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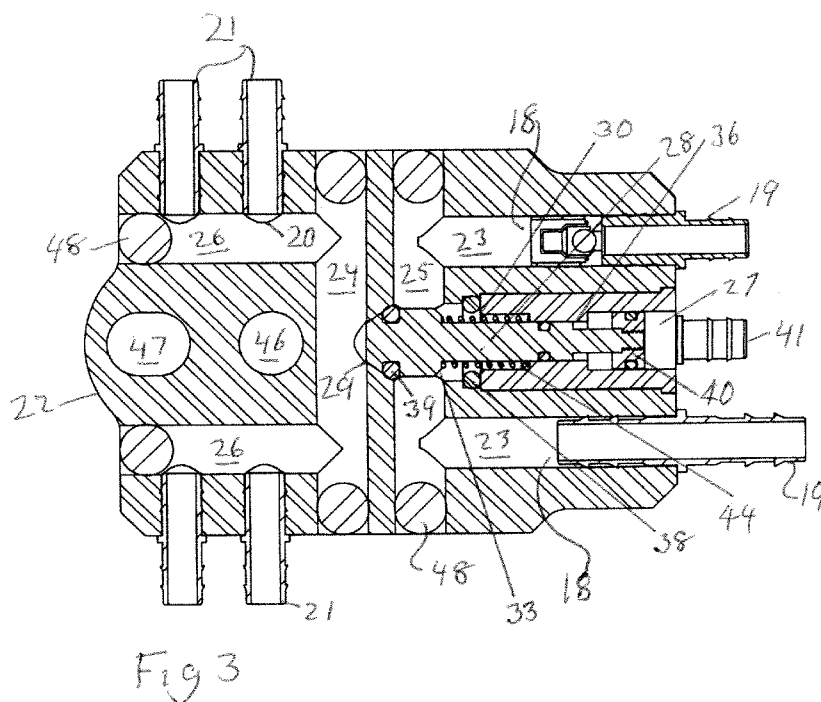
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(54) Title: MILKING EQUIPMENT



(57) Abstract: There is provided a distributor device (22) for distributing treatment fluid to the teat cups of a milking cluster. The distributor device has at least one distributor inlet (18) for treatment fluid, at least one distributor outlet (20) for connection to a teat cup, and a safety valve. The safety valve is selectively operable to permit flow between the at least one inlet (18) and the at least one outlet (20) and, in a rest position, to shut off flow between the at least one inlet and the at least one outlet and vent the at least one inlet to atmosphere.

MILKING EQUIPMENT

The present invention relates to milking equipment and, more particularly, to a milking cluster of teat cups and a distributor device for mounting with the cluster and for distributing treatment fluid to the teat cups of the cluster, post milking.

Conventionally, milking equipment installed in a milking parlour comprises a milking point at each animal stall within the parlour. Each milking point includes a milking cluster of teat cups for connecting the milking equipment to the teats of an animal to be milked. In the case of cows, for example, each milking cluster has four teat cups. The cluster additionally comprises a claw or clawpiece which connects short pulse tubes and short milk tubes leading from the teat cups, respectively, to a long pulse tube coupled to a pulsator and a long milk tube connected to a milk collection system. Each teat cup comprises a rigid hollow shell supporting a resilient or flexible liner which has a barrel portion for engaging about a teat and which has, at its upper end, an head portion with a mouth through which the teat is engaged with the barrel of the liner. At the opposite discharge end of the teat cup, the liner communicates with a short milk tube which delivers milk extracted from an animal's teat to the claw where it is collected and delivered to the long milk tube. A short pulsator tube is connected, at one end, to the annular space or pulse chamber between the shell and the liner and, at its opposite end, is connected, via a device on the claw, to the long pulsation tube and a pulsator.

Upon commencement of milking, vacuum is applied to the teat cups of a milking cluster at each milking point via the long milk tube, the claw and the short milk tubes for the purposes of extracting milk from the teat cups. This vacuum also leaks between the barrel of each liner and the engaged teat and is applied to a void formed about the teat in the head of a liner in order to capture the cup on the teat. Milking is performed by automatically and alternately applying vacuum and atmospheric pressure pulses produced by the pulsator to the pulse chamber of each teat cup in order to flex the liner and stimulate discharge of milk from the engaged teat. It is customary to apply these pneumatic pulses alternately to pairs of teat cups of a cluster.

After completion of the milking cycle, the milking cluster at each milking point is withdrawn from the teats (commonly referred to as “take-off”), such as by an automatic cluster remover and, in a treatment and cleansing cycle, the teats are disinfected and the teat cup liners are flushed internally with disinfectant and water and are dried with compressed air. To this end, teat cups may be fitted with injection nozzles for injecting treatment fluids into the heads of the liners as described in international publication No. WO 2005/043986. The treatment fluid is fed to the injection nozzles via a distributor on the claw. Alternatively, or in addition, treatment fluids may be supplied to each teat cup via a back flush valve disposed at the discharge end of the teat cup. In either event, upon take-off, the milking cluster is designed to enable the short milk tubes to fall away from the centre line of the cluster so that the teat cups are inverted and hang with their heads downwardly from the claw in a rest position. Flushing may be performed with the teat cups in this rest position. Consequently, liquid can escape through the head portions of the teat cups.

