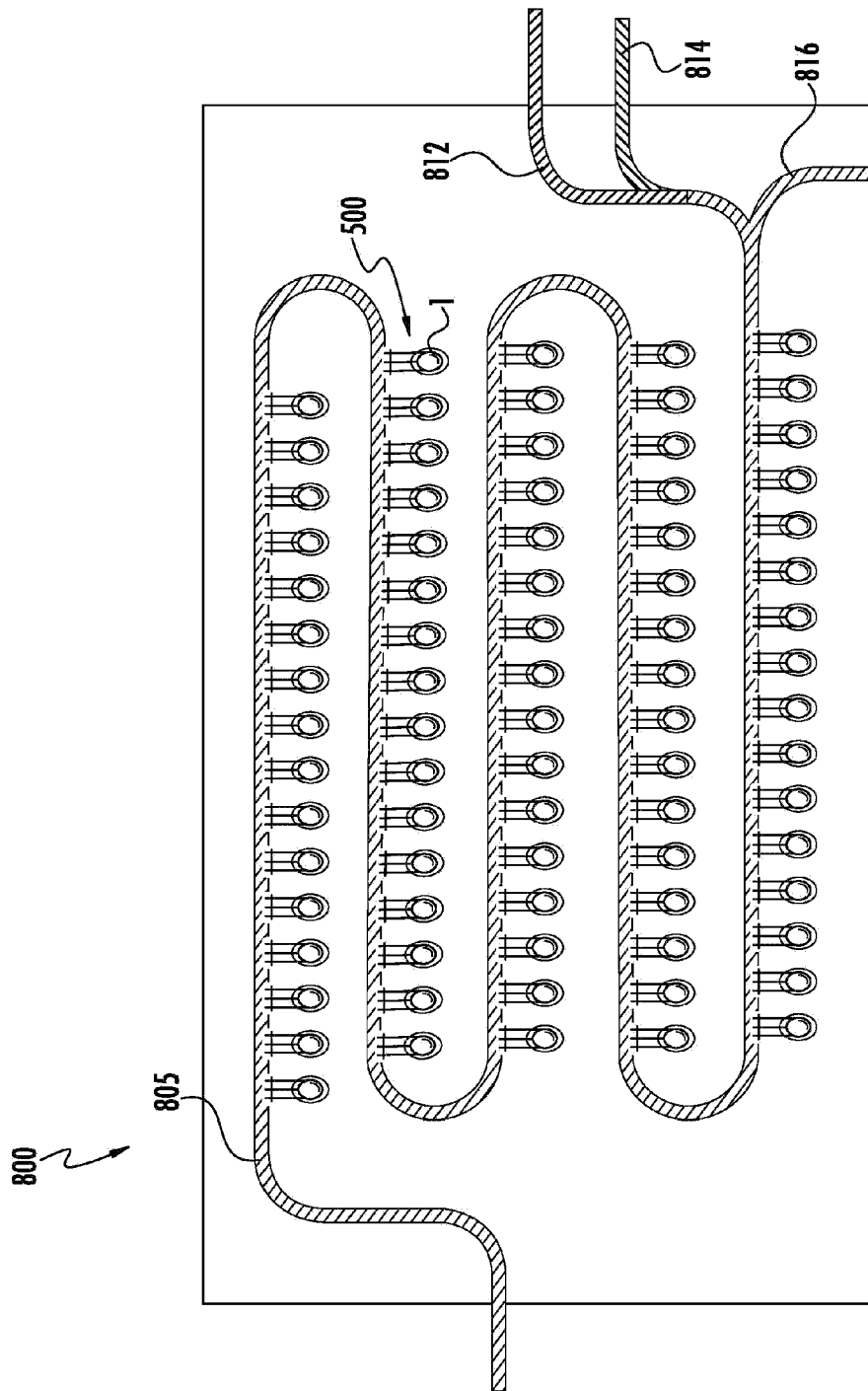


FIG. 25

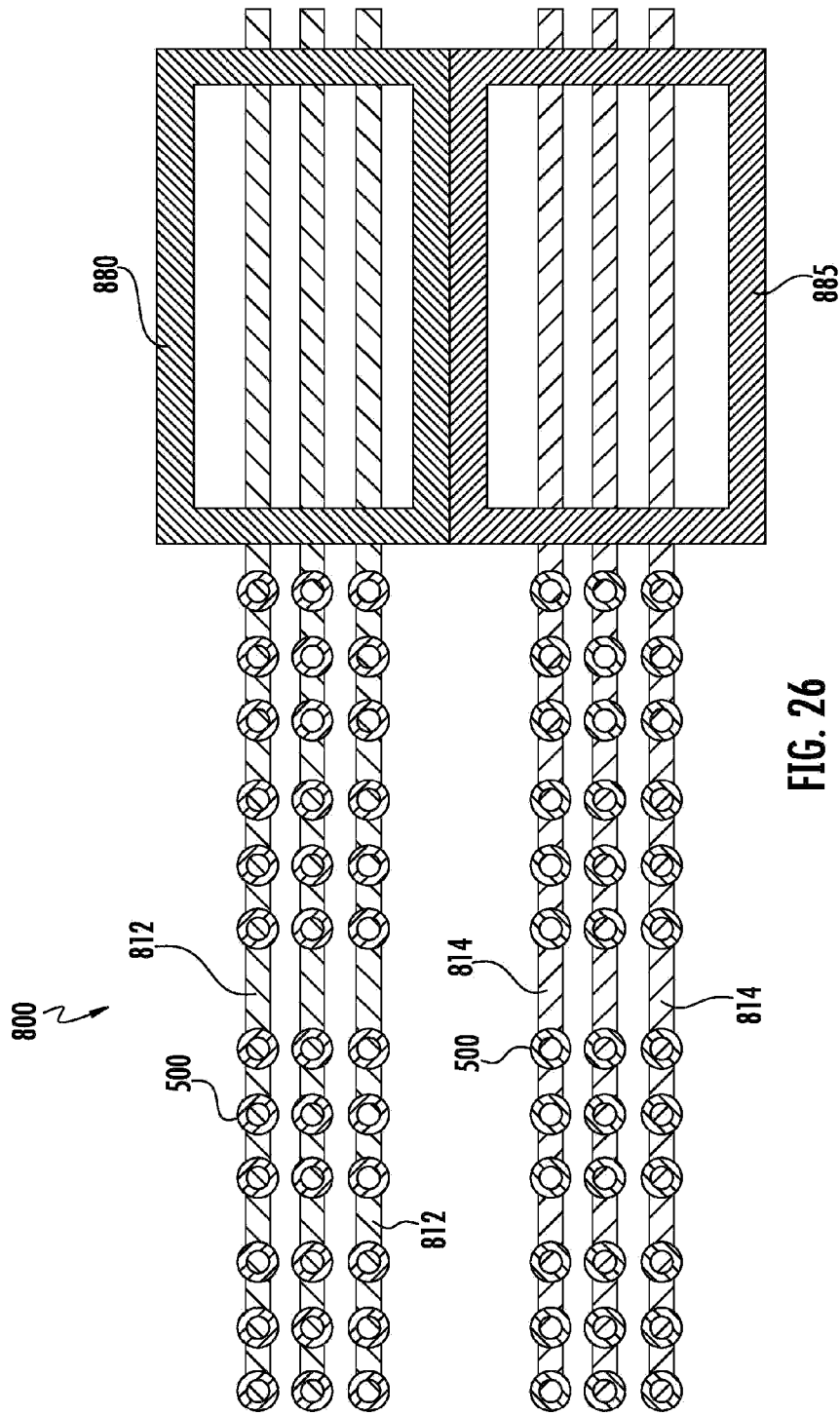
