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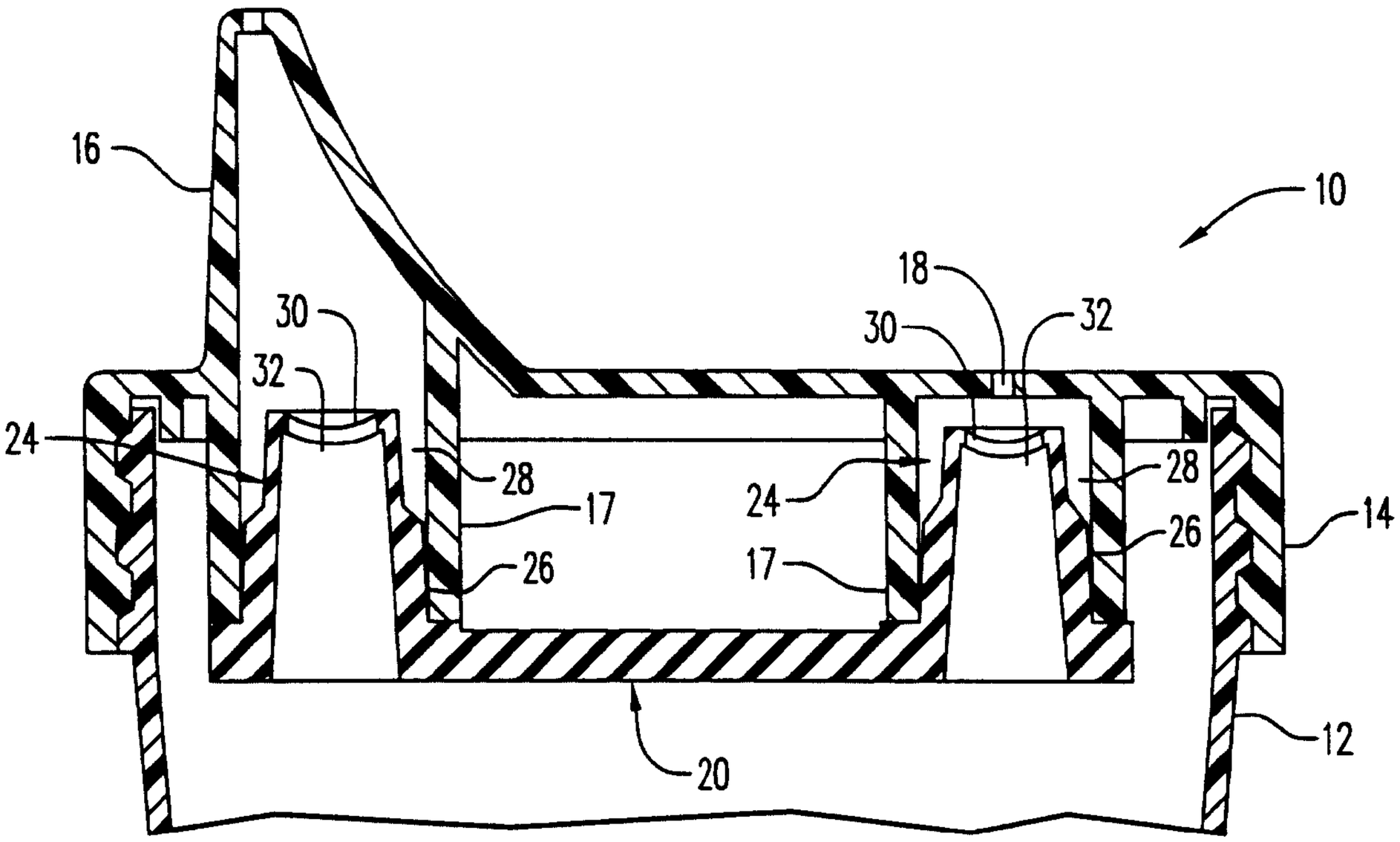

(57) Abrégé/Abstract:
A drinking cup assembly (10) including a cup (12) having an open end and a cap (14) adapted to close the open end. The cap (14) includes a drinking spout (16) and an air vent (18), each having mating surfaces adjacent or incorporated therein. A flow control valve (20) has two stacks (24) adapted to engage the mating surfaces of the drinking spout (16) and air vent (18). Each of the two stacks has a concave valve face (30) at a top portion thereof.

