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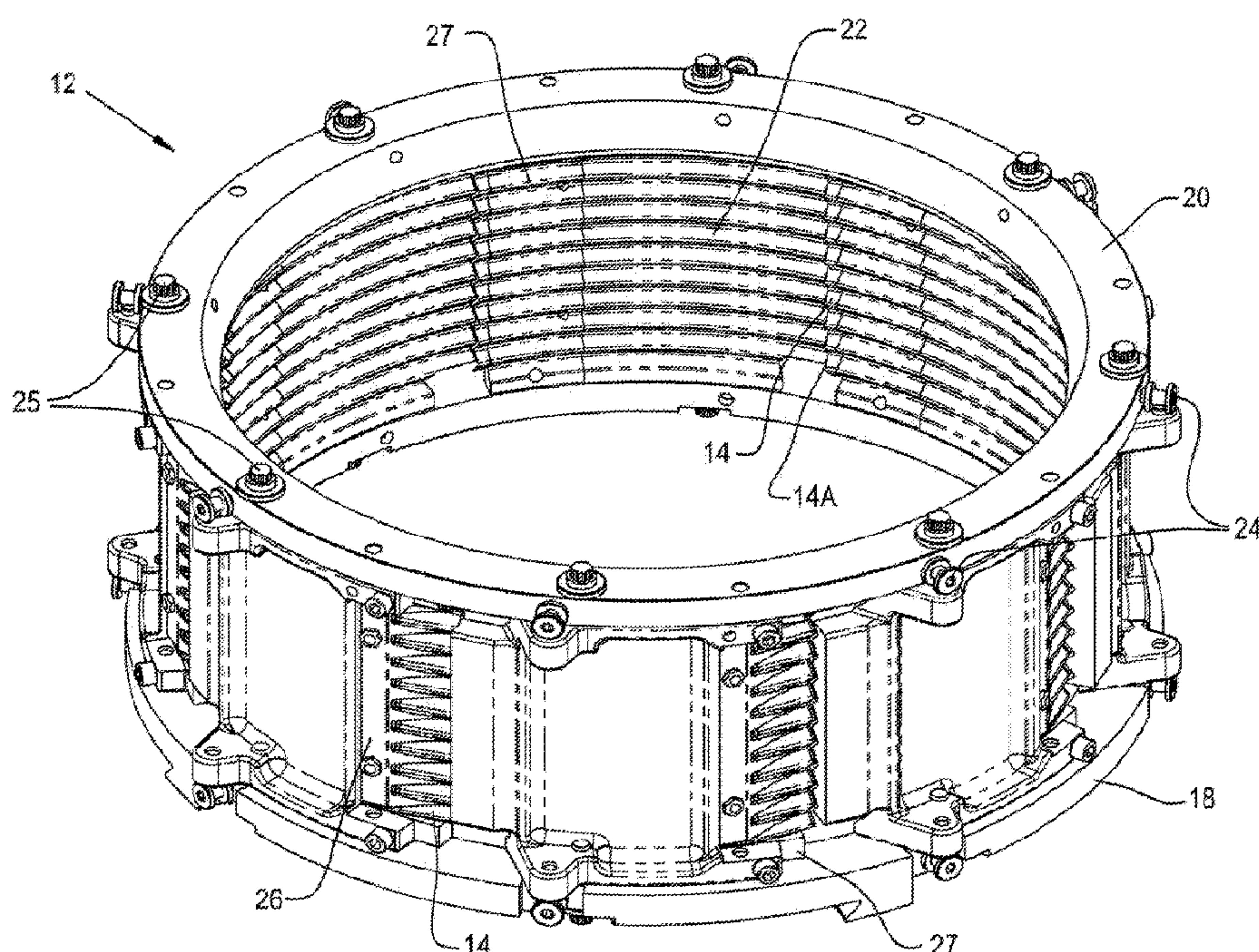
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(54) **Title: APPARATUSES FOR CUTTING FOOD PRODUCTS**



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

Apparatuses for cutting food product are provided having a cutting head (12, 112, 212). The cutting head (12, 112, 212) includes one or more knife assemblies. Each knife assembly includes a knife (14, 114, 214) extending toward the food product and is adapted to secure the knife (14, 114, 214) to the cutting head (12, 112, 212). The knife (14, 114, 214) has a corrugated shape to produce a food product slice with generally parallel cuts wherein the food product slice has a periodic shape and a large-amplitude cross-section.

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(54) Title: APPARATUSES FOR CUTTING FOOD PRODUCTS

