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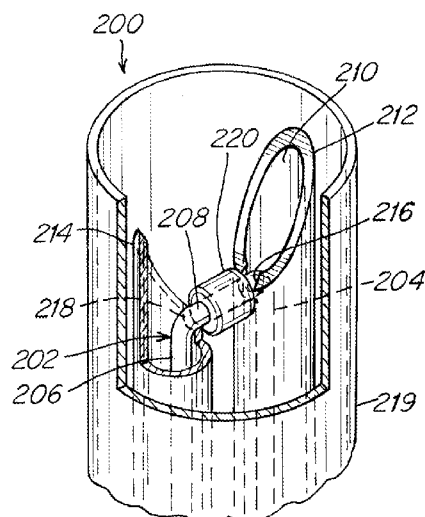
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(54) Title: INSTRUMENTS FOR DELIVERING TRANSFASCIAL SUTURES, TRANSFASCIAL SUTURE ASSEMBLIES, AND METHODS OF TRANSFASCIAL SUTURING

**Fig. 3**

(57) Abstract: An instrument for delivering a suture transfascially may include a handle, a shaft extending from the handle, and a pair of needles that are moveable to an extended position beyond the end of the shaft. One or more sutures are carried by the instrument and may be delivered transfascially. A transfascial suture assembly includes a suture having a first segment, a second segment, and an intermediate segment therebetween. A force distributing member is locatable at the intermediate segment. Suture retainers may be provided at the end of each suture segment, and may have a connection that is moveable relative to the portion of the suture segment connected therewith. A method of delivering transfascial sutures includes inserting a twin-needle instrument loaded with one or more sutures into an abdominal cavity and deploying, from within the abdominal cavity, the suture carrying needles through a soft tissue repair patch and then through at least part of the abdominal wall.

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## **INSTRUMENTS FOR DELIVERING TRANSFASCIAL SUTURES, TRANSFASCIAL SUTURE ASSEMBLIES, AND METHODS OF TRANSFASCIAL SUTURING**

### **FIELD**

The invention relates to instruments for delivering transfascial sutures, to transfascial  
5 suture assemblies, and to methods of transfascial suturing.

### **BACKGROUND**

Ventral hernia repair routinely involves placement of a soft tissue repair prosthetic, typically in the form of a patch, across an abdominal wall defect. In a laparoscopic procedure,  
10 or other minimally invasive approach, the patch is reduced in size and delivered through a narrow cannula or incision into the abdominal cavity where it then is returned to an expanded shape and deployed against the abdominal wall. Sutures may be applied through a partial, if not full, thickness of the abdominal wall (i.e., transfascial suturing). Additionally, or alternatively, tacks, screws, coils or other fasteners may be placed through the patch into just the innermost  
15 layers of the abdominal wall, such as the peritoneum and posterior fascia.

A conventional approach for transfascial suture delivery, as shown in FIG. 1, proceeds from outside of the patient. Sutures are pre-tied at spaced locations 100 about a patch 102 periphery, with pairs of suture tails 104 extending from each knot. It is these tails that will bridge the fascia and be secured together to form the transfascial suture fixation. The patch, pre-  
20 loaded with sutures, is collapsed and delivered into the abdominal cavity.

A suture passer instrument 106 is inserted, from outside of the patient, through the abdominal wall 108 and into the abdominal cavity in the approximate location of a particular suture tail pair. The suture passer includes a jaw or other grasper type arrangement which is operated within the cavity to capture one of the suture tails. The suture passer is retracted back  
25 through and out of the abdominal wall, drawing the suture tail exteriorly of the abdominal cavity. A hemostat or other clamp is applied to the exposed suture tail, preventing slippage of the suture tail back into the abdominal cavity. The suture passer is inserted again through the abdominal wall, creating a new puncture adjacent the first puncture, and operated to grab the remaining suture tail. The suture passer is pulled outwardly from the abdominal cavity,  
30 retrieving the second suture tail which also can be clamped against the anterior fascia. This standard transfascial suturing technique, approached from outside of the abdominal cavity, is

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repeated until all of the suture tail pairs have been transfascially deployed and tied together, typically at small skin incisions such that the tied knots are in the subcutaneous space.

## SUMMARY

5           One aspect of the invention is a method of delivering a transfascial suture including providing a soft tissue repair prosthetic in an abdominal cavity of a patient and then passing, from within the abdominal cavity, a suture first through the soft tissue repair prosthetic and then through at least a part of the abdominal wall.

          Another aspect of the invention is a method of delivering a transfascial suture with a  
10   suturing instrument that has been inserted into an abdominal cavity. The suturing instrument has a pair of needles and is loaded with at least one suture defined by a pair of suture segments, with each needle being associated with one of the pair of suture segments. Each of the needles is advanced from the suturing instrument through at least a part of the abdominal wall.

          Another aspect of the invention is a method of delivering a transfascial suture including  
15   the acts of providing a suture that is defined by a pair of segments, each segment having a tail end and a section proximal the tail end, and passing each proximal section of a suture segment, before passing each tail end, through at least a portion of the abdominal wall.

          Another aspect of the invention is a method of delivering a transfascial suture including providing a soft tissue repair prosthetic, and a suture defined by a pair of segments, each  
20   segment including a suture retainer, in an abdominal cavity. Passing, from within the abdominal cavity, each of the suture retainers through the soft tissue repair prosthetic and at least part of the abdominal wall, with each of the suture segments following a respective suture retainer through the soft tissue repair prosthetic and abdominal wall. The pair of suture segments that have passed through the abdominal wall are then secured together, such as by tying.

25           Another aspect of the invention is a method of delivering a transfascial suture including the acts of creating an opening in a soft tissue repair prosthetic located in an abdominal cavity by passing a suture through the soft tissue repair prosthetic, and then at least partially covering the opening with a force distributing member carried by the suture.

          Another aspect of the invention is a method of inserting an instrument into an abdominal  
30   cavity. The instrument includes at least one tissue piercing member having a sharp end adapted to pierce abdominal wall tissue, and the instrument has a non-piercing mode with the sharp end of the tissue piercing member being shielded against contact with abdominal wall tissue and a

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piercing mode with the sharp end of the tissue piercing member being available for contact with abdominal wall tissue. The method includes inserting the instrument in the non-piercing mode into the abdominal cavity with the sharp end of the at least one tissue piercing member being shielded from contact with the abdominal wall tissue, and positioning the instrument in the non-piercing mode adjacent the abdominal wall. After positioning the instrument, the instrument is actuated to the piercing mode, and the at least one tissue piercing member is advanced through at least a part of the abdominal wall with the instrument in the piercing mode.

Another aspect of the invention is an instrument for delivering a transfascial suture including a handle and an elongated shaft extending from the handle, the shaft including a distal end. The instrument also includes a first needle and a second needle, the first and second needles being moveable to an extended position beyond the distal end of the shaft. Each needle has a sharp end adapted to pierce a soft tissue repair prosthetic and abdominal wall tissue. A suture is carried by the instrument, the suture defined by a first segment and a second segment, and including a suture force distributing member between the first and second segments. The suture is arranged in the instrument so that the suture segments are carried by the needles as the needles move to the extended position.

Another aspect of the invention is an instrument for delivering a transfascial suture including a handle and an elongated shaft extending from the handle, the shaft including a distal end. The instrument also includes a first needle and a second needle, the first and second needles being moveable to an extended position beyond the distal end of the shaft. Each needle has a sharp end adapted to pierce a soft tissue repair prosthetic and abdominal wall tissue. Each needle also includes a suture receiving channel. A suture is carried by the instrument. The suture is defined by a first segment and a second segment, the first segment is located in the first suture receiving channel and the second segment is located in the second suture receiving channel.

Another aspect of the invention is an instrument for delivering a transfascial suture including a handle and an elongated shaft extending from the handle, the shaft including a distal end. The instrument includes a first needle and a second needle, the first and second needles being moveable to an extended position beyond the distal end of the shaft. Each needle has a sharp end adapted to pierce a soft tissue repair prosthetic and abdominal wall tissue. The instrument includes a plurality of sutures indexed according to a delivery sequence, and is

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configured to register a next indexed suture in the delivery sequence with the first and second needles.

Another aspect of the invention is an instrument for delivering a transfascial suture including a handle and an elongated shaft extending from the handle, the shaft including a distal  
5 end. The instrument includes a first drive member and a second drive member, the first and second drive members being moveable along respective drive paths to an extended position beyond the distal end of the shaft. The instrument carries a suture, the suture defined by a first segment and a second segment. A first suture retainer is connected to the first segment and is located in a first drive path, and a second suture retainer is connected to the second segment and  
10 is located in a second drive path, the first and second suture retainers being carried by the instrument.

Another aspect of the invention is a tip for a transfascial suture delivery instrument including a tip body having a first needle pathway and a second needle pathway. Each of the first and second needle pathways being registrable with a respective first needle channel and a  
15 second needle channel in a transfascial suture delivery instrument. The instrument includes at least one suture defined by a first segment and a second segment, the first and second suture segments, or a retainer associated with each of the first and second suture segments, being located along the first needle pathway and the second needle pathway, respectively. The tip body is adapted to removably fit to the transfascial suture delivery instrument with the first and  
20 second needle pathways registered with the first and second needle channels.

Another aspect of the invention is a tip for an instrument for delivering a transfascial suture including a tip body having a first needle pathway and a second needle pathway. Each of the first and second needle pathways have a portion adapted to register with a respective first needle channel and a second needle channel in a transfascial suture delivery instrument. The tip  
25 body includes at least one suture defined by a first segment and a second segment. An elongated suture enclosure extends proximally of the first and second pathways, the first and second segments being located within the elongated suture enclosure. The tip body is adapted to fit to the transfascial suture delivery instrument with the first and second needle pathways registered with the first and second needle channels.

Another aspect of the invention is a suture assembly including a suture having a first  
30 segment, a second segment, and an intermediate section between the first segment and the second segment. A first suture retainer is connected to the first segment, and a second suture

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retainer is connected to the second segment. A suture force distributing member is positioned about the intermediate section.

Another aspect of the invention is a suture assembly including a suture and a suture retainer. The suture retainer includes a connector to connect with the suture. The position of the connector being selectively adjustable along the length of the suture. The suture retainer includes an axial bore therethrough for receiving a needle.

Another aspect of the invention is an instrument for delivering a transfascial suture including a handle and an elongated shaft extending from the handle, the elongated shaft including a distal end. A needle extends through the elongated shaft and is advanceable beyond the distal end, the needle including a sharp tip and a drive feature. A plurality of suture retainers are stacked in an end-to-end orientation on the needle, each pair of suture retainers connected to a single suture. A stop is provided at the distal end, the stop adapted to be overcome by needle induced movement of the distal-most suture retainer. The drive feature has a firing profile to drive the distal-most suture retainer through the stop and out of the distal end when the needle is moved in the distal direction, and a reloading profile allowing the drive feature to move past the next distal-most suture retainer as the needle is moved in the proximal direction.

A still further aspect of the invention is an instrument for delivering a transfascial suture including a handle, an elongated shaft extending from the handle, the shaft including a distal end. A pair of needles extend through the shaft and are advanceable beyond the distal end. The instrument includes a pick-up area and a loading zone in the distal end. A suture including a force distribution member is located in the pick-up area, and one or more sutures each including a force distribution member are located in the loading zone. A translating feature moves a suture and force distribution member from the loading zone to the pick-up area.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other objects and advantages of the invention will be appreciated more fully from the following drawings, wherein like reference characters designate like features, in which:

FIG. 1 is an illustration of a conventional transfascial suture delivery;

FIGS. 2-5D are illustrations of an instrument for transfascial delivery of a suture;

FIGS. 6-8 are illustrations of an instrument for transfascial delivery of a plurality of sutures;

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FIGS. 9-13 are illustrations of an instrument for transfascial delivery of a suture including a reusable unit and a disposable tip;

FIGS. 14-15 are illustrations of a suture retainer with a tissue piercing tip;

FIGS. 16A-21B are illustrations of various suture retainers;

5 FIGS. 22-25C are illustrations of an instrument for transfascial delivery of a plurality of sutures;

FIGS. 26A-27 are illustrations of an instrument for transfascial delivery of a plurality of sutures;

10 FIGS. 28A-28B are partial sectional illustrations of a drive mechanism for an instrument for transfascial delivery of a suture;

FIGS. 29-32C are illustrations of an instrument for transfascial delivery of a plurality of sutures;

FIGS. 33-33C are illustrations of an instrument for transfascial delivery of a suture assembly including implantable retainers;

15 FIGS. 34-34D are illustrations of an instrument for transfascial delivery of a suture assembly including a subcutaneous anchor; and

FIG. 35 is an illustration of a ventral repair patch and an inflatable deployment assist device.

## 20 DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Various aspects of the invention are described below and/or shown in the drawings. These aspects of the invention may be used alone and/or in any suitable combination with each other. Aspects of the invention are not limited in any way by the illustrative embodiments shown and described herein.

25 Embodiments of the invention are described in connection with instruments for transfascial delivery of one or more sutures, arrangements of transfascial suture assemblies, and methods of delivering a transfascial suture. These instruments, suture assemblies, and methodologies are particularly configured for transfascial delivery of sutures from within the abdominal cavity to the outside of the patient, rather than in the traditional manner of pulling  
30 sutures across the fascia in an approach from outside of the patient. Such instruments, suture assemblies, and techniques may be applied independently or in conjunction with other approaches, such as those involving mechanical fastener-type fixation. Although disclosed in

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connection with a repair of a ventral hernia, the invention is not so limited and has other applications as should be apparent to one of skill in the art.

An instrument for transfascial delivery of a suture may include an actuating handle, an elongated shaft extending from the handle, one or more sutures loaded in the instrument and a  
5 drive system for advancing the suture out of the instrument. The shaft may be flexible, may be configured with a selectively articulating tip, may be selectively rotatable, and may be sized to fit through a narrow cannula, such as a 5mm cannula or even smaller – although the outer diameter of the shaft is not necessarily a limitation of the invention.

The drive system may include one or a pair of needles or other drive elements, each with  
10 an end configured for piercing tissue and/or a soft tissue repair prosthetic, such as a ventral hernia patch. A pair of drive needles may be arranged to move simultaneously or, instead, in sequence, and may be driven by a single or a dual actuating arrangement (e.g., one trigger or two triggers).

The instrument may have a non-piercing mode with a sharp end of each needle or other  
15 tissue piercing member being shielded against contact with abdominal wall tissue and a piercing mode with the sharp end of the needle being available for contact with abdominal wall tissue. The instrument may be inserted in the non-piercing mode into the abdominal cavity. After positioning adjacent the abdominal wall, the instrument may be actuated to the piercing mode, and the needle may be advanced through at least a part of the abdominal wall.

20 The one or more sutures may be in carrying engagement with the needles as-loaded, or may be positioned in a path of movement of the needles so that the suture is picked up and advanced out of the instrument by the moving needles. The suture may be arranged so that a first suture segment is associated with a first needle and a second suture segment is associated with a second needle, with an intermediate suture segment extending between the two. So  
25 arranged, deployment of the pair of needles will deliver both suture segments through a ventral hernia patch and then through fascial tissue, with the intermediate segment remaining in the abdominal cavity internal of the ventral repair patch. The portions of the first and second suture segments delivered through and beyond the patch and fascial tissue, referred to as suture tails or suture segment tails, may then be joined, such as by tying, and prior to joining may be pulled to  
30 draw the intermediate segment against the ventral repair patch.

A suture force distributing member may be provided along the intermediate segment of the suture, so that the force distributing member contacts the ventral repair patch when the suture



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tails are drawn away from the abdominal cavity and/or secured together. The suture force distributing member may be fixed in position on the intermediate segment or may 'float' along the intermediate segment.

Where a plurality of sutures are loaded in an instrument, an indexing system may be provided to deliver the sutures according to a predetermined sequence, and such indexing system may be axially based, rotationally based, or otherwise. The instrument may be arranged to provide for tangle-free storage of a plurality of sutures. Further, the instrument may be configured as a reusable device, a disposable device, or a hybrid including a reusable aspect and a disposable aspect. Such a hybrid device might include, for example, a reusable handle and shaft and a disposable tip and suture assembly that is mountable to the shaft. A safety mechanism may be provided to prevent firing of the needle when no sutures are present, or are not properly loaded, in the instrument. The instrument and suture assemblies preferably will be sterilized prior to transfascial suturing.

One embodiment of a transfascial suture delivery instrument 200 is illustrated in FIGS. 2-5D (handle is not shown) and is arranged to deliver a suture 202 defined by a first segment 204, a second segment 206 and an intermediate segment 208. The first segment may be positioned within the channel 210 of a needle 212 or otherwise contained within the needle. The second segment may be similarly positioned with respect to the second needle 214. Locating the first and second suture segments within the first and second needles may allow for a reduced instrument profile. However, the suture segments could be positioned externally of the needles (anywhere about the circumference of the needle including between the needles), or partially internal of the needles and partially external of the needles. For example, and without limitation, the suture segments could extend across each, respective, needle tip and then run along opposite sides of the needle bodies. Further, the suture segments may be extended partially or fully lengthwise, that is essentially or partially linearly, or may be partially or fully reduced in length such as being in the form of loops or coils. In any of such arrangements, it is preferable to load and deliver the suture segments in a fashion that minimizes tangling. The internal or external surface of the needles may be coated or otherwise finished to facilitate delivery of the suture segments without damaging the suture.

The tips of each of the needles may be pointed to facilitate piercing of a ventral repair patch P and/or abdominal wall tissue W. The needles may include a notch 216, 218 or other feature to assist in picking up and/or paying out the suture segments as the needles are deployed.

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The as-loaded suture may be in an inverted U-shaped configuration as shown, with the tail ends of the suture segments being closer to the proximal end of the shaft 219. Consequently, when the needles are deployed from a non-piercing mode, as shown in FIG. 5A, to a piercing mode, as shown in FIG. 5B, the portions of the suture segments closer to the intermediate segment are first delivered from the instrument with the portions of the suture segments closer to the tail ends, or the tail ends themselves where the entire suture segments are released from the instrument, being delivered later. After deployment, respective suture tail pairs may be knotted, excess suture length trimmed, and the skin over the suture knot closed by stitching, adhesive strip or otherwise, as shown in FIGS. 5C-5D.

A force distributing member 220 may be provided along the intermediate segment of the suture, and may be located between the needles in the as-loaded arrangement as shown or may be moved into position between the needles at a point during needle deployment. The force distributing member may be fixed in position to the suture or may be freely moveable along a length of the suture (i.e., floating). In a fixed embodiment, the force distributing member may be joined to the intermediate segment through mechanical arrangements, such as by crimping the force distributing member to the segment or by one or more clamps or wedges provided in the force distributing member that may be engaged to the segment. Alternatively, and again without limitation, the suture may be tied to the force distributing member to fix the position at the intermediate segment. Additionally, the force distributing member may be joined by thermal or chemical bonding with the suture, by heat shrinking the force distributing member to the suture, or by an adhesive applied between the two components. Further, the force distributing member may be integrally formed with the suture, such as by hardening or reshaping a portion of the suture. The force distributing member is not limited to the tubular shape shown, as should be apparent to one of skill in the art, and may have other configurations such as a substantially plate-like or planar arrangement (including, without limitation, flat, slightly convex, slightly concave, and hybrids of the foregoing) with such substantially planar embodiments including any design suitable for spreading forces applied along the suture. An alternative arrangement is an hourglass or bow-tie configuration (shown as 220a in FIG. 4) with openings therethrough, or along contoured edges, for passage of the suture segments. Other three-dimensional and substantially planar shapes, as well as compound shapes including three-dimensional and planar aspects, are contemplated as one of skill in the art will appreciate. Further, one or more surfaces of the force distributing member may be adapted for contact or engagement with the soft tissue

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repair prosthetic. For example, a tubular shaped force distributing member may include one or more specially shaped surfaces, or facets, about its circumference, which may be planar, convex, concave, or other arrangement suitable to promote contact or engagement between the force distributing member and the soft tissue repair prosthetic. The force distributing member may be  
5 formed of a permanent material (e.g., polypropylene, polycarbonate, nylon, polyester, stainless steel, titanium), an absorbable material (e.g., polyglycolic acid (PGA), polylactic acid (PLA), polydioxanone (PDO), and blends of any of the foregoing), or a hybrid of a permanent material and an absorbable material.

A transfascial suture delivery instrument 300 arranged to deliver a multiple of pre-loaded  
10 sutures 302a-d is illustrated in FIGS. 6-8. The sutures may be in a form similar to the suture described in connection with FIGS. 2-4, characterized by a first segment, a second segment, and an intermediate segment to which a force distributing member may be provided. The sutures may be indexed in an intended delivery sequence. In the axial index shown, the distal-most suture 302a will be delivered first, the next distal-most suture 302b will be delivered second,  
15 with the indexing continuing in this fashion along the length of the stack.