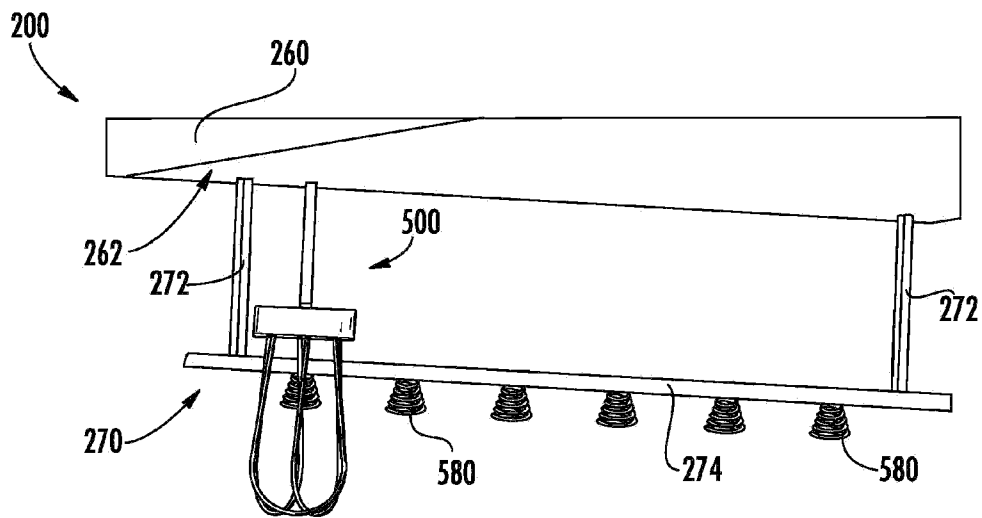
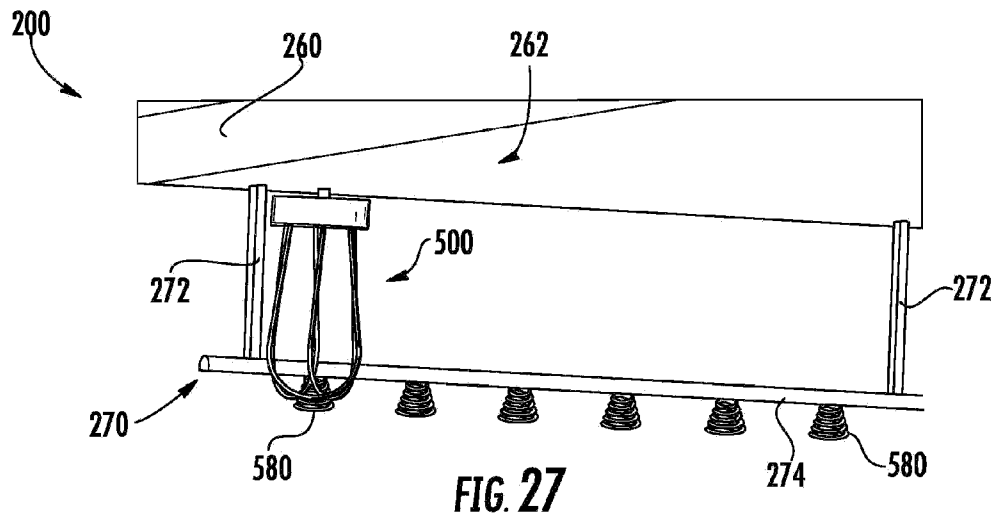