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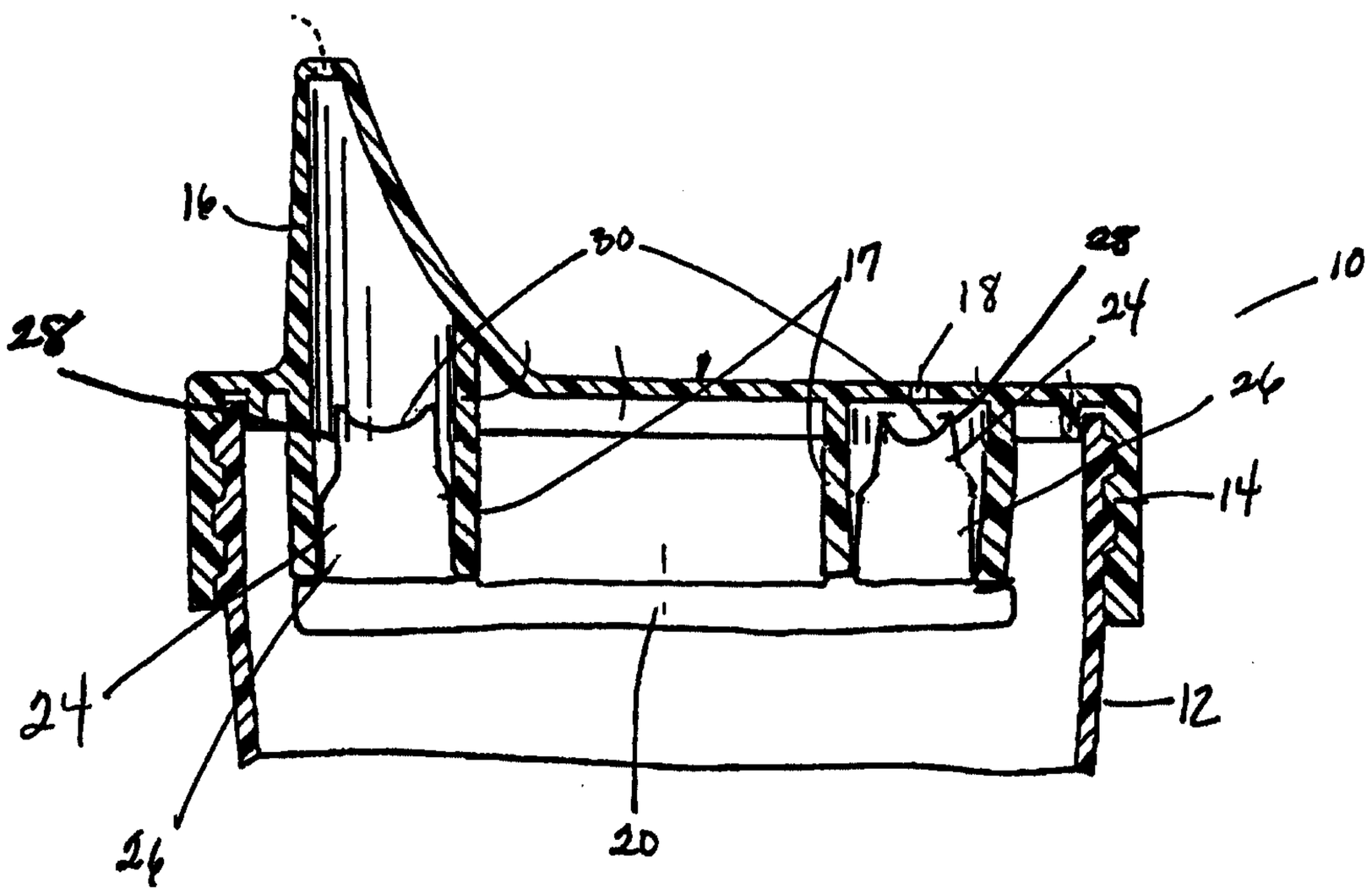


(57) Abstract

A drinking cup assembly (10) including a cup (12) having an open end and a cap (14) adapted to close the open end. The cap (14) includes a drinking spout (16) and an air vent (18), each having mating surfaces adjacent or incorporated therein. A flow control valve (20) has two stacks (24) adapted to engage the mating surfaces of the drinking spout (16) and air vent (18). Each of the two stacks has a concave valve face (30) at a top portion thereof.

LEAK-PROOF CUP WITH FLOW CONTROL

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to an improved leak-proof cup. More particularly, the present invention relates to a cup assembly having a cap bearing a drinking spout at one side and an air vent spaced from the drinking spout, with a flow control element frictionally engaged in the vicinity of the drinking spout and air vent to allow passage of liquid out and air in during use, while preventing significant leakage through the spout and vent when not in use.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Enclosed cups having drinking spouts and separate air vents, which allow the user to drink from the spout without creating excessive vacuum in the cup, are known in the art. However, drinking spouts and air ven ts are liable to leak liquid stored in the cup between feedings, or if dropped during use. Accordingly, certain cups have been developed that use valving mechanisms at the spout and at the air vent. These valves respond to suction generated during feeding to open and allow liquid to pass through the spout and to allow air to enter the air vent when a vacuum is developed in the interior of the cup.

Two patents disclosing such valves are U.S. Pat. No. 5,079,013 to Belanger and U.S. Pat. No. 5,542,670 to Morano, both commonly assigned or licensed to the assignee of the present application. Applicant has on the market a cup that employs a valve assembly similar to that show n in U.S. Pat. No. 5,079,013 that is secured to sleeves in the underside of the cup's top, but in which the valves are mounted on a single base element. Applicant is also aware of a competitive product having a flow control element of the configuration depicted in FIG. 1, sold as part of the TUMBLE MATES™ Spill Proof Cup by the First Years.

Despite the effectiveness of these cup mechanisms, applicant has discovered an improved flow control element and corresponding valve configuration that provides improved fluid flow rates without sacrificing the valve' s resistance to spills or the valve's durability.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Thus, it is an object of the present invention to provide an improved valve mechanism for a cup assembly that is substantially leak-proof even when upended, dropped or shaken.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide an improved valve mechanism for a leak-proof cup that gives higher fluid flow rates at normal suction forces without sacrificing durability or resistance to spills.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide an improved valve mechanism, cap and cup that are easy to clean and easy to assemble.