An inner cannula 304 may be provided with pairs of slots 306a-d of varying length corresponding to respective positions in the index order. For example, the distal-most suture may be located in a pair of slots which is located closest to the distal tip of the instrument and, consequently, the pair of slots associated with the distal-most suture have a length shorter than  
20 the pair of slots for the next distal-most suture.

The axial indexing arrangement may be reversed so that the distal-most suture is the last suture delivered by the instrument and, further, other delivery sequences for an axial stacking arrangement may be employed as should be apparent to one of skill in the art. The indexing sequence also, or alternatively, may be characterized by rotational positioning about the  
25 circumference of the inner cannula. For example, the first suture may be located at a reference location, and then the second suture in the sequence located at a predetermined angular adjustment from the reference location (i.e., first suture), and then the third suture at a further angular adjustment from the second suture. The angular adjustments may be the same or varying as between different suture positions in the indexing sequence. For example, and  
30 without limitation, the angular adjustment between different suture index positions (e.g., pairs of slots) may be 30 degrees, allowing 6 different sutures to be indexed for a single circumferential

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indexing arrangement. As a further example, also non-limiting, a rotational offset of 45 degrees would permit circumferential indexing of 4 sutures, as shown in FIGS. 6-8.

As shown, the sutures are indexed axially and rotationally, with the first and second segments of each suture hanging over and draped along the outer surface of the indexing cannula, with the intermediate segment, with or without a force distributing member, extending across and internally of the indexing cannula. The indexing cannula may include outer partitions, ribs, or other features to maintain the separateness of the suture segments and avoid tangling therebetween. As described above and shown, the suture segments may be fully extended in a lengthwise direction or may be partially or substantially completely reduced in length, for example by being looped into coils. If desired, the indexing cannula may include an outer wall that shrouds the suture segments, and such an arrangement may facilitate assembly and insertion of a suture loaded indexing cannula into the instrument. One or more of adjacent, axially stacked, intermediate segments may be spaced from each other or, alternatively, may be in contact.

A pair of needles 308 are advanceable to deliver each suture from the instrument in the desired indexing sequence. The needles may be located within the indexing cannula, or otherwise arranged to pick-up or carry a suture from within the indexing cannula, as shown. Alternatively, the needles may be located externally of the indexing cannula or otherwise arranged to pick-up or carry a suture externally of the indexing cannula.

The needles may be adapted for piercing the soft tissue repair prosthetic and fascial tissue, and may include one or more features adapted to pick-up and pay out the suture segments as the needles are deployed, for example, the notched 310 arrangement shown. The needles may be solid or hollow, as the structure of the needles is not necessarily a limitation of the invention as should be apparent to one of skill in the art.

The stroke of the needles may be coordinated with the indexing location of the sutures. For example, in certain embodiments where the sutures are stacked axially, the needles must be retracted far enough to reach the proximal-most suture in the index. The stroke length in these particular embodiments, then, must be designed to reach the proximal-most suture for each retraction of the needle. Alternatively, in other axial indexing embodiments, the stroke length may be dynamic and vary depending upon the sequence order of the suture being delivered.

The needles may be rotated a predetermined angular adjustment corresponding to the next suture position in the index, and such rotational indexing may occur automatically in

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response to actuation of the instrument, such as at the end of the backstroke of the prior suture delivery or at some other interval, or may occur manually, as should be apparent to one of skill in the art. Once rotated, the needles are reset to pick up the next suture in the sequence.

Alternatively, the indexing cannula may be arranged to rotate, while the needles remain in the same orientation, whether automatically in response to actuation of the instrument, for example  
5 at the end of the backstroke of the prior suture delivery, at some other interval, or manually.

An instrument 400 for delivering a transfascial suture is shown in FIGS. 9-13 and includes a reusable unit 402 having a handle 404, an elongated shaft 406 and a drive assembly included within and actuatable at the handle, and a disposable unit 408 including a tip 410 and  
10 suture assembly 412. The reusable unit includes a pair of drive elements 414, which may be in the form of needles, that extend along the elongated shaft and are deployable and retractable in response to actuation of a control mechanism at the handle.

As shown, the path of the drive elements or needles may diverge, increasing the spacing between the needles beyond the instrument and the amount of tissue purchase thereby.  
15 Alternatively, the drive element paths may be parallel or converging. The drive elements may run on a surface of the shaft but, preferably, are located in one or a pair of channels 416 running through the shaft as illustrated.

The distal face of the shaft may include an exit opening of the respective channels through which the drive elements may extend when deployed. The surface of the shaft may be  
20 contoured 420, as shown, to cooperate with an interface feature 422 in the disposable tip and also may be adapted to receive a suture support 424, both described further below. Although shown with a truncated elliptical cross-section, the shape of the shaft is not so limited as should be apparent to one of skill in the art.

The disposable tip includes a body portion 426 with a distal extension 428 and a  
25 proximal extension 430. The proximal extension is shaped to mount about the distal portion of the shaft and includes an interface 422 for snap fitting into the complementary recess 420 in the shaft. The location of these complementary interface features could be reversed and other arrangements for releasably engaging the disposable tip to the shaft are contemplated as should be apparent to one of skill in the art.

30 In one embodiment, a releaseable interface between the distal shaft face and proximal face of the tip body may be provided, such as a male/female arrangement 432, 434 shown, which assist in the releasable connection between the two components and may be in lieu of the

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proximal extension and shaft interface. The tip body includes a pair of drive channels 436 with openings that are registrable, respectively, with the first and second exit openings in the distal face of the shaft. The distal extension includes a pair of drive paths 438 that continue from the drive channels extending through the tip body. Wall structure may be built up around, and/or  
5 between, the drive paths to guide and/or support the drive elements.

Extending proximally of the tip body is a support 424 for a pair of suture segments. The support may be tubular shaped and may be integral with the proximal extension or a separate component that extends from the tip body along the extension, whether internal of the extension as shown, or external of the extension if desired. The suture support may form a single channel  
10 or may be divided, fully or partially, or otherwise configured to maintain first and second suture segments separate from each other. The support is arranged to mount to the shaft, such as by seating in a complementary recess 440 formed in the shaft surface. As shown, the complementary recess may be in the form of an elongated concave depression, bounded by convex walls. Other arrangements of a mount for the suture support are contemplated and this  
15 particular configuration is not necessarily a limitation of the invention. The suture support communicates with an opening through the tip body which may include a mount 442 or support for a force distribution member 444, such as the washer-type device shown. The opening may include a divider presenting a first segment opening and a second segment opening.

A suture retainer 450 may be located in each of the drive paths, with each retainer  
20 connected to one of the suture segments 452 extending through the opening or openings in the tip body. The suture retainers are adapted to receive and be carried by the drive elements as they are advanced from the shaft of the reusable unit, through the tip body and along and beyond the distal extension of the tip. In one embodiment, the suture retainers each include an axial through-bore for receiving a portion of a needle tip. The bore and/or needle may be configured  
25 so only part of the needle will project through the retainer. For example, and without limitation, the needle may include a necked down narrow tip portion that is extendable through and beyond the retainer bore, and a stepped up larger proximal portion that is engageable with the retainer, for example with an internal or external shoulder of the retainer.

As shown, the force distribution member may be arranged in floating relationship with  
30 the suture segments; that is, the force distribution member need not be fixedly located at a singular position on the suture. After both suture segments are fully deployed out of the instrument, whether by advancement of the needles or by pulling of the suture tails or tail

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segments that have been transfascially delivered, the force distributing member and intermediate segment will position against the soft tissue repair patch. Prior to full deployment, the force distribution member may stay with the disposable tip or may be suspended by the moving suture segments even though displaced from the instrument.

5           The suture retainers are carried by the needles from the instrument through the soft tissue repair prosthetic and/or fascial tissue, presenting on the other side of the abdominal wall. Upon completion of the instrument stroke, the needles retract back through the fascia and abdominal wall patch, leaving a first suture segment running from a first suture retainer located exterior of the abdominal cavity, to an intermediate segment and force distribution member internal of the  
10 abdominal cavity and positionable against the abdominal wall patch, and back to a second segment running from the force distribution member through the abdominal wall patch and fascia to a second retainer located exterior of the fascia. The deployed retainers may be reoriented, automatically or manually, so that the retainers are unlikely to slip back through the needle puncture openings. The retainers hold the suture segments in place pending tying, or  
15 other securing, of the suture tails together. The retainers may be left as deployed, pending delivery of other sutures about the abdominal wall patch, or the surgeon may choose to tie or otherwise connect the ends of each pair of suture tails prior to delivering the next suture. Prior to tying together or other connection of the suture tails, the suture segments may be pulled to take up any excess suture slack still remaining in the instrument or in the abdominal cavity,  
20 preferably while holding the suture retainers against the patient. Where the soft tissue repair patch is not already positioned flush against the abdominal wall, such retraction of the suture segments may help hoist a portion of the patch into position.

          Although just described with an axial-through bore for receiving a needle, the suture retainer may have a different arrangement, as shown in FIGS. 14-15, where the suture retainer  
25 500, itself, is formed with a tip 502 that is sharp and otherwise adapted to pierce the abdominal wall prosthesis and/or abdominal wall. In this embodiment, then, the suture retainer does not have to be configured to extend a needle therethrough, and may be solid or include only a partially extending axial-bore 504. The tip of the drive elements will be configured to appropriately engage with and advance such alternatively designed suture retainers. For  
30 example, and without limitation, the suture retainer may include a partial axially extending bore, and the drive element may include a cylindrical portion that is compatible and just slightly narrower than the bore so as to fit within and be removable from the bore without catching. For

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a solid suture retainer, the proximal face may include features such as notches or projections, or other arrangements, that provisionally engage with complementary features in the distal end of the drive element.

Various suture retainer arrangements are shown in FIGS. 16A-21B. A suture retainer  
5 600 may include a tapered distal end 602 to assist in advancement through the soft tissue repair  
prosthetic P and the fascial tissue W. A proximal portion 604 may be wider than the distal end,  
making it more difficult for the suture retainer to pass back through the puncture formed through  
the fascia and abdominal wall prosthesis, and such enlargement may be symmetrical or  
asymmetrical. In certain embodiments, the proximal portion includes a side body 606 that  
10 extends radially from the main retainer body. The side body may be tubular shaped, or at least  
present a curved outer wall, and have a distal portion 608 that tapers towards the retainer body.  
The side body may serve as a connector between the retainer and the suture segment.

In the embodiment of FIGS. 16A-16B, the suture segment is fixed at the connector such  
as by insert molding, adhesive or ultrasonic bonding sections of the connector about an end of  
15 the suture segment, mechanically clamping or otherwise mechanically securing the end of the  
suture segment to the connector, or other approach as should be apparent to one of skill in the  
art. Alternatively, the connector may be configured to allow the suture segment to move  
therethrough, so that the location of the suture segment within the connector is selectively  
variable. In such cases, an end of the suture segment may be knotted, formed in a bulbous  
20 shape, or otherwise configured so as not to pass through the connector, preventing the suture  
segment from slipping out. Although described as a substantially tubular side body, other  
configurations of a connector for a suture segment are contemplated as should be apparent to  
one of skill in the art.

As illustrated in FIGS. 17A-21B, the connector may include an axial bore 610 extending  
25 at least partially through the connector.

The axial bore may open 612 transversely through the connector sidewall, as shown in  
FIGS. 17A-17B, and include a wedge or other suture lock arrangement that is actuated by  
pulling the suture segment axially through the connector and then over the connector and back in  
the direction of the proximal end. Where there is tension on the suture segment, the already  
30 delivered suture retainer may stand upright against the fascia.

A portion of the connector at a proximal end may include a side-cut 614, as shown in  
FIGS. 18A-18B, or other arrangement that allows the suture retainer to tip over and lay



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transversely to the direction of the suture segment (e.g., flat against the fascia) that has escaped through the side-cut. Here, again, a wedge or other suture locking feature may be incorporated in a transverse opening in the connector sidewall.

In a further embodiment illustrated in FIGS. 19A-19B, a tipping arm 616 may extend  
5 from the connector or other aspect of the retainer, about which the suture segment may be wrapped to encourage tipping of the retainer.

In an arrangement shown in FIGS. 20A-20B, a connector includes an axial bore 620, a first opening 624 through the connector sidewall and a second opening 622 in the connector sidewall, in the form of a slot, spaced from the first opening and extending in the same direction  
10 through the connector sidewall. A suture can be arranged to run through the connector so that the enlarged tail end can be pulled in a direction away from the proximal end of the retainer and then cinched against the suture lock in the slot.

In a variation shown in FIGS. 21A-21B, a slot 630 may open in a direction transversely to a first opening 632 in the connector sidewall so that the tail may be pulled through the slot  
15 and away from the retainer in a first direction and the remaining suture segment can extend from the first opening in a generally opposite direction.

Other arrangements of connectors for suture retainers, particularly the arrangements of openings and/or slots to facilitate orientation of a suture retainer relative to the fascia, are contemplated as should be apparent to one of skill in the art. For example, and without  
20 limitation, the sidecut, slot and/or opening may including varying directional components to allow relative positioning of the suture retainer and suture tail, so that the suture retainer may be rotated as well as tipped over. Further, although each end of a suture has been described as being associated with a respective suture retainer, the invention is not so limited and only one end of a suture need be employed with a suture retainer. In this latter embodiment, the other end  
25 of the suture may be attached to a different component, such as a T-bar fastener, or may be free of any additional component.

An instrument for delivery of transfascial sutures 700, shown in FIGS. 22-25C, is pre-loaded with a plurality of sutures. Each suture includes a first suture segment attached to a first suture retainer 750, a second suture segment attached to a second suture retainer 720, and an  
30 intermediate segment extending therebetween which may further incorporate a force distribution member.

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The instrument includes a handle 702, an outer shaft 704, and a single drive needle 706 located within the outer shaft about which the suture retainer pairs are mounted in end-to-end fashion. Adjacent suture retainers may be slightly spaced from each other, or in contact. A proximal end of the drive needle may extend outside of the handle and may be pushed forward  
5 to drive the tip of the needle to a deployed position beyond the end of the shaft. The proximal end of the drive needle may then be retracted to reposition the needle tip at a starting position. Other arrangements for deploying and retracting the drive needle are contemplated as should be apparent to one of skill in the art.

A biased loading member, such as a spring ending in a washer or other structure is  
10 adapted to act against a proximal end of the retainer stack, urging the retainer stack towards the distal tip. A resilient stop 708 extends inwardly from the shaft preventing further displacement of the stack in response to the biased loading member. Slightly more than a retainer's length proximal of the distal tip, sufficient to account for projection of the piercing tip of the needle through the retainer, the drive needle includes an active drive and reload feature 710. The drive  
15 and reload feature is biased into a drive profile to engage a distal-most retainer as the needle is deployed, imparting a drive force to the distal-most retainer that overcomes the resilient stop and forces the retainer through the puncture path in the abdominal wall patch and fascia that has been formed by the deploying needle.

As the needle retracts through the shaft on its return stroke, the active drive and reload  
20 feature contacts the tip of the next suture retainer, which has been advanced to the stop by the biased loading member. The rearward force on the active drive and reload feature as it contacts the tip of the next suture retainer overcomes the bias for the drive profile, causing the drive and reload feature to move into a reloading profile that is adapted to pass through the retainer. Upon completion of the stroke, the drive and reload feature emerges proximal of the new distal-most  
25 retainer and biases again into the drive profile.

In one embodiment, the active drive and reload feature includes a cam member that is pivoted to the drive needle so that forces directed against the front of the cam member cause upward pivoting into a drive profile, while forces directed to the back of the cam member cause downward pivoting into a reloading profile. As shown, and but one example of a drive and  
30 reload feature, is a wedge shaped member pivotally mounted to the drive needle with an upright front face 712 and a downwardly inclining back face 714.

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An instrument 800 for delivering transfascial sutures is shown in FIGS. 26A-27 and includes a plurality of pre-loaded suture and suture force distribution members 802a-f. The delivery instrument includes an elongated shaft 804 and a pair of needles 806 or other drive elements which may be configured similar to the needles and drive elements previously  
5 described so as to be controllably moved through the instrument to pick up a pair of suture segments and transfascially deliver the suture and suture force distribution member. A distal end of the shaft includes a loading zone 810 and a pick-up position 812 for the suture and suture force distribution members. The loading zone may be arranged at a first side of the shaft with the pick-up position on another, preferably opposite, side of the shaft, with the needles or other  
10 delivery elements moveable through the pick-up position side of the shaft. The loading zone may include stacking walls, ribs or other features, projecting inwardly from the shaft, and that may be configured to correspond with the contour of the suture force distribution members to assist in aligning and guiding the position of the stack within the shaft.

The loading zone and pick-up position may overlap to some extent as shown in FIG. 27,  
15 such that a portion of the suture force distribution member in the pick-up zone may eclipse a portion of the next distal-most suture force distribution member. A design factor for relative location of the pick-up position and the stacking zone includes providing a clear path for the needle pairs to travel through the pick-up position so as to grab the suture segments.

In the loading zone, the suture and suture force distribution members may be stacked,  
20 such as in a face-to-face orientation as shown and be biased by a spring drive towards the distal tip of the instrument. Advance of the stack towards the distal tip is shown in FIG. 26D. The distal-most suture and suture force distribution member is moved, manually or automatically, to a pick-up position that is offset from the rest of the stack as shown in FIG. 26D. For example, and without limitation, a leaf spring, a cam element 814 formed or provided within the shaft and  
25 that cooperates with the spring drive, or other mechanical arrangement may be located at the distal end of the loading zone to bias over the distal most suture force distribution member into the pick-up position after the needle pair have been retracted proximal of the pick-up position. Other arrangements for translating, or otherwise moving, the suture force distribution member and associated suture segments to the pick-up position may be employed as should be apparent  
30 to one of skill in the art.

The pair of needles or other delivery elements are advanced to and through the pick-up position, picking up the suture segments and dragging the suture segments through the tissue as

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the needle is advanced well beyond the end of the instrument. The suture force distribution member, similar to previous embodiments, may be fixed to the suture segments or free-floating therealong. This delivery instrument is not limited to the shape or arrangement of the suture force distribution members shown nor to the position of the suture segments relative to the suture force distribution members. Other arrangements and configurations of sutures and suture force distribution members for use with a delivery instrument with attributes as just described are contemplated as should be apparent to one of skill in the art.

In an alternative embodiment, a cartridge separate and apart from the delivery instrument may similarly be loaded with one or more sutures and suture force distribution members and configured to receive the tip of the separate delivery instrument to load a suture and suture force distribution member. The delivery instrument, now loaded with a suture and suture force distribution member, may be removed from the cartridge and inserted through a cannula or narrow incision into the abdominal cavity and applied to fire the suture transfascially. The depleted delivery instrument may be withdrawn from the cavity and reloaded by again inserting the tip of the delivery instrument into the cartridge and picking-up the new distal-most suture and suture force distribution member. As with the integrated delivery instrument and cartridge arrangement described previously, the separate cartridge may be configured to translate, or otherwise move, the suture force distribution member from the stacked loading position to the pick-up position, with a leaf spring, cam, or other arrangement moving the suture force distribution member to the pick-up position once the needle pairs have vacated the pick-up position.

A system 900 for actuating the needles or other drive elements of a delivery instrument is shown in FIGS. 28A-28B and includes a handle body 902 which may be formed of a pair of handle sections as illustrated and which supports a rack and pinion drive system. A trigger 904 is mounted for linear movement along a bar and is translatable against the force of a spring 906 mounted about the bar towards the rear of the handle. A rack 908 governed by the trigger cooperates with a drive aspect 910 of a pinion gear to rotate the pinion gear in response to movement of the trigger. A separate rack 912, linked to a pair of needles 914 or other drive elements, moves in response to the rotation of the pinion gear, either towards the distal direction of the instrument so as to advance the needles or other drive elements out of the device, or in the proximal direction to retract the needles or other drive elements back into the shaft.

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The handle body may include various mounts and support for the active components including, without limitation, a support for the needle rack, stabilizer rods for the needles, a pinion/drive gear mount, and a limit for distal movement of the trigger block. A pawl or other approach for providing incremental movement of the trigger may be incorporated into the handle arrangement. Incremental movements of the drive system may be coordinated to particular aspects of the suture delivery process. For example, and without limitation, the trigger stroke may have predetermined stopping points, such as at suture pickup or at various stages of needle deployment, allowing the physician to ensure it is appropriate to proceed to the next aspect of the stroke. Although an axial translatable trigger is shown, other arrangements including a pivoting trigger, and other actuators for a drive system, may be employed as should be apparent to one of skill in the art. Further, the rack and pinion drive system illustrated and described is but one of many drive systems that may be used to advance and retract the needle pairs or other drive elements of the delivery instrument.