FIG. 26



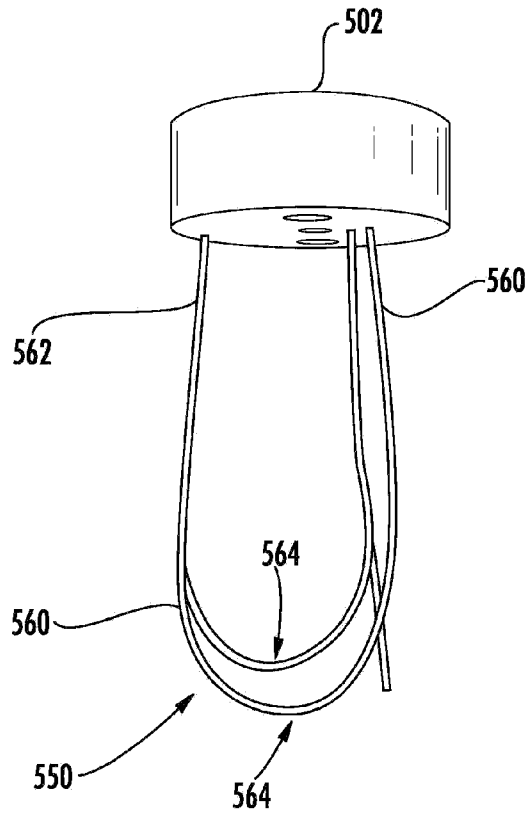


FIG. 29

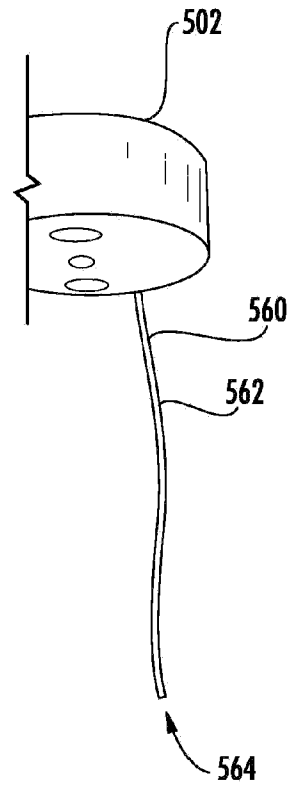