Accordingly, the present invention provides a drinking cup assembly including a cup having an open end; a cap adapted to enclose the open end, the cap including a drinking spout and an air vent and mating surfaces adjacent or incorporated into the drinking spout and the air vent; and a flow control valve including two stacks adapted to engage the mating surfaces, each of the two stacks having a concave valve face at a top portion thereof.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a perspective view of a prior art valve mechanism;

Figure 2 is a perspective view of a cup, cap and valve assembly according to the present invention;

Figure 3 is a section diagram taken along the lines 3-3' in Figure 2;

Figure 4 is a side view of the valve of Figure 3; and

Figure 5 is a top view of the valve of Figure 3.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Referring to the figures and, in particular, Figures 2 through 4, the cup, cap and valve assembly of the present invention is generally referred to by reference numeral 10. The assembly 10 includes a cup 12, a cap 14 and a flow control valve 20. Cap 14 is adapted to seal cup 12, with the exception of the apertures in the spout 16 and air vent 18 formed in its surface. Flow control valve 20 is adapted to communicate with spout 16 and air vent 18, to form the substantially spill-proof assembly 10.

Cap 14 is formed with mating surfaces, preferably adjacent to or incorporated into spout 16 and air vent 18, to frictionally engage flow control valve 20 and place the flow control valve in fluid communication with spout 16 and

air vent 18. In the embodiment depicted in Figure 2, cap 14 is formed with cylindrical recesses 17 within spout 16 and below air vent 18. These recesses 17 are configured to accept flow control valve 20.

In the embodiment shown in Figures 3 through 5, flow control valve 20 includes two stacks 24. Stacks 24 include lower portions 26, upper portions 28 and valve faces 30 bearing slits 32. These stacks 24 are adapted to be pressed into recesses 17 to friction fit flow control valve 20 into cap 14. Accordingly, when recesses 17 have a lower cylindrical portion, as preferred, lower portions 26 of stacks 24 are also preferably substantially cylindrical in shape.

As also shown in Figures 3 and 4, each stack 24 is elongated. In addition, each stack 24 is of significant diameter and of substantially equal height. The elongated shape of stacks 24 enables them to place valve faces 30 and slits 32 (see Figure 5) in close proximity to the apertures in spout 16 and air vent 18. The diameter of stacks 24 permits significant, relatively unconstrained fluid flow to the area of slits 32. It has been found that this arrangement provides optimal balancing of suction needed to open slits 32 and the fluid flow through the slits.

Similarly, its substantial cylindrical diameter and resulting inner contour presents a simple, wide opening and tube to enable thorough cleaning of the stacks 24 after use and to minimize the number of corners and niches in which dried or congealed liquid can be deposited. It is preferred that the outer contour of stacks 24 be stepped, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, but that the inner contour of the stacks be a constant diameter or of constantly diminishing diameter, thus presenting a smooth, unstepped inner face. Thus, the smooth inner face is preferably either cylindrical, frustoconical, or a combination of the two. This smooth inner face further enhances free fluid flow and promotes easy cleaning of stacks 24. The fact that this preferred flow control valve 20 is easy to clean is very important both to the proper and sanitary functioning of the assembly 10, and also to consumer acceptance of the valve.

It has also been discovered that the preferred concave shape of valve faces 30, in conjunction with the attendant curved shape of slits 32, provides superior fluid flow rate through slits 32 than existing valve configurations. This makes the assembly 10 easier to drink from and less frustrating and tiring to use. Furthermore, it has been found that elongated single slits 32 are preferred to cross-cuts or other types of apertures through valve faces 30. It

is also preferred that slits 32 extend substantially from edge to edge of concave valve faces 30.

Most preferably, the radius of curvature of the valve face 30 that is aligned with spout 16 is about 0.267 inches. The most preferred radius of curvature of the valve face 30 that is aligned with air vent 18 is also about 0.267 inches. The most preferred length of slit 32 that is aligned with spout 16 is about 0.235 inches. The most preferred length of slit 32 that is aligned with air vent 18 is about 0.170 inches. The most preferred inner diameter of the stack 24 that is aligned with spout 16 is from about 0.301 inches to about 0.368 inches, ideally a frustoconical shape having the foregoing as minimum and maximum diameters. The most preferred inner diameter of the stack 24 that is aligned with air vent 18 is from about 0.252 inches to about 0.368 inches, ideally a frustoconical shape having the foregoing as minimum and maximum diameters. The most preferred height of the stack 24 that is aligned with spout 16 is about 0.803 inches from top to bottom, and about 0.521 inches from indentation to bottom. The most preferred height of the stack 24 that is aligned with air vent 18 is about 0.730 from top to bottom, and about 0.550 from indentation to bottom. The two stacks 24 are preferably 1.60 inches on center. The preferred outer diameter of the lower portion

26 of the stack 24 that is aligned with spout 16 is about 0.522 inches. The preferred outer diameter of the lower portion 26 of the stack 24 that is aligned with air vent 18 is about 0.457 inches. These dimensions provide an interference fit with a cup lid having cylindrical recesses 17 having preferred inner diameters of about 0.499 inches and about 0.439 inches, respectively. All of the foregoing measurements are subject to a preferred tolerance of plus or minus about 0.005 inches. In addition, a further dimension that is most preferred is the thickness of valve face 30. It is most preferably about 0.023 inches thick, with a preferred tolerance of only about plus or minus 0.002 inches. This dimension has been found to be very important in providing proper flexion of the valve faces 30 and opening of slits 32 under suction during use.