An instrument for delivery of transfascial sutures 1000, shown in FIGS. 29-32C, may be pre-loaded with a plurality of sutures. Each suture includes a first suture segment attached to a first suture retainer, a second suture segment attached to a second suture retainer, and an intermediate segment extending therebetween which may further incorporate a force distribution member, if desired.

The instrument includes a hollow drive needle 1002 that may be located within an outer shaft (not shown) similar to those described above. An actuation handle, also similar to those described above, may be provided at a proximal end of the shaft to actuate the instrument for deploying sutures.

Suture retainer pairs 1004 are supported within the needle in end-to-end fashion. Adjacent suture retainers may be slightly spaced from each other, or in contact. The instrument may be configured to advance the stack of suture retainers along the length of the needle and deploy a distal-most suture retainer from the distal end of the needle in response to actuation of a control mechanism at the handle.

Each suture retainer 1004 may include one or more features that cooperate with the needle 1002 to maintain the suture retainers in the stacked configuration within the needle while also permitting the retainers to be moved along the length of the needle for controlled deployment. In one embodiment shown in FIGS. 29-31, each suture retainer 1004 may include a pair of protrusions 1006, such as fingers, that extend in an outward direction from opposing

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sides at a proximal end of the retainer and ride along elongated slots 1008 extending along opposite sides of the needle. The fingers are configured to protrude into the slots and eventually engage with a distal end 1010 of each slot when a suture retainer is advanced to a distal-most stack position within the needle. In this manner, as shown in FIG. 32, the distal-most suture  
5 retainer in the stack is restricted from advancing beyond the distal-most stack position along the needle when its fingers 1006 engage the distal ends 1010 of the slots 1008 to thereby retain the stack of suture retainers within the needle.

The suture retainers 1004 may be adapted to release from the needle upon application of a longitudinal force that is sufficient to overcome the engagement between the fingers 1006 of  
10 the distal-most retainer and the distal end 1010 of the slot. In one embodiment, each finger may include a cam surface 1012 that coacts with the end of the slot to deflect and collapse the finger inwardly as the longitudinal force is applied to drive the suture retainer in the distal direction. As shown, the cam surface 1012 may be angled outwardly from the retainer in a proximal direction. As shown in FIGS. 30-31, the distal portion of each retainer may be configured with a  
15 relief 1013, such as a slot, to receive the fingers of the adjacent retainer as the fingers become collapsed during a deployment sequence. Such an arrangement may allow for a more compact device. However, it is to be appreciated that the retainer may employ any suitable arrangement to facilitate stacking and release of the retainers as should be apparent to one of skill in the art.

When the fingers 1012 are fully collapsed into a low profile, as shown in FIG. 32A, the  
20 distal-most suture retainer may be advanced distally beyond the distal-most stack position for deployment from the needle. The fingers may be resilient so that they return toward their original expanded position after deployment, making it more difficult for the suture retainer to pass back through the puncture formed through the fascia and abdominal wall prosthesis. However, use of a resilient finger is not a required feature and other engagement features may be  
25 employed as should be apparent to one of skill in the art. For example, and without limitation, the retainer may include shear pins or other deformable features that maintain the stack of suture retainers within the needle until deployment is desired.

A first pusher 1014 may be located within the shaft and be adapted to act against a proximal end of the retainer stack, urging the retainer stack towards the distal tip of the needle in  
30 response to actuation of the instrument. In one embodiment shown in FIGS. 30 and 32-32C, the first pusher 1014 may include a tube that is advanced along the length of the needle in response to actuation of the instrument. The first pusher may include a distal end 1016 that is configured

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to engage with a proximal portion of the most proximal suture retainer. Advancement of the first pusher in the distal direction applies a longitudinal force along the stack of retainers to advance the distal-most suture retainer into position for deployment from the needle. The first pusher 1014 may be configured to index the stack of retainers a distance corresponding to the  
5 length of a suture retainer so that only the distal-most retainer is released upon each stroke of the pusher.

A second pusher 1018 may be located within the shaft and be adapted to drive the distal-most suture retainer from the needle in response to actuation of the instrument. In one embodiment, the second pusher 1018 may include a drive wire that is adapted to extend and  
10 retract in a reciprocating manner through the first pusher 1014 and the stack of suture retainers. As shown in FIG. 32A, the distal end 1020 of the second pusher is configured to engage with the collapsed proximal end of the distal-most suture retainer. Once engaged, distal extension of the second pusher 1018 drives the distal-most suture retainer from the needle, as shown in FIG. 32B.

15 After deployment of the distal-most suture retainer, as shown in FIG. 32C, the second pusher 1018 is retracted proximally to its initial position for the next deployment sequence. The first pusher 1014 remains in its indexed position and engaged with the most proximal retainer in the stack to maintain the next distal-most suture retainer in position at the distal end of the slot for the next deployment sequence.

20 Although the instrument 1000 has been described above using one needle, it is to be appreciated that the instrument may include first and second needles with each needle supporting a stack of retainers 1004 arranged in end-to-end fashion. The instrument may be pre-loaded with a plurality of sutures with each suture including a first suture segment attached to a suture retainer in the first needle and a second suture segment attached to a correspondingly  
25 positioned suture retainer in the second needle. For example, and without limitation, the suture segments of a suture may be attached to the distal-most retainer in each needle. If desired, a force distribution member may be provided with the suture in a manner described above.

For some transfascial suturing procedures, it may be desirable to employ one or more suture retainers that may be deployed and/or implanted below the skin surface, for example,  
30 between the fascia and the dermal layer. An implantable suture retainer may be configured to anchor a suture or suture segment using a knotless procedure.

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An instrument 1100 for delivering a transfascial suture is shown in FIGS. 33-33B and may include a reusable unit and a disposable unit similar to those described above in connection with the instrument of FIGS. 9-13. The reusable unit 1102 may include a handle (not shown), an elongated shaft 1104 and a drive assembly included within and actuatable at the handle. The  
5 disposable unit 1106 may include a tip 1108 and suture assembly 1110. The reusable unit includes a pair of drive elements 1112, which may be in the form of needles, that extend along the elongated shaft and are deployable and retractable in response to actuation of a control mechanism at the handle.

As shown, the path 1114 of the drive elements or needles may diverge, increasing the  
10 spacing between the needles beyond the instrument and the amount of tissue purchase thereby. Alternatively, the drive element paths may be parallel or converging.

An implantable suture retainer 1120 may be located in each of the drive paths, with each retainer connected to one of the suture segments 1122, 1124 extending through the opening or openings in the tip body. The suture retainers are adapted to receive and be carried by the drive  
15 elements 1112 as they are advanced from the shaft of the reusable unit, through the tip body and along and beyond the distal extension of the tip. In one embodiment, the suture retainers each include an axial through-bore for receiving a portion of a needle tip. The bore and/or needle may be configured so only part of the needle will project through the retainer. For example, and without limitation, the needle may include a necked down narrow tip portion that is extendable  
20 through and beyond the retainer bore, and a stepped up larger proximal portion that is engageable with the retainer, for example with an internal or external shoulder of the retainer.

As shown, a force distribution member 1126 may be arranged in floating relationship with the suture segments. As shown in FIG. 33C, after both suture segments are fully deployed out of the instrument, the force distribution member and intermediate segment 1128 will  
25 position against the soft tissue repair patch.

The suture retainers 1120 are carried by the needles from the instrument through the soft tissue repair prosthetic and/or fascia, presenting below the skin surface, for example, between the fascia and the skin layer. Upon completion of the instrument stroke, the needles retract back through the fascia and through the abdominal wall patch, leaving a first suture segment 1122  
30 running from a first suture retainer located between the fascia and skin layer, to an intermediate segment 1128 and force distribution member 1126 internal of the abdominal cavity and positionable against the abdominal wall patch, and back to a second segment 1124 running from



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the force distribution member through the abdominal wall patch and fascia to a second retainer located between the fascia and skin layer.

The retainers may be configured so that they are unlikely to slip back through the needle puncture openings. In one embodiment, the proximal end portion 1130 of a retainer may expand  
5 from a collapsed configuration suitable for delivery through the fascia to an expanded configuration after deployment between the fascia and dermal layer. When expanded, the retainers anchor the suture segments in place without tying, or other securing, of the suture tails together. The retainers may be formed of an absorbable material, such as PLA, having sufficient stiffness to anchor the suture and abdominal wall patch in position. However, the retainers may  
10 be formed of any suitable material, including non-absorbable material, as should be apparent to one of skill in the art.

The suture may be configured to draw the intermediate segment and/or force distribution member toward the implanted retainers and against the abdominal wall patch. In one embodiment, the suture may be formed of a stretchable material, such as polybutester, that  
15 becomes stretched and loaded during deployment of the retainers to thereby tension the suture segments and automatically tighten the suture without having to manually pull the suture or retainers to hoist and/or secure the patch in position. For example, and without limitation, the suture segments may be sized for a deployment of approximately 1.0-1.5 cm through the fascia. During deployment, the suture segments may be over-deployed to approximately 2.0 cm to place  
20 sufficient tension on the suture segments for anchoring the patch in position.

An instrument 1200 for delivering a transfascial suture is shown in FIGS. 34-34D and may include a drive element 1202, which may be in the form of a needle, and a suture assembly 1204 supported on the needle. The needle and suture assembly may be housed within an elongated shaft 1206 and may be operated with a drive assembly included within and actuatable  
25 at a handle provided at a proximal end of the shaft.

The suture assembly 1204 may include a suture retainer 1208 connected to a first suture segment 1210 and a suture anchor 1212 connected to a second suture segment 1214. As shown, the first suture segment may be slidably received through a locking member 1216, such as a locking knot, provided at the end of the second suture segment and adjacent the suture anchor.  
30 A force distribution member 1218 may be arranged in floating relationship with the suture segments.

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The suture retainer is adapted to receive and be carried by the needle 1202, or other drive element, as it is advanced from the shaft of the instrument. In one embodiment, the suture retainer includes an axial through-bore for receiving a portion of a needle tip. The bore and/or needle may be configured in a manner similar to arrangements describe above so only part of the needle will project through the retainer. As shown, the suture assembly may extend along the exterior of the needle. However, it is to be appreciated that one or more features of the suture assembly may be carried within the needle. For example, and without limitation, the suture anchor may be received and carried in a corresponding cavity provided on the exterior surface of the needle to position the suture anchor below the skin upon deployment of the suture assembly.

As shown in FIG. 34A, the suture retainer 1208 is carried by the needle from the instrument through the soft tissue repair prosthetic P and/or fascia W, presenting on the other side of the abdominal wall and above the skin surface. Upon completion of the instrument stroke, as shown in FIG. 34B, the needle retracts back through the fascia and the abdominal wall patch, leaving the first suture segment 1210 running from the suture retainer 1208 located exterior of the abdominal cavity, to the force distribution member 1218 internal of the abdominal cavity and positionable against the abdominal wall patch, and back to the second segment 1214 running from the force distribution member through the abdominal wall patch and fascia to the suture anchor 1212 which is located below the skin. The first suture segment 1210 extends through the locking member 1216 adjacent the suture anchor 1212.

As shown in FIG. 34C, the suture assembly may be tightened to draw the force distribution member against the wall patch by holding and pulling the suture retainer to draw a length of the suture segment through the locking member. If desired, a knot pusher 1220 may be slid along the first suture segment external to the abdominal cavity and pushed against the locking member to assist with tightening of the suture assembly. As shown, the suture anchor may be adapted to toggle into an anchoring position as the suture is tightened. When the suture assembly is sufficiently tightened to secure the wall patch, excess length of the first suture segment may be cut below the skin and removed along with the suture retainer.

A method of transfascial suturing, for example in the repair of an abdominal wall defect such as a ventral hernia, will now be described. The patient is prepared in the typical fashion for hernia surgery which may include administration of general anesthesia, identification of the hernia size and location, and shaving, washing and sterilization of the surgical site. The abdominal cavity may be insufflated or otherwise expanded to separate the abdominal wall from

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organs located in the abdominal cavity. A trocar cannula may be inserted to provide camera access to the cavity allowing the physician to visualize the surgical site. A separate laparoscopic cannula may be inserted into the abdominal wall cavity, or an incision (such as formed by a trocar) may be made leading into the abdominal wall cavity, and an abdominal wall repair  
5 prosthetic then may be inserted, as described below, through such cannula, incision, or other passageway into the abdominal cavity.

The prosthetic, which may be in the form of a patch, preferably is reduced in size to facilitate delivery through the slender cannula or incision. For example, and without limitation, the prosthetic may be rolled, folded, or otherwise collapsed into a shape suitable for passage  
10 through the narrow approach to the abdominal cavity. Once located within the cavity, the prosthetic is unfurled or otherwise enlarged, manually or inherently under its own power, and then is positioned relative to the defect, preferably with a margin of at least several centimeters projecting beyond the edges of the defect. Delivery and enlargement of the patch may be facilitated by a mesh introducer such as a PRECISIONPASS instrument available from Davol  
15 Inc., assignee of the instant application. Alternatively, a patch deployment assist device, such as an inflatable deployment assist balloon as illustrated in FIG. 35, may be employed to deliver, expand, and/or position the prosthetic against the abdominal wall relative to the defect.

In a representative method, the patch is reduced along with a deflated deployment assist device, to a slender size such as by rolling the patch and deployment assist device into a  
20 cylindrical shape. One or more attachment components on the deployment assist device may help mount the patch to the deployment assist device. An inflation tube for the deployment assist device may be routed through the patch and then grasped, once the deployment assist device and patch are in the abdominal cavity, by a suture passer or other instrument that has been inserted into the abdominal cavity from outside of the patient. The suture passer is  
25 withdrawn, externalizing the inflation tube. The end of the inflation tube outside of the patient may be fluidly connected to an inflation source. Introduction of an inflation medium through the inflation tube will expand the balloon, unfurling the patch into a substantially planar configuration or such other end-use configuration as may be desired. The patch is positioned relative to the defect and when appropriately located, the inflation tube may be pulled from  
30 outside of the patient to hoist the deployment assist device and, consequently, the patch carried thereby against the abdominal wall. A hemostat, clamp or other instrument, may be applied to

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the inflation tube to retain the deployment assist device in position. If desired, the patch still may be rotated to optimize angular orientation of the patch.

The prosthetic patch may be maintained in position against the abdominal wall by the deployment assist device or, alternatively, by use of laparoscopic instruments such as graspers.

5 At this time, in the discretion of the physician, a plurality of coils, tacks, staples, or other mechanical fixation elements may be applied through the patch into the abdominal wall.

A single or twin-needle, or other single or twin-drive element, suture delivery instrument is then inserted through the cannula or narrow incision into the abdominal cavity. The instrument includes one or more suture and suture force distribution member assemblies, such as  
10 any of the arrangements previously described. From within the abdominal cavity and under camera visualization, the tip of the suture delivery instrument is placed against a margin of the patch, or other location as desired by the physician. At least one trigger or other control is actuated, from outside of the patient, driving one needle or a pair of needles simultaneously or in a sequence, through the distal end of the instrument where the needles associate, if they were not  
15 pre-associated, with respective suture segments. The needle or needles advance out of the instrument and pierce through the patch margin, the abdominal wall (fascia) and, if desired, also through subcutaneous tissue, fat and skin, with the needles paying out the suture segments as they travel through the patch and anatomy.

The tail ends or sections of the suture segments may be retained on the exterior side of  
20 the abdominal cavity by application of hemostats, clamps, or other devices, or by grasping by medical staff, to prevent the suture segments from slipping back into the abdominal cavity, as well as to maintain tension on the sutures thereby keeping the patch positioned against the internal abdominal wall. The tail ends or sections external of the abdominal cavity may be pulled to hoist the patch against the abdominal wall and then the hemostats or other instruments  
25 applied, or reapplied, to manage the suture ends and patch location. In certain embodiments, suture retainers, such as those previously described, may be employed to manage the suture tails post deployment.

As the suture is delivered through the fascia, and/or in response to the pulling, external of the abdominal cavity, of the suture tails or segments that have been delivered through the fascia,  
30 a suture force distribution member becomes lodged against the prosthetic inside of the abdominal wall cavity. Advantageously, the puncture openings through the patch formed by the needles are covered, at least in part, by the force distribution member. By covering the puncture

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openings, the suture force distribution member helps prevent adhesions between the viscera and the tissue infiltratable side of the patch. The delivery of sutures may be repeated, for example at spaced locations about the periphery of the patch, and either after deployment of each suture or after all of the sutures have been delivered, respective suture tail pairs may be knotted, excess  
5 suture length trimmed, and the skin over the suture knot closed by stitching, adhesive strip or otherwise. The deployment assist device may be separated from the patch and removed at any time after proper positioning of the patch, and preferably after the patch has at least been provisionally secured such as by initial suturing or mechanical fixation, and may remain in the abdominal cavity until transfascial suturing has been completed. As mentioned, mechanical  
10 fixation elements may, at the discretion of the physician, be applied to the patch prior to transfascial suturing. Alternatively, such mechanical fixation may occur after transfascial suturing, or the transfascial suturing procedure may be concluded without deploying any mechanical fixation elements.

The soft tissue repair prosthetic may be formed of a porous material, such as a knit,  
15 woven or non-woven fabric, or may be composed of a solid, substantially non-porous, or micro-porous material. The prosthesis may be formed of one or more layers of the same or dissimilar material, and the layers may be stacked one on top of the other, side-to-side, or include a combination of both stacking arrangements. The prosthesis may be formed with portions that are tissue infiltratable and other portions that are less tissue infiltratable or are non-tissue  
20 infiltratable, providing selected areas of the repair device with different tissue ingrowth and adhesion resistant properties. The prosthesis may be formed of permanent material, resorbable material, or a combination of permanent and resorbable materials. It should be appreciated that the prosthesis may be formed of any biologically compatible material, synthetic or natural, suitable for repairing a tissue or muscle wall defect as would be apparent to one of skill in the  
25 art. Depending upon the surgical application, the prosthesis may be in the form of a patch, plug or combination patch and plug.

In a representative embodiment, the soft tissue repair prosthetic is in the form of a ventral hernia repair patch, and may include a tissue infiltratable layer and a barrier layer. The tissue infiltratable layer may include one or more sheets of surgical mesh fabric, such as a  
30 polypropylene knit. The barrier layer may be a sheet of synthetic or natural barrier material; for example, and without limitation, a sheet of ePTFE may be stitched, heat fused or otherwise

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connected to a polypropylene sheet. In the described method of ventral hernia repair, the polypropylene side would face the abdominal wall and the ePTFE side would face the viscera.

Surgical materials which are suitable for tissue or muscle reinforcement and defect correction may be utilized include, but are not limited to, BARD MESH (available from C.R. Bard, Inc.), SOFT TISSUE PATCH (microporous ePTFE – available from W.L. Gore & Associates, Inc.); SURGIPRO (available from US Surgical, Inc.); TRELEX (available from Meadox Medical); PROLENE and MERSILENE (available from Ethicon, Inc.); and other mesh materials (e.g., available from Atrium Medical Corporation). Biologic materials, including XENMATRIX, COLLAMEND, and ALLOMAX (all available from C.R. Bard, Inc.) or COOK SURGISIS (available from Cook Biomedical, Inc.) may also be used. Resorbable materials, including polyglactin (VICRYL -- available from Ethicon, Inc.) and polyglycolic acid (DEXON -- available from US Surgical, Inc.). These materials may be used alone in a soft tissue repair prosthetic, in combination with one another, or in combination with other materials. The fabric may be formed from multifilament yarns and any suitable method, such as knitting, weaving, braiding, molding and the like, may be employed to form the mesh material. It should be appreciated that when the soft tissue repair prosthesis is in the form of a patch, it may be configured in many shapes, including, but not limited to substantially flat, concave, convex, and concave-convex, and may, for example, be in the shape of a square, rectangle, circle, or ellipse. Further, the patch may be loaded with one or more drugs including, without limitation, an analgesic or antibiotic.

The suture may be formed of a synthetic or natural material, and may be absorbable or non-absorbable. For some applications, the suture may be formed of a stretchable material. Representative suture materials include, but are not limited to, polypropylene, PTFE, nylon, polyester, polybutester, silk, PGA, PLA/PGA, caprolactone, catgut, polyhydroxyalkanoate and PDO.

The above and other aspects of the invention will be appreciated from the detailed description and claims. It should be understood that although aspects of the invention have been described with reference to illustrative embodiments, aspects of the invention are not limited to the embodiments described. Also, aspects of the invention may be used alone, or in any suitable combination with other aspects of the invention.