FIG. 30

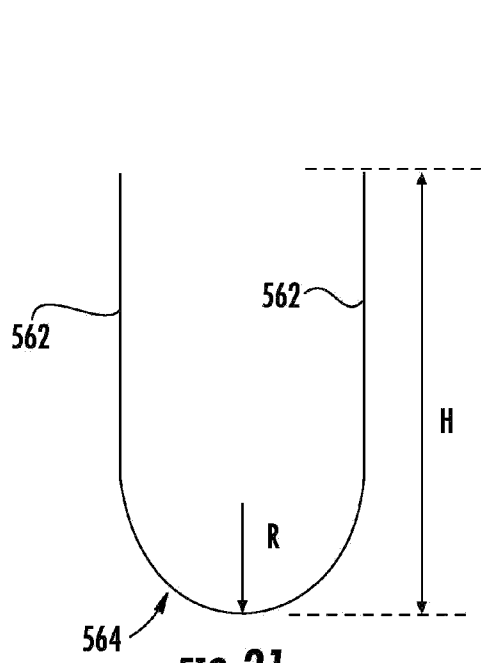


FIG. 31

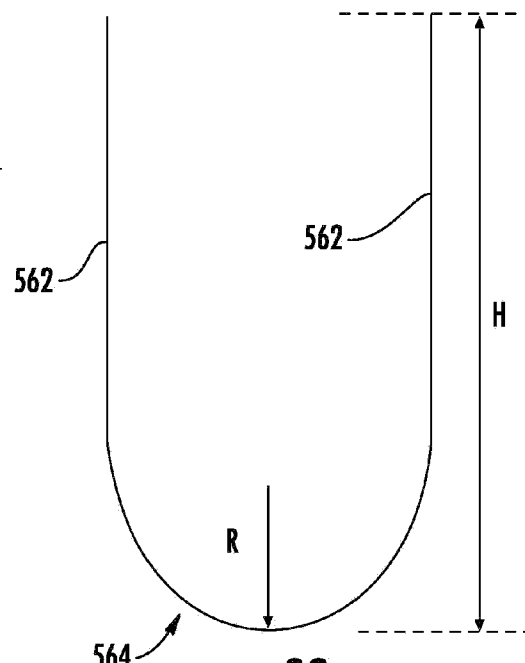