Where treatment fluids are injected into the liners of the teat cups, post milking, for example, as described in the aforementioned international publication, the treatment fluid is delivered to the different teat cups of a milking cluster via a distributor on the claw and a safety valve, which is desirably included with the distributor, is provided to prevent treatment fluid entering the liners and contaminating the milk in the event of a control system malfunction. The safety valve provides protection against manifold valve malfunction during the milking cycle and ensures that, in the event of a malfunction which causes treatment fluid under pressure to be fed to the distributor, this is controlled by the safety valve. As described in international application No. WO 2005/102035, during the milking cycle, the safety valve is open to a drain port so that treatment fluid can flow to waste instead of risking the possibility of this treatment fluid contaminating the milk.

It is an object of the present invention to provide an improved distributor device for distributing treatment fluid to the teat cups of a milking cluster and which incorporates a safety valve which, in a rest position, shuts off the fluid flow of treatment fluid through the distributor and vents to atmosphere.

To this end, according to an aspect of the invention there is provided a distributor device for distributing treatment fluid to the teat cups of a milking cluster. The distributor device has at least one distributor inlet for treatment fluid, at least one distributor outlet for connection to a teat cup, and a safety valve. The safety valve is selectively operable to permit flow between the at least one inlet and the at least one outlet and, in a rest position, to shut off flow between the at least one inlet and the at least one outlet and vent the at least one inlet to atmosphere. Preferably, the safety valve is incorporated in the body of the distributor.

With the invention, the safety valve is in the rest position during the milking cycle and provides an atmospheric break. It shuts off treatment fluid flow between the inlet(s) and the outlet(s) and ensures that, in the event of a malfunction which causes treatment fluid under pressure to be fed to the distributor, the treatment fluid bleeds away through the atmospheric vent and flows to waste instead of risking the possibility of milk contamination.

In a preferred embodiment, the distributor includes a first passageway interconnecting the inlet(s) and the bleed port venting to atmosphere, a second passageway connecting with the distributor outlet(s) for delivering treatment fluid thereto, first and second valve ports disposed respectively between the first passageway and the bleed port and the first and second passageways, and valve means controlling the ports, said valve means opening the first valve port and closing the second valve port in the rest position of the valve means.

Conveniently, the valve means may comprise a movable valve body carrying at least one valve member cooperating with the first and second valve ports. A return spring may be arranged to resiliently urge and retain the valve body in the position in which said at least one valve member opens the first valve port and closes the second valve port, thereby shutting off fluid flow to the distributor outlet(s).

Advantageously, the movable valve body may comprise two back-to-back valve surfaces, one of which is engageable with a valve seat of the first valve port to close the first valve port, and the other of which is engageable with a valve seat of the second valve port to close the second valve port.

The distributor device may comprise two of the inlets and two of the outlets, and a distributor body having two inlet passageways and two outlet passageways. The two inlet passageways may extend from the two inlets and exit into the first passageway, and the two outlet passageways may extend from the two outlets and connect to the second passageway.

Furthermore, the two inlet passageways may be mutually parallel to one another, the two inlet passageways may be mutually parallel to one another, and the first and second passageways may be mutually parallel to one another and transverse to the inlet and outlet passageways.

The safety valve may comprise a valve bore extending transverse to the first and second passageways, and the movable valve body may be slidably mounted in the valve bore.

Advantageously, the movable valve body may be pneumatically actuatable. The movable valve body may comprise a piston that is actuable by compressed air to close the first valve port and open the second valve port.

In order that the present invention may be more readily understood reference will now be made to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Fig. 1 is a perspective view from one side of a milking cluster of teat cups embodying the invention,

Fig. 2 is a perspective view of the treatment fluid distributor from above,

Figs. 3 and 4 are sectional views taken along the lines A-A and B-B of Fig. 2, respectively, with the safety valve shown in the unactuated or rest position, and

Figs. 5 and 6 are sectional views taken along the lines A-A and B-B of Fig. 2, respectively, with the safety valve shown in the actuated or open position.

Fig. 1 of the accompanying drawings illustrates a milking cluster 1 of teat cups embodying the invention and for connecting milking equipment installed at a milking point of an animal stall within a milking parlour to the teats of an animal to be milked. It comprises four teat cups 2, a claw 3 having a nipple 4 for connecting the claw to a long milk tube (not shown) connecting the claw 3 to a milk line, and a distributor 5 clamped to the top side of the claw for connecting the cluster, via nipples 5a, to long pulsation tubes (not shown) supplying milking pulses from a pulsator. The teat cups 2 are each composed of a rigid outer shell 6, for example made of stainless steel or plastic, and a flexible liner 7 which has a barrel portion for engaging about a teat, and at its upper end, has a head portion 8 with a mouth through which the teat is engaged with the barrel of the liner. At the opposite, discharge end 9 of the teat cup, the liner is integral with a flexible short milk tube 10 connecting the teat cup to nipples 11 on the top of the claw so that milk extracted from an animal's teats is delivered to the claw 3 from which the collected milk is supplied via the long milk tube to the milk line.

