

(19) World Intellectual Property Organization
International Bureau



(43) International Publication Date
6 November 2008 (06.11.2008)

PCT

(10) International Publication Number
WO 2008/132606 A2

- (51) International Patent Classification: **Not classified**
- (21) International Application Number: PCT/IB2008/001531
- (22) International Filing Date: 8 April 2008 (08.04.2008)
- (25) Filing Language: English
- (26) Publication Language: English
- (30) Priority Data: 60/914,564 27 April 2007 (27.04.2007) US
- (71) Applicant (for all designated States except US): **OTTO BOCK HEALTHCARE IP GMBH & CO. KG** [DE/DE]; Max-Näder-Strasse 15, 37115 Duderstadt (DE).
- (72) Inventors; and
- (75) Inventors/Applicants (for US only): **STREET, Glenn, M.** [US/US]; 1806 Danielle Drive, St. Cloud, MN 56301 (US). **MOSLER, Lüder** [DE/DE]; Wolfsgärten 3, 37115 Duderstadt (DE). **FINLINSON, Robert** [US/US]; 2752 Wardway Drive, Salt Lake City, UT 84124 (US). **CLOVER, William, M., Jr.** [US/US]; 17845 4th Avenue N, Minneapolis, MN 55447 (US).
- (74) Agent: **LINS, Edgar**; c/o Gramm, Lins & Partner GbR, Theodor-Heuss-Str. 1, 38122 Braunschweig (DE).
- (81) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of national protection available): AE, AG, AL, AM, AO, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BH, BR, BW, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DO, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, GT, HN, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KM, KN, KP, KR, KZ, LA, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LY, MA, MD, ME, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MY, MZ, NA, NG, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PG, PH, PL, PT, RO, RS, RU, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SM, SV, SY, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, ZA, ZM, ZW.
- (84) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of regional protection available): ARIPO (BW, GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, MZ, NA, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MC, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Declarations under Rule 4.17:

— as to applicant's entitlement to apply for and be granted a patent (Rule 4.17(ii))

[Continued on next page]

(54) Title: PNEUMATIC CONNECTOR FOR PROSTHETIC SOCKET

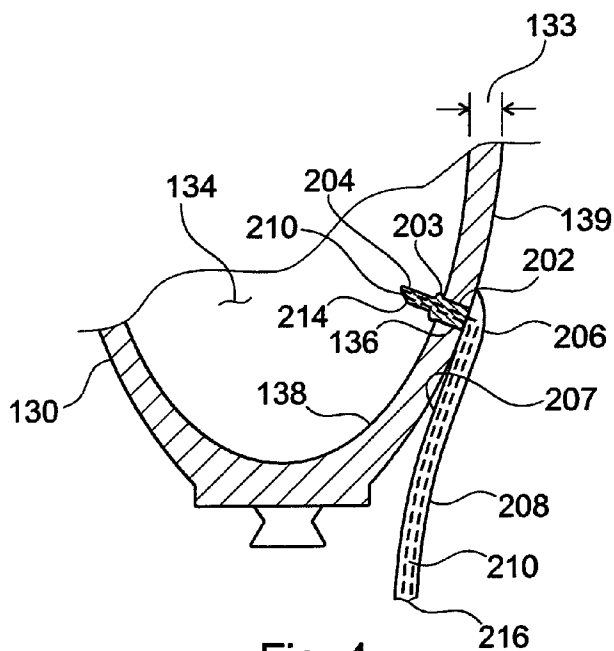


Fig. 4

(57) Abstract: Artificial limb comprising a prosthetic socket (102) having an open-ended socket wall (132) with an inner surface (138) and an outer surface (139) and into which a residual limb (110) may be inserted, the socket (102) forming, when the residual limb (110) is inserted, a sealed interior wherein a positive or negative pressure may be generated through a fitting (126) fixed in a hole (138) of the socket (102) and connected to a pressure source (120) through a flexible tubing (124), characterized in that a connector (200) made of flexible material is used as the fitting (126), the connector (200) has a flange (206) formed at one end of an elongated tubular section (208), a seal surface (212) of said flange (206) is intended for sealingly abutting one of the surfaces (138, 139) of the socket (130) around the hole (136), a tubular section (202, 204) having a lumen (210) extends through the hole (136) from the seal surface (212) of the flange (206), and the tubular section (202, 204) includes at least one portion (202, 203) oversized relative to the size of the hole (136) so that a reasonable air-tight seal is provided between said portion (202, 203) and the inner surface of the hole (136) or the other of said surfaces (138, 139) around the hole (136) said other surface being distant

from the flange (106).

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- *as to the applicant's entitlement to claim the priority of the earlier application (Rule 4.17(iii))*
 - *of inventorship (Rule 4.17(iv))*
- Published:**
- *without international search report and to be republished upon receipt of that report*

5 **Pneumatic Connector for Prosthetic Socket**

Technical Field

This invention related to pneumatic connectors for prosthetic sockets, in
10 particular, for fluidly connecting a pressure source to the socket interior.

Background

An amputee is a person who has lost part of an extremity or limb such as
15 a leg or arm, the remainder of which commonly may be termed as a residual limb. Residual limbs come in various sizes and shapes with respect to the stump. That is, most new amputations are either slightly bulbous or cylindrical in shape while older amputations that may have had a lot of atrophy are generally more conical in shape. Residual limbs may
20 further be characterized by their various individual problems or configurations including the volume and shape of a stump and possible scar, skin graft, bony prominence, uneven limb volume, neuroma, pain, edema or soft tissue configurations.

25 An artificial limb was designed to replace the portion of the limb lost through the amputation. One example of an artificial lower limb is shown in FIG. 1. Limb 100 includes socket 102, into which residual limb 110 is inserted, shin portion 104 and foot 106. Historically, artificial limbs typically used by a leg amputee were, for the most part, all made out of wood, such
30 as an Upland Willow. The limbs were hand carved with sockets for receiving the stump of the residual limb. Below the socket would be the shin portion with the foot below the shin. These wooden artificial limbs

were covered with rawhide which often were painted. The sockets of most wood limbs were hollow, as the limbs were typically supported in the artificial limb by the circumferential tissue adjacent the stump rather than at the distal end of the stump. Some artificial limbs in Europe were also
5 made from forged pieces of metal that were hollow. Fiber artificial limbs were also used which were stretched around a mold after which they were permitted to dry and cure. Again, these artificial limbs were hollow and pretty much supported the residual limb about the circumferential tissue adjacent the stump. Today, most artificial limbs are constructed from
10 thermoplastics, such as polyester resins, acrylic resins, polypropylene and polyethylene, which are often laminated over a nylon stockinette that also may be impregnated by the various resins.

All of these various artificial limbs have sockets into which the amputee's
15 stump is put. There are generally two categories of sockets. There are hard sockets wherein the stump is placed into the socket and actually touches the socket wall without any type of liner or stump sock. Another category of sockets is a socket that utilizes a liner or insert. Both categories of sockets typically were open ended sockets having a hollow
20 chamber in the bottom and no portion of the socket touched the distal end of the stump. As a result, the stump was supported about its circumferential surface as it fit against the inside wall of the sockets.

These types of sockets caused a lot of shear force on the stump, as well
25 as had pressure or restriction problems on the nerve bundles and vascular flow of fluid by way of the circumferential pressure effect of the socket on the limb. This pressure effect could cause a swelling into the ends of the socket where an amputee may develop severe edema and draining nodules at the end of their stump.

30 With time, it was learned that by filling in the socket's hollow chamber and encouraging a more total contact between the stump and the socket, the

swelling and edema problems could be eliminated. However, problematic tissue configurations, such as bony prominences, required special consideration, such as the addition of soft or pliable materials to be put into the socket.

5

In the past, most artificial limbs were suspended from the amputee's body by some form of pulley, belt or strap suspension, which was often used with various harnesses and perhaps leather lacers or lacings. Another method of suspending artificial limbs is known as the wedge suspension, wherein an actual wedge is built into the socket which is more closed at its top opening. The wedge in the socket cups a portion of the femur. Yet another form of suspension is referred to as the shuttle system, or a mechanical hookup or linkup, wherein a thin suction liner is donned over the stump that has a docking device on the distal end which mechanically links up with its cooperative part in the bottom of the socket chamber. Sleeve suspensions were also used wherein the amputee may use a latex rubber tube which forms into a rubber-like sleeve which would be rolled on over both the top of the artificial limb and onto the amputee's thigh. The sleeve suspensions have been used in combination with other forms of suspensions techniques.

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Both the use of a positive pressure system and the use of a negative pressure system (or a hypobaric closed chamber of a vacuum) have been utilized in the field of prosthetics. At one time, for positive pressure systems "inflatable inner tubes" were used to fit into sockets. Presently, there are pneumatic "bags" which are strategically placed over what people consider to be good weight-bearing areas to increase pressure to help accommodate for volume changes within the socket.

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Some of the problems with these positive pressure systems are that they use a very specific pressure at specific locations resulting in the creation of atrophy and loss of tissue dramatically over these high pressure areas.

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None of these systems employs positive pressure distributed over the total contact area between the residual limb and the artificial limb socket to accommodate volume changes within the socket.

- 5 One system using negative pressure utilized a closed chamber with a socket that is donned by pulling on with a sock, pulling the sock out of the socket and then closing the opening with a valve. this creates a seal at the bottom and the stump is held into the socket by the hypobaric seal.
- 10 The older systems were initially started in Germany. They were an open-ended socket, meaning there was an air chamber in the bottom of the socket. This did not work particularly well because it would cause swelling of the residual limb into the chamber created by the negative draw of suspending the weight of the leg and being in a confined area. This would
- 15 lead to significant edema which would be severe enough to cause stump breakdown and drainage.

It was later discovered in the United States that total contact is important between the residual limb and the socket to reduce uneven force distribution. Once total contact is achieved, the weight was distributed

20 evenly or the suspension was distributed over the whole surface of the limb rather than just over the open chamber portion of the socket.