It is preferred that the flow control valve 20 be formed from a single piece of elastomeric material to facilitate easy insertion into and removal from recesses 17. However, flow control valve 20 can be formed of two separate valving elements, each adapted to be inserted into recesses 17 or otherwise engage cap 14. The elastomeric material used is most preferably silicone, but TPE (thermoplastic elastomer), natural rubber, and synthetic rubber (e.g., isoprene) are also preferred.

The following data demonstrate the improved flow rates of a flow control valve 20 according to the present invention. Six samples of a flow control valve as depicted in Figure 3 (Valve A) were tested against six samples of a flow control valve as depicted in Figure 1 (Valve B) and against ten samples of a flow control valve as disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,079,013 to Belanger (Valve C).

Valve A

Sample Number	Suction to Start Flow (psi)	Suction for Continuous Flow (psi)	Time to Evacuate 100 ml water (sec.)
1	1.23	2.21	49
2	1.47	2.21	37
3	1.47	2.46	51
4	1.47	2.33	44
5	1.23	2.33	56
6	1.23	2.21	50
Avg.	**1.35**	**2.29**	**48**

Valve B

Sample Number	Suction to Start Flow (psi)	Suction for Continuous Flow (psi)	Time to Evacuate 100 ml water (sec.)
1	0.98	2.82	58
2	0.98	2.95	41
3	1.72	2.46	44
4	1.72	2.70	57
5	1.47	2.70	63
6	1.23	2.46	75
Avg.	**1.35**	**2.68**	**56**

Valve C

Sample Number	Suction to Start Flow (psi)	Suction for Continuous Flow (psi)	Time to Evacuate 100 ml water (sec.)
1	2.46	4.42	36
2	2.95	4.54	27
3	2.95	4.42	76
4	2.46	3.93	24
5	2.95	4.42	38
6	3.19	4.17	33
7	2.46	3.93	78
8	3.19	4.42	29
9	2.46	3.93	40

10	2.95	3.93	26
Avg.	2.80	4.21	40.7

These data show that the Valve A, a valve according to the present invention, requires lower suction to generate a continuous flow than the prior art valves, and requires less time to evacuate 100 ml of water than the prior art elastomeric valve, Valve B. Moreover, this Valve A is more consistent from sample to sample than the controls. This provides a more acceptable product.

Various modifications may be made to the foregoing disclosure as will be apparent to those skilled in the art. Thus, it will be obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art that the foregoing description and drawings are merely illustrative of certain preferred embodiments of the present invention, and that various obvious modifications can be made to these embodiments in accordance with the spirit and scope of the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A drinking cup assembly, comprising:

a cup having an open end;

a cap adapted to enclose said open end, said cap including a drinking spout, an air vent, an inside surface and a plurality of mating surfaces in communication with said inside surface, one of said plurality of mating surfaces being located adjacent or inc orporated into said drinking spout and another of said plurality of mating surfaces being located adjacent or incorporated into said air vent; and

a flow control valve including two stacks, each of said two stacks being adapted to engage a separate one of said plurality of mating surfaces and thereby place said flow control valve in fluid communication with said spout and said vent, each of said two stacks having a top portion with a concave valve face that extends substantially completely across said top portion and curves inwardly toward said stack.

2. The drinking cup assembly of claim 1, wherein each of said concave valve faces has a single valve slit therethrough.

3. The drinking cup assembly of claim 2, wherein said single valve slit extends subst antially completely across said concave valve face.

4. The drinking cup assembly of claim 1, wherein said two stacks are of substantially equal height.

5. The drinking cup assembly of claim 1, wherein each of said two stacks has an upper portion and a lower portion, and said lower portion has an outer diameter that is larger than the outer diameter of said upper portion.

6. The drinking cup assembly of claim 5, wherein each of said two stacks has an outer surface contour that includes a step that is located between and is in communication with said upper and lower portions of said stack.

7. The drinking cup assembly of claim 5, wherein said lower portion of each of said two stacks is frustoconical.

8. The drinking cup assembly of claim 1, wherein each of said two stacks has a smooth inner contour.

9. The drinking cup assembly of claim 8, where said smooth inner contour is selected from the shape consisting of cylindrical, frustoconical, and a combination thereof.

10. The drinking cup assembly of claim 8, wherein said smooth inner contour is frustoconical.

11. The drinking cup assembly of claim 10, wherein said smooth frustoconical inner contour extends substantially to said single valve slit.

12. The drinking cup assembly of claim 1, wherein said valve face is about 0.023 inches thick.

13. The drinking cup assembly of claim 1, wherein said flow control valve comprises two separate pieces, each of said two separate pieces includes one of said two stacks.

14. The drinking cup assembly of claim 1, wherein said mating surfaces comprise cylindrical recesses.

15. The drinking cup assembly of claim 1, wherein each of said plurality of mating surfaces comprises a wall that depends from said inside surface of s aid cap.