An annular space (not shown) between the shell 6 and the barrel of the liner 7 of each teat cup is called the pulse chamber and is connected via a short pulse tube 12 to the distributor 5 on the claw, via which vacuum and atmospheric pressure fed from the pulsator is automatically and alternately supplied to the pulse chambers of the four teat cups in order to flex the liners and stimulate milking of the engaged teats.

The short milk tubes 10 have weaker sections 13 at positions immediately above the nipples 11 connecting the short milk tubes to the claw so that, when a milking cycle is terminated, which is detected via a milk flow metre of the stall control unit as a reduction of milk flow below a predetermined level, an automatic cluster remover attached to the loop 14 of the cluster support 15, is signalled to take off the cluster from the cow's udder, whereupon the teat cups naturally fall into a position in which they hang downwardly from the short milk tubes 10, in an inverted position, with their heads 8 downwardly, as illustrated in Fig. 1. When the teat cups fall into this downwardly hanging position, the short milk tubes are folded about their weaker sections 13 which serve to shut-off the short milk tube 5 and liner 7 from the claw 3 and prevent treatment fluid sprayed upwardly into the liners,

as hereinafter more fully described, from contaminating the claw.

Disposed internally of the head 8 of each liner 7 is an injection nozzle (not shown) for injecting treatment fluid internally into the liner. It is designed so as to direct fluid sprayed from the nozzle inwardly and towards the interior of the barrel of the liner. These nozzles are supplied with treatment fluid for sanitizing the teats, upon take-off, and disinfecting and rinsing the teat cups when the latter fall into their downwardly hanging position, by small diameter flexible tubes 16 connected to a treatment fluid distributor 17 clamped to the top of the claw underneath the pulse distributor 5. Referring also to Figs 2 - 6, each stall control unit has two fluid delivery lines connected to inlets 18 of the distributor 17 via nipples 19. One delivery line, which is connected to the uppermost nipple 19 as drawn in Fig. 3 and which is provided with a non-return valve, supplies disinfectant and conditioning liquid, for example iodine and emollient, for sanitizing the teats of a cow, post milking, whilst a second delivery line, which is connected to the lowermost nipple 19 as drawn in Fig. 3, supplies disinfectant for the teat cups, water or other rinsing fluid and high and low pressure compressed air. These treatment fluids supplied to the inlets 18 of the distributor 17 are distributed by the distributor to individual outlets 20 having nipples 21 for connecting the outlets to the small diameter fluid delivery tubes 16.

The distributor 17 is a moulded plastic body 22 comprising two mutually parallel inlet passageways 23 extending from the inlets 18 in the longitudinal direction of the distributor body and exiting into the first of two mutually parallel transverse passageways 24, 25. The second transverse passageway 24 is connected to two mutually parallel outlet passageways 26 extending in the longitudinal direction of the distributor body and each communicating with two distributor outlets 20 and their associates nipples 21 on the adjacent side.

Formed between the inlet passages 23 is a safety valve comprising a valve bore 27 extending in the longitudinal direction of the distributor body and slidably mounting a valve body 28. The valve bore intersects the transverse passageways 24, 25 and forms a valve port 29 between the first and second transverse passageways. Axially spaced along the bore 27 towards the outer end of the bore

is a second valve port 30 outwardly of which the bore connects with a bleed hole 31 formed through the distributor body and venting to atmosphere. The valve body 28 has a double valve member having back-to-back valve surfaces 32, 33 which are selectively engageable with a valve seats about the port 29, in order to shut off fluid flow between the two transverse passageways 24, 25 and with a valve seat 38 about the port 30 in order to shut-off fluid flow to the bleed hole 31. The valve surface 32 incorporates a valve seal 39.

The valve body 28 slidably engages with a narrow section 36 of the bore 27 axially outwardly of the bleed hole 31 and is sealed therein for sliding movement by an O-ring 37. The valve body 28 has a piston 40 located at its axial outer end and engaging the valve bore 27. This piston is actuated to slide the valve body axially outwardly of the valve bore by compressed air supplied via a pneumatic tube connected to a nipple 41 communicating with a pneumatic passageway 42 extending longitudinally above the valve bore 27, and communicating with the latter, via a port 43, inwardly of the piston. The valve body is resiliently urged into a rest position in which the valve member 32 shuts the valve port 29 to shut-off connection between the first and second transverse passageways 24, 25 (see figs. 3 and 4) by a cylindrical compression spring 44 mounted on the valve body between the valve member 33 and a shoulder of the narrow section 36 supporting the valve body.

The distributor body 22 is clamped to the top of the claw 3 by the clamping screw 45 projecting through an aperture 46 in the distributor body. Aperture 47 in the distributor body is an indexing hole engagable with an indexing pin projecting upwardly from the claw 3 and preventing turning of the distributors.

Plugs in the form of stainless steel balls 48 are forced into the open ends of passages 24, 25 and 26 to seal the open ends. Alternatively, another method of plugging the open ends of the passages 24, 25, and 26 may be used, such plastic plugs. The use of plugs for the ends of the passages means that the passages can be easily manufactured, for example by drilling through the plastic body 22, rather than needing to mould them.