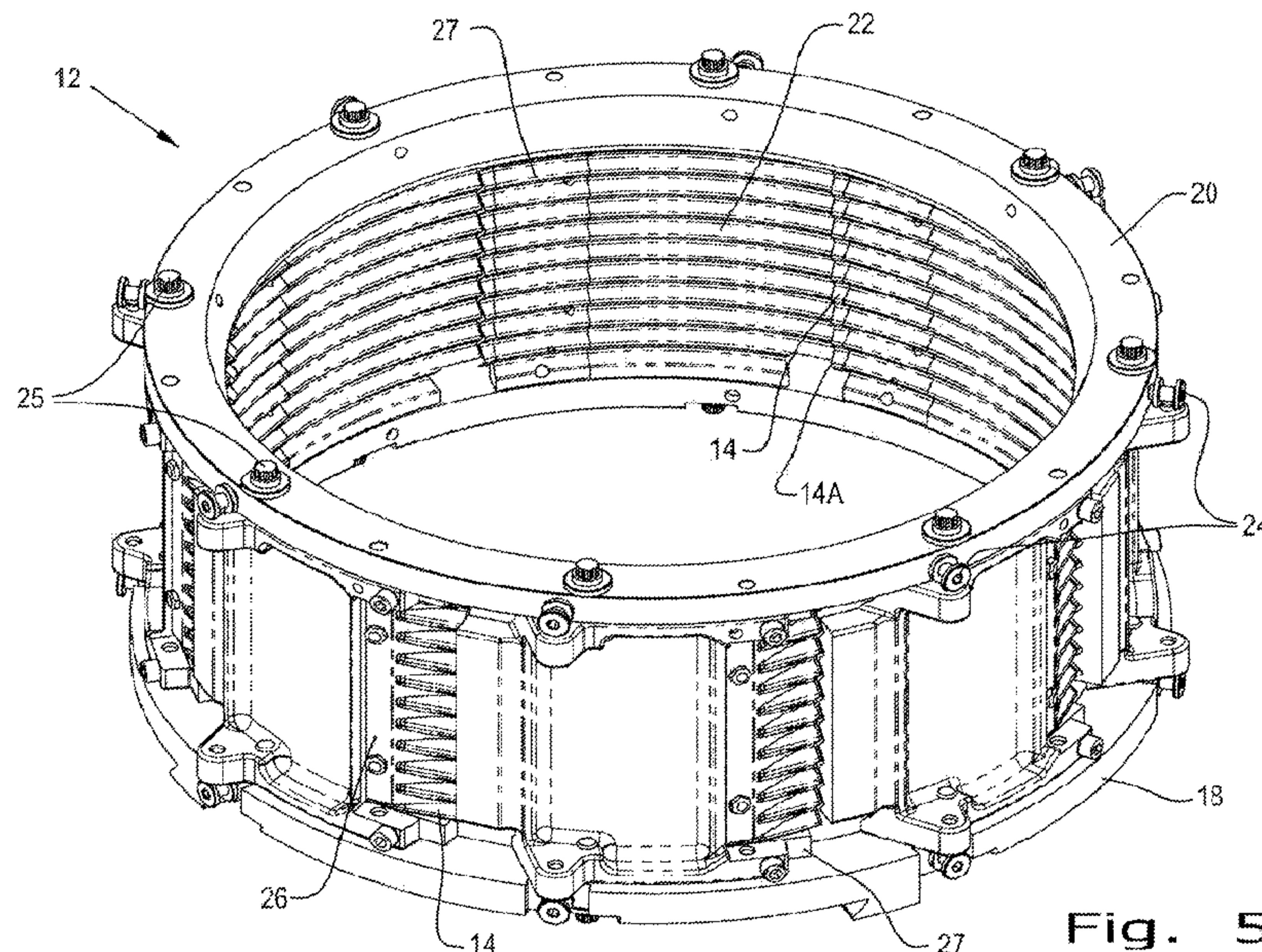


Fig. 5

(57) **Abstract:** Apparatuses for cutting food product are provided having a cutting head (12, 112, 212). The cutting head (12, 112, 212) includes one or more knife assemblies. Each knife assembly includes a knife (14, 114, 214) extending toward the food product and is adapted to secure the knife (14, 114, 214) to the cutting head (12, 112, 212). The knife (14, 114, 214) has a corrugated shape to produce a food product slice with generally parallel cuts wherein the food product slice has a periodic shape and a large-amplitude cross-section.

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APPARATUSES FOR CUTTING FOOD PRODUCTS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention generally relates to methods and equipment for cutting food products. More particularly, this invention relates to apparatuses suitable for cutting food product slices having relatively large amplitude cross-sections.

[0003] Various types of equipment are known for slicing, shredding and granulating food products, such as vegetable, fruit, dairy, and meat products. A widely used line of machines for this purpose is commercially available from Urschel Laboratories, Inc., under the name Urschel Model CC®, an embodiment of which is represented in FIG. 1. The Model CC® machine line provides versions of centrifugal-type slicers capable of producing uniform slices, strip cuts, shreds and granulations of a wide variety of food products at high production capacities.

[0004] FIGS. 2 and 3 are perspective views of an impeller 10 and cutting head 12, respectively, of types that can be used in the Model CC® machine. In operation, the impeller 10 is coaxially mounted within the cutting head 12, which is generally annular-shaped with cutting knives 14 mounted on its perimeter. The

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impeller 10 rotates within the cutting head 12, while the latter remains stationary. Each knife 14 projects radially inward toward the impeller 10 in a direction generally opposite the direction of rotation of the impeller 10, and defines a cutting edge at its radially innermost extremity. As represented in FIG. 4, the impeller 10 has generally radially-oriented paddles 16 with faces that engage and direct food products (e.g., potatoes) radially outward against the knives 14 of the cutting head 12 as the impeller 10 rotates.

[0005] FIG. 1 schematically represents the cutting head 12 mounted on a support ring 28 above a gear box 30. A housing 32 contains a shaft coupled to the gear box 30, through which the impeller 10 is driven within the cutting wheel 12. Further descriptions pertaining to the construction and operation of Model CC® machines are contained in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,694,824 and 6,968,765.

[0006] The cutting head 12 shown in FIG. 3 comprises a lower support ring 18, an upper mounting ring 20, and circumferentially-spaced support segments (shoes) 22. The knives 14 of the cutting head 12 are individually secured with clamping assemblies 26 to the shoes 22, which are secured with bolts 25 to the support and mounting rings 18 and 20. The shoes 22 are equipped with coaxial pivot pins (not shown) that engage holes in the support and/or mounting rings 18 and 20. By pivoting on its pins, the orientation of a shoe 22 can be adjusted to alter the radial location of the cutting edge of its knife 14 with respect to the axis of the cutting head 12, thereby controlling the thickness of the sliced food product. As an example, adjustment can be achieved with an adjusting screw and/or pin 24 located circumferentially behind the pivot pins. FIG. 3 further shows optional gate insert strips 23 mounted to each shoe 22, which the food product crosses prior to

encountering the knife 14 mounted to the succeeding shoe 22.

[0007] The knives 14 shown in FIG. 3 are depicted as having straight cutting edges for producing flat slices, though other shapes are also used to produce sliced and shredded products. For example, the knives 14 can have cutting edges that define a periodic pattern of peaks and valleys when viewed edgewise. The periodic pattern can be characterized by sharp peaks and valleys, or a more corrugated or sinusoidal shape characterized by more rounded peaks and valleys when viewed edgewise. If the peaks and valleys of each knife 14 are aligned with those of the preceding knife 14, slices are produced in which each peak on one surface of a slice corresponds to a valley on the opposite surface of the slice, such that the slices are substantially uniform in thickness but have a cross-sectional shape that is characterized by sharp peaks and valleys ("V-slices") or a more corrugated or sinusoidal shape (crinkle slices), collectively referred to herein as periodic shapes. Alternatively, shredded food product can be produced if each peak of each knife 14 is aligned with a valley of the preceding knife 14, and waffle/lattice-cut food product can be produced by intentionally making off-axis alignment cuts with a periodic-shaped knife, for example, by cross-cutting a food product at two different angles, typically ninety degrees apart. Whether a sliced, shredded or waffle-cut product is desired will depend on the intended use of the product.