16. The drinking cup assembly of claim 15, wherein said depending walls define said cylindrical recesses.

17. A flow control element for use in a spill -proof cup assembly that includes a lid with a drinking spout, an air vent and a plurality of mating surfaces that are engagable with said flow control element to provide channeled fluid communication to each of the spout and vent, respectively, said flow control element comprising two stacks adapted to engage the plurality of mating surfaces of the lid, each of said two stacks having a top portion and a lower portion, each of said top portions having a concave valve face that extends across said top portion and is curved inwardly into said stack, and each of said lower portions having an outer sur face that has a diameter that is larger than the diameter of the outer

surface of said top portion and is sized to engage one of the plurality of mating surfaces of the lid.

18. The flow control element of claim 17, wherein said lower portions of said st acks have frustoconical outer contours.

19. The flow control element of claim 18, wherein the mating surfaces of the lid are depending cylindrical recesses, and only said frustoconical lower portions of said stacks are dimensioned to engage the cylindric al recesses.

20. The flow control element of claim 17, wherein each said concave valve face extends substantially completely across said top portion of said stack and has a single valve slit that extends through and substantially completely across said v alve face.

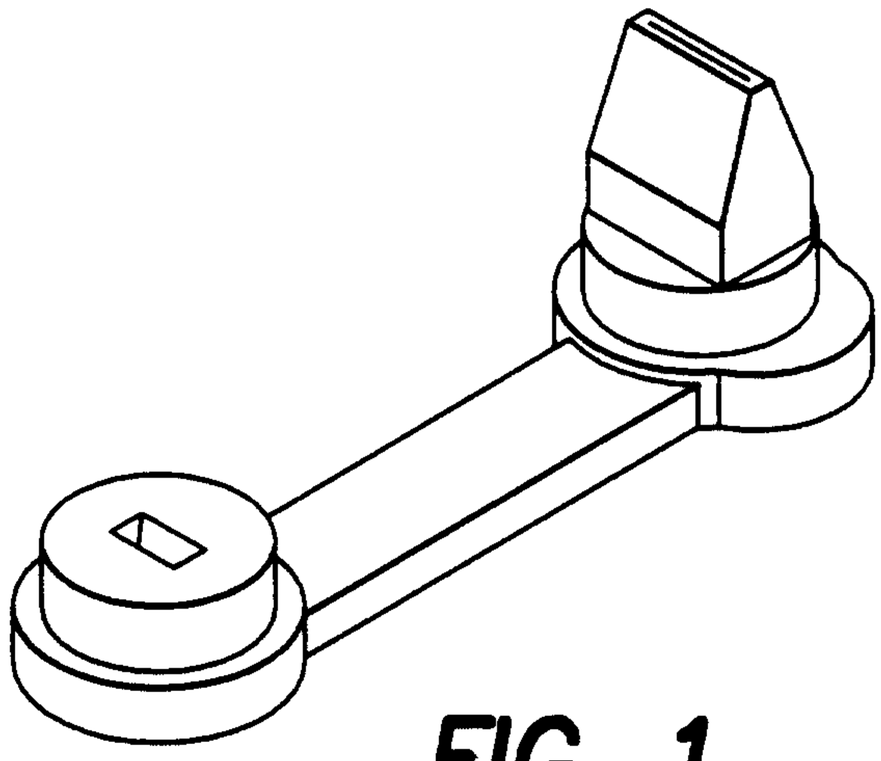


FIG. 1
(PRIOR ART)