The human body as a whole is under approximately one atmosphere of pressure at sea level. It keeps and maintains a normal fluid system throughout the body. When an amputee dons a prosthesis and begins

25 taking the pressures of transmitting the weight of the body through the surface area of the residual limb to the bone, there is increased pressure on the residual limb equal to one atmosphere plus whatever additional pressures are created by weight bearing. This increased pressure causes the eventual loss of fluids within the residual limb to the larger portion of

30 the body which is under less pressure. This loss of fluids causes the volume of the residual limb to decrease during the day. The amount of

loss varies from amputee to amputee. The more "fleshy" and the softer the residual limb, the more volume fluctuation there will be. The greater the weight and the smaller the surface area, the greater the pressure will be and the more "swings" there will be in fluids. In the past, the amputee
5 compensated for this volume decrease by removing the artificial limb and donning additional stump socks to make up for the decreased residual limb volume.

In order to achieve either positive or negative pressure within the socket, a pressure source of some type was needed. Numerous mechanisms and
10 methods for providing and/or controlling pressure in the socket have been introduced over the years. For example, in U.S. Patent No. 5,549,709, a hypobarically-controlled artificial limb for amputees is described as including, in part, an outer socket, a flexible, compressible inner socket within the outer socket with a cavity for receiving the residual limb and a
15 vacuum source connected to the cavity. In U.S. Patent No. 6,761,742, a weight-actuated vacuum pump and shock absorber for an artificial limb is described as including vacuum valves that connect a vacuum source to the inside of the socket. In FIG. 1, vacuum pump 120 is mounted beneath socket 102, in line with shin portion 104.

20 The connection of a pressure source to the interior of a socket has been accomplished using many techniques. One such technique involves providing a threaded metal elbow fitting to install in a socket, such as fitting 126 shown in FIG. 1. The technique was to drill an oversize hole, then fill the hole with epoxy resin/adhesive and allow the resin to cure.
25 Then, a tap drill sized hole was drilled in the epoxy resin filling the hole, and the hole was then threaded with a tap. The purpose of filling the hole with epoxy was to provide a homogenous material to drill and tap. A homogenous material without filler or reinforcement tends to be less prone to air migration within the material. A typical definitive socket (the final
30 socket intended to last a considerable period of time) will be made of a fiber reinforced resin. These materials have a tendency to delaminate

when drilled and, if the material is porous, then air can migrate through the material to form a leak path. After metal elbow fitting 126 is attached to socket 102, flexible tubing 124 is used to connect elbow fitting 126 to valves 122 on vacuum pump 120.

- 5 The disadvantage of using a metal elbow fitting is that the fitting is very rigid, fairly large and protrudes from the side of the socket. If this fitting is bumped or jarred during the amputees daily activities, the stiff fitting transfers all of the impact load to the threads in the socket. The impact must then be withstood by the unreinforced epoxy material. This can
10 result in breakage of the threads and subsequent pneumatic leaks.

Summary of the invention

15 Accordingly, an object of the present invention is to provide an artificial limb with a system for generating a positive or, preferably, negative pressure in the interior of a socket which allows a simple manufacturing and a reliable sealing of the hole in which a fitting is mounted for providing a pressure communication duct.

20 According to the present invention an artificial limb comprising a prosthetic socket having an open-ended socket wall with an inner surface and an outer surface and into which a residual limb may be inserted, the socket forming, when the residual limb is inserted, a sealed interior wherein a positive or negative pressure may be generated through a fitting fixed in a
25 hole of the socket and connected to a pressure source through a flexible tubing is characterized in that a connector made of flexible material is used as the fitting ,
the connector has a flange formed at one end of an elongated tubular section,
30 a seal surface of said flange is intended for sealingly abutting one of the surfaces of the socket around the hole,

a tubular section having a lumen extends through the hole from the seal surface of the flange, and
the tubular section includes at least one portion oversized relative to the size of the hole so that a reasonable air-tight seal is provided between
5 said portion and the inner surface of the hole or the other of said surfaces around the hole said other surface being distant from the flange.

According to the present invention the connector is made of a flexible material so that an oversized section of the connector can be pressed into
10 or through the hole and used for providing an addition seal. The other seal is provided by the flange abutting with a seal surface one of the surfaces of the socket wall round the hole. By the at least two sealings which are obtained in a simple and reliable manner the reliability of the sealing is considerably enhanced, especially if a negative pressure (vacuum) is
15 applied to the interior of the socket.

Further advantages and preferred embodiments are described in the following description of embodiments illustrated in the drawings.

20 **Brief description of the drawings**

FIG. 1 is a side view of a prior art artificial lower limb, including a foot, a shin and a limb socket into which a residual limb is inserted.

FIG. 2 is a perspective view of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector in
25 accordance with a first embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 3 is a side view of the connector of FIG. 2.

FIG. 4 is a partial cross-sectional view of an artificial limb socket including the connector of FIG. 2 mounted through a wall of the limb socket.

FIG. 5 is a perspective view of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector in
30 accordance with a second embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 6 is a side view of the connector of FIG. 5.

FIG. 7 is a partial cross-sectional view of an artificial limb socket including the connector of FIG. 5 mounted through a wall of the limb socket.

5 FIG. 8 is a partial cross-sectional view of a third embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector mounted through a wall of an artificial limb socket.

FIG. 9 is a partial cross-sectional view of a fourth embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector mounted through a wall of an artificial limb socket.

10 FIG. 10 is a partial cross-sectional view of a fifth embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector mounted through a wall of an artificial limb socket.

15 FIG. 11 is a partial cross-sectional view of a sixth embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector mounted through a wall of an artificial limb socket.

FIG. 12 is a partial cross-sectional view of a seventh embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector mounted through a wall of an artificial limb socket.

20 FIG. 13 is a partial cross-sectional view of an eight embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector mounted through a wall of an artificial limb socket.

FIG. 14 is a perspective view of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector in accordance with a ninth embodiment of the invention.

25 FIG. 15 shows an artificial limb socket including the connector of FIG. 14 mounted through a side wall of the limb socket.

FIG. 16 is a perspective view of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector in accordance with a tenth embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 17 is a side view of the pneumatic connector of FIG. 16.

FIG. 18 is a perspective view of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector
5 in accordance with an eleventh embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 19 is a partial cross-sectional view of a low profile pneumatic connector in accordance with a twelfth embodiment of the invention during a non-vacuum state.

FIG. 20 is a partial cross-sectional view of the low profile pneumatic
10 connector of FIG. 19 during a vacuum state.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

While the invention is amenable to various modifications and alternative forms, specific embodiments have been shown by way of example in the drawings and are described in detail below. The intention, however, is not
15 to limit the invention to the particular embodiments described. On the contrary, the invention is intended to cover all modifications, equivalents, and alternatives falling within the scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims. Unless otherwise specified, the components of the invention may be formed from any suitable material and by any suitable
20 manufacturing method. With reference to the attached figures, it is to be understood that like components are labeled with like numerals throughout the several figures. In particular, artificial limb socket 130 and its various features are the same in all the embodiments described below and shown in the figures.

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FIGS. 2 and 3 show a low profile flexible pneumatic connector 200 in accordance with a first embodiment of the invention. Connector 200 is formed from a high strength elastomer or other suitable flexible material.

- Connector 200 includes elongated tubular section 208, flange 206, tubular head section 202, tubular insertion section 204, and lumen 210. Flange 206 is formed at one end of elongated tubular section 208 with tubular head section 202 extending from a portion of surface 212 on flange 206 and terminating as tubular insertion section 204. The outside diameter of tubular head section 202 is greater than the outside diameter of tubular insertion section 204. Lumen 210 extends the length of connector 200 between opening 214 of tubular insertion section 204 and opening 216 the other end of elongated tubular section 208.
- FIG. 4 is a partial cross-sectional view of artificial limb socket 130 having connector 200 mounted through wall 132 of socket 130. Socket 130 includes socket wall 132 having thickness 133, outer surface 139, inner surface 138, interior space 134, and hole 136 extending through socket wall 132 at a predefined location on socket 130. In order to enable a snug and reasonably air-tight connection between connector 200 and socket 130, the diameter of hole 136 is both smaller than the outside diameter of tubular head section 202 and greater than the outside diameter of tubular insertion section 204. As such, installing connector 200 in socket 130 includes sliding tubular insertion section 204 through hole 136 followed by forcing tubular head section 202 through hole 136 by applying pressure on the surface of flange 206 opposite surface 212 or by pulling on the tubular insertion section 204 from the interior 134 of socket 130. The force applied to tubular head section 202 is maintained until surface 212 of flange 206 abuts outside surface 139 of socket 130.
- With the outside diameter of tubular head section 202 being greater than the diameter of hole 136, the outer surface of tubular head section 202 abuts snugly against the inner surface of hole 136, thereby providing a reasonably air-tight seal. The length of tubular head section 202 extending from surface 212 of flange 206 is such that at least a portion of tubular head section 202 extends into interior 134 expanding beyond hole 136 thereby forming tubular bulbous section 203 on tubular head section

202 around hole 136 and against inner surface 138 of socket wall 132. With tubular head section 202 positioned as such, tubular bulbous section 203 creates a reasonably air tight seal against inner surface 138 around hole 136. Another reasonably air-tight seal is also created around hole
5 136 at the interface between surface 212 of flange 206 and outer surface 139 of socket wall 132. A high strength flexible adhesive may also be used to further seal and adhere the outer surface of tubular head section 202 to the inner surface of hole 136, and to adhere and seal surface 212 of flange 206 against outer surface 139 of socket wall 132. As such,
10 impact on connector 200 and/or in the vicinity of hole 136 is absorbed by the flexible material of connector 200 and the flexible adhesive. Any portion of tubular head section 202 and/or tubular insertion section 204 extending beyond inner surface 138 of socket wall 132 may be trimmed flush against inner surface 138 so that it does not interfere with the user's
15 limb and/or does not cause any discomfort to the limb housed in socket 130. Elongated tubular section 208 further includes surface 207 extending from surface 212 of flange 206 for adhering a portion of elongated tubular section 208 proximate flange 206 to outer surface 139 of socket wall 132, and thereby securely attaching connector 200 to socket 130. Elongated
20 tubular section 208 connects to a pressure source (not shown). Lumen 210 within elongated tubular section 208 of connector 200 fluidly connects interior 134 of socket 130 to a pressure source.

In an alternate embodiment (not shown), a tubular bulbous section, such as tubular bulbous section 203, is formed on the tubular head section 202
25 around hole 136 at outer surface 139 of socket wall 132. In another embodiment of the invention (also not shown), tubular bulbous sections, such as tubular bulbous section 203, are formed on tubular head section 202 around hole 136 on both inner surface 138 and outer surface 139 of socket wall 132.