What is claimed is:

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### CLAIMS

1. An instrument for delivering a transfascial suture, comprising:  
a handle;  
5 an elongated shaft extending from the handle and including a distal end;  
a first needle and a second needle, the first and second needles being moveable to an  
extended position beyond the distal end of the shaft, each needle having a sharp end adapted to  
pierce a soft tissue repair prosthetic and abdominal wall tissue; and  
a suture carried by the instrument, the suture defined by a first segment and a second  
10 segment, and including a force distributing member between the first and second segments, the  
suture arranged in the instrument so that the suture segments are carried by the needles as the  
needles move to the extended position.
2. The instrument of claim 1, wherein each of the needles includes a notch for  
15 carrying a respective suture segment.
3. The instrument of claim 1, wherein each of the needles is hollow and the suture  
segments are located within the hollow needles.
- 20 4. The instrument of claim 1, wherein the suture segments pay out as the needles  
move to the extended position.
5. The instrument of claim 1, wherein the force distributing member is located  
between the needles.  
25
6. The instrument of claim 1, wherein the force distributing member is located along  
a path of the pair of needles and is adapted to receive the pair of needles therethrough.
7. The instrument of claim 1, wherein the pair of needles are arranged to move  
30 along a parallel needle path.

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8. The instrument of claim 1, wherein the pair of needles are arranged to move along a diverging path.

9. The instrument of claim 1, wherein the instrument has a loaded position where the suture has an inverted-U shaped with the force distribution member at a distal end and the pair of suture segments extending proximally.

10. The instrument of claim 1, further including a plurality of suture and force distributing member assemblies.

11. The instrument of claim 10, wherein the plurality of suture and force distributing member assemblies are indexed, and the pair of needles are arranged to index according to a predetermined order.

12. The instrument of claim 11, wherein the index is an axial index.

13. The instrument of claim 11, wherein the index is a rotational index.

14. An instrument for delivering a transfascial suture, comprising:  
a handle;

an elongated shaft extending from the handle and including a distal end;

a first drive member and a second drive member, the first and second drive members being moveable along respective drive paths to an extended position beyond the distal end of the shaft;

a suture carried by the instrument, the suture defined by a first segment and a second segment; and

a first suture retainer connected to the first segment and located in a first drive path, and a second suture retainer connected to the second segment and located in a second drive path, the first and second suture retainers carried by the instrument.

15. The instrument recited in claim 14, wherein the first suture and second suture retainers include an axial through-bore.



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16. The instrument recited in claim 14, wherein the first and second suture retainers are configured to be carried by the first and second drive members as they move to the extended position.

5 17. The instrument recited in claim 14, wherein the first and second drive members includes a narrow tip and a proximal, wider shoulder.

18. The instrument recited in claim 14, wherein the first drive member and the second drive member include a pair of needles.

10

19. The instrument recited in claim 14, wherein the first and second suture retainers include a pointed tip.

20. The instrument recited in claim 14, wherein each of the first and second suture  
15 retainers include a side body at which respective suture segments are connected.

21. The instrument recited in claim 20, wherein the suture segments are movingly connected to respective side bodies.

20 22. The instrument recited in claim 21, wherein each suture retainer includes an engagement feature for securing to the suture segment

23. An instrument for delivering a transfascial suture, comprising:  
a handle;

25 an elongated shaft extending from the handle and including a distal end;  
a first needle and a second needle, the first and second needles being moveable to an extended position beyond the distal end of the shaft, each needle having a sharp end adapted to pierce a soft tissue repair prosthetic and abdominal wall tissue, and including a suture receiving channel; and

30 a suture carried by the instrument, the suture defined by a first segment and a second segment, the first segment located in the first suture receiving channel and the second segment located in the second suture receiving channel.

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24. The instrument recited in claim 23, wherein each hollow needle includes a notch adapted to carry a respective suture segment and pay out the respective suture segment as the needle is advanced to the extended position.

5

25. The instrument recited in claim 24, wherein the notches are located on opposed inward portions of the needles.

26. The instrument recited in claim 23, wherein an intermediate segment extends  
10 from the first segment to the second segment and is located between suture carrying portions of the needles.

27. The instrument recited in claim 26, wherein the intermediate segment includes a force distributing member.

15

28. The instrument recited in claim 27, wherein the force distributing member is in the form of a tube or a plate.

29. The instrument recited in claim 27, wherein the force distributing member  
20 floatably located along the intermediate segment.

30. The instrument recited in claim 27, where the force distributing member is fixed to the intermediate segment.

25 31. The instrument recited in claim 27, wherein the force distributing member is located between the needles.

32. The instrument of claim 23, wherein the pair of needles are arranged to move along a parallel needle path.

30

33. The instrument of claim 23, wherein the pair of needles are arranged to move along a diverging path.

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34. An instrument for delivering a transfascial suture, comprising:  
a handle;  
an elongated shaft extending from the handle and including a distal end;  
a first needle and a second needle, the first and second needles being moveable to an  
5 extended position beyond the distal end of the shaft, each needle having a sharp end adapted to  
pierce a soft tissue repair prosthetic and abdominal wall tissue; and  
a plurality of sutures indexed according to a delivery sequence;  
wherein the instrument is configured to register together a next indexed suture in the  
delivery sequence and the first and second needles.

10

35. The instrument recited in claim 34, wherein the plurality of sutures are axially indexed.

15

36. The instrument recited in claim 34, wherein the plurality of sutures are rotationally indexed.

37. The instrument recited in claim 34, further includes an indexing cannula internal of the shaft.

20

38. The instrument recited in claim 37, wherein the indexing cannula moves according to a predetermined sequence from the preceding indexed suture to the next indexed suture.

25

39. The instrument recited in claim 37, wherein the indexing cannula rotates a predetermined angular amount between the preceding indexed suture and the next indexed suture.

30

40. The instrument recited in claim 34, wherein the needles move according to a predetermined delivery sequence from the preceding indexed suture to the next indexed suture.

41. The instrument recited in claim 34, wherein the needles rotate a predetermined angular amount between the preceding indexed suture and the next indexed suture.

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42. The instrument recited in claim 34, wherein indexing occurs after deployment of a preceding indexed suture by the first and second needles.

5           43. The instrument recited in claim 34, wherein the registered first and second needles are arranged to contact the next indexed suture during a movement of the pair of needles.

          44. A suture assembly, comprising:  
10           a suture having a first segment, a second segment, and an intermediate section between the first segment and the second segment;  
          a first suture retainer connected to the first end, and a second suture retainer connected with the second end; and  
          a force distributing member positioned about the intermediate section.

15           45. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the force distributing member is fixed at the intermediate section.

          46. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the force distributing member is  
20           movably connected about the intermediate section.

          47. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the force distributing member has a tubular or a substantially planar configuration.

25           48. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the force distribution member includes a pair of openings for receiving respective of the first and second suture segments.

          49. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the force distribution member includes a pair of edge contours for receiving respective of the first and second suture segments.

30           50. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the first and second suture segments are fixedly connected to the first and second suture retainers.

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51. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the first and second suture segments are movable connected to the first and second suture retainers.

5 52. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the first and second suture retainers include an axial throughbore.

53. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the first and second suture retainers include a pointed tip.

10

54. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the first and second suture retainers include a narrow distal end and a wider proximal end.

55. The suture assembly of claim 44, wherein the first and second suture retainers  
15 include a side body at which the respective suture segments are connected.

56. The suture assembly of claim 55, wherein each side body includes an axial bore and an opening extending through the side body from the axial bore.

20 57. The suture assembly of claim 56, wherein the opening is a sidecut located at a proximal end of the sidebody.

58. The suture assembly of claim 56, wherein each side body includes a second opening extending through the side body from the axial bore, the second opening spaced from  
25 the first opening.

59. The suture assembly of claim 58, wherein the first opening and second openings extend in different directions from the axial bore.

30

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60. A suture assembly, comprising:

a suture; and

a suture retainer including a connector to connect with the suture, the position of the connector being selectively adjustable along the length of the suture, the suture retainer  
5 including an axial bore therethrough for receiving a needle.

61. The suture assembly of claim 60, wherein the suture retainer includes an engagement feature to selectively engage the suture to the retainer.

10 62. The suture assembly of claim 60, wherein the engagement feature is a wedge.

63. The suture assembly of claim 62, wherein the connector includes an axial bore and an opening extending from the axial bore, the wedge being located in the opening.

15 64. The suture assembly of claim 60, wherein the connector is adapted to reorient a position of the suture retainer relative to the suture.

65. The suture assembly of claim 60, further including a tipping arm extending from each suture retainer about which a suture may be tied to cause the suture retainer to tip over.

20

66. A tip for a transfascial suture delivery instrument, comprising:

a tip body including a first needle pathway and a second needle pathway, each of the first and second needle pathways being registrable with a respective first needle channel and a second needle channel in a transfascial suture delivery instrument; and

25 at least one suture defined by a first segment and a second segment, the first and second suture segments, or a retainer associated with each of the first and second suture segments, being located along the first needle pathway and the second needle pathway, respectively;

wherein the tip body is adapted to removably fit to the transfascial suture delivery instrument with the first and second needle pathways registered with the first and second needle  
30 channels.

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67. The tip recited in claim 66, wherein the tip body includes a distal extension including the first and second needle pathways.

68. The tip recited in claim 66, wherein the tip body includes a proximal extension  
5 including a fitting for attaching with a shaft on a transfascial suture delivery instrument.

69. The tip recited in claim 68, wherein a portion of the first and second suture segments extend through the proximal extension.

10 70. The tip recited in claim 66, further including a suture enclosure extending proximally of the tip body.

71. The tip recited in claim 70, wherein the tip body includes a passageway for the first and second suture segments.

15 72. The tip recited in claim 71, wherein the passageway for the first and second suture segments is spaced from the first and second needle pathways.

73. The tip recited in claim 66, wherein a mating feature for the transfascial suture  
20 delivery instrument extends proximally from the tip body.

74. The tip recited in claim 66, further including a mount for a force distribution member.

25 75. The tip recited in claim 74, wherein the mount is spaced from the first and second needle paths.

76. The tip recited in claim 74, wherein the first and second suture segments are connected with a suture force distributing member.

30 77. The tip recited in 76, wherein the force distributing member is floatably positioned relative to the suture segments.

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78. The tip recited in claim 66, further in combination with a transfascial suture delivery instrument.

5           79     A tip for a transfascial suture delivery instrument, comprising:  
a tip body including a first needle pathway and a second needle pathway, each of the first  
and second needle pathways having a portion adapted to register with a respective first needle  
channel and a second needle channel in a transfascial suture delivery instrument, the tip body  
including at least one suture defined by a first segment and a second segment, and an elongated  
10   suture enclosure extending proximally of the first and second pathways, the first and second  
segments being located within the elongated suture enclosure;  
wherein the tip body is adapted to fit to the transfascial suture delivery instrument with  
the first and second needle pathways registered with the first and second needle channels.

15           80.     The tip recited in claim 79, wherein the suture enclosure is tubular shaped.

81.     The tip recited in claim 80, wherein the suture enclosure includes a divider to  
separate the first and second suture segments.

20           82.     The tip recited in claim 79, wherein the tip body includes a proximal extension  
and the suture enclosure extends through the proximal extension.

83.     The tip recited in claim 79, further in combination with a transfascial suture  
delivery instrument.

25           84.     The tip recited in claim 83, wherein the transfascial suture delivery instrument  
includes a shaft with a recess adapted to seat the suture enclosure.

30



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85. An instrument for delivering a transfascial suture, comprising:

a handle;

an elongated shaft extending from the handle and including a distal end;

a needle extending through the elongated shaft and advanceable beyond the distal end,

5 the needle including a sharp tip and a drive feature;

a plurality of suture retainers stacked end-to-end on the needle, each pair of suture retainers connected to a single suture; and

a stop at the distal end, the stop adapted to be overcome movement of the distal-most suture retainer induced by the drive feature of the needle, the drive feature having a firing profile  
10 to drive the distal-most suture retainer out of the distal end when the needle is moved in the distal direction, and a reloading profile allowing the drive feature to move past the next distal-most suture retainer as the needle is moved in the proximal direction.

86. The instrument recited in claim 85, wherein the drive feature toggles between the

15 firing profile and the reloading profile.

87. The instrument recited in claim 85, wherein the drive feature is biased to the firing profile.

88. The instrument recited in claim 85, wherein the drive feature includes a front cam surface a different rear cam surface.

89. The instrument recited in claim 88, wherein the drive feature is mounted for pivoting movement to the needle.

90. The instrument recited in claim 85, wherein the drive feature is a leaf spring.

91. An instrument for delivering a transfascial suture, comprising:

a handle;

an elongated shaft extending from the handle and including a distal end;

30 a pair of needles extend through the elongated shaft and are advanceable beyond the distal end;

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a suture including a force distribution member located in a pick-up area in the distal end, and one or more sutures each including a force distribution member located in a loading zone in the distal end; and

a translating feature in the distal end to move a suture and force distribution member  
5 from the loading zone to the pick-up area.

92. The instrument recited in claim 91, wherein movement of the pair of needles actuates the translating feature.

10 93. The instrument recited in claim 92, wherein the actuating movement includes movement of the distal ends of the pair of needles proximally of the pick-up area.

94. The instrument recited in claim 92, wherein the translating feature includes a distal end of the loading zone having a camming surface.

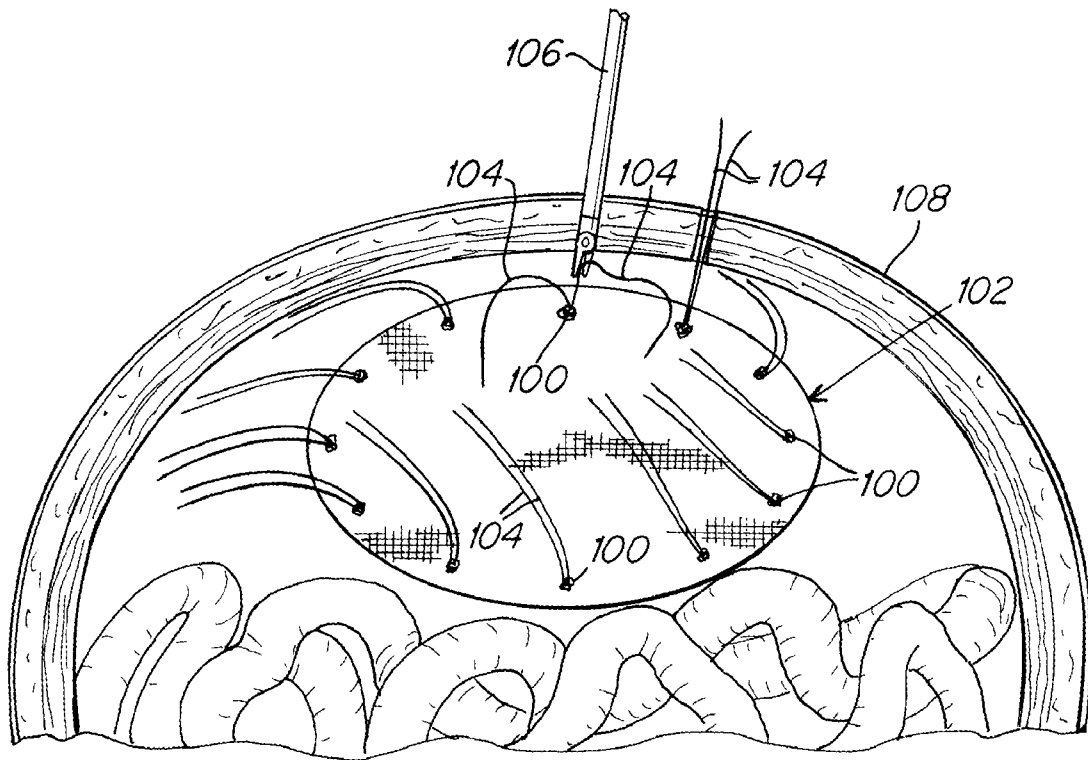
15 95. The instrument recited in claim 91, further including a biasing member acting on the one or more suture and force distribution members in the loading zone.

20 96. The instrument recited in claim 91, wherein the pick-up area and loading zone partially overlap.

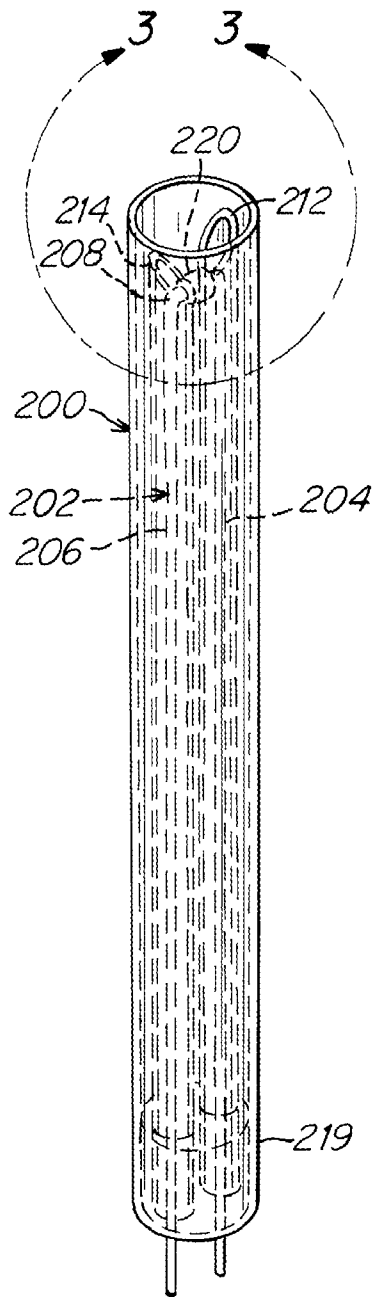
97. The instrument recited in claim 91, wherein the force distribution members include openings adapted to receive the pair of needles.

25 98. The instrument recited in claim 91, wherein each suture has a first segment, a second segment, and an intermediate segment therebetween, the force distribution member locatable at the intermediate segment.

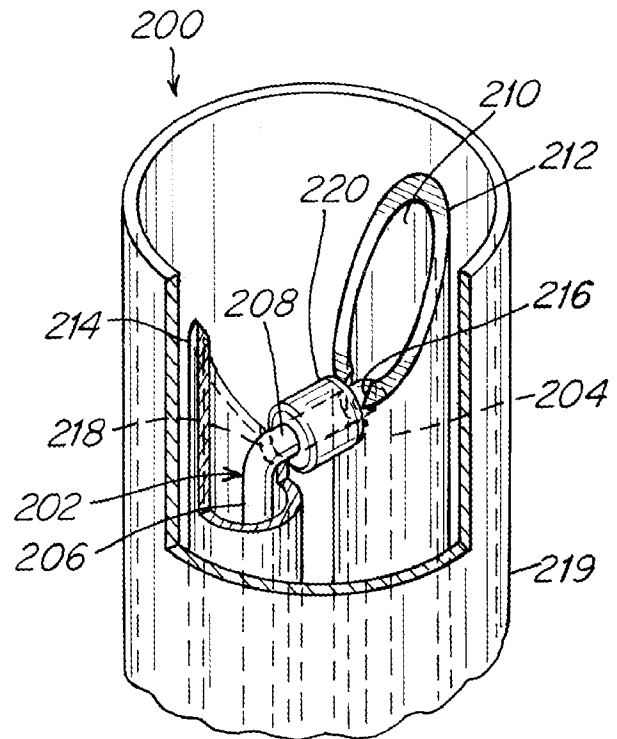
30 99. The instrument recited in claim 98, wherein the force distribution members in the loading zone are axially indexed.