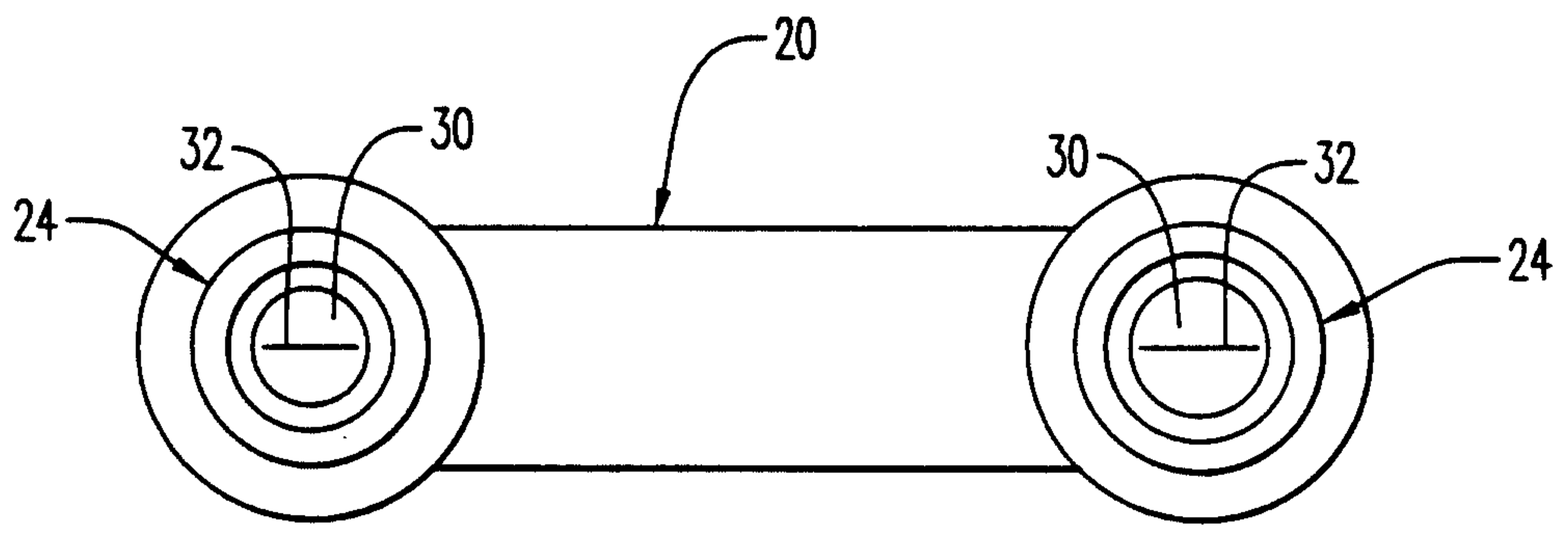


FIG. 5

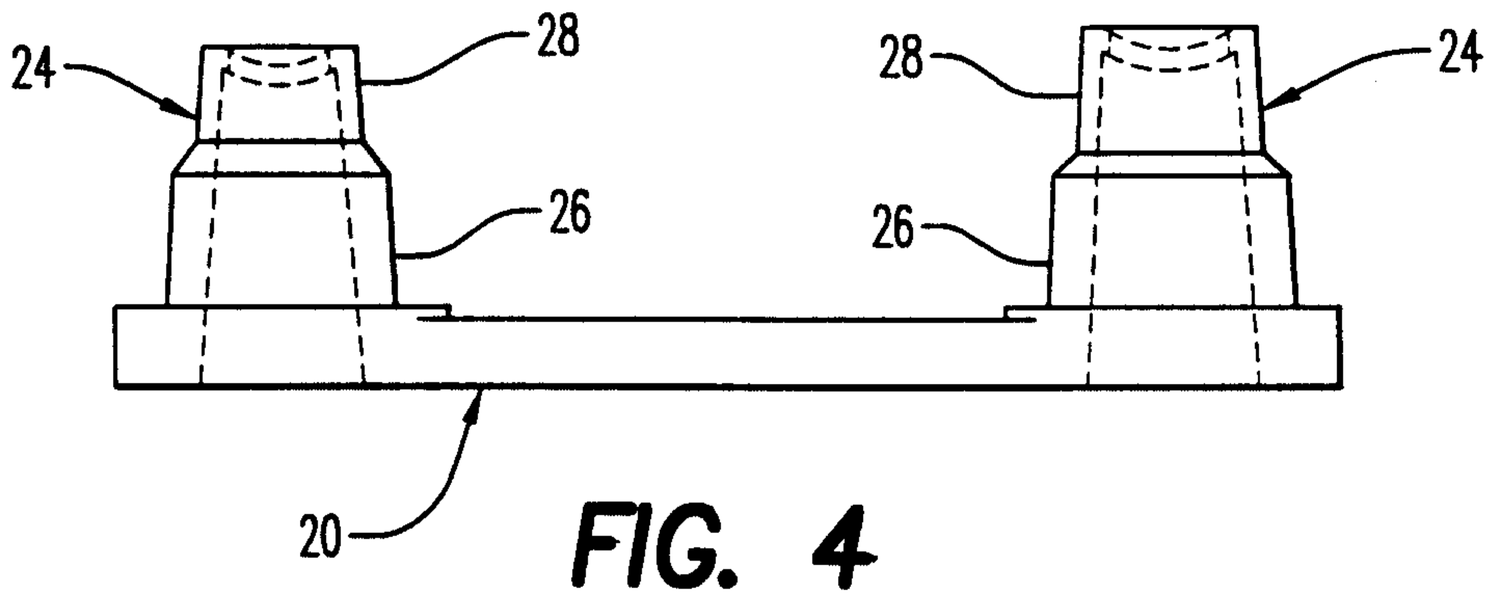


FIG. 4