FIG. 32

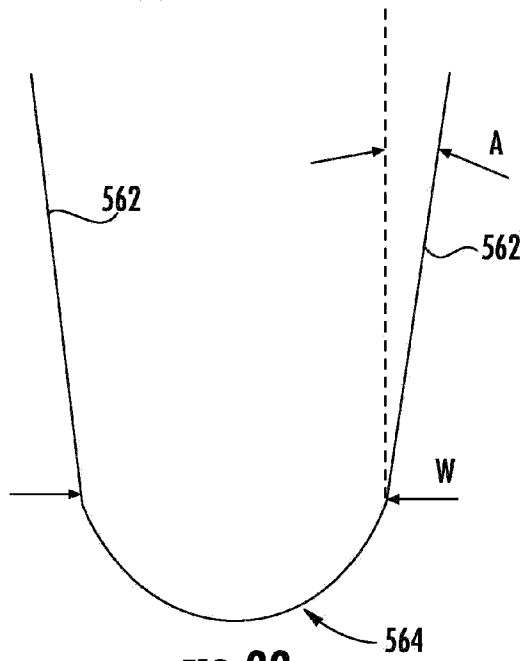


FIG. 33

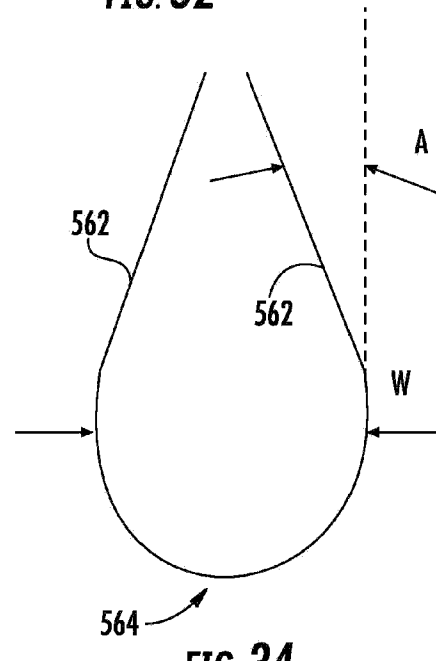