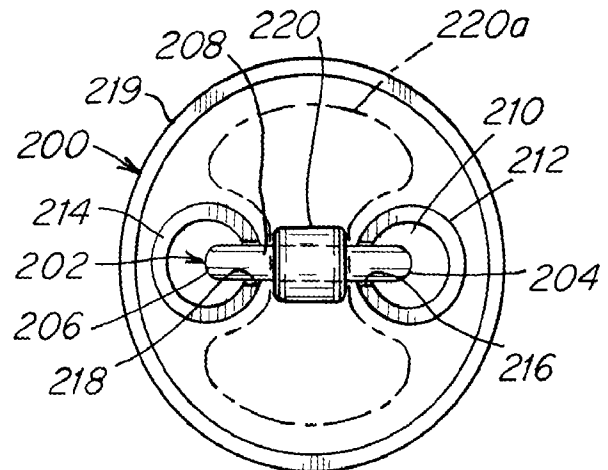
*Fig. 1*  
PRIOR ART



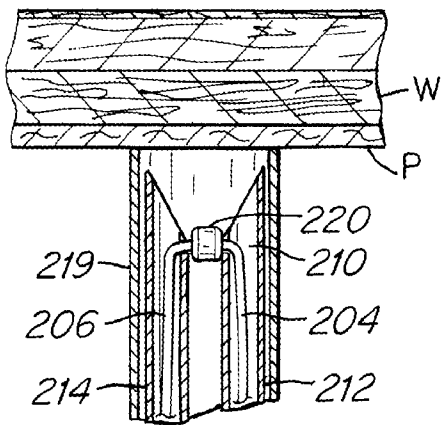
**Fig. 2**



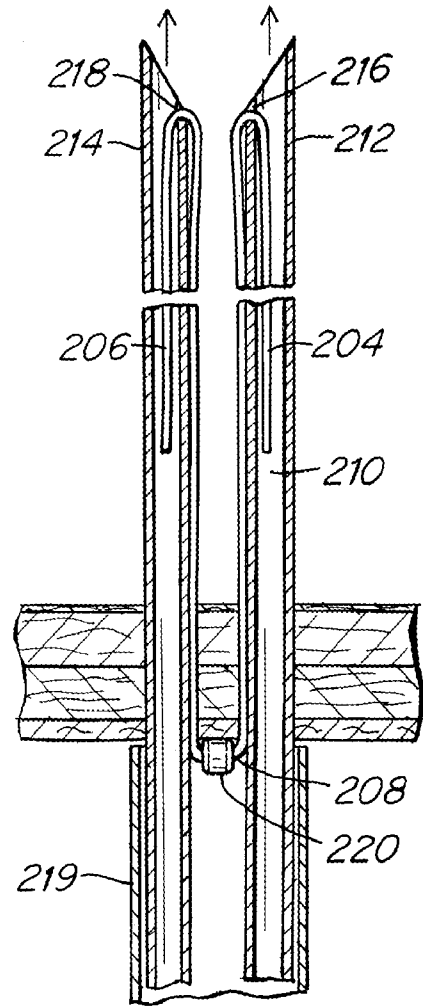
**Fig. 3**



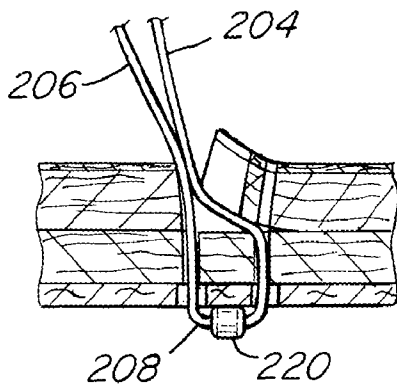
**Fig. 4**



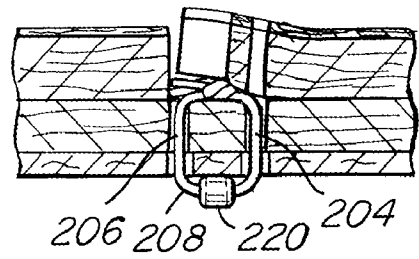
*Fig. 5A*



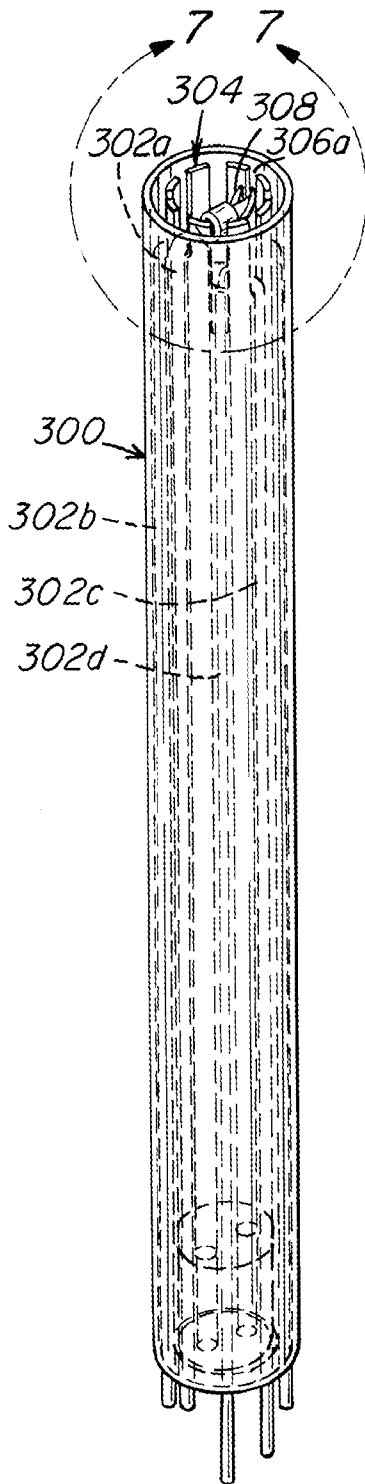
*Fig. 5B*



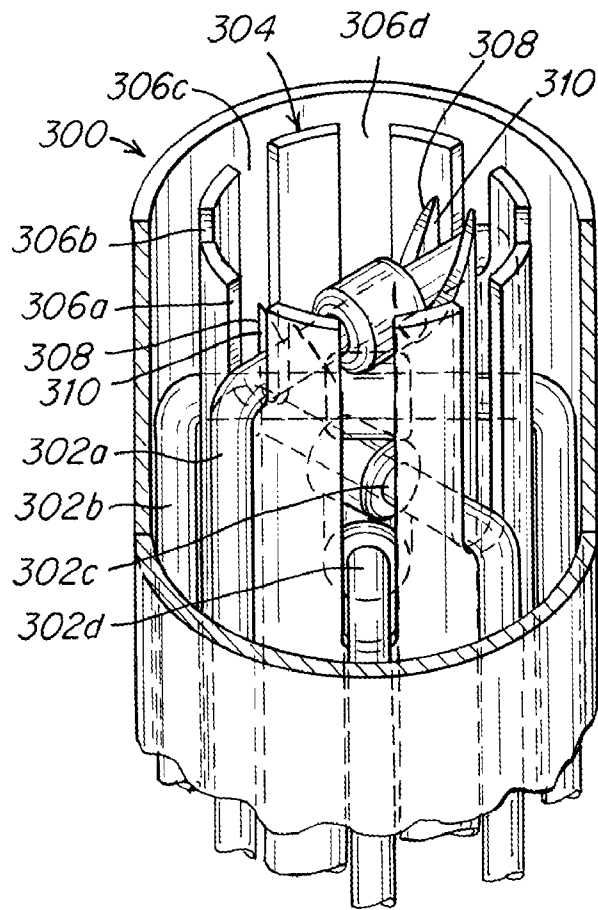
*Fig. 5C*



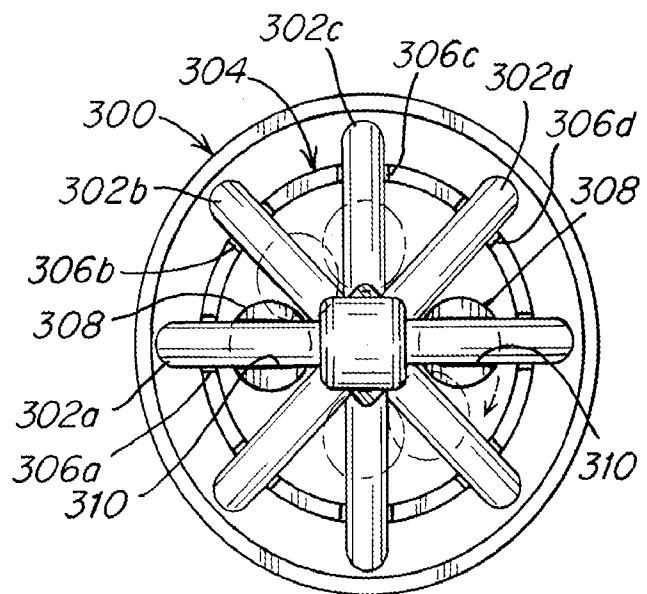
*Fig. 5D*



*Fig. 6*



*Fig. 7*



*Fig. 8*

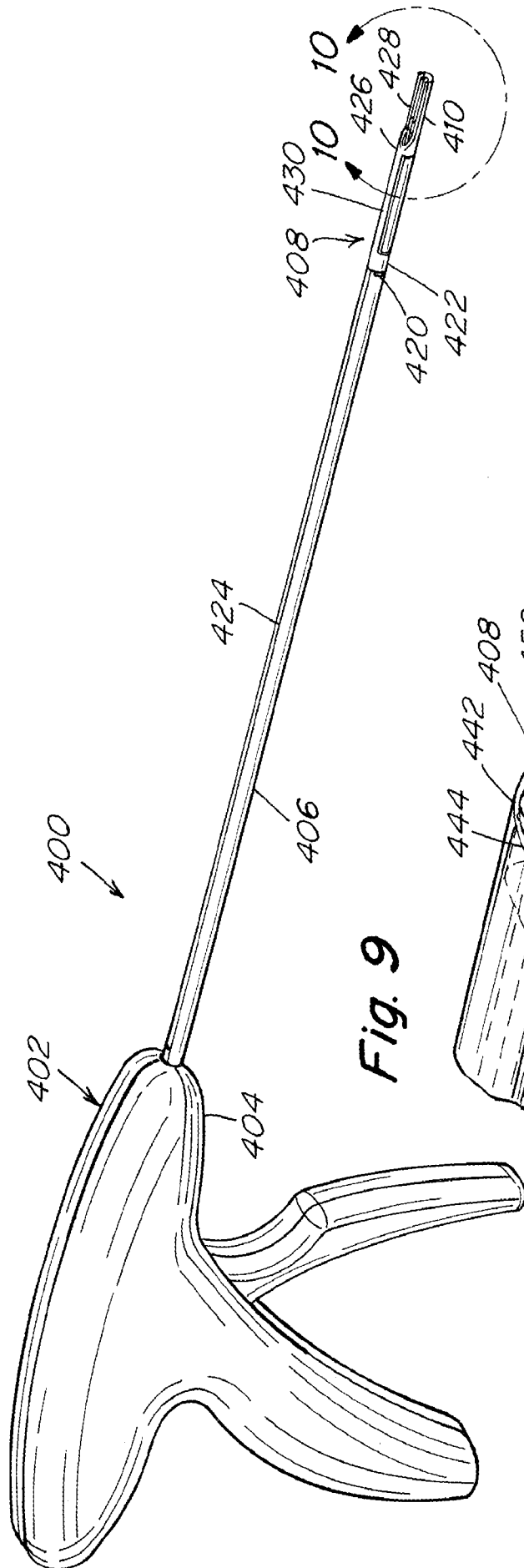


Fig. 9

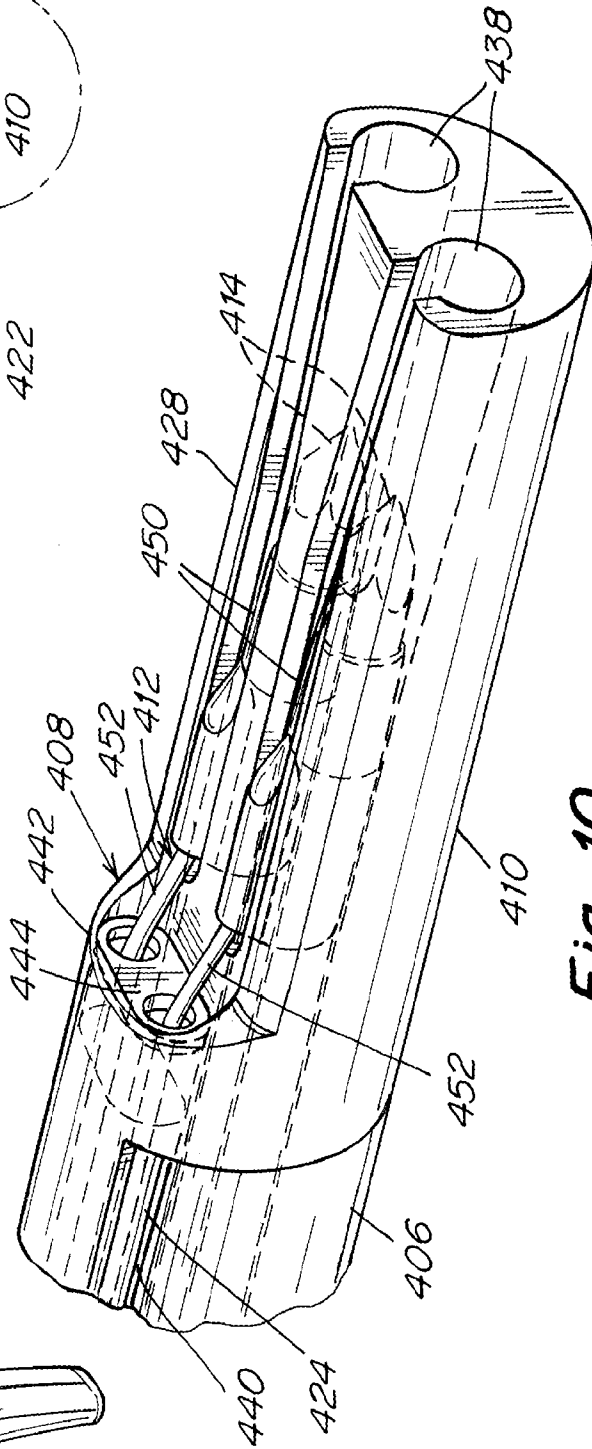


Fig. 10

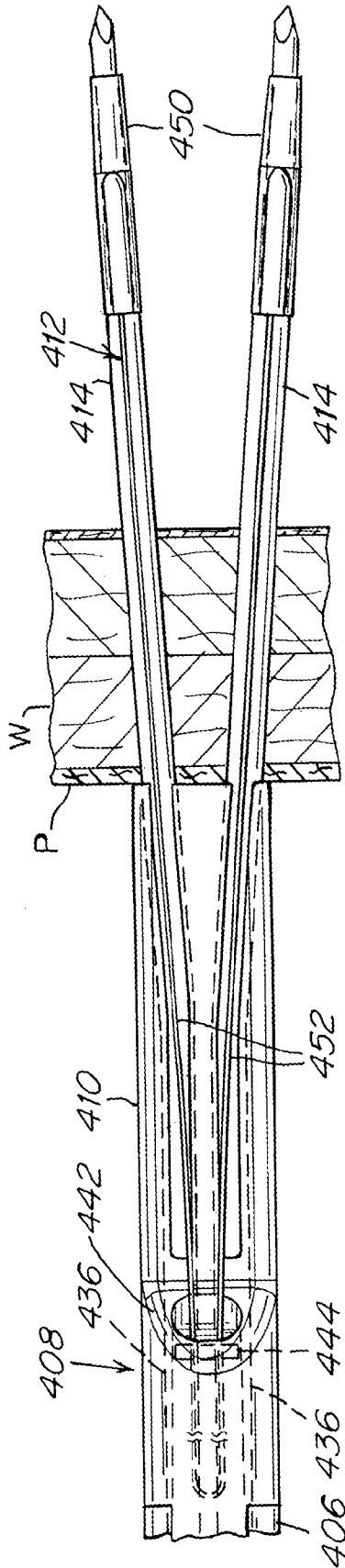


Fig. 11

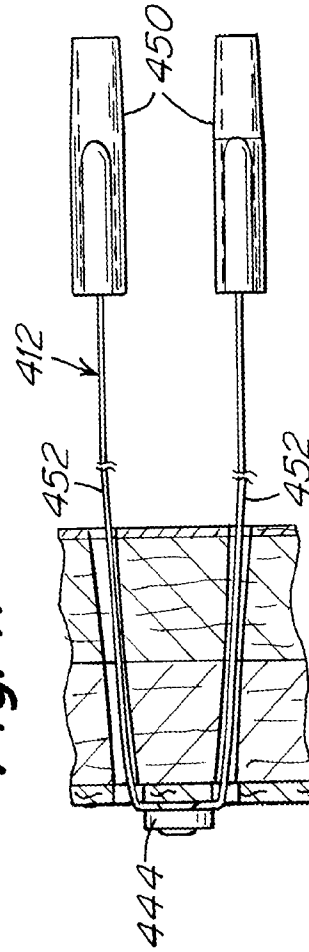


Fig. 12

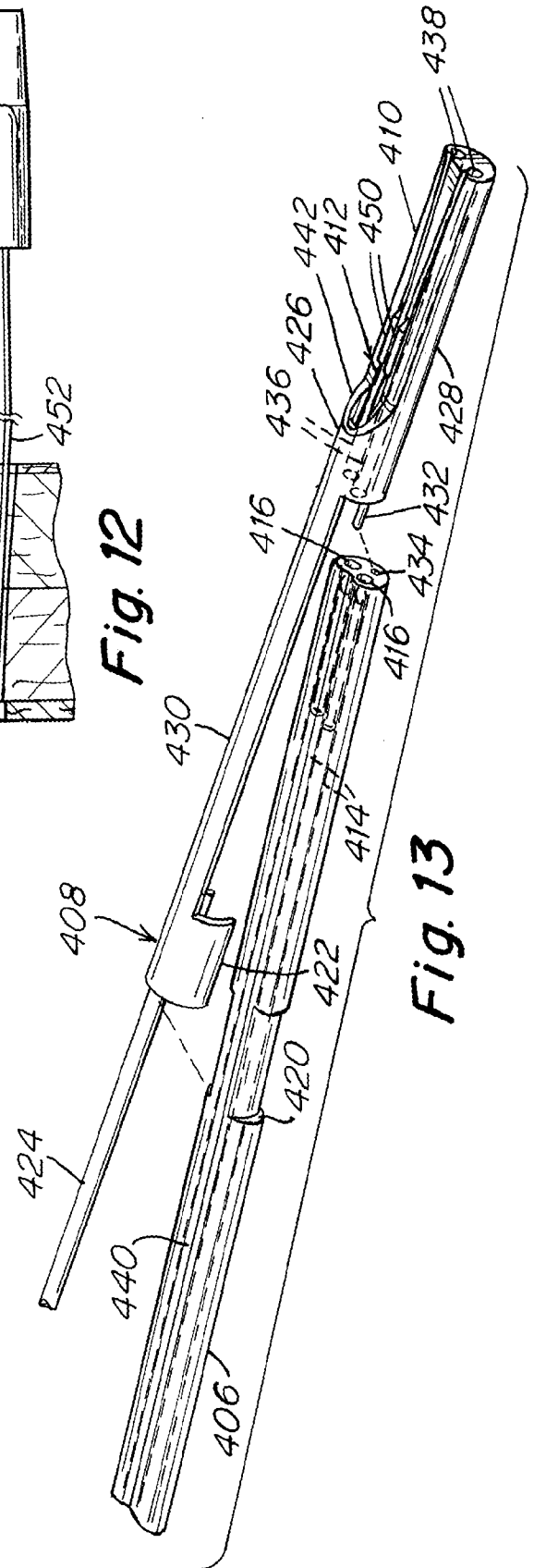
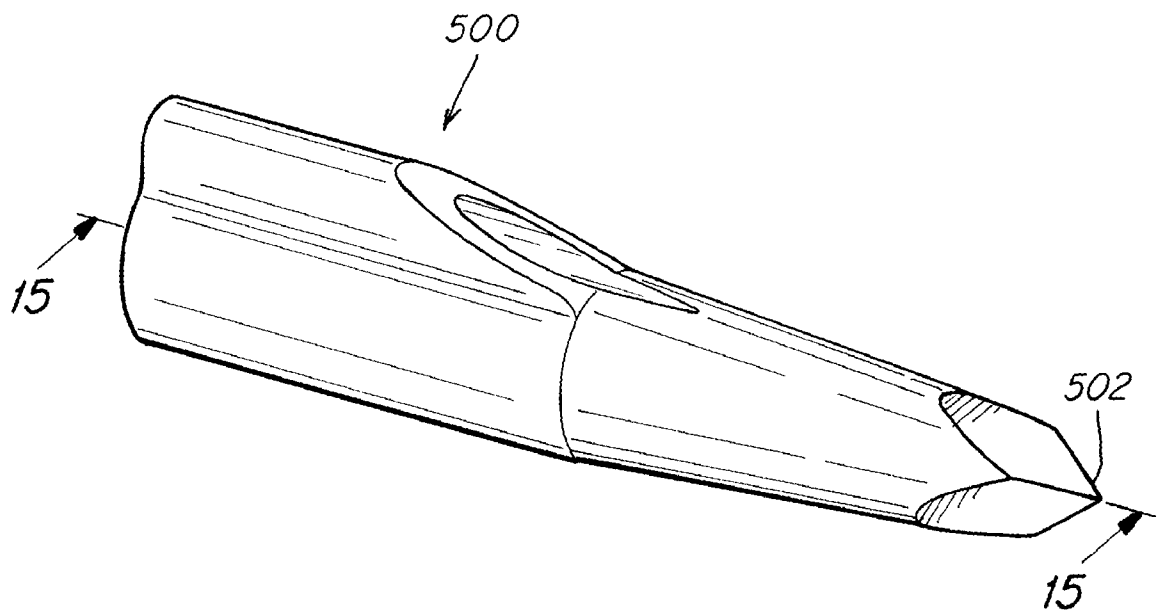
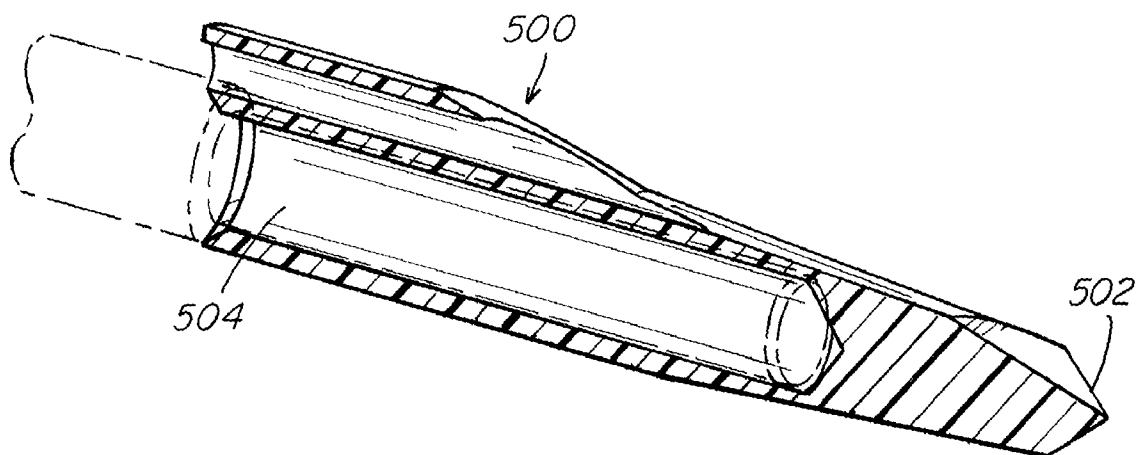
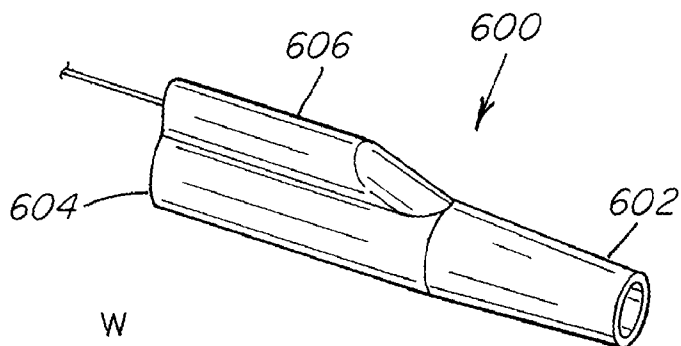
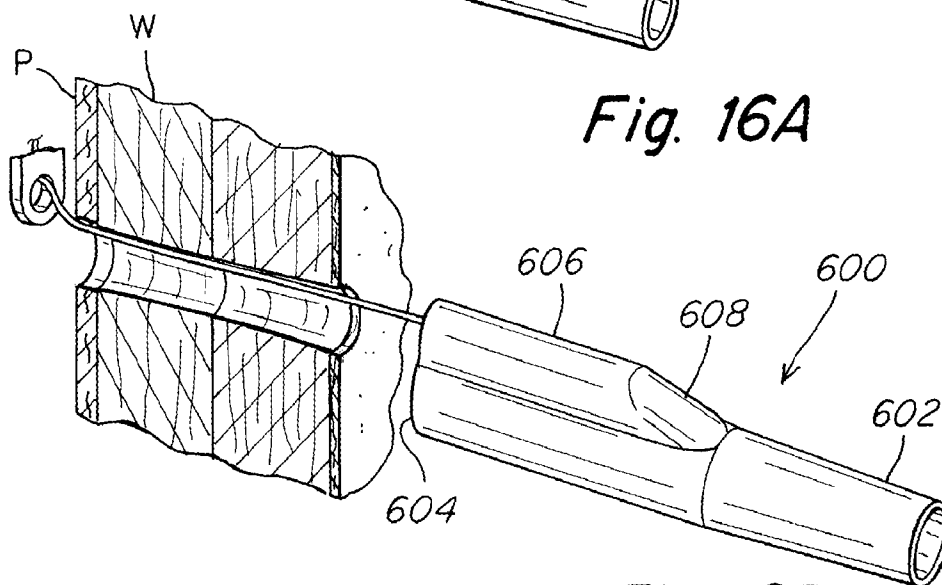
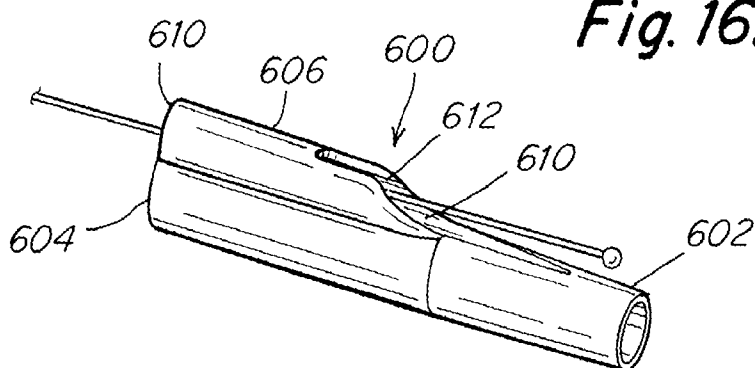
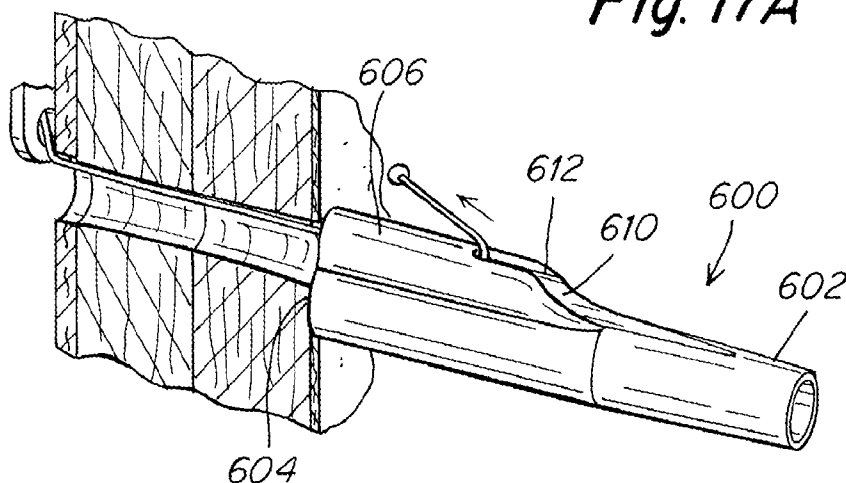
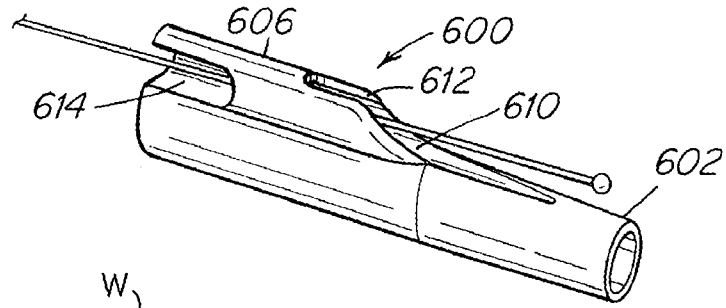


Fig. 13

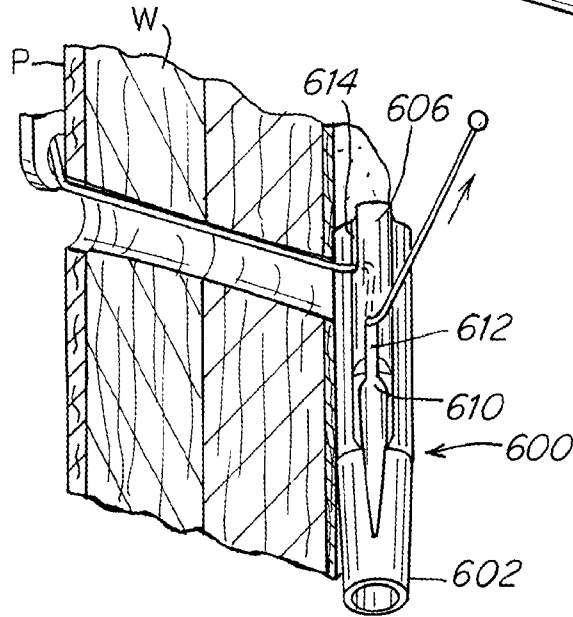


*Fig. 14**Fig. 15*

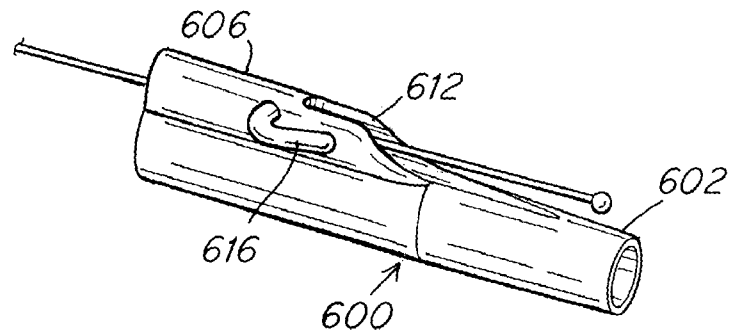
*Fig. 16A**Fig. 16B**Fig. 17A**Fig. 17B*