[0008] Equipment currently available for cutting food product, such as those represented in FIGS. 1-4, are well suited for producing slices of a wide variety of food products, but have shown to be incapable of producing V-slices and crinkle slices having relatively large amplitude cross-sections without incurring unacceptable levels of through-slice cracking, or at minimum undesirable surface

cracking and surface roughness. As used herein, large amplitude refers to cross-sections with amplitudes of about 0.1 inches (about 2.5 mm) or greater.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0009] The present invention provides apparatuses suitable for cutting food product slices having relatively large amplitude cross-sections.

[0010] According to a first aspect of the invention, an apparatus for cutting food product includes an annular-shaped cutting head (12) and an impeller (10) coaxially mounted within the cutting head (12) for rotation about an axis of the cutting head (12) in a rotational direction relative to the cutting head (12). The impeller (10) includes one or more paddles (16) circumferentially spaced along a perimeter thereof for delivering food product radially outward toward the cutting head (12). The cutting head (12) includes one or more knife assemblies arranged in sets spaced around the circumference of the cutting head (12). Each knife assembly includes a knife (14) extending radially inward toward the impeller (10) in a direction opposite the rotational direction of the impeller (10) and is adapted to secure the knife (14) to the cutting edge (48). The knife (14) has a corrugated shape to produce a food product slice with generally parallel cuts wherein the food product slice has a periodic shape and a large-amplitude cross-section.

[0011] According to a second aspect of the invention, an apparatus for cutting food product includes a cylindrical-shaped cutting head (112) mounted for rotation about a horizontally disposed central axis of rotation. The cutting head (112) includes a circular-shaped front opening and a circumferential wall defined in part by at least one knife assembly having an axially extending knife (114) and means

for securing the knife (114) to the cutting head (112). The knife (114) has a corrugated shape to produce a food product slice with generally parallel cuts, wherein the food product slice has a periodic shape and a large-amplitude cross-section. The apparatus is adapted to rotate the cutting head (112) about the central axis of rotation. A stationary hollow elongate feed chute (140) is disposed through the front opening and includes an inlet opening and an outlet opening (138) for containing and consecutively feeding a supply of food products to the knife (114). The longitudinal axis of the feed chute (140) intersects the circumferential wall of the cutting head (112) approximately midway between the opposite ends of the wall and spaced rearwardly of the axis of rotation with respect to the direction of cutting head (112) rotation to dispose the outlet opening (138) of the feed chute (140) adjacent the lower circumferential wall portion of the cutting head (112) so that each food product is caused to engage the lower circumferential wall portion of the cutting head (112) for slicing by the knife (114) during rotation of the cutting head (112).

[0012] According to a third aspect of the invention, an apparatus for cutting food product includes a rotatable cutting wheel (212) wherein the food product advances towards the cutting wheel (212) in a feed direction. The cutting wheel (212) has a hub (242), a rim (244), and at least one knife assembly including a knife (214) and means for securing the knife (214) to the cutting wheel (212). The knife (214) has a leading edge facing a direction of rotation of the cutting wheel (212) and extending generally radially from the hub (242) to the rim (244). A cutting edge (248) on the leading edge of the knife (214) and a second edge on the trailing edge of the knife assembly with respect to the direction of cutting wheel (212) rotation form a juncture. The juncture extends substantially parallel to and spaced in the food product feed direction from the cutting edge (248) of an adjacent surface (214) located in a trailing direction so as to form an opening therebetween. The opening determining a thickness of the sliced food product engaging the knife (214) while the cutting wheel (212) is rotated about a central axis to advance the cutting edge (248) in a cutting plane. The knife (214) has a corrugated shape to produce a food product slice with generally parallel cuts wherein the food product slice has a periodic shape and a large-amplitude cross-section.

[0013] A technical effect of the invention is the ability to produce a food product slice having a large amplitude cross-section with minimal through-cracking and abrasion on the peaks of the slices.

[0014] Other aspects and advantages of this invention will be better appreciated from the following detailed description.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0015] FIG. 1 is a plan view representing a cutting apparatus known in the art.

[0016] FIG. 2 is a perspective view representing an impeller of a cutting apparatus known in the art.

[0017] FIG. 3 is a perspective view representing a cutting head of a cutting apparatus known in the art.

[0018] FIG. 4 is a top view representing paddle angles of the impeller of FIG. 2.

[0019] FIG. 5 is a perspective view representing a cutting head in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0020] FIGS. 6 and 7 are side and cross-sectional views, respectively, of a quick clamping assembly in accordance with an aspect of the invention.

[0021] FIG. 8 is a perspective view representing a knife assembly in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0022] FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional view of a chip having a periodic shape and a large-amplitude cross-section in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0023] FIG. 10 is a perspective view representing a knife assembly with a relieved shoe in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0024] FIGS. 11a-e are plan views representing various knife assembly

configurations in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0025] FIG. 12 is a plan view representing profiles of knives with biased bevels in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0026] FIGS. 13a-c schematically represent interference zones of biased knives in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0027] FIG. 14 is cross-sectional and top views representing an impeller with an impact absorbing material on the side of the impeller that impacts food product in accordance with an aspect of this invention.

[0028] FIG. 15 is a side view representing a profile of three types of knife assemblies in accordance with an aspect of this invention.

[0029] FIG. 16 is a cross-sectional view showing phase misalignment in a chip.

[0030] FIG. 17 is a side view representing a cutting apparatus, with partial cutaways to expose a cutting head within the cutting apparatus in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0031] FIG. 18 is a side view of the cutting apparatus of FIG. 17, with partial cutaways to expose the cutting head within the cutting apparatus.

[0032] FIG. 19 is a side view representing a cutting apparatus, with partial cutaways to expose a cutting head within the cutting apparatus in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0033] FIGS. 20-21 are perspective views representing a cutting wheel in accordance with an aspect this invention.