FIG. 34

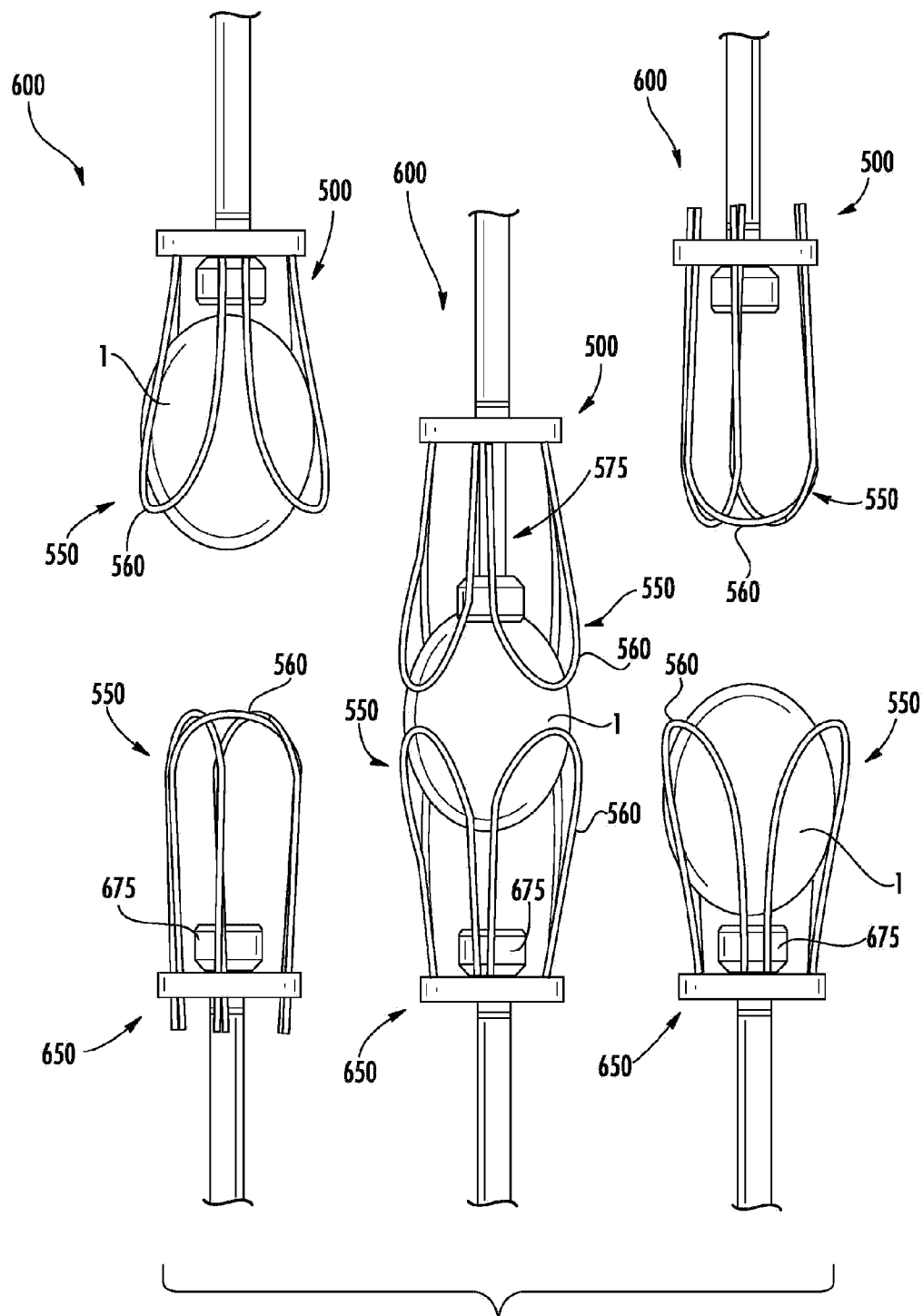


FIG. 35

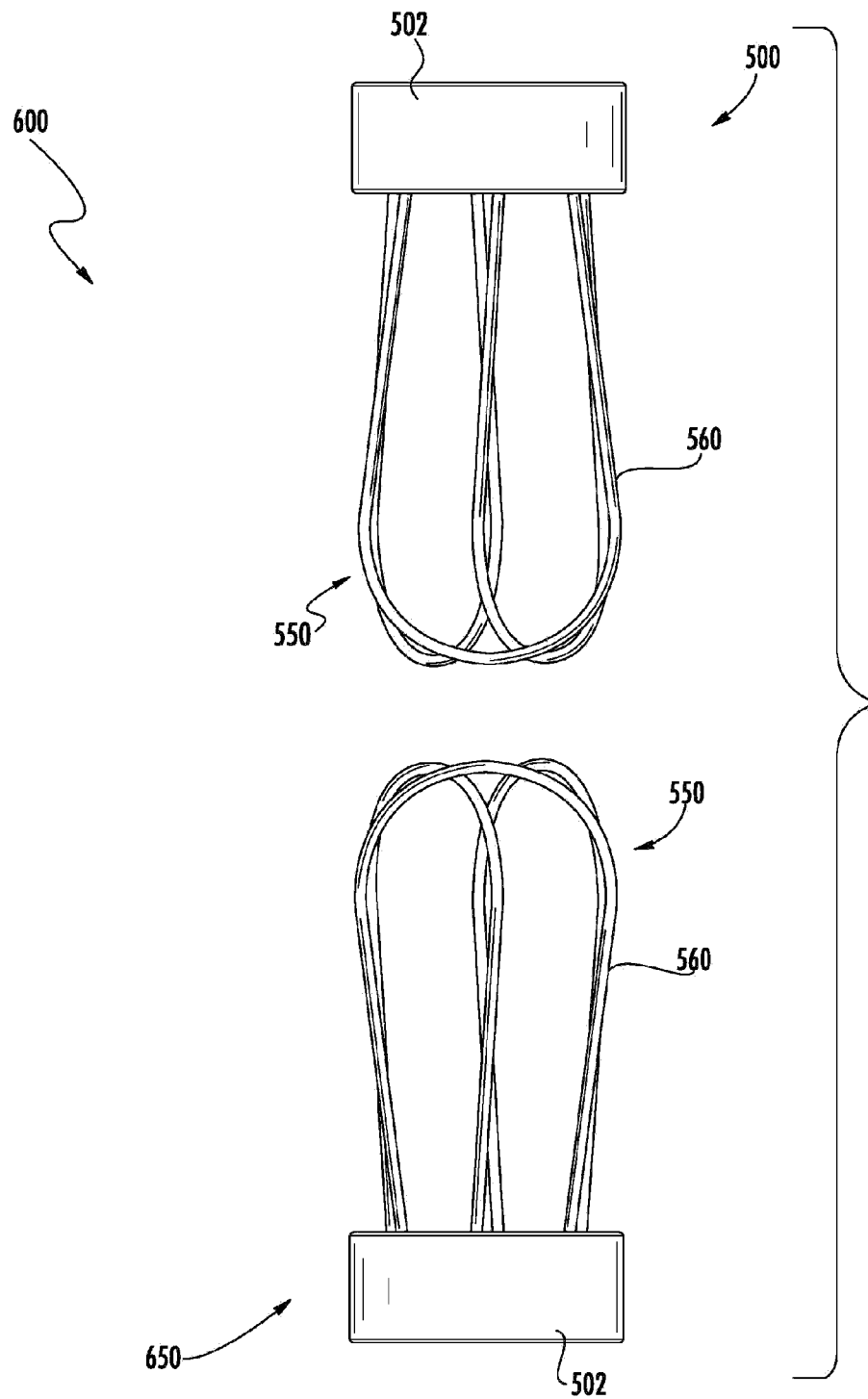