30 FIGS. 5 and 6 show a low profile flexible pneumatic connector 300 in accordance with a second embodiment of the invention. Connector 300 is

formed from a high strength elastomer or other suitable flexible material. Connector 300 includes flange 306 having surfaces 312 and 313, tubular head section 302, elongated tubular section 308, and lumen 310. Flange 306 is formed at one end of tubular head section 302 having elongated tubular section 308 extending from the other end of tubular head section 302. Lumen 310 extends the length of connector 300 between opening 314 on surface 313 of flange 306 and opening 316 the other end of elongated tubular section 308. The outside diameter of tubular head section 302 is somewhat greater than the outside diameter of elongated tubular section 308.

FIG. 7 is a partial cross-sectional view of artificial limb socket 130 having connector 300 mounted through wall 132 of socket 130. In order to enable a snug and reasonably air-tight connection between connector 300 and socket 130, the diameter of hole 136 is smaller than the outside diameter of tubular head section 302 and larger than the outside diameter of elongated tubular section 308. As such, the end of elongated tubular section 308 having opening 316 is pulled through hole 136 from interior 134 of socket 130 until tubular head section 302 abuts against inner surface 138 surrounding hole 136 in socket wall 132. With the application of a pushing force on surface 313 of flange 306 and/or a tugging or pulling force on elongated tubular section 308, tubular head section 302 is forced into and positioned within hole 136.

With the outside diameter of tubular head section 302 being greater than the diameter of hole 136, the outer surface of tubular head section 302 abuts snugly against the inner surface of hole 136, thereby providing a reasonably air-tight seal. The length of tubular head section 302 extending from surface 312 of flange 306 is less than or equal to thickness 133 of socket wall 132, and yet it is sufficiently long so that at least a portion of tubular head section 302 extends within hole 136 to ensure a snug fit when surface 312 of flange 306 abuts against inner surface 138 of socket wall 132. A high strength flexible adhesive may be used to further

seal and adhere the outer surface of tubular head section 302 to the inner surface of hole 136, and to adhere and seal surface 312 of flange 306 against inner surface 138 of socket wall 132. As such, impact on connector 300 and/or in the vicinity of hole 136 is absorbed by the flexible material of connector 300 and the flexible adhesive. Flange 306 is relatively thin so that it does not interfere with the user's limb and/or does not cause any discomfort to the limb housed in socket 130. Lumen 310 within connector 300 fluidly connects interior 134 of socket 130 to a pressure source (not shown).

10 FIG. 8 is a partial cross-sectional side view of a third embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector 400 mounted through the wall 132 of artificial limb socket 130. Connector 400 is formed from a high strength elastomer or other suitable flexible material. Connector 400 includes flange 404 having surfaces 412 and 413, tubular head section 402, tubular
15 bulbous section 420, elongated tubular section 408, and lumen 410. Tubular head section 402 includes flange 404 at one end, and tubular bulbous section 420 at the other end whereat tubular head section 402 transitions into elongated tubular section 408. The length of tubular head section 402 is equal to or slightly less than thickness 133 of socket wall
20 132, and yet it is sufficiently long so that tubular head section 402 extends within hole 136 to ensure a snug fit when surface 412 of flange 404 abuts against inner surface 138 of socket wall 132. As such, the combination of flange 404 and tubular bulbous section 420 aid in a snug connection of connector 400 at hole 136 in wall 132 of socket 130. Additionally, the
25 outside diameter of tubular head section 402 is equal to or slightly larger than the diameter of hole 136, thereby enabling a snug and reasonably air tight contact between the outside surface of tubular head section 402 and the inside surface of hole 136.

30 The end of elongated tubular section 408 having opening 416 is pulled through hole 136 from the interior 134 of socket 130 until tubular bulbous section 420 abuts against inner surface 138 surrounding hole 136 in

socket wall 132. With the application of a pushing force on surface 413 of flange 402 and/or a tugging or pulling force on elongated tubular section 408, tubular bulbous section 420 is pulled through hole 136 until it exits hole 136 at surface 139 of wall 132. Both tubular bulbous section 420 and surface 412 of flange 404 abut against and function as stops at outer surface 139 and inner surface 138, respectively, of socket wall 132. The contact between the surfaces on both sides of socket wall 132 will be snug and relatively air tight, and particularly when the length of tubular head section 402 is slightly less than thickness 133 of socket wall 132. Also, the contact between the inside surface of hole 136 and the outside surface of tubular head section 402 positioned within hole 136 will be snug and relatively air tight, and particularly when the outside diameter of tubular head section 402 is slightly larger than the diameter of hole 136. A high strength flexible adhesive may be used to further seal and adhere the outer surface of tubular head section 402 to the inner surface of hole 136 as well as to adhere and seal surface 412 of flange 404 against inner surface 138 of socket wall 132, and a portion of tubular bulbous section 420 against outer surface 139 of socket wall 132. As such, impact on connector 400 and/or in the vicinity of hole 136 is absorbed by the flexible material of connector 400 and the flexible adhesive. Lumen 410 extends the length of connector 400, fluidly connecting the interior 134 of socket 130 to a pressure source (not shown).

FIG. 9 is a partial cross-sectional side view of a fourth embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector 500 mounted through the wall 132 of artificial limb socket 130. Connector 500 is formed from a high strength elastomer or other suitable flexible material. The outside diameter of tubular head section 502 is equal to or slightly greater than the diameter of hole 136 in socket wall 132, and the length of tubular head section 502 is equal to or slightly less than thickness 133 of socket wall 132. As can be seen, connector 500 is similar to connector 200 described in reference to FIG. 2-4. One difference between connectors 500 and 200 is that connector 500 does not include a tubular insertion section such as tubular

insertion section 204 on connector 200. Instead, connector 500 is fixedly attached to socket wall 132 through hole 136 using flanged tubular plug 520. Flanged tubular plug 520 includes flange 532 at one end of tubular plug section 530 and lumen 534 extending between opening 526 on flange 532 and opening 534 at the opposite end of tubular plug section 530. The outside diameter of tubular plug section 530 is equal to or slightly greater than the diameter of lumen 510 within connector 500.

Connector 500 is attached to socket wall 132 by inserting tubular head section 502 into hole 136 until surface 512 of flange 504 abuts against outer surface 139 of socket wall 132 and tubular head section 502 is positioned within hole 136. As such, having the outside diameter of tubular head section 502 slightly larger than the diameter of hole 136 ensures a snug and relatively air tight contact between the outside surface of tubular head section 502 and the inside surface of hole 136. Any portion of tubular head section 502 extending beyond inner surface 138 of socket wall 132 is trimmed flush with inner surface 138. Tubular plug section 530 of flanged tubular plug 520 is inserted into lumen 510 extending through tubular head section 502 until surface 522 of flange 532 abuts against inner surface 138 of socket wall 132. Thus, having the outside diameter of tubular plug section 530 slightly larger than the diameter of lumen 510 ensures a snug and relatively air tight contact between the outside surface of tubular plug section 530 and the inside surface of lumen 510.

In addition, tubular plug section 530 exerts a radial force against the inside surface of lumen 510. This adds to the force already exerted by the oversized tubular head section 520, thereby further assuring a relatively air tight seal within hole 136. A high strength flexible adhesive may be used to further seal and adhere the outer surface of tubular head section 502 to the inner surface of hole 136 as well as to adhere and seal the outer surface of tubular plug section 530 to the inside surface of lumen 510 within tubular head section 502, surface 512 of flange 504 against

outer surface 139 of socket wall 132, and surface 522 of flange 532 against inner surface 138 of socket wall 132. As such, impact on connector 500 and/or in the vicinity of hole 136 is absorbed by the flexible material of connector 500 and the flexible adhesive. Lumen 510 extending
5 the length of connector 500, fluidly connects interior 134 of socket 130 to a pressure source (not shown).

It will be obvious to one skilled in the art that connector 200, as previously described in reference to FIGS. 2-4, can be used as a replacement for
10 connector 500. Any portion of elongated head section 202 and/or elongated insertion section 204 extending into interior space 134 of socket 130 is trimmed flush with inner surface 138 of socket wall 132. Flanged tubular plug 520 is used to attach connector 200 to socket wall 132 in a manner similar to the aforescribed method of using flanged tubular plug 520 for attaching socket 500 to socket wall 132.

15 FIG. 10 is a partial cross-sectional side view of a fifth embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector 600 mounted through socket wall 132 of artificial limb socket 130. Connector 600 includes elongated tubular section 608, double-flange 650, and lumen 610 extending therethrough. Double-flange 650 is shown having inner flange 652 adhered to inner
20 surface 138 of socket wall 132, and outer flange 654 adhered to outer surface 139 of socket wall 132. On double-flange 650, the thickness of opening 656 between inner and outer flanges 652 and 654, respectively, is equal to or slightly less than thickness 133 of socket wall 132 to provide a snug and relatively air tight contact between the outside surface of tubular
25 head section 502 and the inside surface of hole 136. Connector 600 is shown as a single-piece component wherein double-flange 650 is an integrated part of elongated tubular section 608. Double-flange 650 is formed at one end of elongated tubular section 608, and lumen 610 extending within connector 600 fluidly connects the interior of socket 130
30 to a pressure source at the other end of elongated tubular section 608. The diameter of double-flange 650 at opening 656 is equal to or slightly

larger than the diameter of hole 136 in socket wall 132. Additionally, the diameters of inner flange 652 and outer flange 654 are larger than the diameter of hole 136. A high strength flexible adhesive may also be used to further seal and adhere double-flange 650 to socket wall 132 and to hole 136.

FIG. 11 is a partial cross-sectional side view of a sixth embodiment of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector 700 mounted through socket wall 132 of artificial limb socket 130. Connector 700 is shown as a two piece component having double-flange 750 connected to tube 790. As can be seen, double-flange 750 is similar to connector 600 described above in reference to the embodiment shown in FIG. 10. Double-flange 750 is shown having a relatively short tubular section 708 extending from outer flange 754. One end of tube 790 is connected to the end of short tubular section 708, and the other end of tube 790 is connected to a pressure source. In an alternate embodiment (not shown), the end of tube 790 is positioned within lumen 710 at the open end of short tubular section 708. Lumens 710 and 792 are fluidly connected to each other and provide fluid connectivity between the interior of socket 130 and the pressure source. A high strength flexible adhesive may be used to further seal and adhere double-flange 750 to socket wall 132 and to hole 136, and to adhere and seal short tubular section 708 to tube 790.