[0034] FIGS. 22-23 are perspective views representing a knife assembly for a cutting wheel in accordance with an aspect this invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0035] The present invention provides cutting apparatuses capable of producing a variety of food products, including chips from potatoes, and to the resulting sliced food product produced with the apparatus. Although the invention will be described herein as cutting food product, it is foreseeable that the cutting apparatuses may be used for cutting other materials and therefore the scope of the invention should not be limited to food products. The cutting apparatuses are preferably adapted to cut food products into slices with generally parallel cuts resulting in food product slices having cross-sections with an amplitude of at least 0.1 inches (about 2.5 mm) or greater. Preferably, the cutting apparatuses are adapted to produce food product slices having cross-sections with a large amplitude of about 0.100 to 0.350 inch (about 2.5 to 9 mm), more preferably of about 0.12 to 0.275 inch (about 3 to 7 mm), and most preferably of about 0.15 to 0.225 inch (about 3.8 to 5.7 mm).

[0036] For convenience, consistent reference numbers are used in reference to

a first embodiment of the invention, including but not limited to representations in FIGS. 5, 8, 11e, 12, and 13c, to denote the same or functionally equivalent elements as described in FIGS. 1-4. FIGS. 17-23 depict additional embodiments of the invention in which consistent reference numbers are used to identify the same or functionally equivalent elements, but with a numerical prefix (1, 2, or 3, etc.) added to distinguish the particular embodiment from the first embodiment.

[0037] The cutting apparatus of the first embodiment is represented in FIG. 5 as comprising an annular-shaped cutting head 12. The cutting head 12 is configured for operation with an impeller 10, such as of the types represented in FIGS. 2 and 4, and can be used in various types of machines including that represented in FIG. 1. Regardless of its particular configuration, the impeller 10 is coaxially mounted within the cutting head 12 for rotation about an axis of the cutting head 12 in a rotational direction relative to the cutting head 12. Furthermore, the impeller 10 comprises at least one paddle 16 and preferably multiple paddles 16 circumferentially spaced along a perimeter thereof for delivering food product radially outward toward the cutting head 12. The cutting head 12 comprises at least one and preferably multiple knife assemblies arranged in sets spaced around the circumference of the cutting head 12. Each knife assembly includes a knife 14 and means for securing the knife 14 to the cutting head 12. In the embodiment shown in FIG. 5, the securing means comprises a shoe 22, a knife holder 27 mounted to the shoe 22, and a clamp 26 that secures the knife 14 to the knife holder 27. Though shown as discrete components, the knife 14 and holder 27 or the shoe 22 and holder 27 could be fabricated as an integral unitary piece. Although the securing means of the knife assembly is represented as comprising a shoe 22, knife holder 27, and clamp 26, it is foreseeable that the knife 14 could be secured by other means such as, but not limited to, fasteners or bolts. The knife

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14 is mounted to extend radially inward toward the impeller 10 and has a cutting edge 48 that terminates at a knife tip 14a projecting toward the impeller 10.

[0038] Alternatively or in addition, the clamp 26 may be a quick clamping device that allows for relatively quick removal of the knife assembly from the cutting head 12, for example, as disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 7,658,133, whose subject matter relating to a quick clamping device. An exemplary quick clamping device is represented in FIGS. 6 and 7. As represented, the knife 14 is secured to the knife assembly by a radially outer knife holder 27a and a radially inner knife holder 27b. In this particular example, the knife holder 27b comprises an insert 58 that serves to protect the edge of the knife holder 27b from debris. A clamping rod 60 is secured to the radially inner holder 27b with a fastener 62. As evident from FIGS. 6 and 7, the lever 64 has forced one end of the radially outer holder 27a against the clamping rod 78, which in turn forces the opposite end of the radially outer holder 27a into engagement with the knife 14, forcing the knife 14 against the radially inner holder 27b. The knife 14 can be released by rotating the lever 64 clockwise (as viewed in FIG. 7), such that a flat 66 on the lever 64 faces the radially outer holder 27a, releasing the radially outer holder 27a from its engagement with the clamping rod 60.

[0039] According to a first aspect of the invention, the knives 14 are corrugated as represented in FIG. 8 to produce a food product slice having a periodic shape and a large-amplitude cross-section of the type shown in FIG. 9. FIG. 9 also references variables that help to define the shape of the food product slice, including a definition of "amplitude" as based on a distance "A" between an adjacent peak and valley of the product. The cross-section represented in FIG. 9 is referred to herein as a parallel cut in the sense that the product has a generally

uniform web thickness, as opposed to the variable and discontinuous thickness of a waffle/lattice cut. Whereas pitch, included angle, web thickness, outside (peak) radius, and inside (valley) radius are all of interest to producing potato chips and a variety of other food products having consumer appeal, the invention is particularly concerned with chips having cross-sections with large amplitudes of about 0.100 inch (about 2.5 mm) and greater.

[0040] According to another aspect of the invention, FIG. 8 shows the clamp 26 used to secure the knife 14 to the knife holder 27 as having fingers 50 that engage the valleys defined by the corrugated shape of the knife 14. Due to the large amplitude of the slices (chips) being sought, a conventional clamp 26 of the types often used with Model CC® machines, represented in FIG. 3, likely could not be used for manufacturing and material reasons. Consequently, the toothed clamp 26 seen in FIGS. 5 and 8 were manufactured to secure each knife 14 to its knife holder 27. Various embodiments of the clamp 26 were investigated. For example, in one embodiment, the peaks of the knife 14 are not contacted by the clamp 26. In an additional embodiment, the bend line of the clamp 26 was positioned behind the base of the fingers 50 to maintain the stiffness of the clamp 26. However, this embodiment resulted in a relatively steep outer surface of the clamp 26 that slices were required to surmount after slicing, which had the unintended consequence of producing through-slice cracks.