FIG. 36

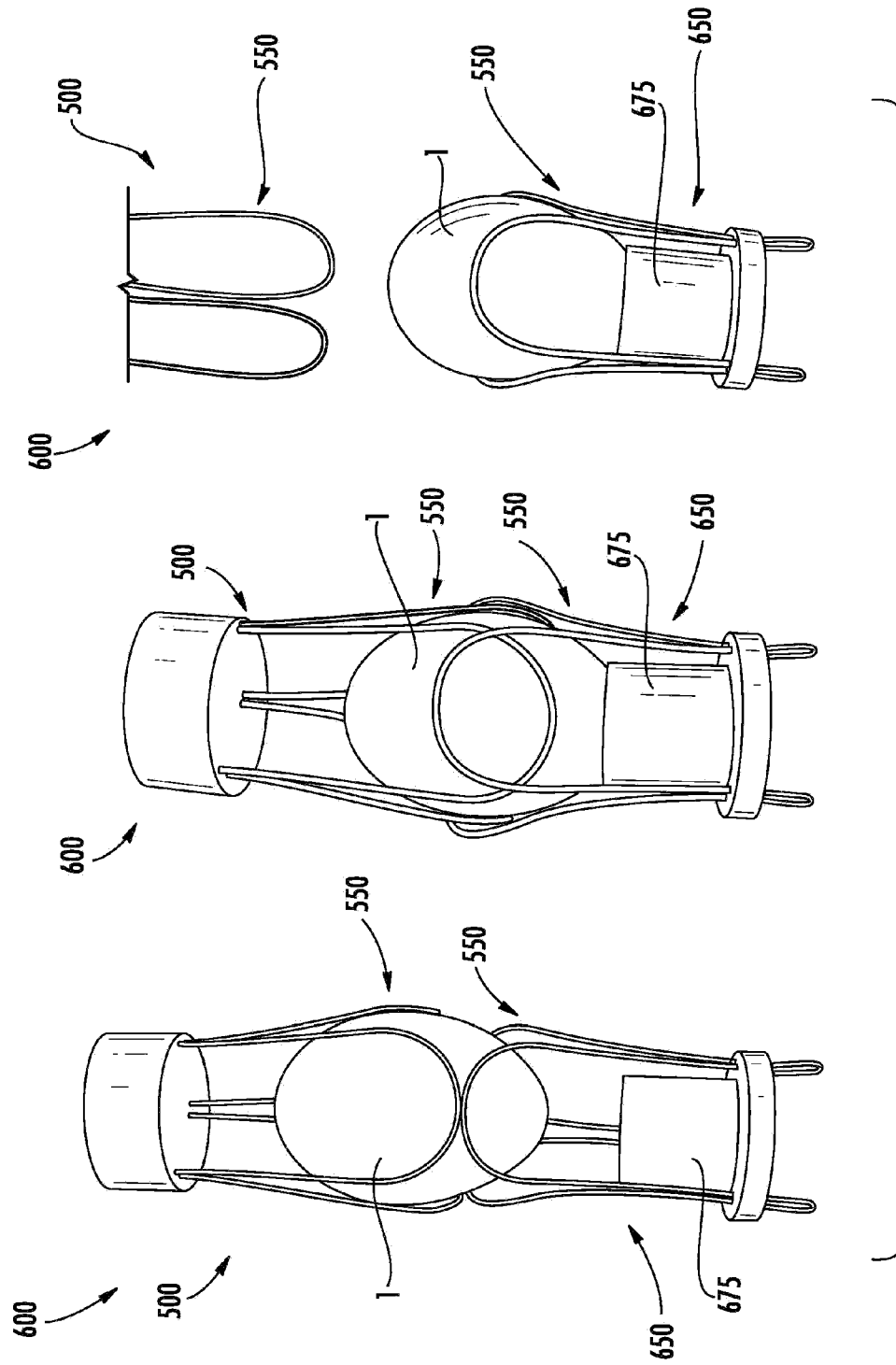
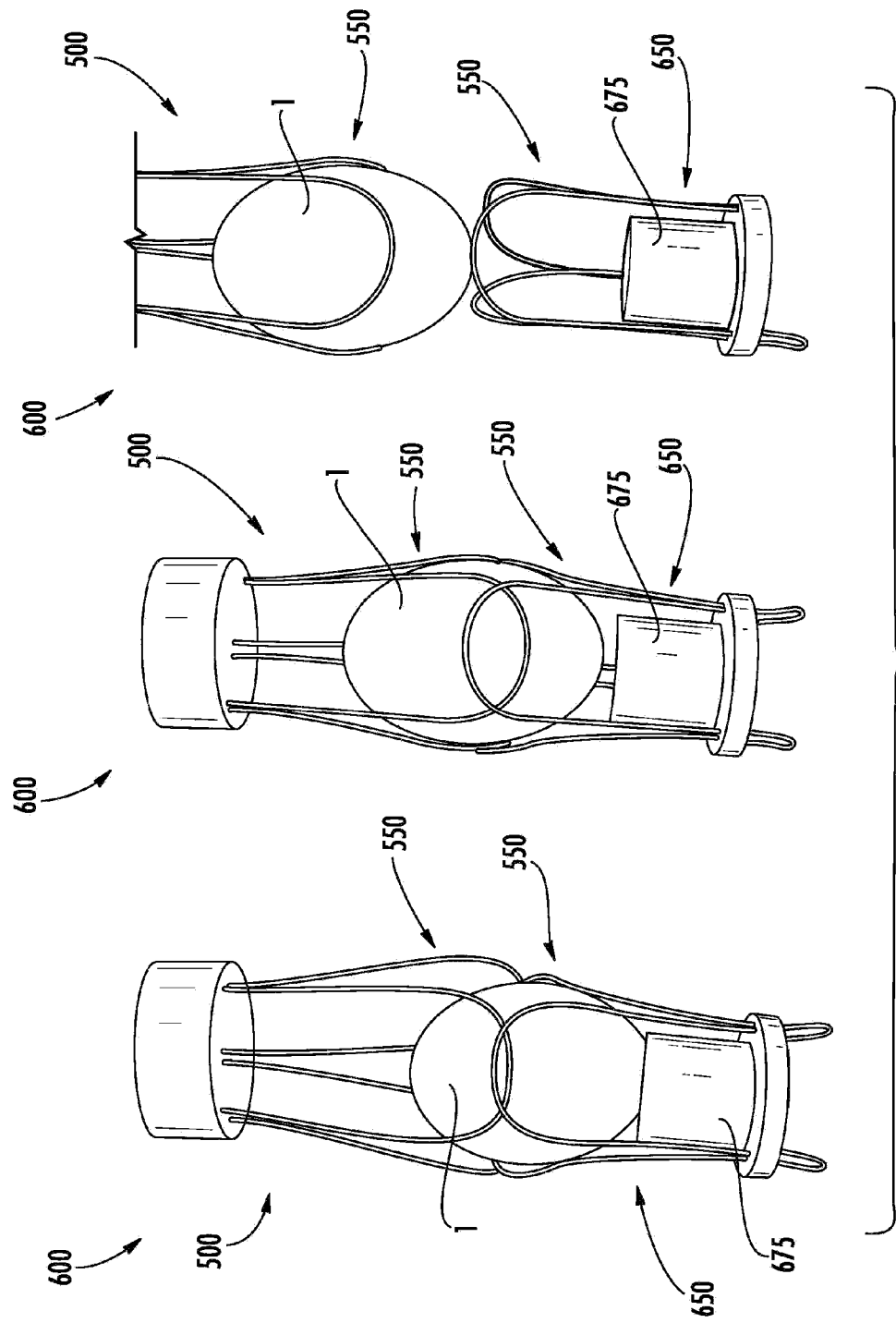