FIG. 12 is a cross-sectional view of a seventh embodiment of the invention for low profile flexible pneumatic connector 800 mounted through socket wall 132 of artificial limb socket 130. Connector 800 includes flange 804 having first surface 813 exposed to interior space 134 of socket 130, and second surface 812 abutting contoured inner surface 854 around hole 136 in socket wall 132. Connector 800 further includes elongated head section 802 dimensioned to snugly fit within hole 136 in socket wall 132, and tubular bulbous section 820 abutting contoured outer surface 856 around hole 136 in socket wall 132. Lumen support tube 850 having opening 814 exposed to interior space 134 of socket 130 is placed within the lumen of

connector 800 to ensure an open passage. Tubing 852 is fluidly connected to and extends between lumen support tube 850 within connector 800 and elongated tubular section 808 having lumen 810, thereby providing fluid connectivity between opening 814 and opening 816 on elongated tubular section 808. A pressure source (not shown) is fluidly connected to opening 816.

FIG. 13 is a cross-sectional view of an eight embodiment of the invention for low profile flexible pneumatic connector 900 mounted through socket wall 132 of artificial limb socket 130. Connector 900 includes flange 904 having first surface 913 exposed to interior space 134 of socket 130, and second surface 912 abutting contoured inner surface 954 around hole 136 in socket wall 132. Connector 900 further includes elongated head section 902 dimensioned to snugly fit within hole 136 in socket wall 132, and tubular bulbous section 920 abutting contoured outer surface 956 around hole 136 in socket wall 132. Lumen support tube 950 having opening 914 exposed to interior space 134 of socket 130 is placed within the lumen of connector 900 to ensure an open passage. Elongated tubular section 908 having lumen 910 extends between tubular bulbous section 920 and a pressure source (not shown). Lumen support tube 950 and lumen 910 within connector 900 provide fluid connectivity between opening 914 exposed to interior space 134 of socket 130 and opening 916 connected to the pressure source.

In the foregoing, the embodiments described in reference to FIGS. 2-13, inclusive, have been shown to include a low profile flexible pneumatic connector having two ports fluidly connected to one another by a lumen within the connector. As described, the opening in the tubular head section at one end of the connector is in fluid communication with the interior of the socket through a hole in the socket wall, and the opening in the elongated tubular section at the other end of the connector is attached to a pressure source. As such, the lumen within the connector fluidly connects the interior of the socket to the pressure source.

Alternate embodiments of the present invention include low profile flexible pneumatic connectors having more than two openings. Accordingly, FIG. 14 is a perspective view of low profile flexible pneumatic connector 1000 having at least three openings 1014, 1016, and 1018 in accordance with a ninth embodiment of the invention. Connector 1000 includes flange-like connector 1006 whereat elongated tubular section 1008, tubular head section 1002, and tubular extension 1068 attach to one another. Lumens 1010, 1070, and 1080 within tubular sections 1008, 1068, and 1002, respectively, are fluidly connected to one another at lumen junction 1072 within flange-like connector 1006, thereby providing fluid connectivity between openings 1014, 1016, and 1018.

As discussed above in the Background section, the function of a hypobaric prosthetic limb depends heavily on the level of vacuum. To be able to ascertain that the desired level of vacuum is actually achieved, it is useful to include a pressure-monitoring device, such as a vacuum-indicating device, fitted as close to the prosthetic socket as possible. A further embodiment of the invention therefore includes means of indicating the level of vacuum integrated into the pneumatic connector, either internally or externally. All current means of indicating a vacuum depend on measuring the pressure differences between the volume within the prosthetic socket and the environment. Usually this is done by letting the pressure difference impinge on a resiliently suspended cylinder, membrane or the like and measuring the resulting displacement or strain either mechanically or electronically. Mechanically, this can be done by making the displacement of the diaphragm or cylinder directly visible or by amplifying the displacement via optical, mechanical, or pneumatic means. Electronic means include measuring the electrical changes in mechanically strained elements such as in strain gauges.

FIG. 15 is an illustration of low profile flexible pneumatic connector 1000 mounted on artificial limb socket 130. As previously described in reference to the prior embodiments of FIGS. 2-13, inclusive, tubular head

section 1002 of connector 1000 is attached to socket 130 through hole 136 extending through socket wall 132 at a predefined location on socket 130, and elongated tubular section 1008 is connected to a pressure source (not shown). In this embodiment, a device 1090 is externally
5 integrated into the pneumatic connector 1000 through tubular extension 1068. As such, lumens 1010, 1070, and 1080 provide fluid connectivity between each of the interior 134 of socket 130, device 1090 and the pressure source.

Device 1090 may be a means for indicating, such as described above, and
10 may include one or more functional portions and/or components, such as monitoring or vacuum indication, control, adjustment, display, power and/or communication. Optionally, one or more of these functional portions may be located external to the device 1090 and then connected to the device 1090 in a suitable manner. This external location may be another
15 apparatus mounted to the socket 130, or may be one or more items located on another portion of the prosthesis, on or with the wearer of the prosthesis (i. e., in a pocket or on a belt), and/or at a monitoring station. The separate apparatus/items may be connected to the device 1090 using a wired connection or using a wireless system.

20 In accordance with an embodiment of the invention, device 1090 is a pressure monitoring device for monitoring the pressure within interior 134 of socket 130. In one such embodiment, the pressure monitoring device includes a pressure sensor and/or a pressure indicator, including a pressure display means, such as a light indicator (LED or other) or an
25 alpha-numeric LCD or LED display (or other). In another such embodiment, the pressure monitoring device further includes an alarm indicative of pressure value(s) outside one or more nominal value(s) and/or range(s). In yet another embodiment of the invention, device 1090 is a controller for maintaining the pressure within interior 134 of socket 130
30 by controlling the operation of the pressure source and may include a computer or microprocessor, or other suitable digital or analog

components. In one or more such embodiments, the controller includes one or more of: a pressure sensor, a feedback control means, a pressure indicator including a pressure display means, etc. Further, in one or more such embodiments, the device 1090 includes a power supply, such as
5 batteries that may be sealed within the device 1090, batteries housed in an accessible location so that they may be changed when needed, or a rechargeable unit including a connection for a recharging device. Sealed devices may be produced as disposable products or as returnable to the vendor for disposal, recycling or refurbishing with new batteries.

10 Alternatively, the functions of the means for indicating, as described above, are internally integrated into the pneumatic connector, as a self-contained unit. Optionally, as described above, one or more of the functions may be provided by an apparatus external to the connector, which is either mounted to the socket, or provided in a remote location
15 with the wearer or at a monitoring station. Connection between the functional components may be wired or wireless.

FIGS. 16 and 17 show a low profile flexible pneumatic connector 1100 in accordance with a tenth embodiment of the invention, including an internally integrated indicating means 1190. Connector 1100 includes
20 elongated tubular section 1108, flange 1106, tubular head section 1102, tubular insertion section 1104, lumen 1110, and device 1190. As can be seen, connector 1100 is similar to the previously described embodiment of connector 200 in reference to FIGS. 2-4, inclusive, having device 1190 mounted thereto. As previously described in reference to
25 FIG. 15, device 1190 is a means for indicating, including a monitoring device, a controller, a display device, a power supply, among others, and is shown mounted on the surface of flange 1106. However in alternate embodiments (not shown) device 1190 is embedded or incorporated within the body structure or material of connector 1100. Lumen 1110 extending
30 through connector 1100 provides fluid connectivity between opening 1116

tubular insertion section 1104. Optionally, device 1190, internally integrated into connector 1100, may include various functions, such as an indicating means, a power supply and a wireless sending unit that communicates with an external device remote from the connector 1100.

5 This external device may include a wireless receiver, a computer/microprocessor, a power supply, a display and adjustment components. The external device may be at another location on the prosthesis, with the wearer of the prosthesis or at a separate location. Another option includes the device 1190 internally integrated with connector 1100 and having an
10 indicating means. An external, remote device may then, for example, include a power supply, computer/microprocessor, a display and/or adjustment components.

FIG. 18 is a perspective view of low profile flexible pneumatic connector 1200 having at least three openings 1214, 1216, and 1218 in accordance
15 with an eleventh embodiment of the invention, also including an internally integrated indicating means 1290. Connector 1200 includes flange-like connector 1206 whereat elongated tubular section 1208, tubular head section 1202, tubular extension 1268, and device 1290 attach to one another. As can be seen, connector 1200 is similar to the previously
20 described embodiment of connector 1000 in reference to FIGS. 14 and 15, inclusive, having device 1290 attached thereto. Lumens 1210, 1270, and 1280 within tubular sections 1208, 1268, and 1202, respectively, and lumen 1292 extending from device 1290 are fluidly connected to one another at lumen junction 1072 within flange-like connector 1006, thereby
25 providing fluid connectivity between device 1290 and openings 1014, 1016, and 1018. As previously described in reference to FIGS. 14 and 15, device 1290 is a means for indicating, including a monitoring device, a controller, a display device, a power supply and/or communication and is shown mounted on the surface of flange 1206. However in alternate
30 embodiments (not shown) device 1290 is embedded or incorporated within the body structure or material of connector 1200. One or more devices are attachable to connector 1200 through opening 1218.

FIGS. 19 and 20 are partial cross-sectional views of a low profile flexible pneumatic connector 1300 in accordance with a twelfth embodiment of the invention, including an indicating means configured as a mechanical device. In FIG. 19, connector 1300 is shown in a non-vacuum state, while
5 FIG. 20 shows connector 1300 when subjected to at least a partial vacuum. Connector 1300 includes elongated tubular section 1308, flange 1306, tubular head section 1302, tubular insertion section 1304, and lumen 1310. Flange 1306 is formed at one end of elongated tubular section 1308 with tubular head section 1302 extending from a portion of
10 surface 1312 on flange 1306 and terminating as tubular insertion section 1304. Flange 1306 includes chamber 1340 positioned between elongated tubular section 1308 and tubular head section 1302. Chamber 1340 includes corrugated diaphragm or membrane 1342 having central part 1344, protrusion 1346 on one side of central part 1344, and spring 1348
15 extending between the other side of central part 1344 and surface 1314 of flange 1306 exposed to chamber 1340. Corrugated diaphragm 1342 is encapsulated within chamber 1340 with lid or cap 1350 fixedly attached to flange 1306 on the side having protrusion 1346. Cap 1350 includes hole 1352 dimensioned to enable protrusion 1346 to extend beyond the surface
20 of cap 1350.