[0041] For reasons discussed in reference to FIGS. 11a through 11e, the fingers 50 of the clamp 26 shown in FIG. 8 are beveled on the surface of the clamp 26 facing the impeller 10. The clamp 26 is also shown as having more than two fasteners (three in FIG. 8) to achieve a more uniform clamping pressure across the length of the knife 14. As shown in FIG. 5, the surface of each shoe 22 and knife

holder 27 facing the impeller 10 has a corrugated shape corresponding to the corrugated shape of its knife 14, which is intended to provide continuous and accurate alignment of individual food products throughout the slicing thereof by the knives 14. While FIG. 5 represents the entirety of these surfaces as continuously and uniformly corrugated, it is foreseeable that only portions immediately adjacent the knife assemblies might be corrugated. Furthermore, the corrugated shapes of the shoes 22 and knife holders 27 can be relieved in key areas (shaped differently than the knife geometry) to minimize surface contact (and the proportional surface friction) between the unsliced food product and the cutting head 12 to minimize the amount of additional energy required to rotate the impeller 10 while pushing food product. Such an effect is represented in FIG. 10, which shows a sectional view of a shoe 22, knife holder 27, and food product slice during the slicing operation. Grooves defined by the corrugation shape in the shoe surface 34 are not fully complementary to the cross-sectional shape of the slice as a result of the shoe surface 34 having localized reliefs or recesses 38 located at the peaks and valleys of the slice as well as midway therebetween.

[0042] According to a preferred aspect of the invention, the knife holders 27 comprise means for accurately aligning their corrugated shapes with the corrugated shapes of their respective shoes 22, preferably to achieve a linear misalignment of less than 0.004 inch (about 0.1 mm), more preferably less than 0.001 inch (about 0.025 mm), and most preferably less than 0.0005 inch (about 0.013 mm). In the particular embodiment represented in FIG. 8, the alignment means is shown as a pin hole 52 that can be used to align the knife holder 27 to its shoe 22 (not shown in FIG. 8), though other means for accurately aligning the knife holder corrugations with the corrugations in the shoe 22 are also foreseeable and within the scope of the invention.

[0043] According to yet another aspect of the invention, the knife holders 27, knives 14, and knife clamps 26 are adjusted to have a relatively low rake-off angle to reduce the probability of slice damage. As used herein, the term “rake-off angle” is measured as the angle that a slice has to deviate relative to a tangent line that begins at the intersection of the radial path of the product sliding surface of the leading shoe 22 and the knife edge. The line is then tangent to the radial product sliding surface of the leading shoe 22. This angle of deviation is a function of both the hardware and the gap setting (“ d_{gap} ”) at which the entire knife holder 27, knife 14, and shoe assembly is positioned. FIGS. 11a through 11e represent a series of iterations that were investigated, during which knife angles, rake-off angle, knife extension, and clamp set-back distance were explored. (The meanings of these terms are identified in FIGS. 11a through 11e). The investigation explored knife angles (“ θ_h ”) within the knife holder 27 of about 11 degrees to about 15 degrees (corresponding to knife angles (“ θ_t ”) relative to the tangent line (“ L_{shoe} ”) of about 4 degrees to about 8 degrees), rake-off angles (“ θ_r ”) with respect to the tangent (“ L_{shoe} ”) of about 17 degrees to about 27 degrees, radial knife extensions (“ d_{pos} ”) of about 0.0002 inch to 0.011 inch, and clamp set-back distances (“ d_{set} ”) of about 0.150 inch to 0.330 inch. For example, one approach was to reduce the knife angle θ_h (within the holder) from a conventional angle of about fifteen degrees to as low as 11.25 degrees. In theory, as the rake-off angle θ_r approaches zero, the resultant stress in the sliced product should be reduced and the instances of slice cracking will be decreased and the slice quality should increase. However, in order to maintain the same relative radial knife extension d_{pos} , defined as a distance between the cutting edge 48 of the knife 14 and a line (“ L_{holder} ”) tangent to an inside radius of the trailing knife holder 27, and gap setting d_{gap} at these extremely low angle configurations, it was required to make extremely long lateral

knife extensions (" d_{ext} ") of about 0.1 to about 0.2 inch. Surprisingly, the compromises in knife position that these minimum knife angle configurations required did not result in the expected improvements in slice quality metrics. One embodiment combined a knife angle θ_h within the holder of about 12.5 degrees (knife angle θ_t relative to the tangent of about 4.5 degrees), a rake-off angle θ_r of about 17 degrees, a radial knife extension d_{pos} of about 0.011 inch and a clamp set-back d_{set} of about 0.200 inch.

[0044] Several different clamps 26 with different geometries were also evaluated in an effort to lower the rake-off angle θ_r and the probability that slice cracking would occur. Some of these evaluations are represented in FIGS. 11a through 11e, which include different (radially outward and inward) clamp bevels. FIG. 11a represents a prior art configuration including a knife 14 having a corrugated shape for making shaped cuts, a knife angle θ_h within the knife holder 27 of about 15 degrees, a radial knife extension d_{pos} of about 0.070 inch, a clamp set back d_{set} of about 0.260 inch, and a rake-off angle θ_r of about 21 degrees. FIG. 11b represents an experimental configuration in which the knife angle θ_h within the knife holder 27 was about 15 degrees, a radial knife extension d_{pos} of about 0.003 inch, a clamp set back d_{set} of about 0.160 inch, and the rake-off angle θ_r is about 27 degrees. Solutions to two immediate issues needed to be resolved: slice cracking and abrasion on the peaks of slices when attempting to produce slices having large amplitudes of 0.100 inch (about 2.5 mm) or greater. FIGS. 11c and 11d represent subsequent steps in the investigation. In FIG. 11c, the fingers 50 of the clamp 26 were beveled on their surfaces facing away from the impeller 10 to reduce the instances of abrasion on the peaks of the slice which contact the clamp 26. The bevel reduced the knife angle θ_h , but resulted in a locally greater rake-off angle θ_r that increased slice cracking. The rake-off angle θ_r was then

decreased further by moving the bevel to the radially inward side of the clamp 26 facing the impeller 10 (FIG. 11d), thereby maintaining a smooth transition for slices. In addition, the bend angle was reduced and the finger lengths shortened. In order to address abrasion on the peaks which contact the inner sliding surface of the shoe 22, knife extension values were explored using equipment represented by FIG. 11d from about 0.135 inch to about 0.570 inch. This particular abrasion was determined to be reduced with larger radial knife extensions d_{pos} . FIG. 11e represents what is believed to be an embodiment that retains the inward bevel of the clamp 26, but further includes a thicker clamp 26 and extended knife position. Based on these investigations it was concluded that, depending on the configuration of the knife assembly used, a sufficiently low rake-off angle θ_r is considered to be less than 23 degrees, more preferably less than 20 degrees, and most preferably about 17 degrees.