When the milking cluster 1 is attached to the teats of a cow for milking, the teat cups 2 are moved from the position illustrated in Fig. 1 to a position in which the head portions 8 are uppermost and are fitted over the teats. Milking is stimulated by applying pneumatic pulses to the pulse chambers of the teat cups 2 via the pulse distributor 5, the pulses being alternately applied to pairs of the teat cups. During the milking cycle, pneumatic pressure is removed from the pneumatic tube 42 of the distributor and the valve body 28 remains in its rest or unactuated position shown in figures 3 and 4 in which the valve member 32 shuts the valve port 29 between the two transverse passageways 24, 25, and the valve member 33 opens the valve port 30 so that, during the milking cycle, the bleed port 31 is in communication with the distributor inlets 18, via the first transverse passageway 24 and, should there be a malfunction in the system, disinfectant and other treatment fluids may vent to atmosphere through the bleed port 31.

When the milking cycle is terminated, which is detected by a milk flow meter of the stall control unit as a reduction of the milk flow below a predetermined level, the automatic cluster remover is signalled to take-off the cluster 1 from the cow's udder and, also, the programmable electronic circuit board of the stall control unit or a central control for all stall units is signalled to commence a cleansing cycle.

Following an optional preselected time delay at the start of the cleansing cycle, for example to permit vacuum within the liners of the teat cups to decay, the valve controlling application of pneumatic pressure to the nipple 41 and pneumatic passageway 42 is actuated to supply compressed air to the passageway and cause the piston 40 of the valve body to slide the valve body to the right, as viewed in Figs. 3 - 6, thereby opening the valve port 29 between the transverse passages 24, 25 and closing the valve port 30 leading to the bleed port 31, as shown in Figs. 5 and 6. Disinfectant and other treatment fluid is then able to flow from the distributor inlets 18 via the transverse passageway 25, the valve port 29 and the transverse passageway 24 to the outlet ports 20 under the selective actuation of solenoid operated valves controlled by the programmable electronic circuit board of the associated stall control unit.

At the end of the cleansing cycle, the solenoid valve controlling the flow of compressed air to the pneumatic passageway 42 is deactivated to remove compressed air from the passageway, and the valve body 28 moves to the left under the action of the return spring 44, thereby opening the valve port 30 and closing the valve port 29 preparatory to commencement of the next milking cycle.

A final optional step at the end of the cleansing cycle, after the valve body 28 has moved to the left under the action of the return spring 44, is to supply a shot/blast of water or cleaning fluid via the second delivery line to the lowermost nipple 19 as drawn in Fig. 3, to flow through the valve port 30 and out of the bleed port 31, to help ensure that the valve port 30 and the bleed port 31 are kept clean and free of debris. The shot/blast of water or cleaning fluid may be followed by a shot/blast of compressed air, also from the second delivery tube connected to the lowermost nipple 19 as drawn in Fig. 3, to dry the valve port 30 and the bleed port 31.

Whilst a particular embodiment has been described, it will be understood that modifications can be made without departing from the scope of the invention. For example, various parts of the specific embodiments described herein may be omitted in alternate embodiments.

In particular, the O-ring seal 37 could be replaced with a lip seal between the narrow section 36 of the bore 27 and the valve body 28, to help reduce friction. The lip of the seal would be angled away from the valve port 29, to help prevent compressed air from the passageway 42 moving past the lip of the seal in the direction of the valve port 29. Alternatively, the O-ring seal 37 could be entirely omitted, and the narrow section 36 and the valve body 28 could be formed with close tolerances such that there was little room between them for compressed air to pass by the narrow section 36.

CLAIMS

1. A distributor device for distributing treatment fluid to the teat cups of a milking cluster, the distributor device having at least one distributor inlet for treatment fluid, at least one distributor outlet for connection to a teat cup, and a safety valve, wherein the safety valve is selectively operable to permit flow between the at least one inlet and the at least one outlet and, in a rest position, to shut off flow between the at least one inlet and the at least one outlet and vent the at least one inlet to atmosphere.
2. The distributor device of claim 1, wherein the safety valve is incorporated in the body of the distributor.
3. The distributor device of claim 1 or 2, wherein the distributor includes a bleed port venting to atmosphere and a first passageway interconnecting the at least one inlet and the bleed port, a second passageway connecting with the at least one outlet for delivering treatment fluid thereto, a first port disposed between the first passageway and the bleed port, a second port disposed between the first and second passageways, and a valve means controlling the ports, said valve means opening the first valve port and closing the second valve port in the rest position of the valve means.
4. The distributor device of claim 3, wherein the valve means comprises a movable valve body carrying at least one valve member cooperating with the first and second valve ports.
5. The distributor device of claim 4, wherein the valve means further comprises a return spring arranged resiliently to urge and retain the valve body in the position in which said at least one valve member opens the first valve port and closes the second valve port, thereby shutting off fluid flow to the at least one outlet.
6. The distributor device of claim 4 or 5, wherein the movable valve body comprises two back-to-back valve surfaces, one of which is engageable with a

valve seat of the first valve port to close the first valve port, and the other of which is engageable with a valve seat of the second valve port to close the second valve port.