As in the previously described embodiments, the outside diameter of tubular head section 1302 is greater than the outside diameter of tubular insertion section 1304. Lumen 1310 extends the length of connector 1300 and through chamber 1340 between opening 1314 of tubular insertion
25 section 1304 and opening 1316 the other end of elongated tubular section 1308. Connector 1300 is attached to a prosthetic socket (not shown) by positioning tubular head section 1302 within a hole in the socket wall. As can be seen, the side of diaphragm 1342 having spring 1348 will be under the same pressure as that within the prosthetic sock. Spring 1348 is
30 configured such that when the vacuum within the prosthetic socket is not at the desired level, diaphragm 1342 is pushed towards cap 1350 with spring force sufficient to cause protrusion 1346 into hole 1352 and extend

beyond the surface of cap 1350 as shown in FIG. 19. However, when the vacuum within the prosthetic socket is at the desired level, the spring force is counteracted by the vacuum, and diaphragm 1342 is pulled away from cap 1350 with spring force sufficient to withdraw protrusion 1346 into hole 1352 leaving no portion extending beyond the surface of cap 1350 as shown in FIG. 20. Accordingly, the vacuum level within the prosthetic socket can be visually inferred from the position of protrusion 1346 within hole 1352 and relative to the surface of cap 1350. Alternatively, chamber 1340 of connector 1300 may include a diaphragm, similar to 1342, that is configured to provide sufficient spring force on its own so that the spring 1348 is not needed, thereby simplifying the indicating means and connector 1300.

Although the present invention has been described with reference to preferred embodiments, one skilled in the art will recognize that changes can be made in form, function, and detail without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. In addition, the invention is not to be taken as limited to the described embodiments as any and all modifications and variations thereof can be made without departing from the spirit or scope of the invention. In addition, one or more of the components described herein can be removed, replaced, mixed in different combinations, etc., without departing from the scope, spirit, and intent of the invention.

25

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5 Claims

1. Artificial limb comprising a prosthetic socket (102) having an open-ended socket wall (132) with an inner surface (138) and an outer surface (139) and into which a residual limb (110) may be inserted, the socket (102) forming, when the residual limb (110) is inserted, a sealed interior wherein a positive or negative pressure may be generated through a fitting (126) fixed in a hole (138) of the socket (102) and connected to a pressure source (120) through a flexible tubing (124), **characterized in that**
- 15 a connector (200) made of flexible material is used as the fitting (126),
- the connector (200) has a flange (206) formed at one end of an elongated tubular section (208),
- 20 a seal surface (212) of said flange (206) is intended for sealingly abutting one of the surfaces (138, 139) of the socket (130) around the hole (136),
- a tubular section (202, 204) having a lumen (210) extends through the hole (136) from the seal surface (212) of the flange (206), and
- 25 the tubular section (202, 204) includes at least one portion (202, 203) oversized relative to the size of the hole (136) so that a reasonable air-tight seal is provided between said portion (202, 203) and the inner surface of the hole (136) or the other of said surfaces (138, 139) around the hole (136) said other surface being distant
- 30 from the flange (106).

2. Artificial limb according to claim 1, characterized in that the tubular section (202, 204) comprises a tubular head section (202) and a tubular insertion section (204), the tubular head section (202) having a greater outside diameter than the insertion section (204).
- 5
3. Artificial limb according to claim 2, characterized in that the outside diameter of the head section (202) is greater than the diameter of the hole (136) and the outside diameter of the tubular insertion section (204) is smaller than the diameter of the hole (136).
- 10
4. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 3, characterized in that the tubular section (202, 204) comprises a bulbous section (203) having a greater outer diameter than the hole (136).
- 15
5. Artificial limb according to claim 4, characterized in that the bulbous section (203) abuts the other of said surfaces (138, 139) being distant from the flange (206).
- 20
6. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 5, characterized in that the flange (206) abuts the outer surface (139) of the socket (130).
- 25
7. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 6, characterized in that a flexible adhesive is arranged between the seal surface (212) of the flange (206) and the surface (139) of the socket wall (132) for sealing.
- 30
8. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 7, characterized a flexible adhesive is arranged between the outer surface of the tubular section (202, 204) and the inner surface of the hole (136).

9. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 8, characterized in that a flange tubular plug (520) having a flange (532) and a tubular plug section (530) is inserted into the lumen (510) of the tubular head section (502) and that an outside diameter of the tubular plug section (530) is larger than the diameter of the lumen (510) ensuring a relatively air-tight contact.
10. Artificial limb according to claim 9, characterized in that the tubular plug (520) exerts a radial force against the tubular head section (502) increasing the force of tubular head section (502) against the inner wall of the hole (136).
11. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 10, characterized in that the connector (600) is provided with a double-flange (650) having an inner flange (652), an outer flange (654) and an opening (656) between them and that the thickness of the opening (656) is equal or less than the thickness (133) of the socket wall (132).
12. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 11, characterized in that the connector (200) having the elongated tubular section (208), the flange (206) and the tubular section (202, 204) is a single-piece component.
13. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 12, characterized in that the connector (1000) comprises additionally a tubular extension (1086) extending from the flange (1006) and having a lumen (1070).
14. Artificial limb according to claim 13, characterized in that the tubular extension (1086) is attached to a monitoring device (1090).

15. Artificial limb according to claim 13 or 14, characterized in that the connector (1100, 1200) is provided with a monitoring device (1190, 1290).
- 5 16. Artificial limb according to claim 14 or 15, characterized in that the monitoring device (1190, 1290) is situated at the flange (1106, 1206).
- 10 17. Artificial limb according to claim 15 or 16, characterized in that the monitoring device (119, 1290) is incorporated within the body structure of the connector (1100, 1200).
- 15 18. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 15 to 17, characterized in that the connector (1300) is provided with a chamber (1340) having the same pressure as within the socket (130) and a moveable membrane (1342) cooperating with a spring (1348) and bearing a protrusion (1346) the position of which relative to a cap (1350) of the chamber (1340) indicating a pressure status.
- 20 19. Artificial limb according to one of the claims 1 to 18, characterized in that a negative pressure source (120) is connected to the socket (130) via the connector (200).

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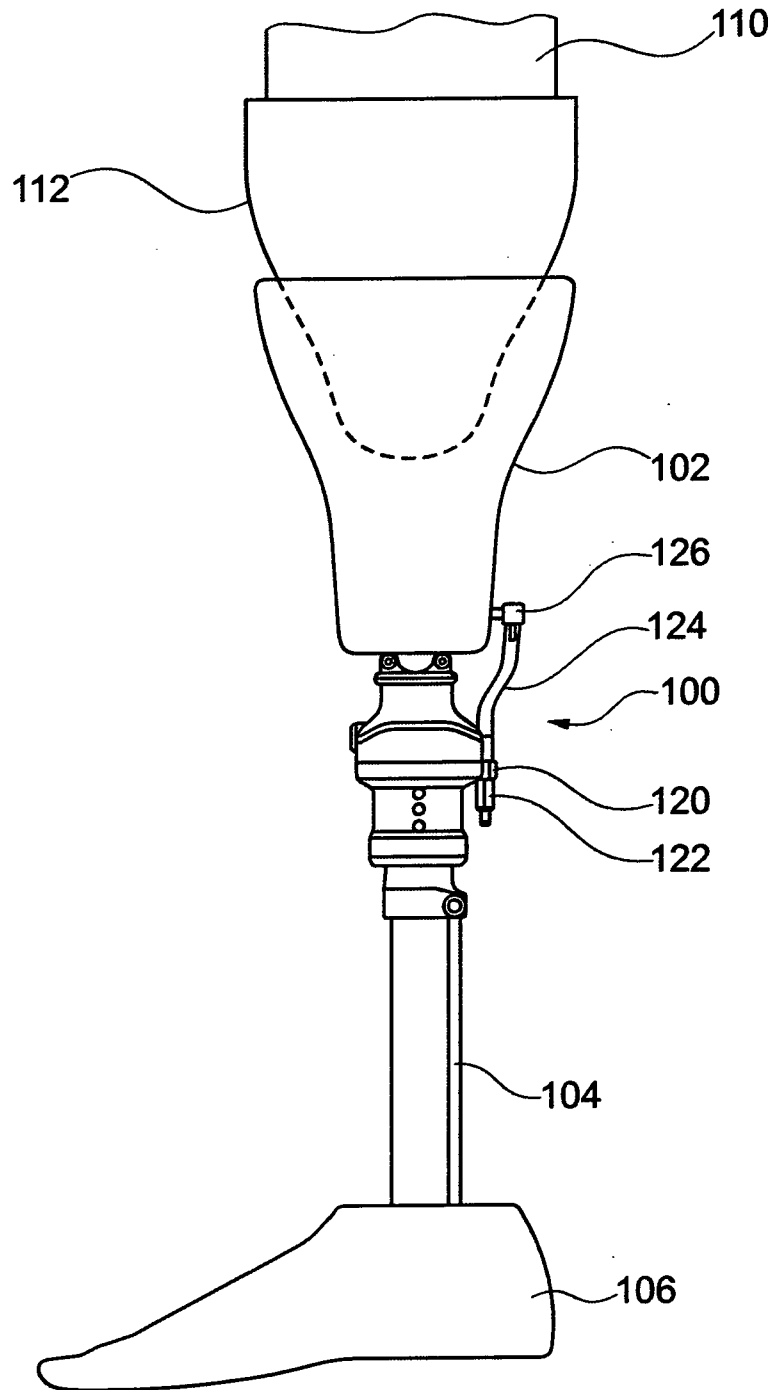