[0045] Furthermore, the knife 14 of FIG. 11e has a ground bevel that is biased to one side, preferably facing away from the impeller 10, to improve the slice quality. As used herein, a “biased bevel” refers to a knife edge that is not symmetrical, but instead has different bevels on its opposite sides in terms of angle and/or length, for example, as exemplified by the different biased bevels represented in FIG. 12. The knife tip geometries represented in FIG. 12 were investigated during development. As represented, knives with double (centered) bevels and biased (single or biased) bevels were evaluated, as were knives with different blade widths. The fundamental difference between the biased bevel knives in FIG. 12 is the angle of the primary (wider) bevel 54. Initial evaluations were conducted following prior art best practices with an 8.5 degree inward biased bevel (FIG. 13b), meaning that the primary bevel 54 faces toward the center of the impeller 10 at different knife inclinations. Surprisingly, the performance with this

orientation was poorer than expected. Following exhaustive analysis of the geometry, the primary bevel 54 of the knife 14 was concluded to interfere with the path of the potato after slicing. The biased bevel knife 14 was then inverted (outward biased bevel in FIG. 13c) to minimize any interference with the unsliced portion of the potato. Data from subsequent testing validated this approach, such that an outward biased bevel with the primary bevel 54 facing away from the center of the impeller 10 delivered improved slice thickness uniformity. Based on the results of the investigation, primary bevels 54 of about 7 to 10 degrees are believed to be acceptable. One embodiment incorporates an 8.5 degree biased bevel with the primary bevel 54 facing away from the impeller 10.

[0046] The knives 14 were initially positioned at a "standard" position, in which the tips 14a of the knives 14 were positioned according to prior art practice a distance of about 0.003 inch (about 75 micrometers) radially inward from the nominal inner radius of its shoe 22, which meant different lateral knife positions for each different knife angle within the knife holder 27. During testing, lateral positions of the knife tips 14a were varied. In one embodiment, the knife tip 14a was located at a lateral distance of 0.195 inch (4.95mm) and a radial distance of 0.011 inch (0.28mm), resulting in the configuration shown in FIG. 11e.

[0047] According to a preferred aspect of the invention, an outward position of the knife bevel relative to the impeller 10 has been shown to cause less interference with food products (e.g., potatoes) and the resulting chips during slicing. FIGS. 13a, 13b and 13c help to illustrate the degree of interference for three different knife bevel configurations. The views of FIGS. 13a, 13b and 13c are from the frame of reference of a potato immediately prior to encountering the knife edge. The "interference" presented by the bevel on the knife edge is shown

on FIGS. 13a through 13c in the respective connected detail views B, D, and F. As used herein, interference refers to the extent to which any portion of the knife 14 intrudes on the radial path of the potato during slicing as a result of the portion protruding farther toward the impeller 10 than the knife tip 14a of the knife 14. Such a protruding portion, referred to herein as the radially innermost local extremity 14b of the knife 14, is believed to cause the slice to have a decreasing taper, sometimes to zero thickness. As discussed below, protrusion of the radially innermost local extremity 14b of the knife 14 is preferably, and in some cases must be, limited to less than 0.004 inch (about 0.1 mm) to avoid excessive slice taper.

[0048] As seen by a comparison of FIGS. 13a, 13b, and 13c, a double bevel shown in FIG. 13a represents a particular degree of interference as evidenced by a dimension ("d_i") between the knife tip 14a and the radially innermost local extremity 14B of the knife 14. FIG. 13b shows an inward biased bevel configuration (bevel facing the impeller 10) that presents greater interference than that of FIG. 13a, whereas FIG. 13c shows an outward biased bevel configuration (bevel facing away from the impeller 10) that presents much less interference than that of FIG. 13a. During investigations pertaining the issue of interference, knives with interferences of less than 0.004 inch (about 0.1 mm), more preferably less than less than 0.003 inch (about 0.08 mm) and most preferably less than 0.001 inch (about 0.025 mm) achieved with biased bevels having a grind angle of between about 7 and 11 degrees were determined to provide improved slice quality, whereas interferences exceeding 0.004 inch resulted in unacceptable slice quality.

[0049] During investigations leading to the present invention, it was noticed that

the food product was sustaining flesh impact damage resulting from contact with the rotating impeller paddles 16. This food product damage leads to finished product quality reductions, additional waste generation, and additional starch release, all negative consequences. During development, positive paddle angles of between 5 to 35 degrees were determined to reduce damage to the food product. Therefore, according to another aspect of the invention, the impeller paddles 16 are preferably inclined at a positive angle (the terms “positive” and “negative” in relation to paddle inclination are defined in FIG. 4), ranging from as little as 5 degrees to about 35 degrees to the radials of the impeller 10. One embodiment positions the paddle angle at about 13.5 degrees, though it is foreseeable that other paddle angles could have different benefits. More preferably, the paddles are at a positive angle of about 8 to 20 degrees, and more preferably about 12 to 15 degrees. The impeller paddles 16 may be equipped with means for absorbing impacts, for example, a gel-facing or an impact absorbing material 56 such as a compressible hose or other material that deforms under impact as represented in FIG. 14, to gently catch and hold food products during slicing. The impact absorbing material or coating may cover the entire impeller paddle 16 of a portion thereof. Alternatively, the food products could be radially accelerated until their radial velocity more closely matches the radial velocity of the impeller paddles 16 to reduce the inevitable product damage resulting from near-stationary food product being impacted by the rotating impeller paddles 16.

[0050] Based on these same investigations, it was also identified that slices with inconsistent slice thickness came in groups, indicating that thickness inconsistency was partially related to impeller 10 contact with the product. It was determined that a solid planar impeller paddle surface, when pushing against a

asymmetric product, where contact is not in line with the product's center of mass, can generate a torque on the product. This resultant torque can disturb the position of the product during the slicing process resulting in inconsistent slice thickness as the slice progresses. In one embodiment, the impeller 10 can be configured with deformable paddle surfaces which can conform to the shape of the product, thus spreading out the forces associated with the contact surface, which results in lower torque generation and more uniform slice thickness.