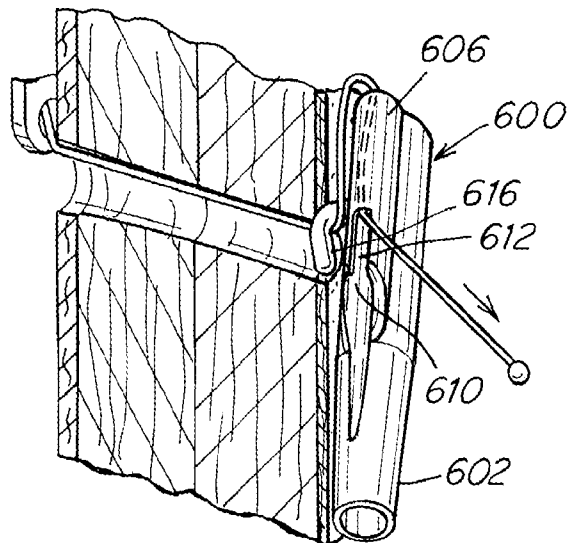
**Fig. 18A**



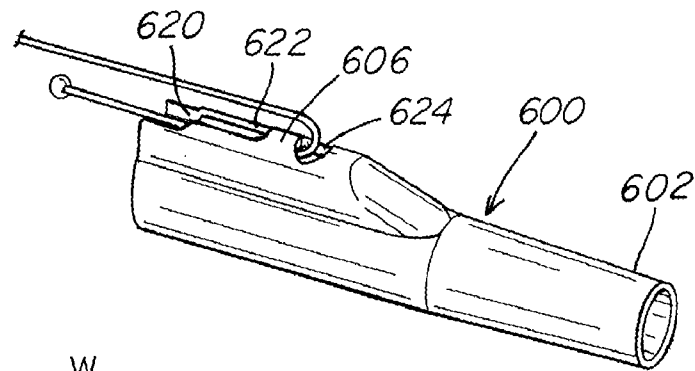
**Fig. 18B**



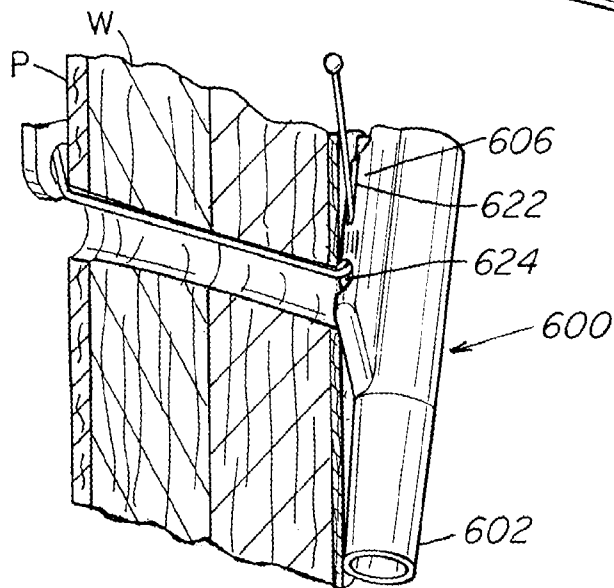
**Fig. 19A**



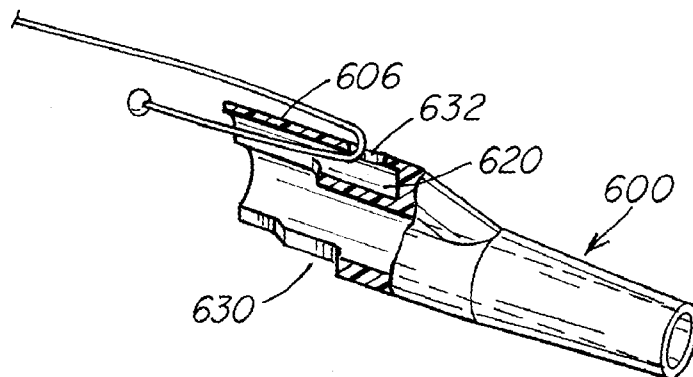
**Fig. 19B**



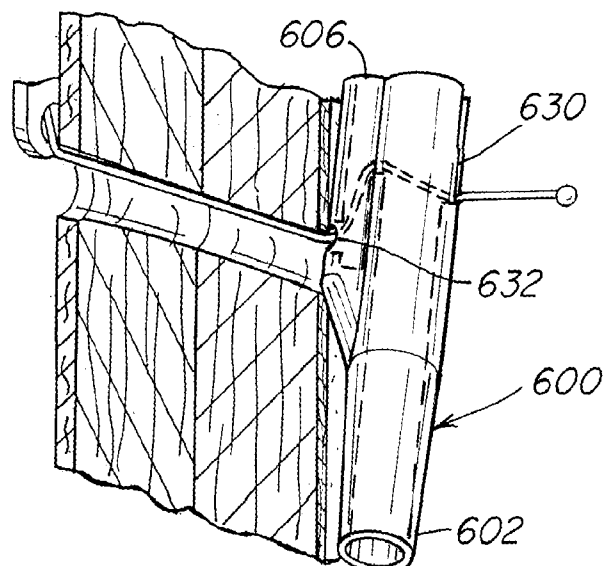
*Fig. 20A*



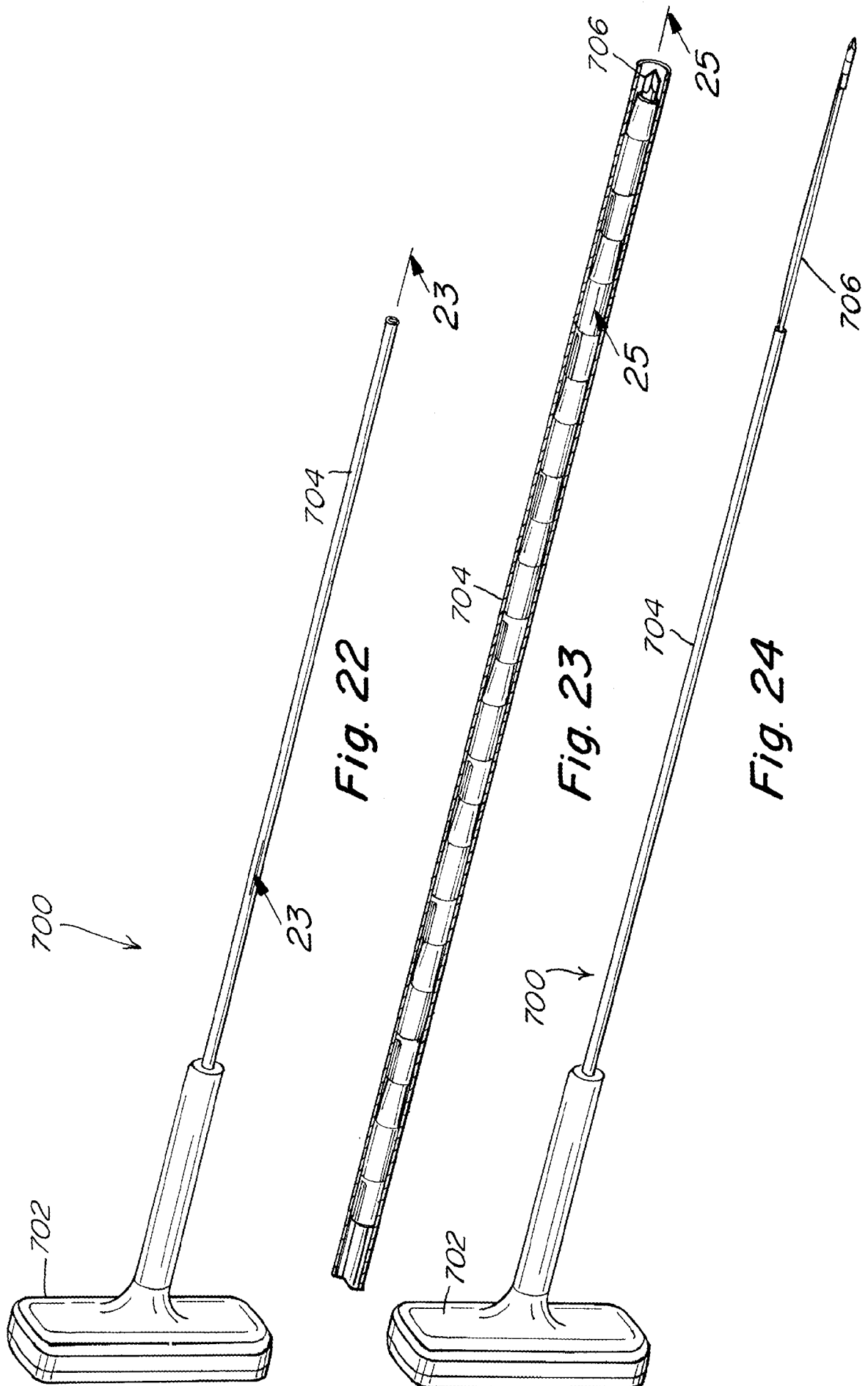
*Fig. 20B*



*Fig. 21A*



*Fig. 21B*



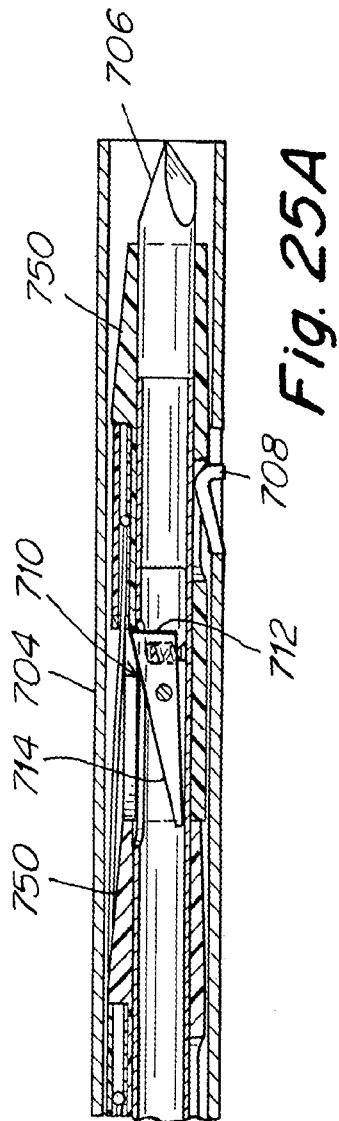


Fig. 25A

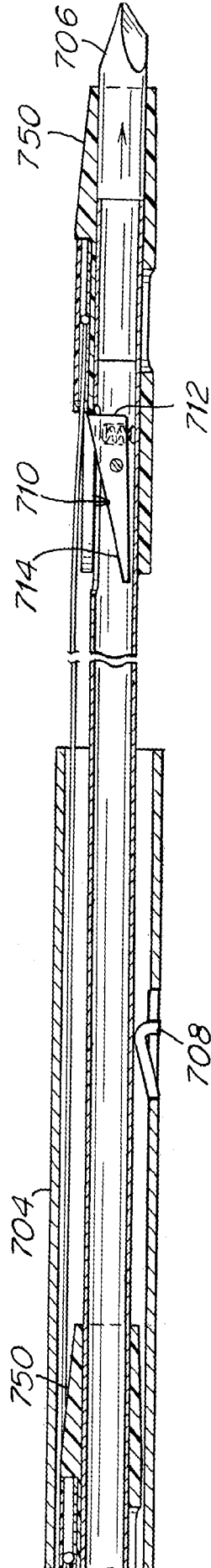


Fig. 25B

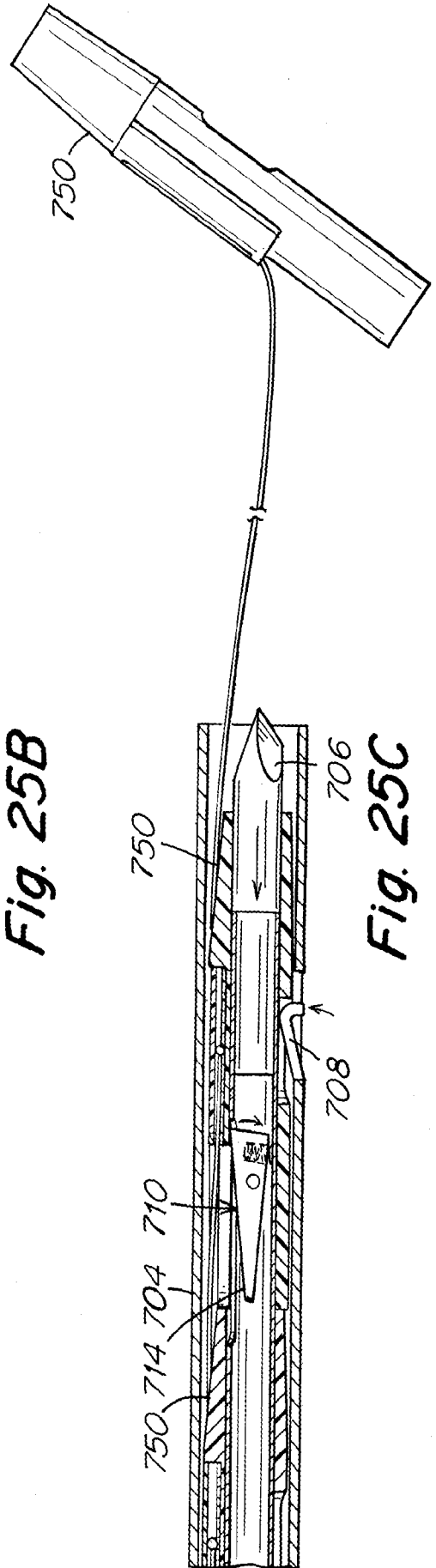
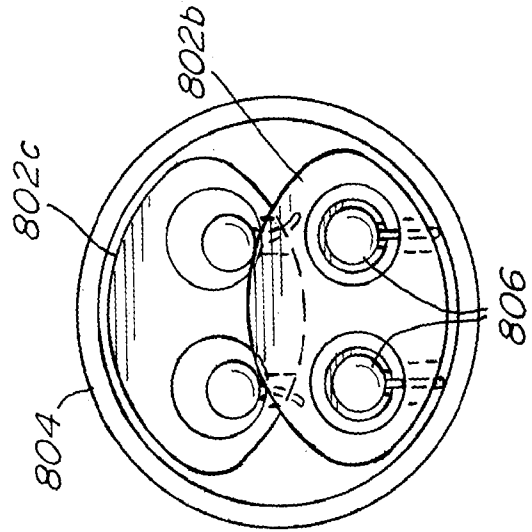
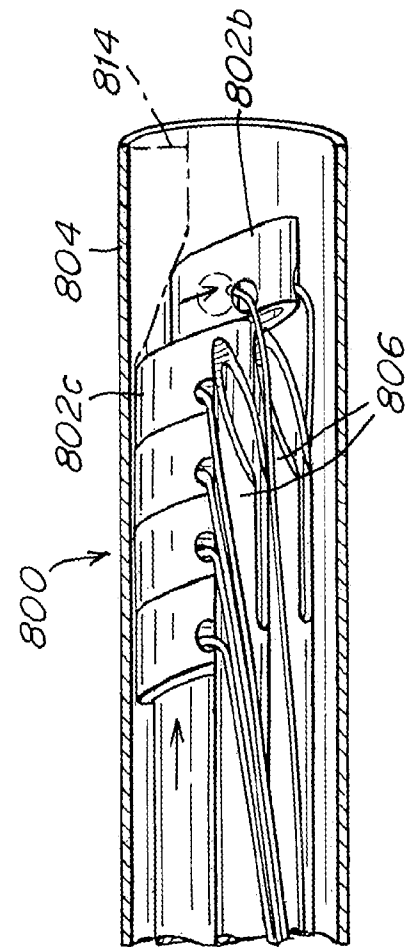
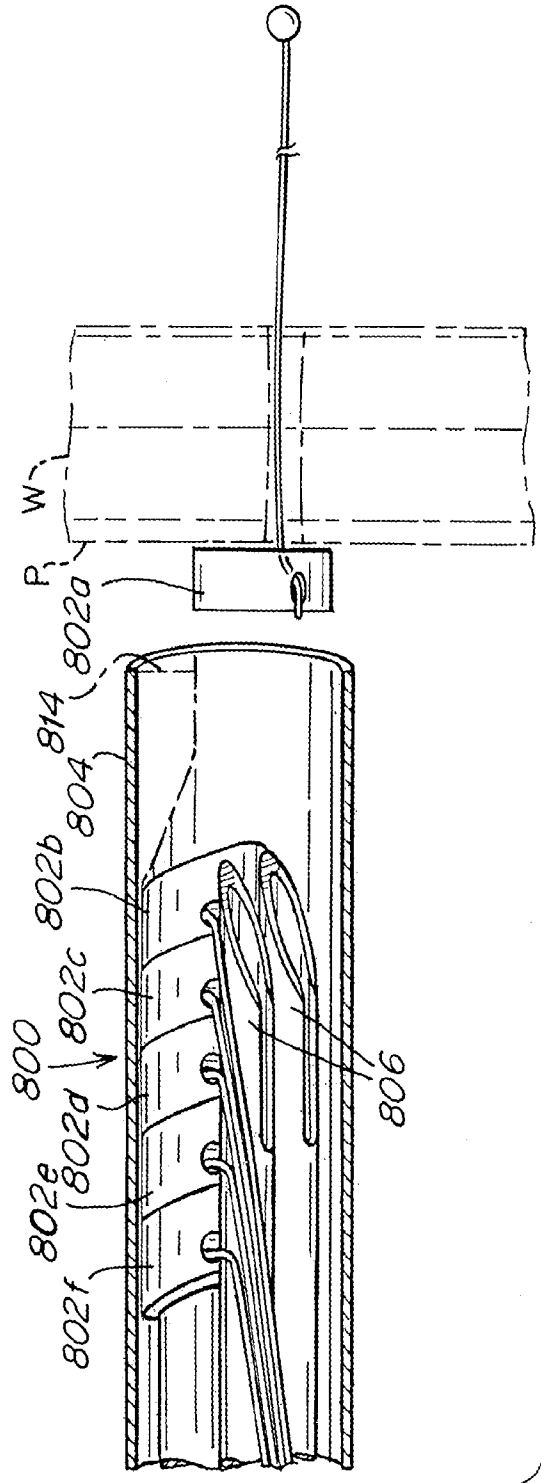