FIG. 37



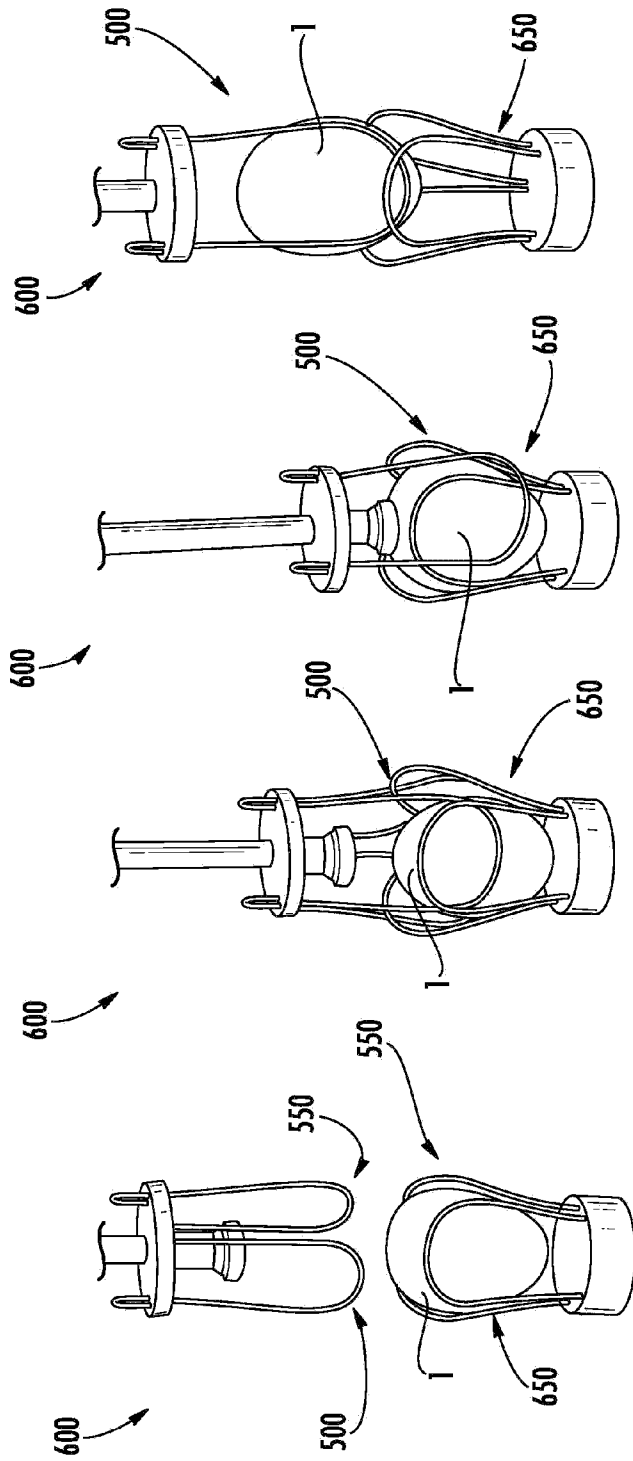


FIG. 39