[0051] During the development of the present invention, shoes 22 with and without gate insert strips 23 were also investigated (FIG. 15). A gate insert strip 23 is the last part of a slicing shoe 22 contacted by the food product prior to engaging the knife 14 mounted on the immediately trailing shoe 22. As was described in reference to FIGS. 1 through 4, the gate insert strip 23 at the end of a shoe 22 is typically adjustable for slice thickness. A shoe 22 comprising the gate insert strips often has the capability to "true up" the end of the shoe 22 to maintain slice quality after wearing. In contrast, a shoe 22 without the gate insert strips 23 extends all the way to the tip 14a of the knife 14. Often for potato slicing, shoes 22 have flat gates to minimize damage to the knife 14 and knife holder 27 from rocks, sand, and other debris. However, during testing to produce potato chips having large-amplitude corrugations of the type represented in FIG. 9, it was determined that phase misalignment occurred in consecutive slices produced with shoes 22 having flat gates. Phase alignment is critical when slicing a dehydrated product, for example, fried or baked potato chips, because the thin-thick cross section of a misaligned phase (FIG. 16) results in over- and under-cooking of a single chip with corresponding results in burnt flavor, breakage, and/or spoilage.

[0052] In response, corrugated gate insert strips 23 were evaluated for the

purpose of maintaining alignment of potatoes during slicing. However, it was found that similar misalignment occurred in the slices. The gate insert strips 23 were examined and their corrugations were found to be aligned with the corrugations on the interior of the shoes 22, but not with sufficient accuracy to avoid slice corrugation misalignment. Attempts to precisely align the corrugations of the gate insert strips 23 with the corrugations of the shoes 22 proved to be successful when gate insert strips 23 were accurately aligned using alignment means such as with mating pins and pin holes 52 (FIG. 8). Shoes 22 without gate insert strips 23 were also evaluated having corrugations that extend all the way to the trailing edge of the shoe 22 as shown in FIG. 5. The corrugated shoes 22 without gate insert strips 23 also provided greatly improved alignment of potatoes prior to slicing, and at lower manufacturing cost than pin holes 52.

[0053] Once it was determined that alignment of the entire shoe 22, including the gate insert strip 23, was effective for maintaining the phase alignment of slices, it was concluded that accurately aligned corrugations in the interior surface of the knife holders 27 would also promote and maintain alignment of the food product with the shoes 22 and knives 14. This role can be fulfilled with pin holes 52 described in reference to FIG. 8 above. By ensuring manufacturing tolerances of the pin holes 52 and complementary pins (not shown) provided on the shoes 22, accurate alignment between each knife holder 27 and its shoe 22 can be achieved.

[0054] According to a second embodiment, the invention is also applicable to a cutting apparatus configured as shown in FIG. 17 as having a cutting head 112 mounted upright and rotated about a horizontally disposed central axis, wherein food product is feed through an opening on a side of the cutting head 112. For example, in FIG. 17 the cutting apparatus is represented as comprising a housing

132, a stationary hollow elongate feed chute 140, and a cylindrical-shaped rotary cutting head 112. The feed chute 140 extends along a longitudinal axis through the housing 132 and a circular-shaped front opening of the cutter head 112. A plurality of food products stacked within the feed chute 140 in a linear array are caused to consecutively be fed through an outlet opening 138 of the feed chute 140 and engage a circumferential wall defined in part by at least one knife assembly of the cutting head 112 approximately midway between the opposite ends of the wall and spaced rearwardly of the axis of rotation with respect to the direction of cutting head rotation to dispose the outlet opening 138 of the feed chute 140 adjacent the lower circumferential wall portion of the cutting head 112 so that each food product is caused to engage the lower circumferential wall portion of the cutting head 112 for slicing by the knife 114 during rotation of the cutting head 112.

[0055] With reference to FIG. 18, the cutting head 112 is defined by one or more knife assemblies, wherein each knife assembly comprises a knife 114 at its leading end and a gauge plate 123 at its trailing end with respect to the direction of rotation of cutting head 112 as indicated by an arrow, and a shoe 122 securing the knife 114 and gate insert strips 123 are secured to the cutting head 112 with a shoe 122. The knives 114 extend axially of the cutting head 112 and are disposed parallel to each other and to an axis of rotation R. As the food products are fed against the cutting head 112, they are caused to be brought into the path of the knives 114 during rotation of the cutting head 112, whereby each knife 114 is caused to cut through the food product and remove a slice therefrom. The thickness of a slice is predetermined by adjusting the position of the gate insert strips 123 relative to the cutting edge 148 of the knife 114. Though multiple knives 114 are shown for the cutting head 112, it is foreseeable that it may be

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desirable to utilize a lesser number of knives 114 or even only a single knife 114. Preferably, the cutting head 112 and knife assemblies are similar to the cutting head 112 and knife assemblies represented in FIGS. 5, 8, 11e, 12, and 13c. For example, the knives 114 have a corrugated shape to produce a food product slice with generally parallel cuts to yield food product slices having large-amplitude cross-sections. However, it is foreseeable that adjustments may be necessary to accommodate the vertical positioning of the cutting head 112. Further details regarding the general arrangement and operation of the cutting apparatus represented in FIGS. 17 and 18 are disclosed in U.S. Patent Application no. 4,813,317 to Urschel et al.

[0056] According to a third embodiment, the invention is further applicable to a cutting apparatus configured as shown in FIGS. 19 through 23. FIG. 19 represents the cutting apparatus as comprising a housing 232, a feed tube 240, and a horizontally disposed rotatable cutting wheel 212. Food product is delivered through the feed tubes 240 mounted to the top of the housing 232. The feed tubes 240 advance the food product in a feed direction towards the cutting wheel 212 within the housing 232.

[0057] The cutting wheel 212 is represented in FIGS. 20 and 21 as comprising at least one knife assembly and preferably a plurality of knife assemblies oriented about the central axis of the cutting wheel 30. As represented in FIGS. 22 and 23, each knife assembly comprises a knife holder 227, a clamping assembly 226, and a knife 214. The knife assemblies are secured to a hub 242 and a rim 244 of the cutting wheel 212 by bolts 225. The knives 214 have leading edges facing a direction of rotation of the cutting wheel 212 and extend generally radially from the

hub 242 to the rim 244. A cutting edge 248 on the leading edge of the knives 214 and a second edge on the trailing edge of the knife assemblies with respect to the direction of cutting wheel 212 rotation form a juncture. The juncture extending substantially parallel to and spaced in the food product feed direction from the cutting edge 248 of the next adjacent knife 214 located in a trailing direction so as to form an opening therebetween. The opening determines a thickness of the sliced food product engaging the knives 214 while the cutting wheel 212 is rotated about a central axis to advance the cutting edges 248 in a cutting plane. Similar to the previous embodiments, the knives 214 have corrugated shapes to produce food product slices with generally parallel cuts to yield food product slices having large-amplitude cross-sections. The construction, orientation, and operation of the knife assemblies and their components are similar to the embodiments represented in FIGS. 5, 8, 11e, 12, and 13c although modifications may be necessary to accommodate the cutting wheel design.