Fig. 25C







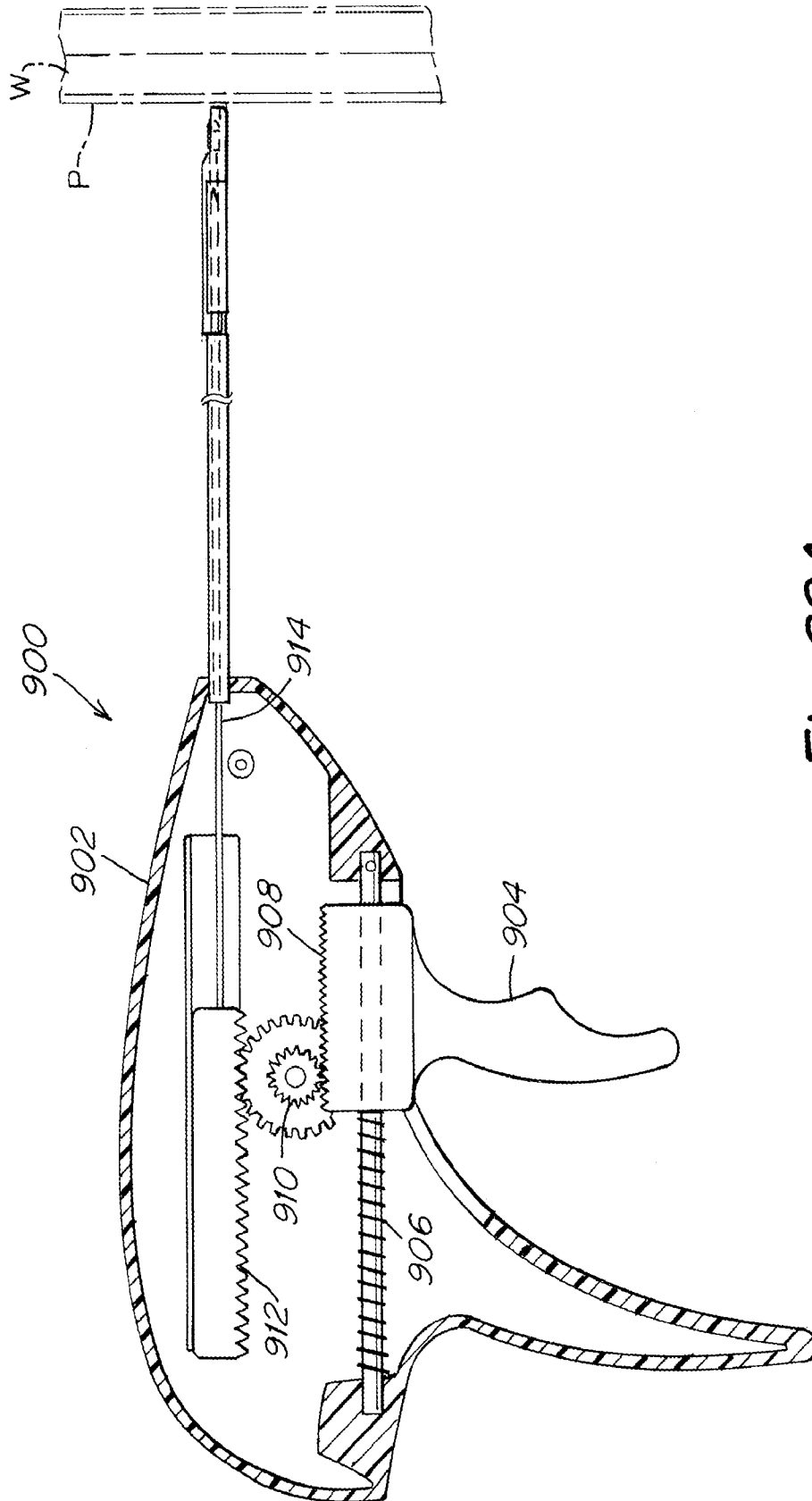


Fig. 28A

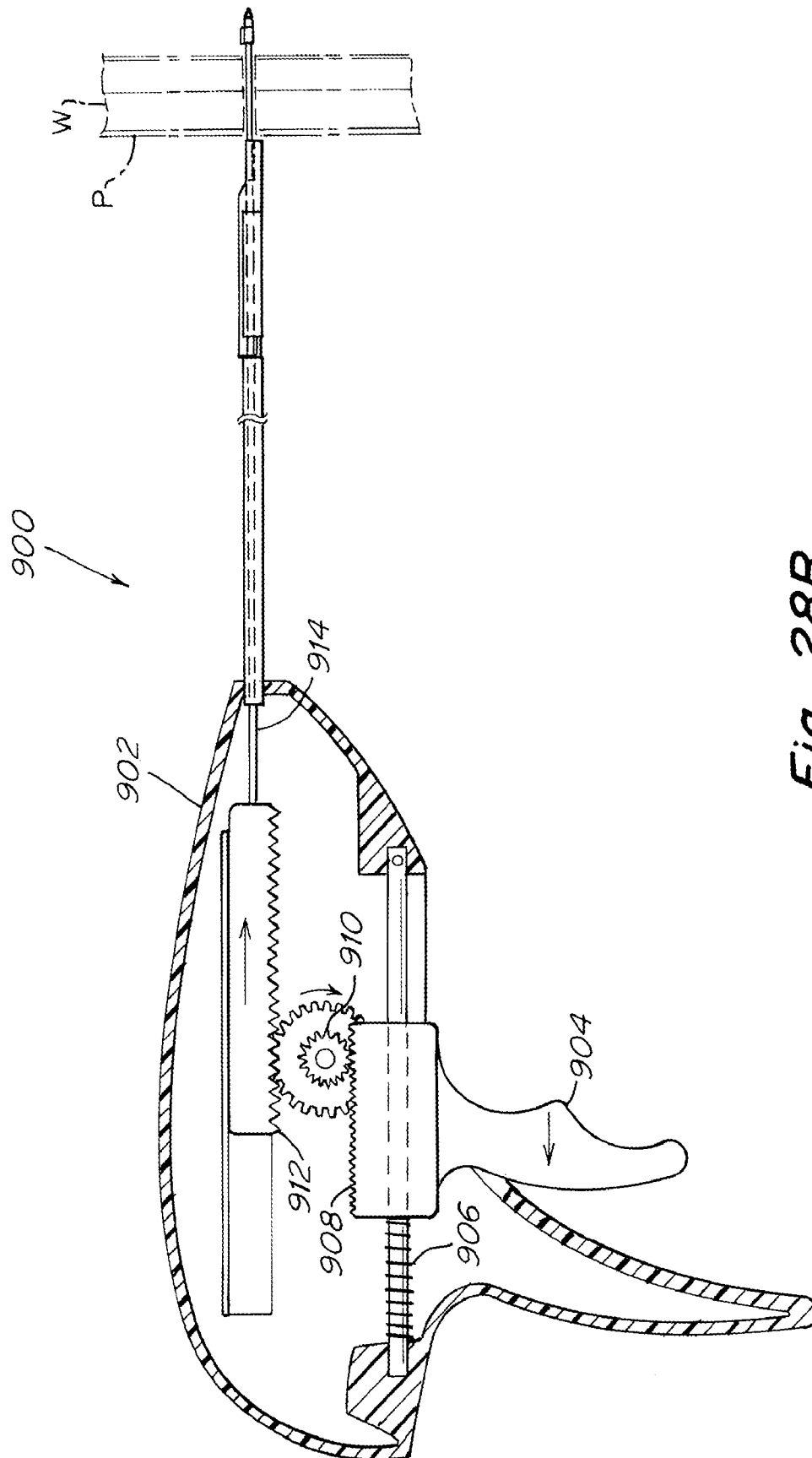
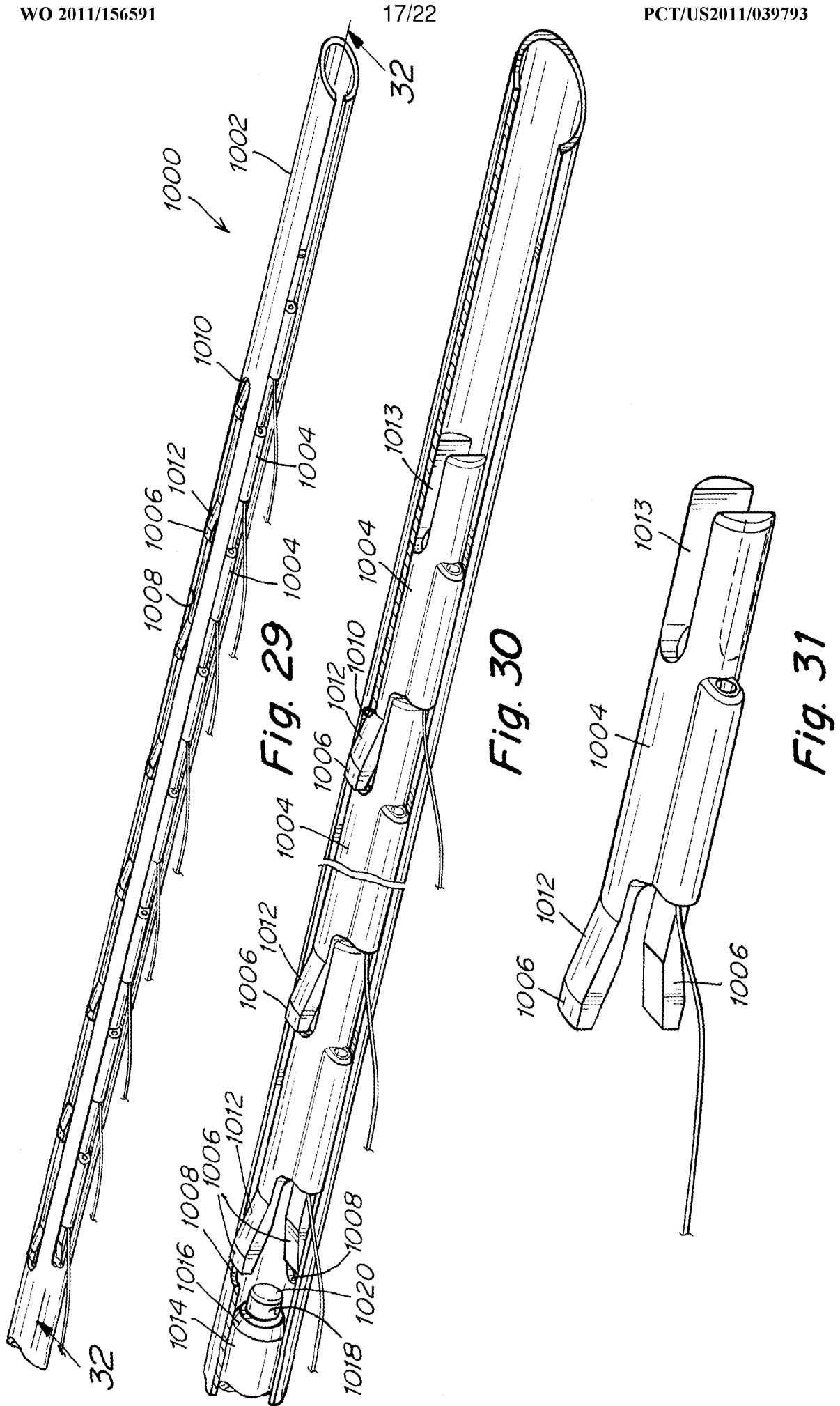
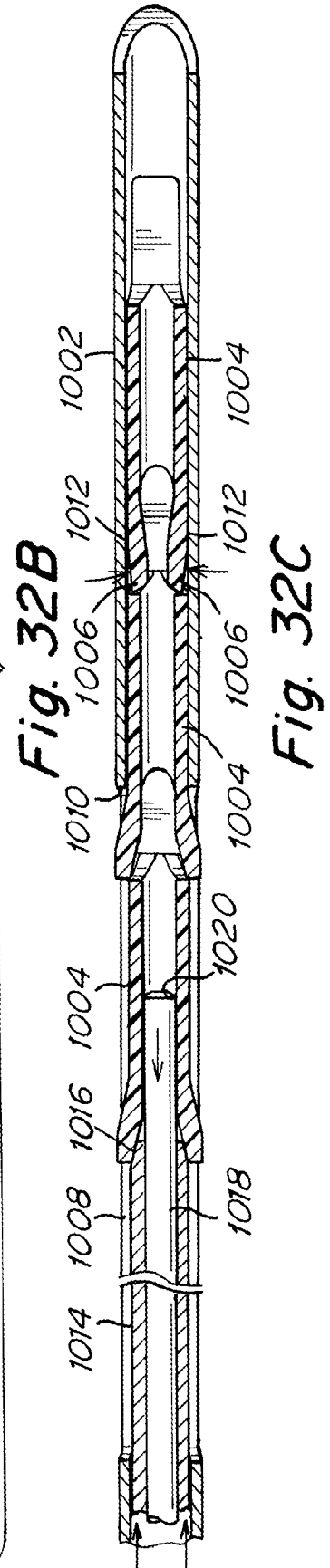
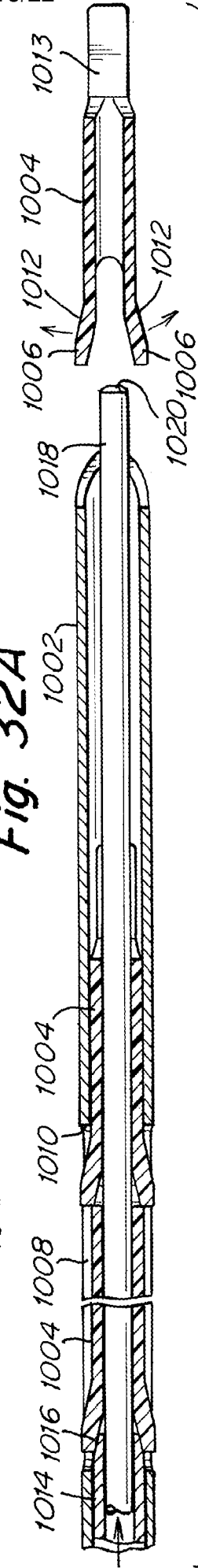
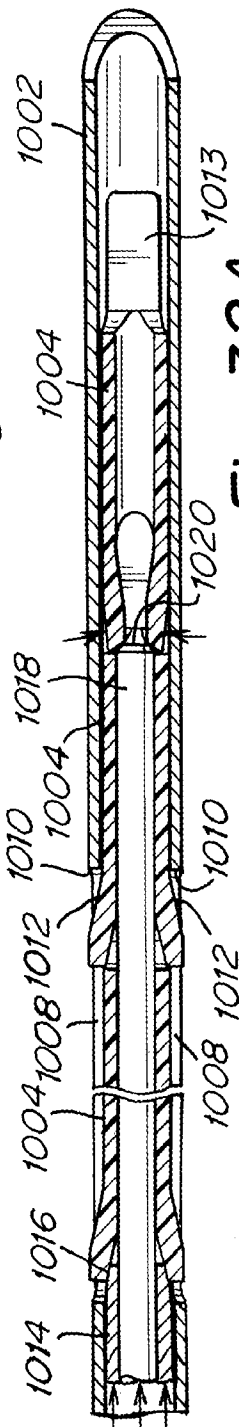
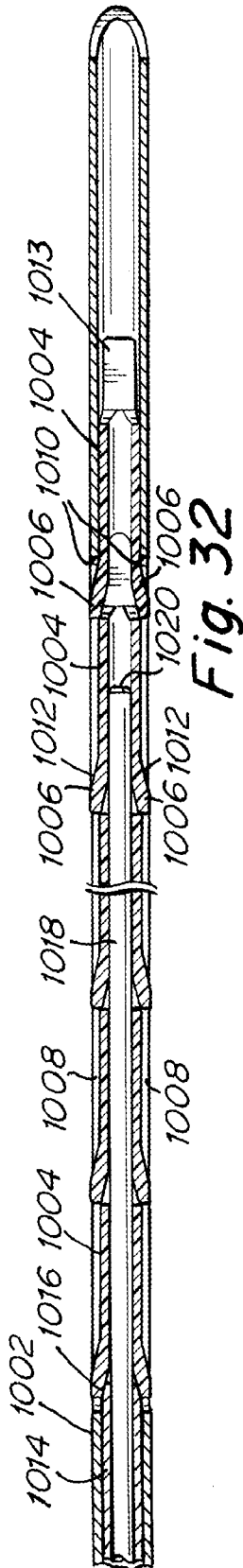
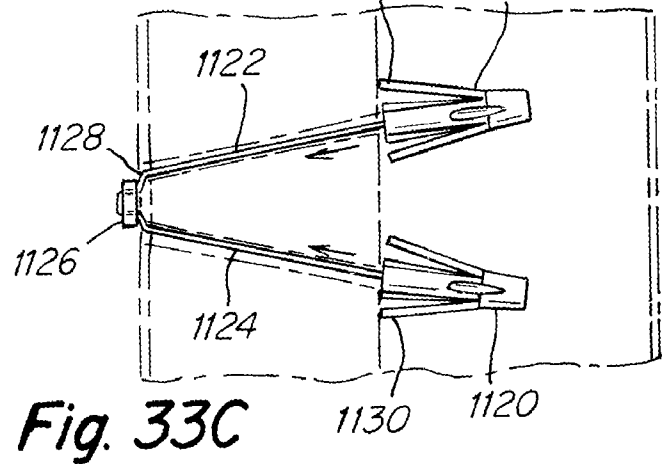
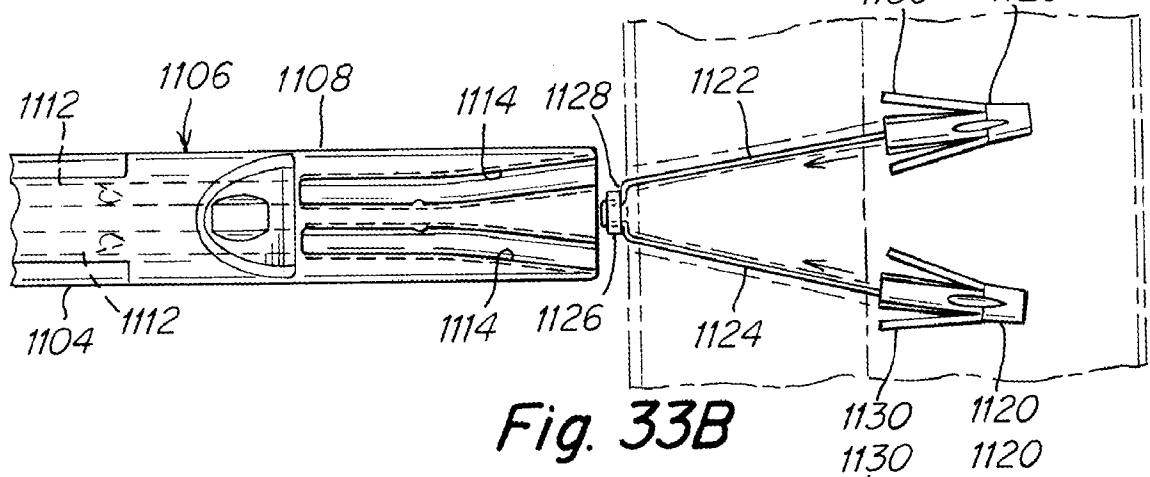