Fig. 1
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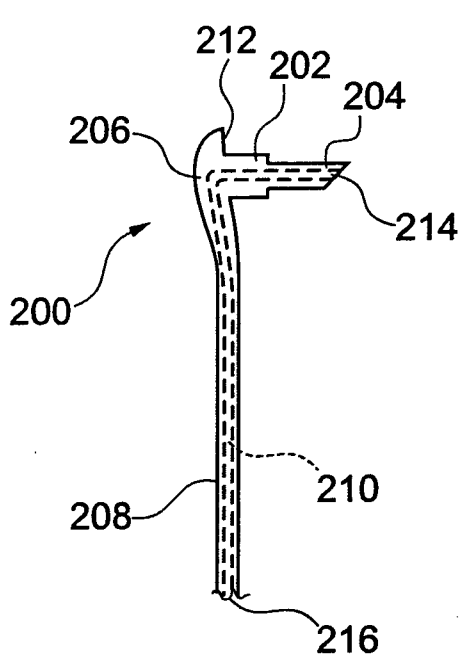


Fig. 3

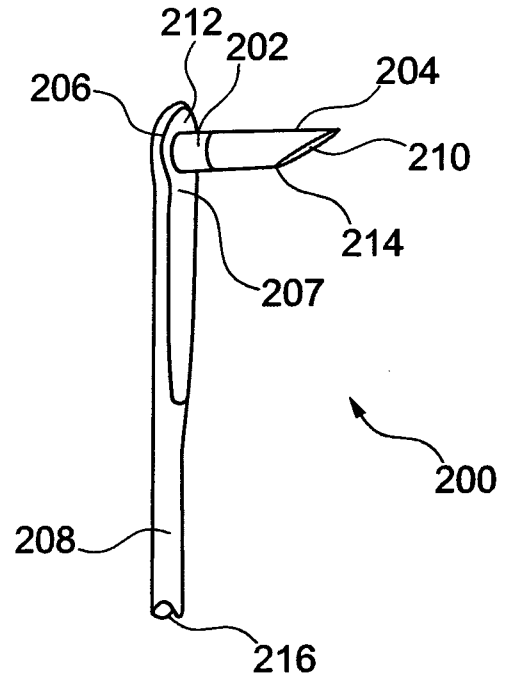


Fig. 2

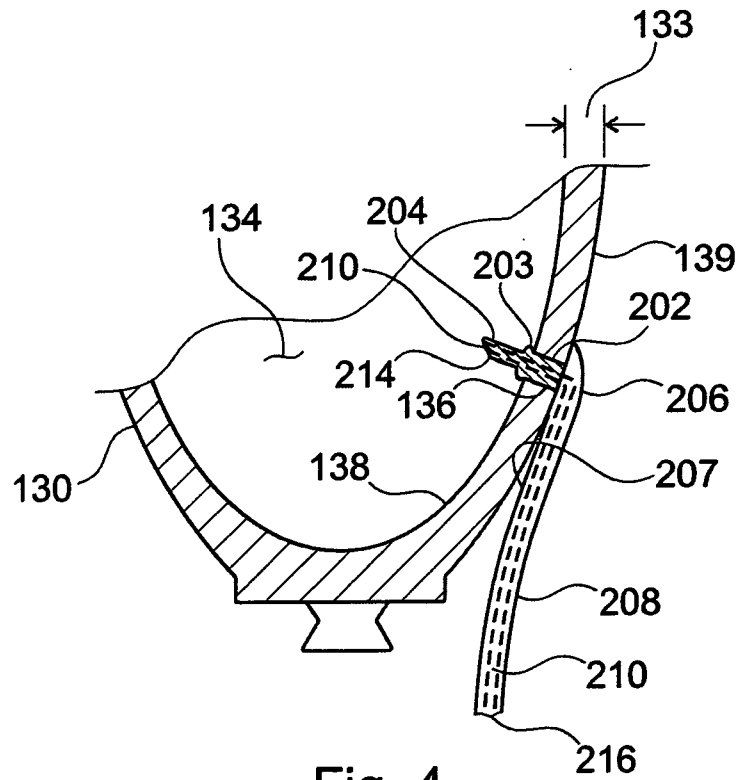


Fig. 4

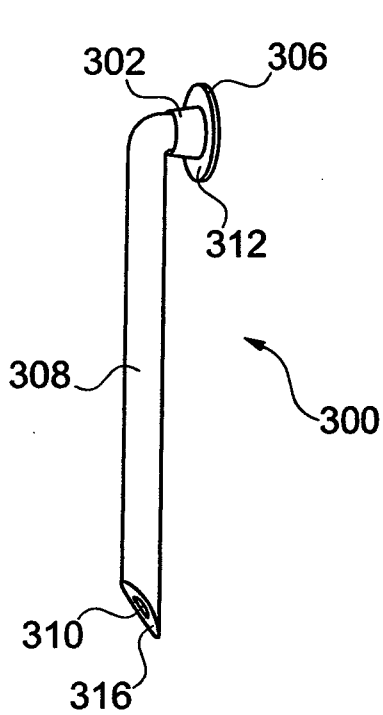


Fig. 5

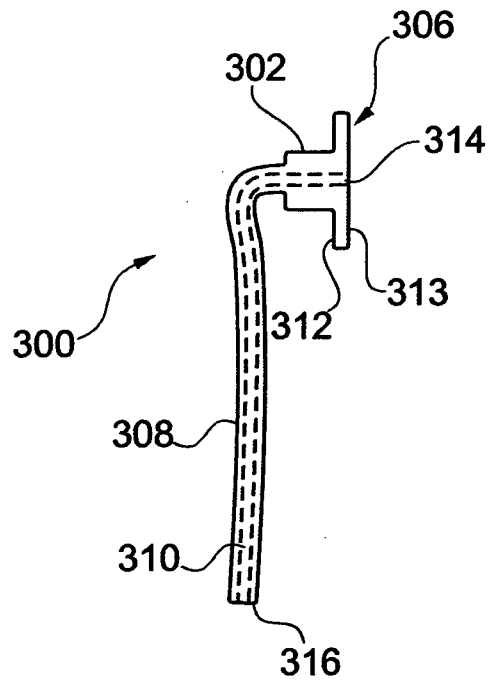


Fig. 6

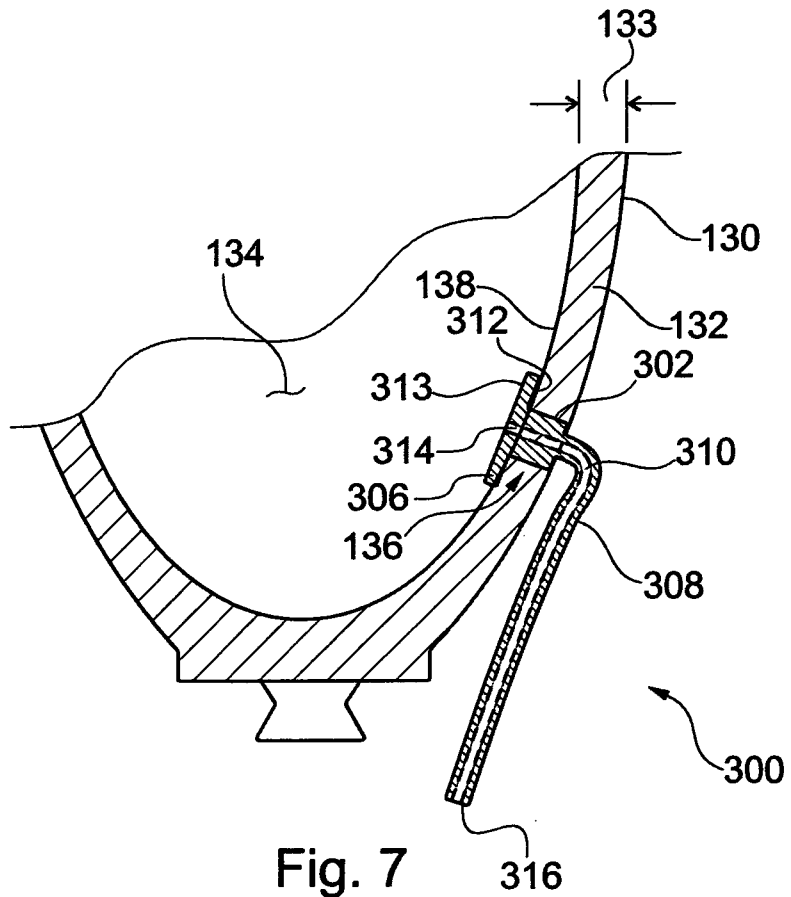


Fig. 7

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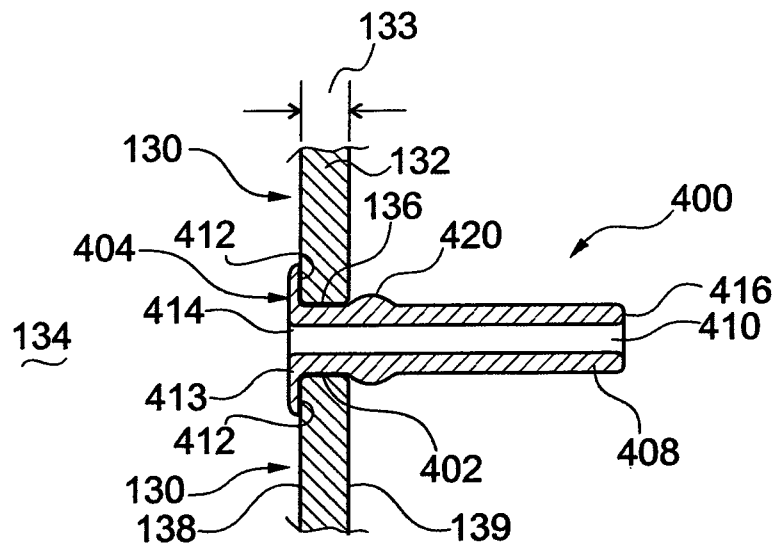