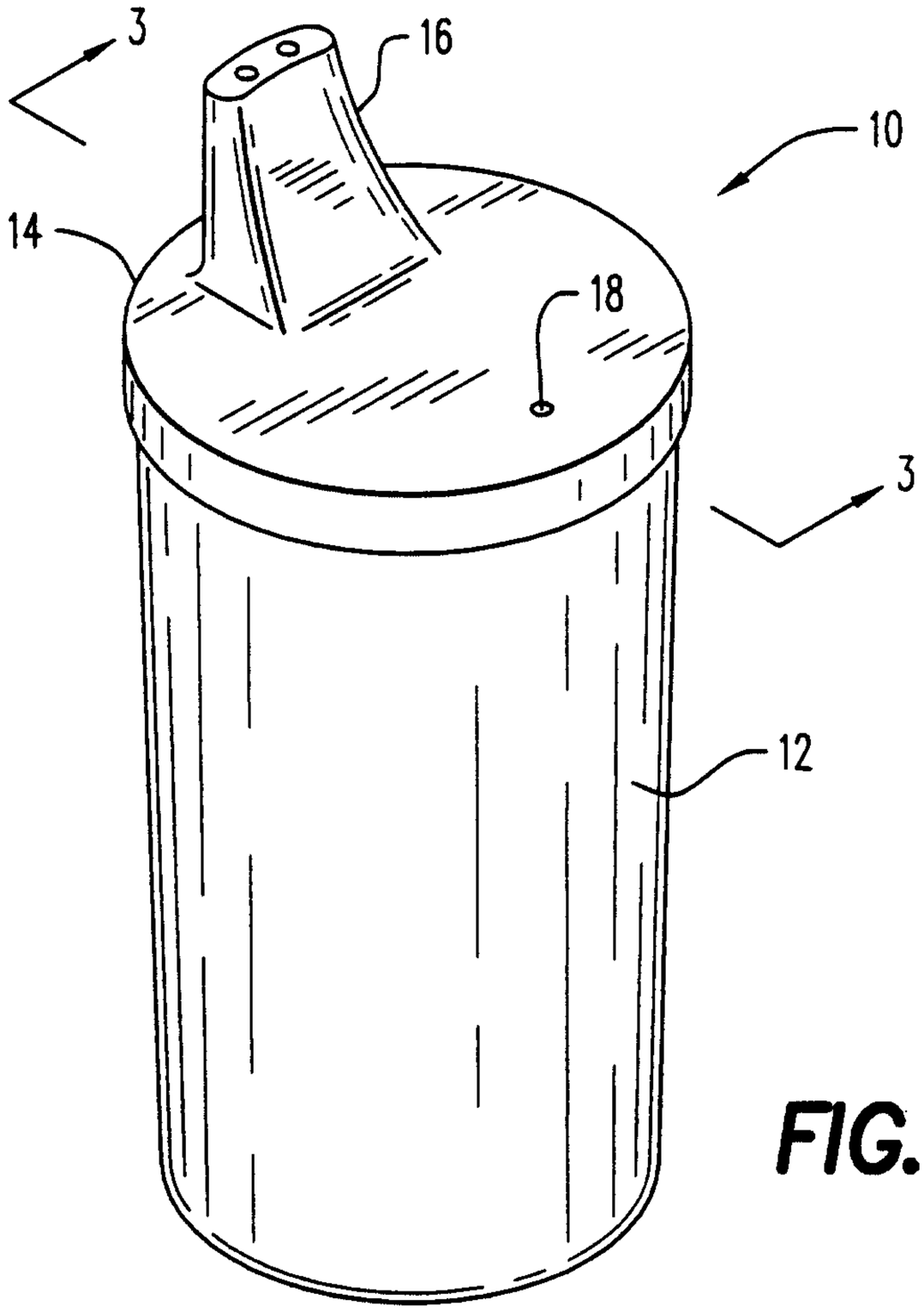


FIG. 2

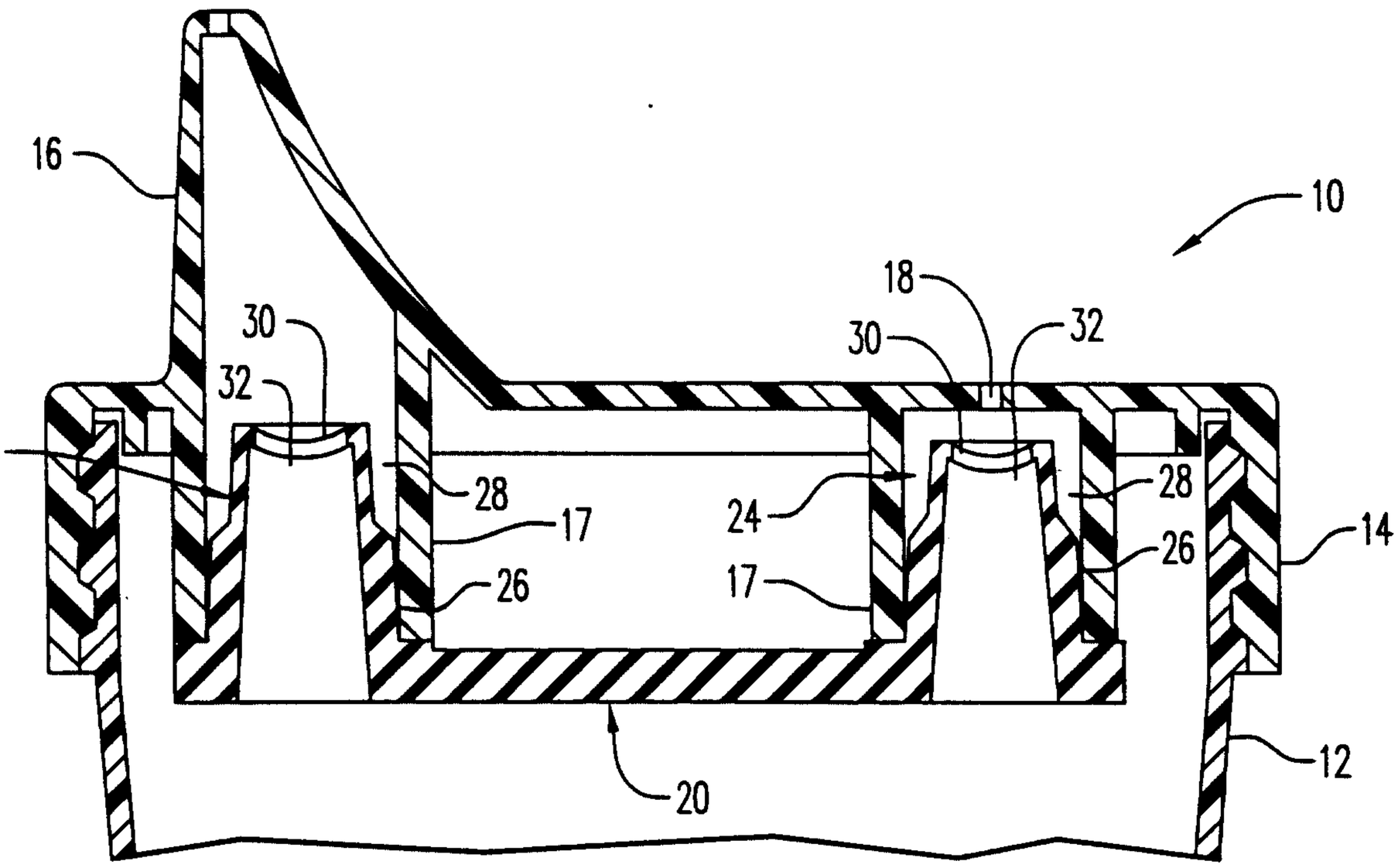