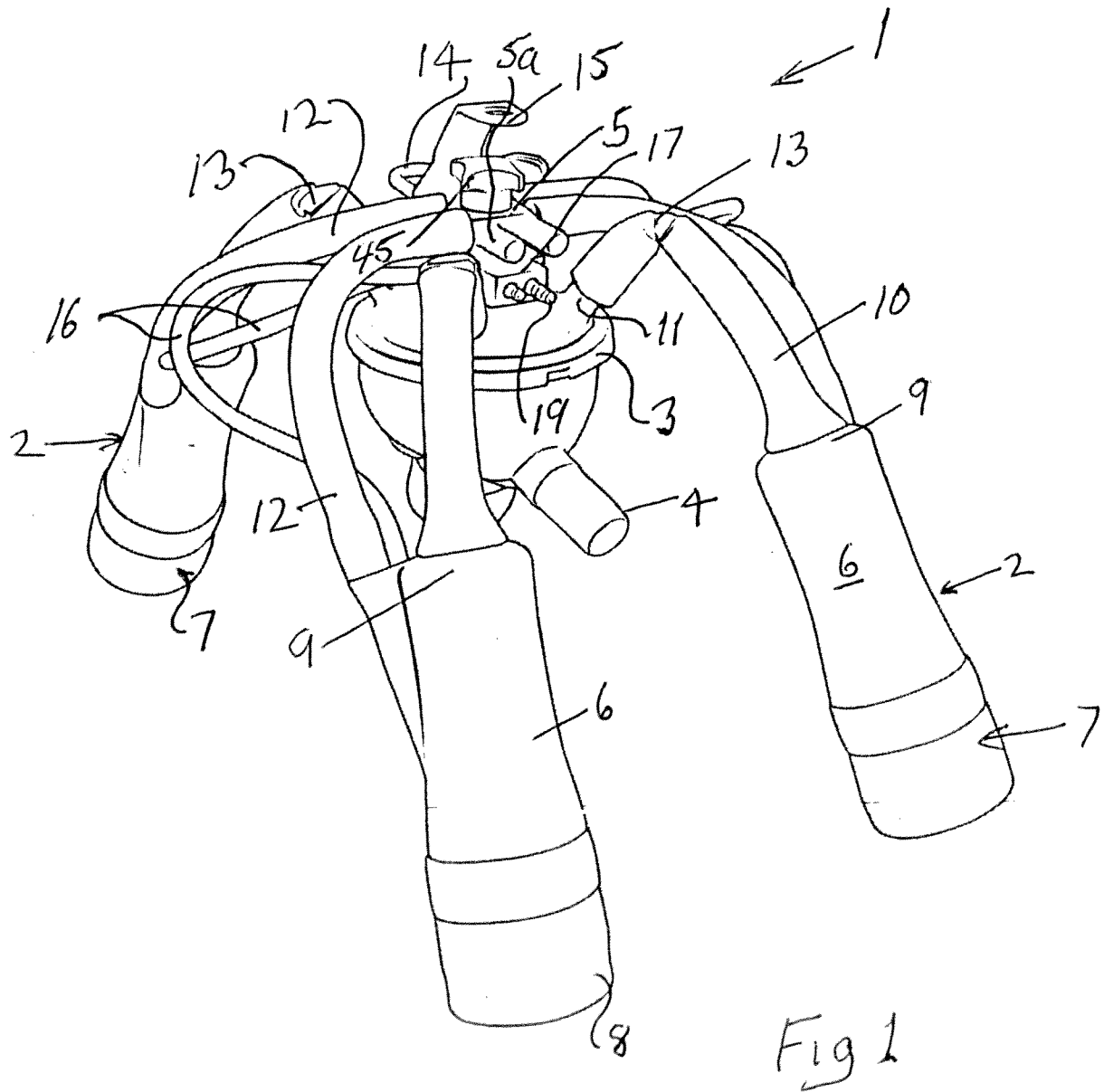
7. The distributor device of any one of claims 3 to 6, wherein the at least one inlet comprises two inlets, wherein the at least one outlet comprises two outlets, wherein the distributor device comprises a distributor body having two inlet passageways and two outlet passageways, wherein the two inlet passageways extend from the two inlets and exit into the first passageway, and wherein the two outlet passageways extend from the two outlets and connect to the second passageway.