Fig. 8

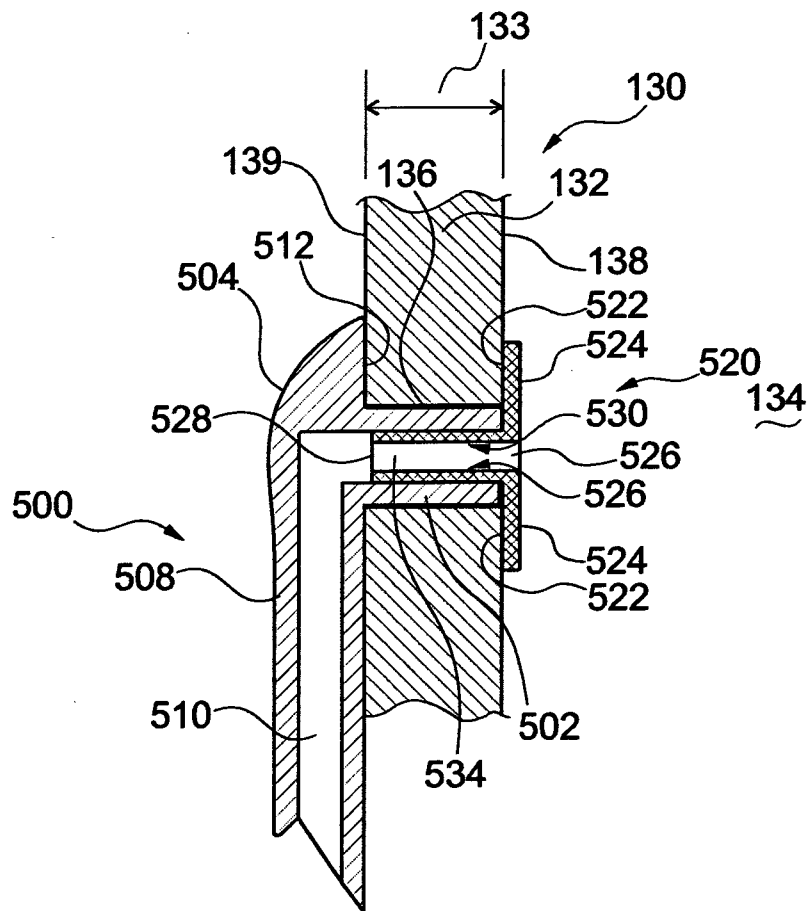
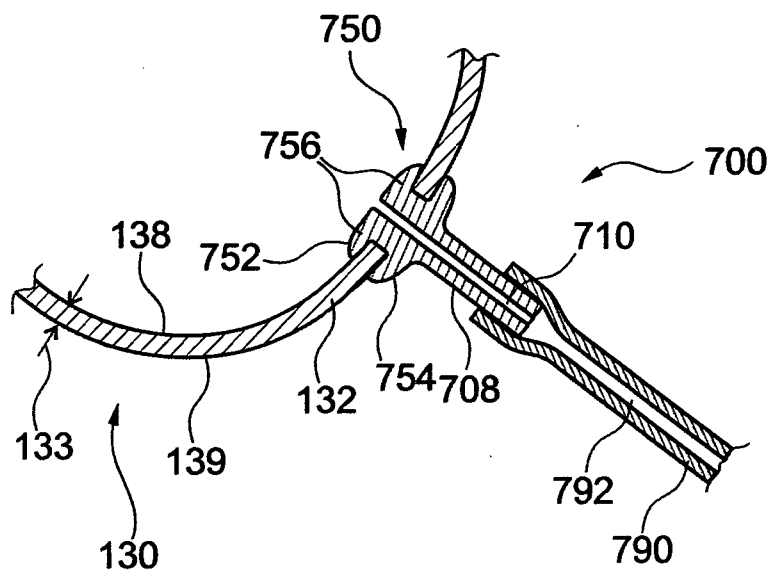
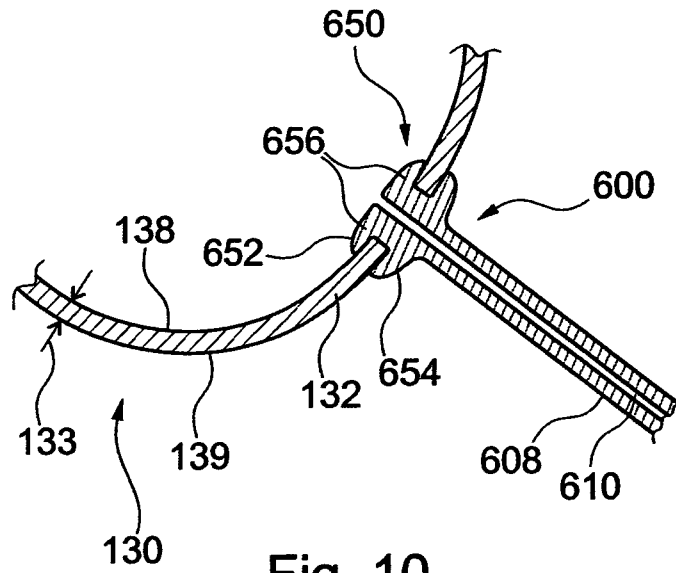