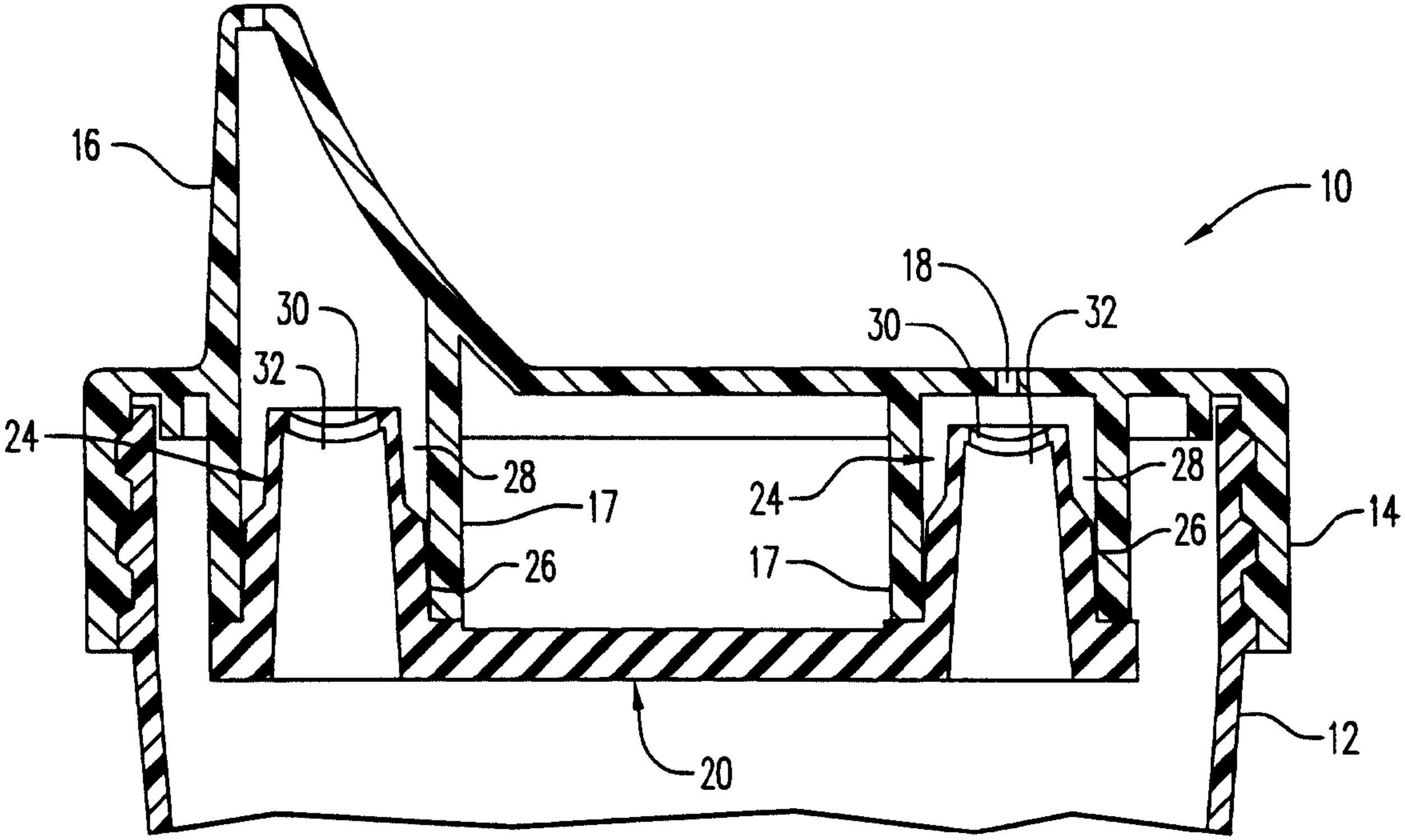


FIG. 3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