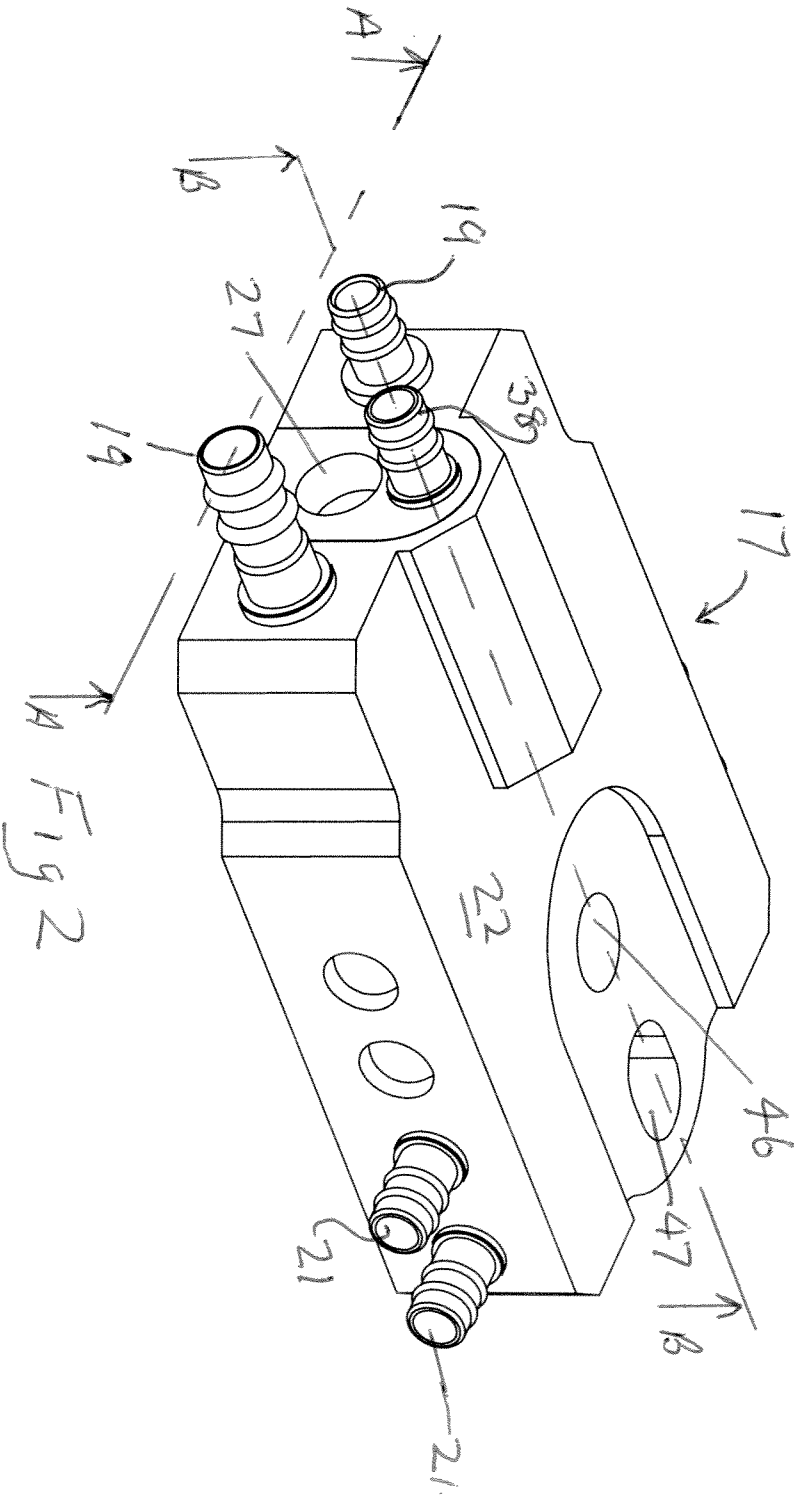
8. The distributor device of claim 7, wherein the two inlet passageways are mutually parallel to one another, wherein the two inlet passageways are mutually parallel to one another, and wherein the first and second passageways are mutually parallel to one another and are transverse to the inlet and outlet passageways.

9. The distributor device of any one of claims 3 to 8, wherein the safety valve comprises a valve bore extending transverse to the first and second passageways, and wherein the movable valve body is slidably mounted in the valve bore.

10. The distributor device of any one of claims 3 to 9, wherein the movable valve body is pneumatically actuable.

11. The distributor device of claim 10, wherein the movable valve body comprises a piston that is actuable by compressed air to close the first valve port and open the second valve port.