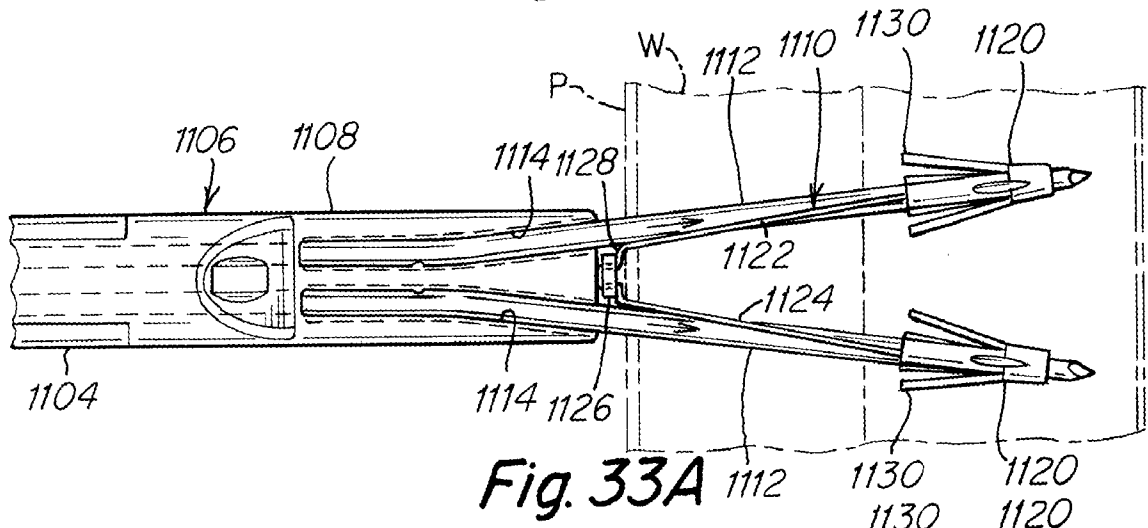
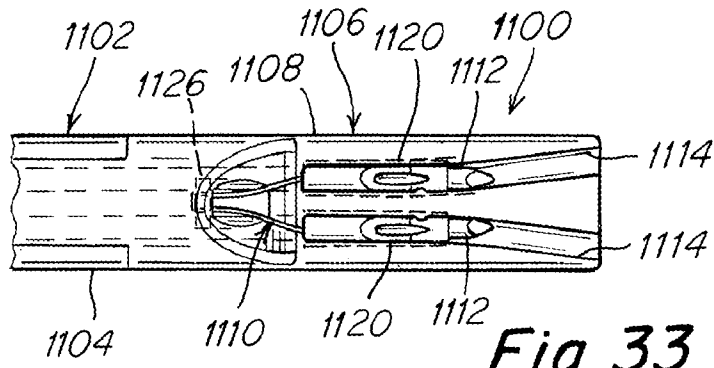
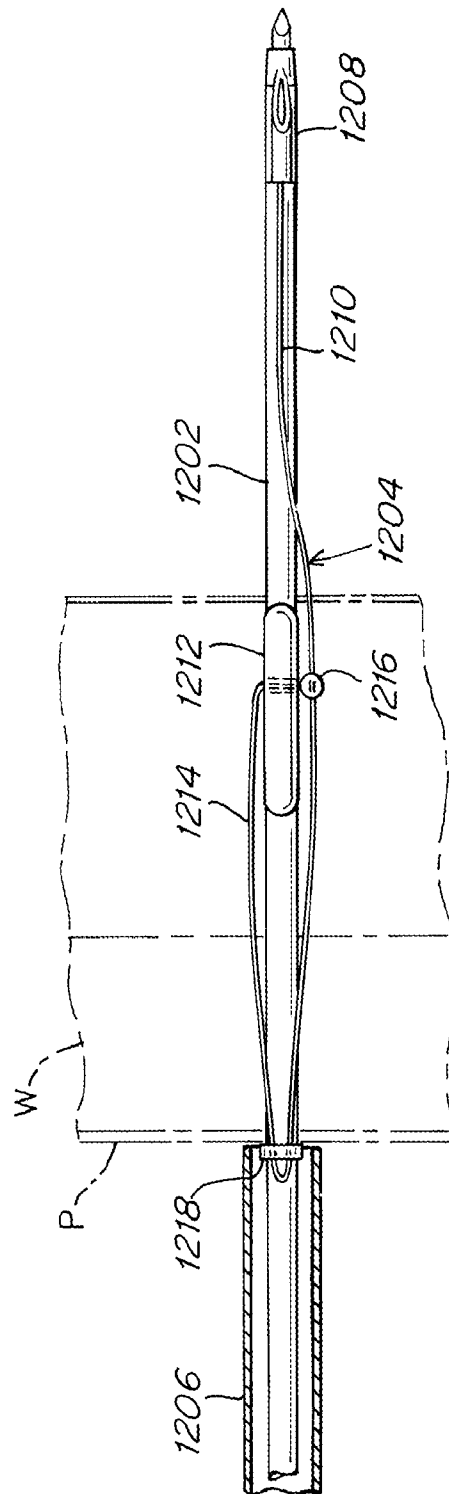
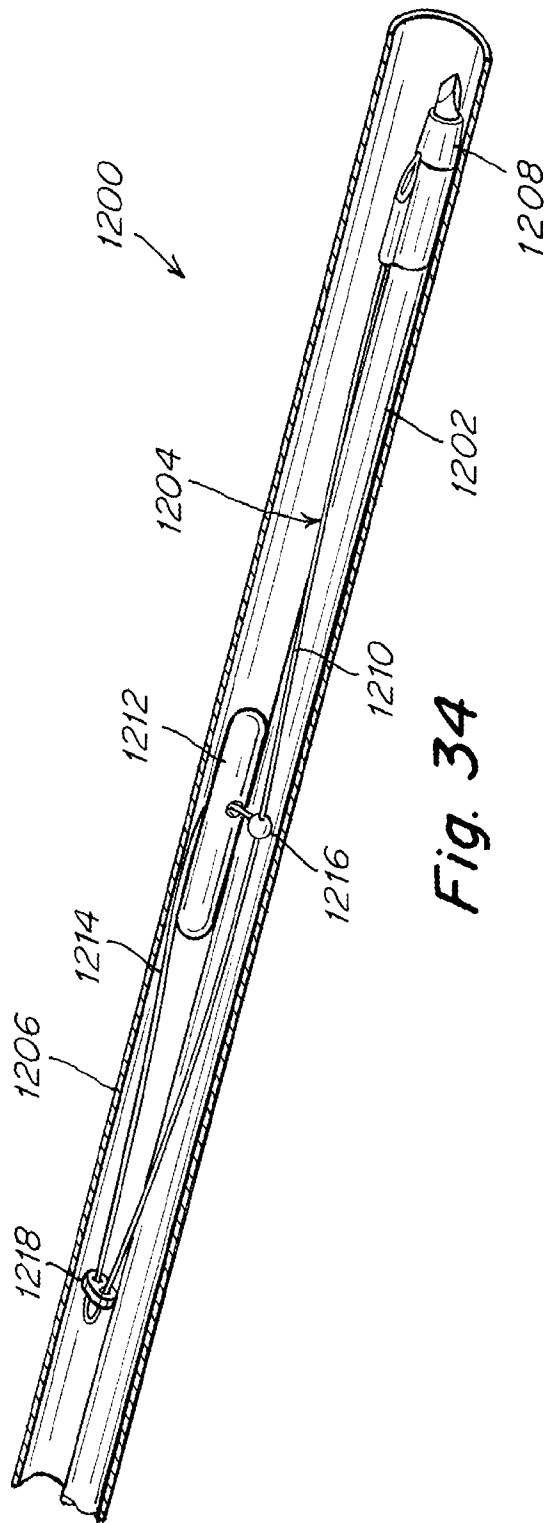


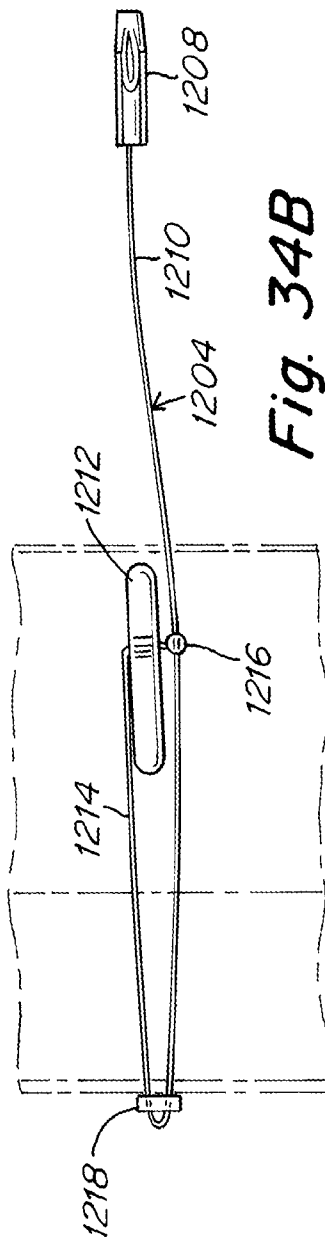
Fig. 28B



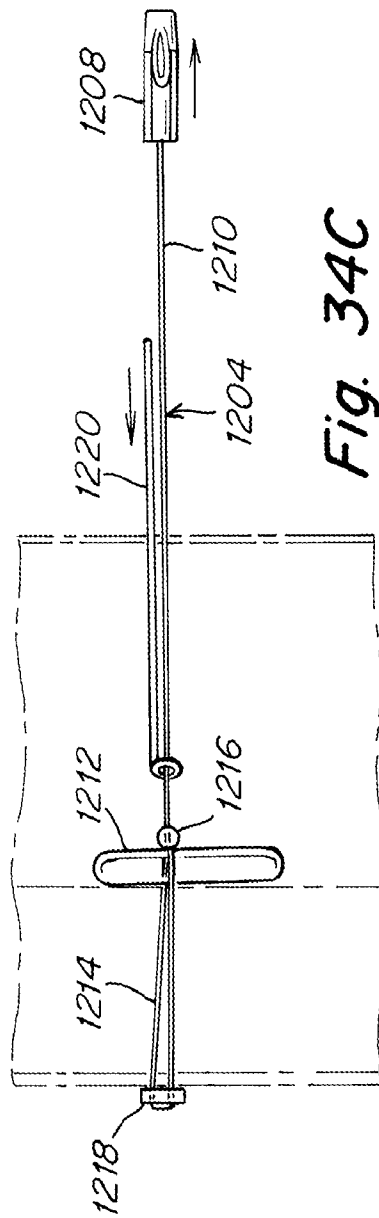




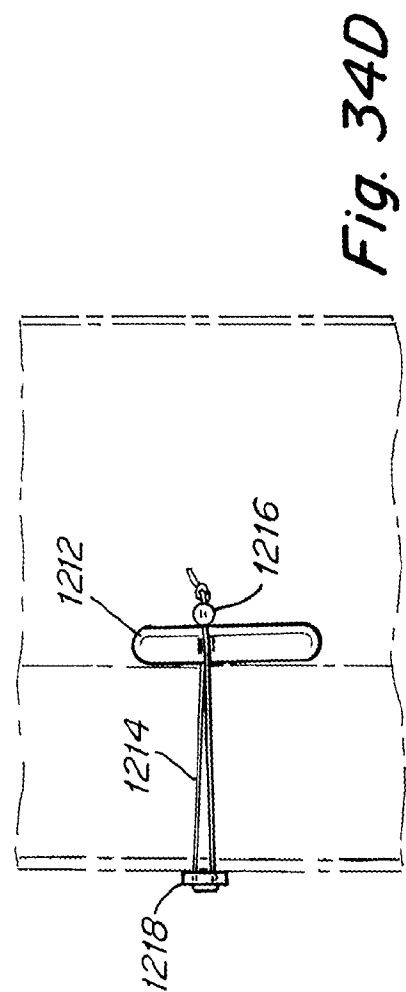




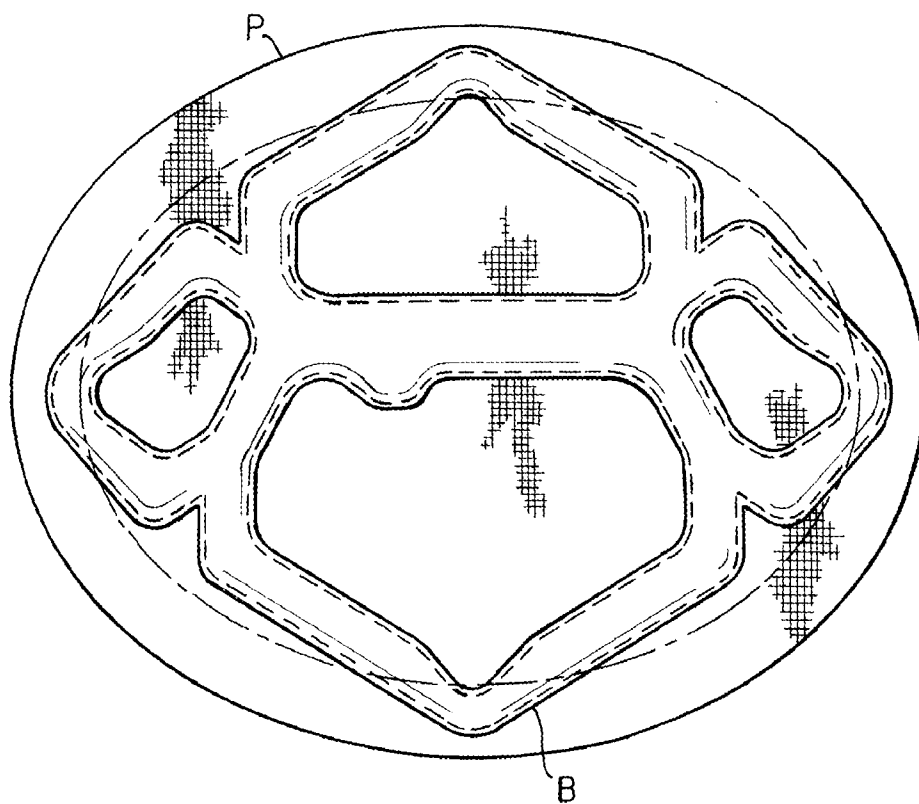
*Fig. 34B*



*Fig. 34C*



*Fig. 34D*



*Fig. 35*