Fig. 9



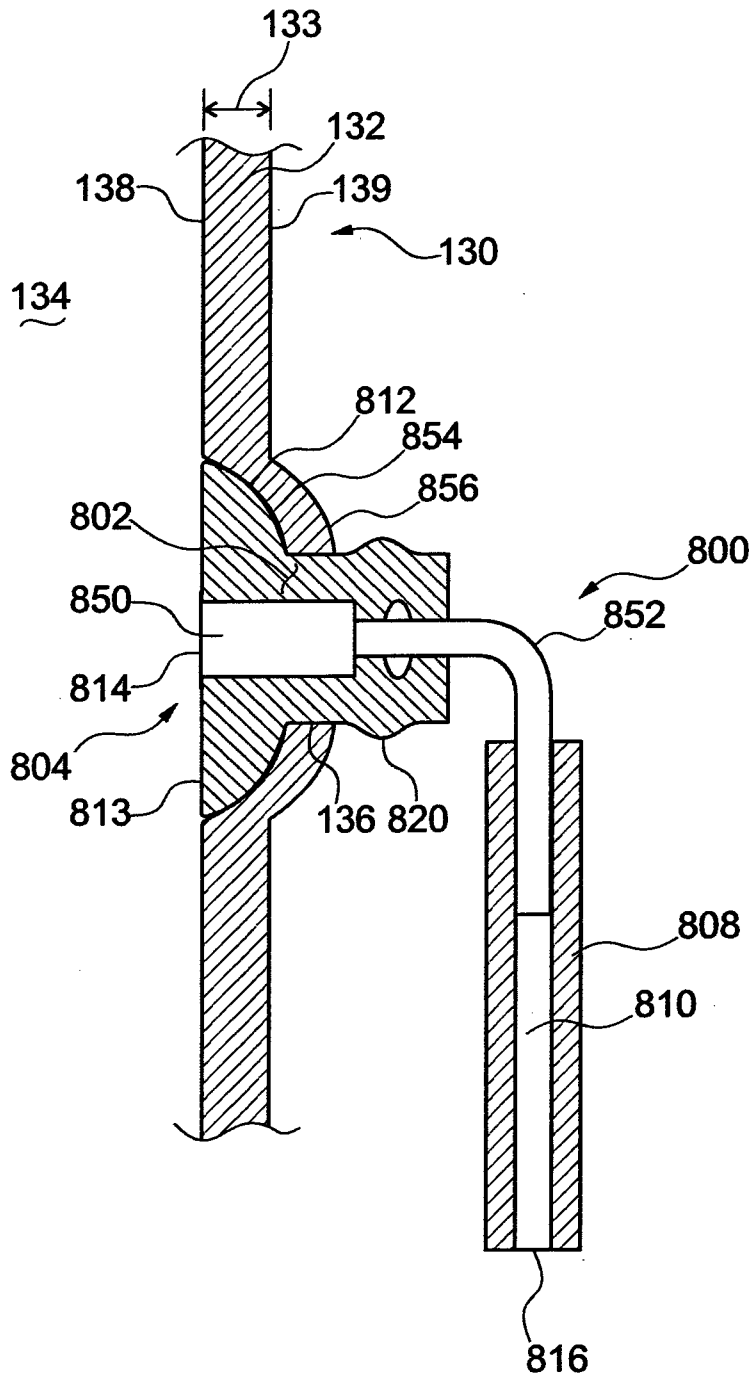


Fig. 12

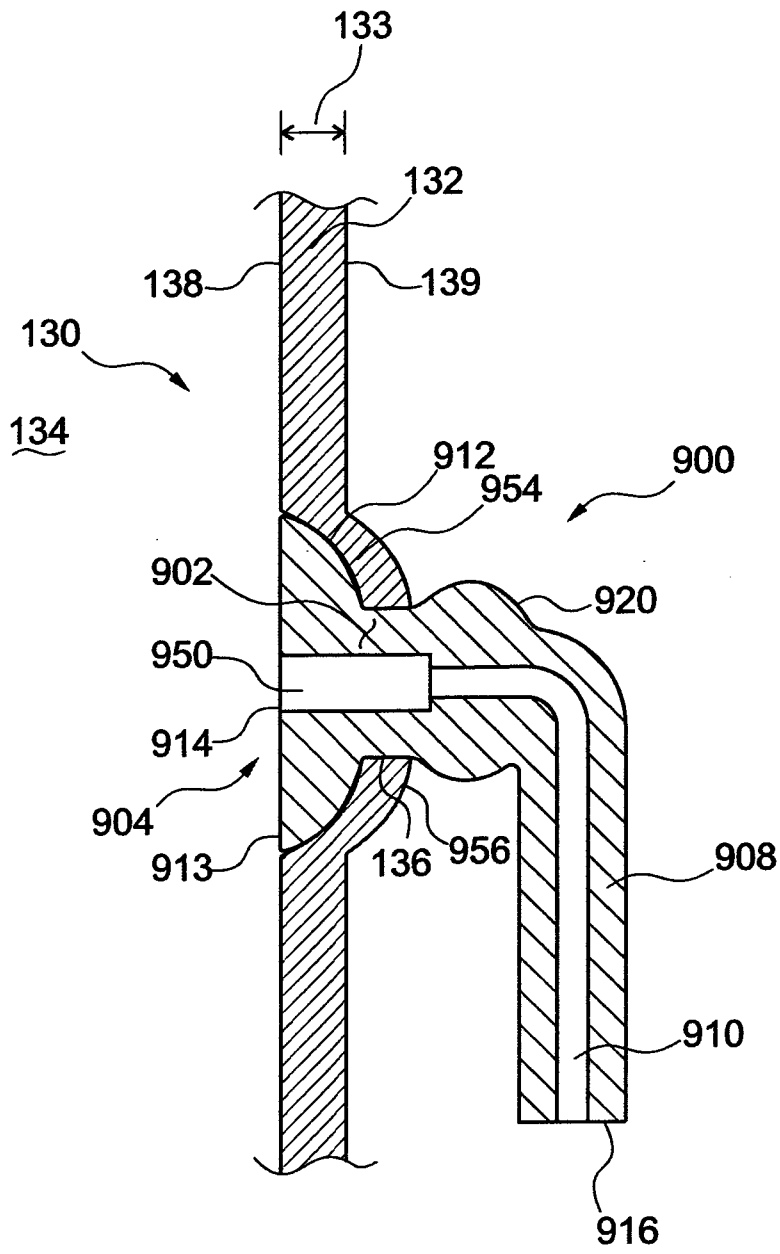


Fig. 13

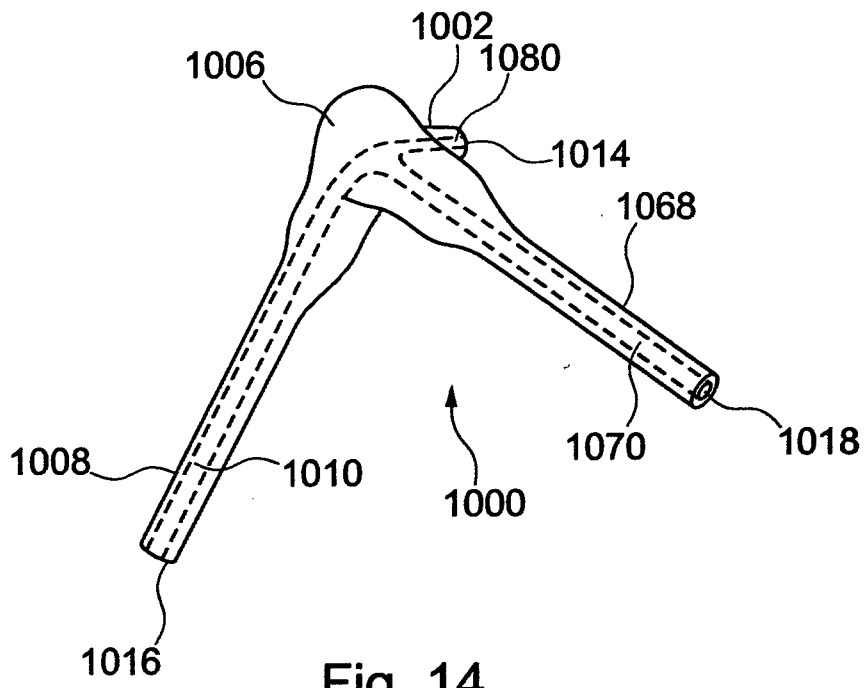


Fig. 14

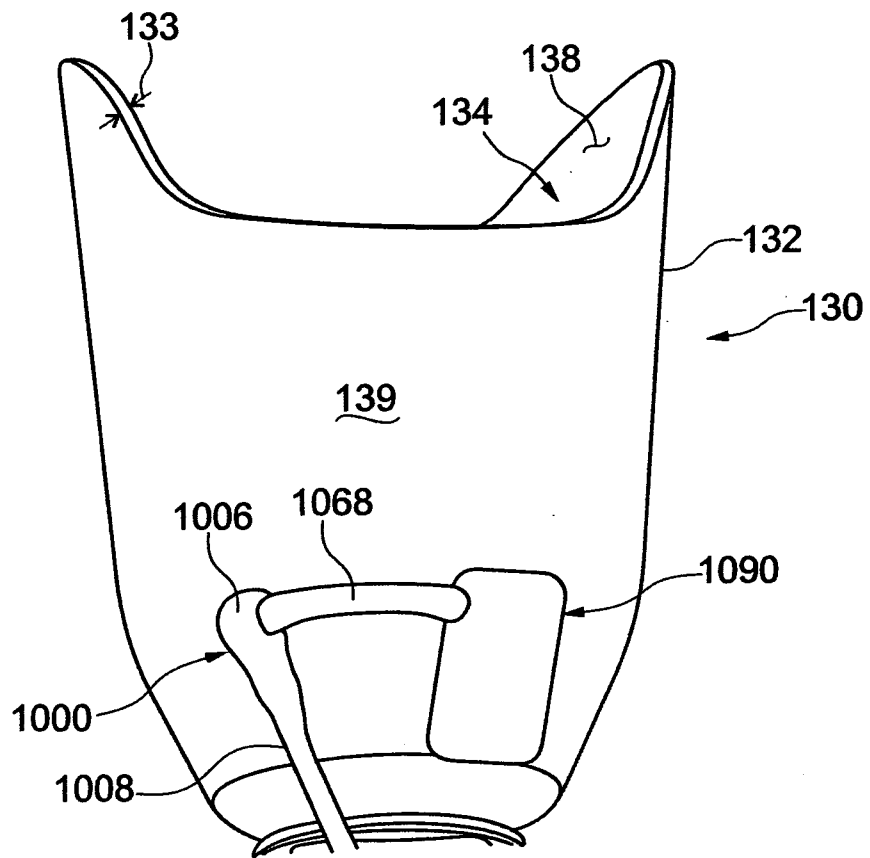


Fig. 15

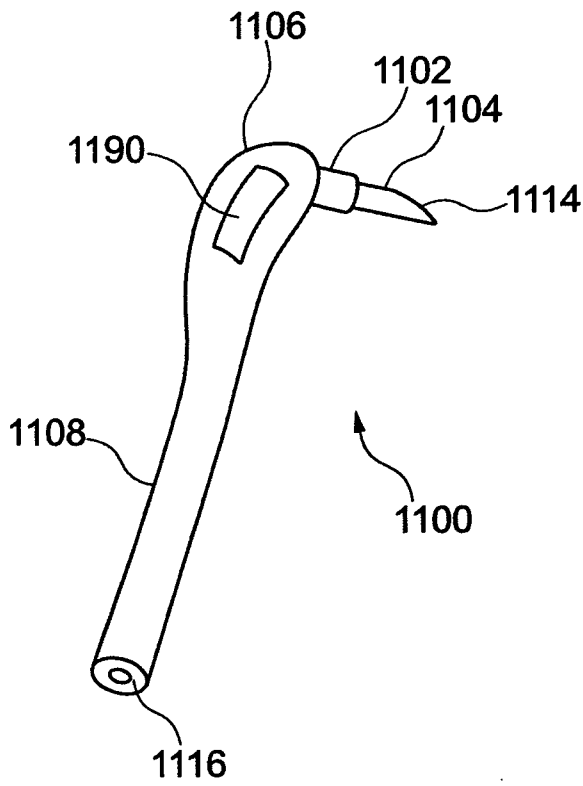


Fig. 16

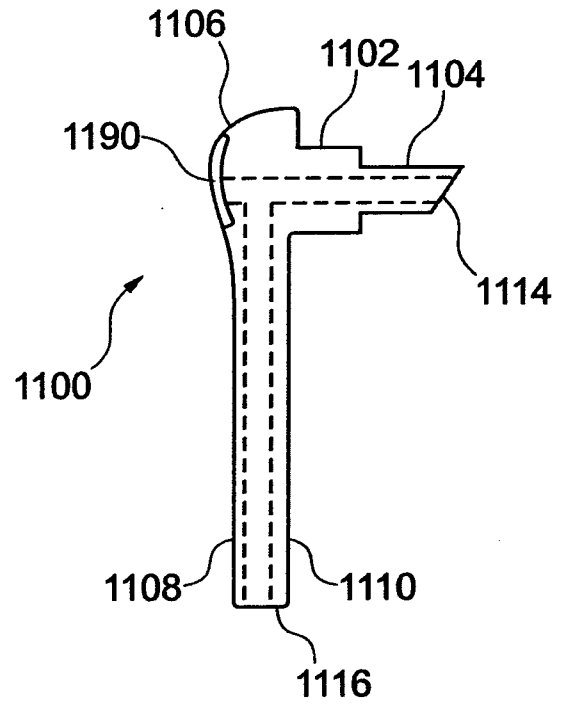


Fig. 17

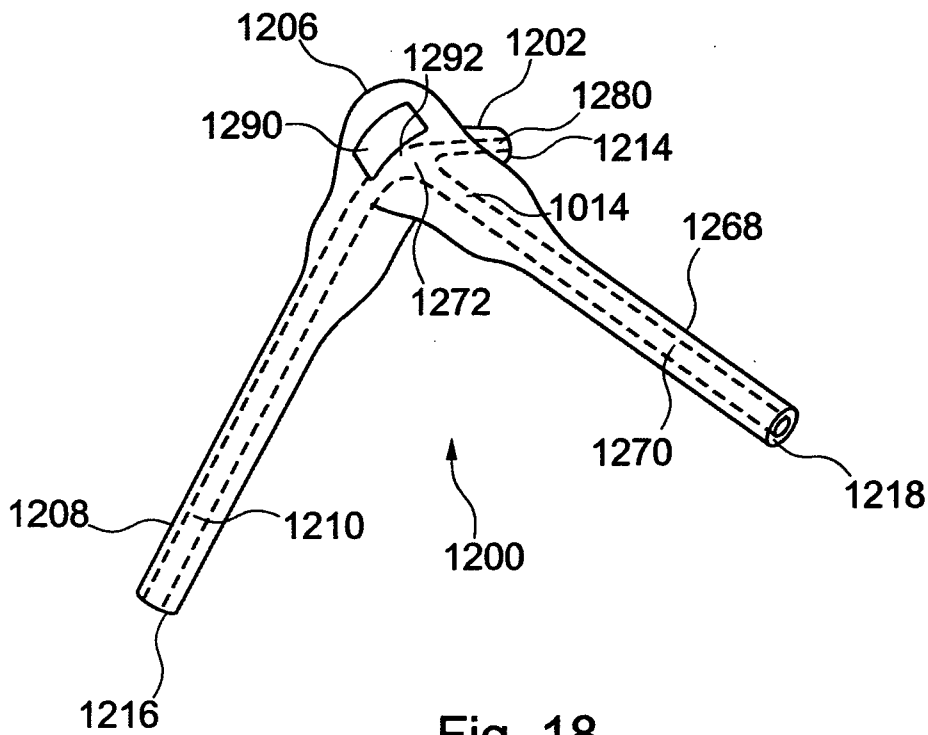


Fig. 18

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