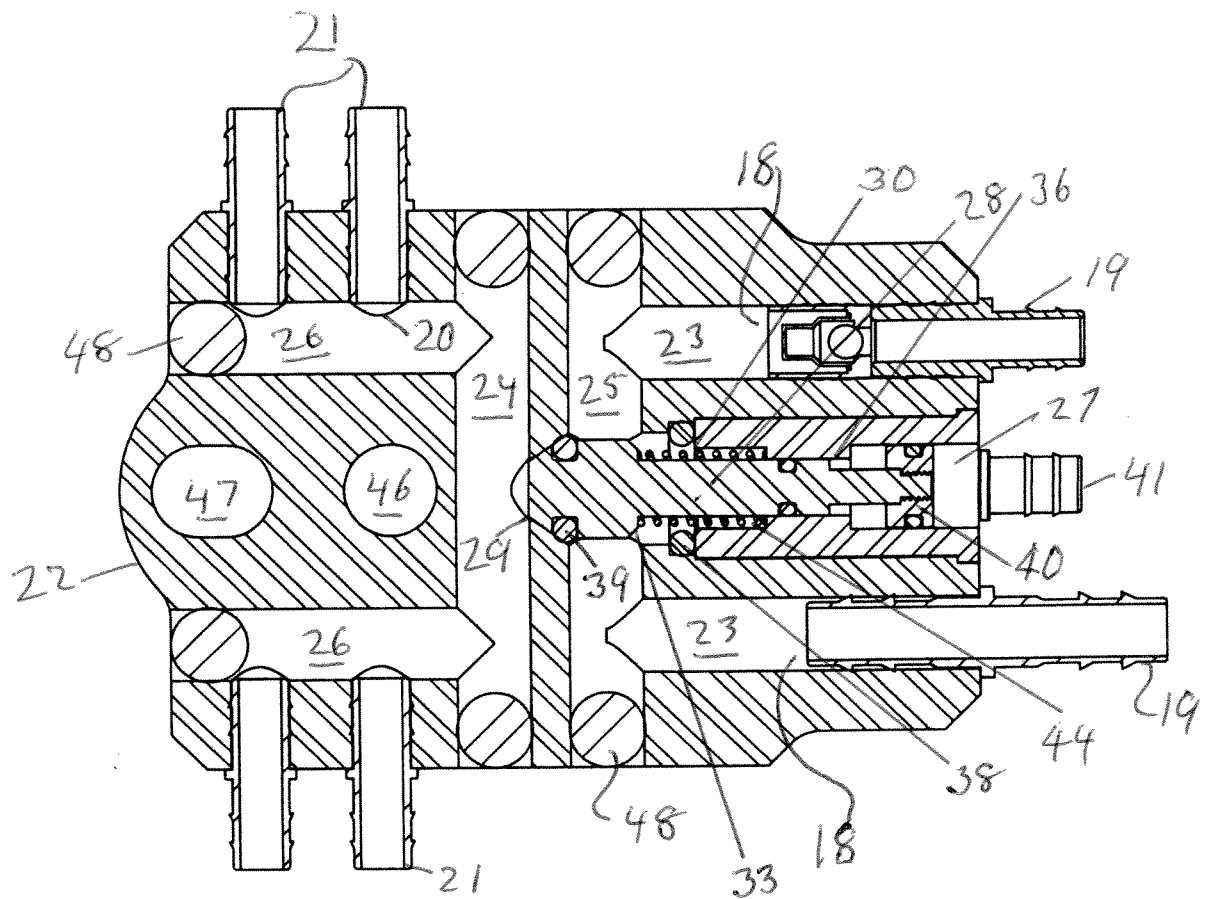


Fig 3

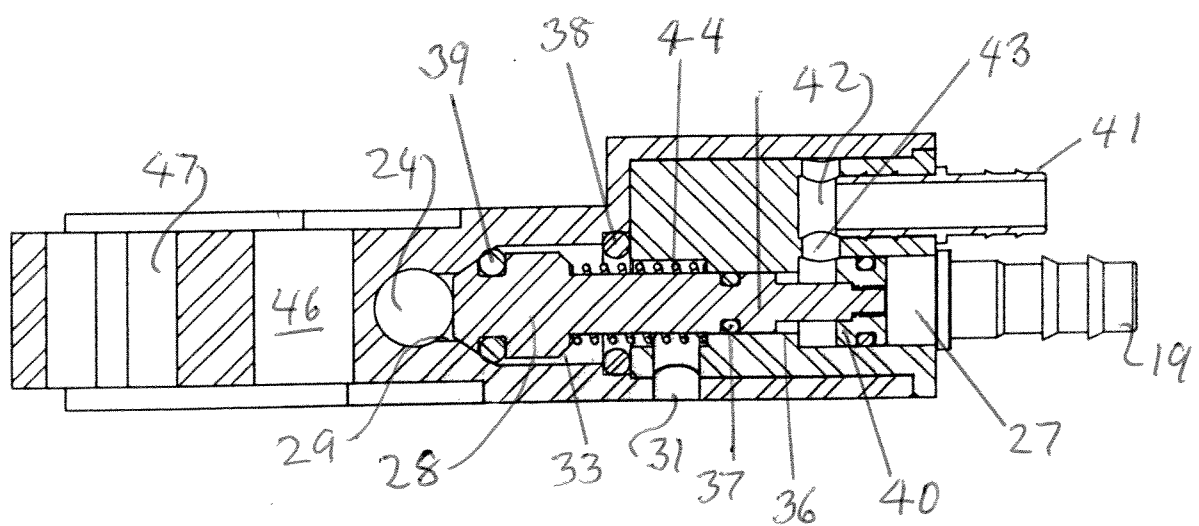


Fig 4

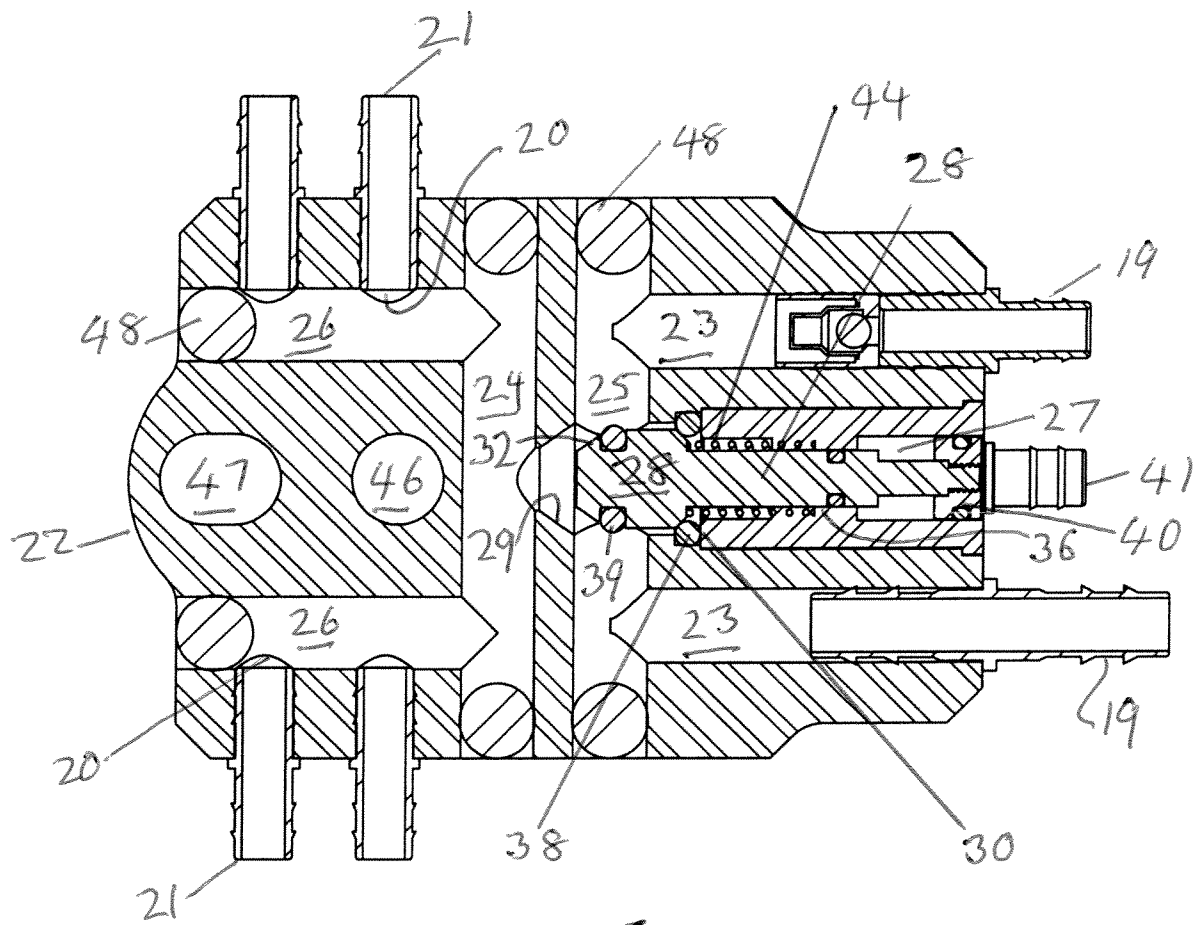


Fig 5

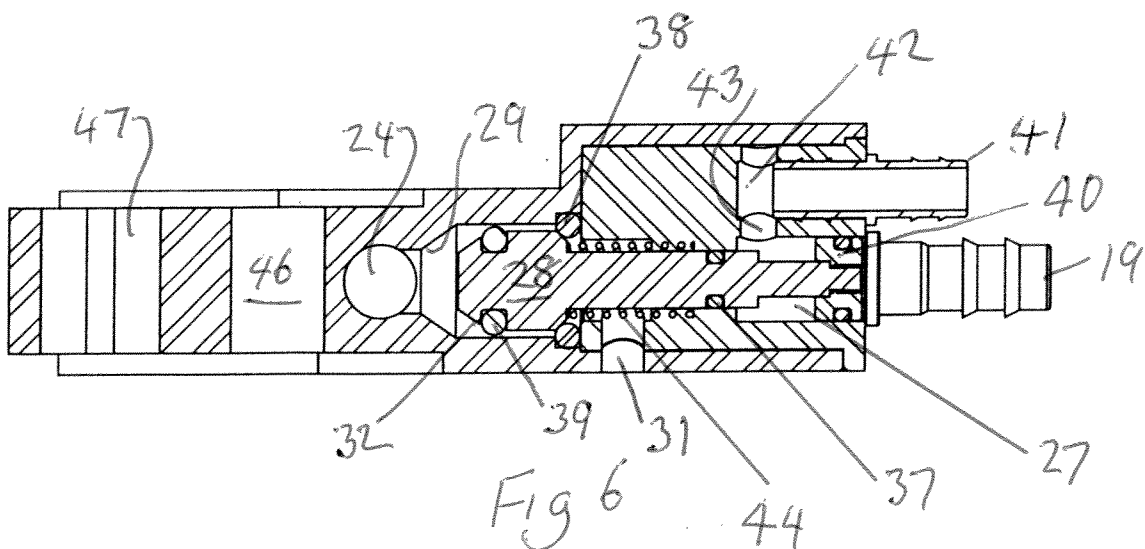


Fig 6

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/GB2013/051979

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
INV. A01J7/02 A01J7/04
ADD.

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
A01J

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

EPO-Internal, WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	WO 2005/102035 A2 (DUKE JAMES RICHARD JOHN [GB]) 3 November 2005 (2005-11-03) cited in the application	1,2
A	page 5 - page 14; figure 5 -----	3-11



Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents :

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance

"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date

"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

7 November 2013

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International application No

PCT/GB2013/051979

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
WO 2005102035 A2	03-11-2005	EP 1737291 A2	03-01-2007
		EP 2625953 A1	14-08-2013
		US 2007215053 A1	20-09-2007
		US 2012272911 A1	01-11-2012
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