[0058] From FIG. 19, it can be seen that the cutting apparatus singulates and orients the food product before delivering the food product in a substantially vertical direction to the feed tubes 240, which are also shown as being vertically oriented. The generally vertical presentation of the food product is due to the substantially horizontal orientation of the cutting wheel 212. While the feed tubes 240 are shown as being oriented at about 90 degrees to the surface (plane) of the cutting wheel 212, it is foreseeable that other orientations could be used, depending on the angle at which cuts are desired through the food product. However, the cutting wheel 212 is preferably disposed in the horizontal plane, and the feed tubes 240 are disposed at an angle of about 15 to about 90 degrees, preferably about 90 degrees, to the cutting wheel 212. Further details regarding the general arrangement and operation of the cutting apparatus represented in

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FIGS. 17 through 23 are disclosed in U.S. Patent Application Nos. 6,973,862 to Bucks and 7,000,518 to Bucks et al.

[0059] While the invention has been described in terms of specific embodiments, it is apparent that other forms could be adopted by one skilled in the art. For example, the impeller 10 and cutting head 12 could differ in appearance and construction from the embodiments shown in the Figures, the functions of each component of the impeller 10 and cutting head 12 could be performed by components of different construction but capable of a similar (though not necessarily equivalent) function, and various materials and processes could be used to fabricate the impeller 10 and cutting head 12 and their components. Therefore, the scope of the invention is to be limited only by the following claims.

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WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An apparatus for cutting food product, the apparatus comprising an annular-shaped cutting head (12) and an impeller (10) coaxially mounted within the cutting head (12) for rotation about an axis of the cutting head (12) in a rotational direction relative to the cutting head (12), the impeller (10) comprising one or more paddles (16) circumferentially spaced along a perimeter thereof for delivering food product radially outward toward the cutting head (12), the cutting head (12) comprising two or more knife assemblies arranged in sets spaced around the circumference of the cutting head (12), each knife assembly comprising:

a knife (14) extending radially inward toward the impeller (10) in a direction opposite the rotational direction of the impeller (10), the knife (14) having a large-amplitude corrugated shape characterized by peaks and valleys; and

securing and aligning means (26,27) for securing the knife (14) to the cutting head (12), aligning the peaks of the knife (14) of a first of the knife assemblies to the knife (14) of a second of the knife assemblies, and aligning the valleys of the knife (14) of the first knife assembly to the knife (14) of the second knife assembly to produce food product slices with a generally parallel-cut cross-section having a large-amplitude periodic shape characterized by peaks and valleys;

wherein the knife (14) and the securing and aligning means (26,27) of each knife assembly define a rake-off angle for the knife assembly of at least 17 degrees and less than 23 degrees.

2. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the knife (14) of each knife assembly comprises a cutting edge (48) having a knife tip (14a) and a radially innermost local extremity (14b) that is separate from the knife tip (14a) and protrudes farther toward the impeller (10) than the knife tip (14a) by a distance of less than 0.1 millimeter.

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3. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the large-amplitude cross-section of the food product slice has an amplitude of 2.5 to 9 millimeters.
4. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the large-amplitude cross-section of the food product slice has an amplitude of 3 to 7 millimeters.
5. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the large-amplitude cross-section of the food product slice has an amplitude of 3.8 to 5.7 millimeters.
6. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the rake-off angle for the knife (14) of each knife assembly is less than 20 degrees.
7. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the rake-off angle for the knife (14) of each knife assembly is 17 degrees.
8. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the knife (14) of each knife assembly has a biased bevel comprising a bevel (54) that faces away from the impeller (10).
9. An apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the bevel (54) of the biased bevel has a grind angle of 7° to 11°.
10. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the paddles (16) of the impeller (10) are inclined at a positive angle.
11. An apparatus according to claim 10, wherein the paddles (16) of the impeller (10) are inclined at a positive angle of between 5° and 35°.
12. An apparatus according to claim 10, wherein the paddles (16) of the impeller (10) are inclined at a positive angle of between 8° and 20°.
13. An apparatus according to claim 10, wherein the paddles (16) of the impeller (10) are inclined at a positive angle of between 12° and 15°.

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14. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the paddles (16) of the impeller (10) comprise means (56) for absorbing impacts with the food product.

15. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the paddles (16) of the impeller (10) comprise deformable surfaces that are adapted to deform to conform to the shape of the food product.

16. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the securing and aligning means (26,27) of each knife assembly comprise surfaces that face the impeller (10) and have corrugated shapes corresponding to the corrugated shape of the knife (14).

17. An apparatus according to claim 16, wherein the corrugated shapes of the surfaces of the securing and aligning means (26,27) of each knife assembly are shaped differently than the corrugated shapes of the knives (14) to minimize surface contact between the unsliced food product and the cutting head (12).

18. An apparatus according to claim 16, wherein the securing and aligning means (26,27) of each knife assembly comprise means (52) for aligning the corrugated shapes of the surfaces of the securing and aligning means (26,27) with the corrugated shapes of the knives (14) thereof.

19. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the securing and aligning means (26,27) of each knife assembly have fingers (50) that engage the valleys defined by the corrugated shapes of the knives (14) thereof.

20. An apparatus according to claim 19, wherein the fingers (50) of the securing and aligning means (26,27) of each knife assembly are beveled on a side of the securing and aligning means (26,27) facing the impeller (10).

21. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the securing and aligning means (26,27) of each knife assembly comprise a shoe (22), a knife

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holder (27) mounted to the shoe (22) and a clamp (26) securing the knife (14) thereof to the knife holder (27).

22. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the securing and aligning means (26,27) of each knife assembly comprise a quick clamping device (26) for securing the knife (14) thereof.

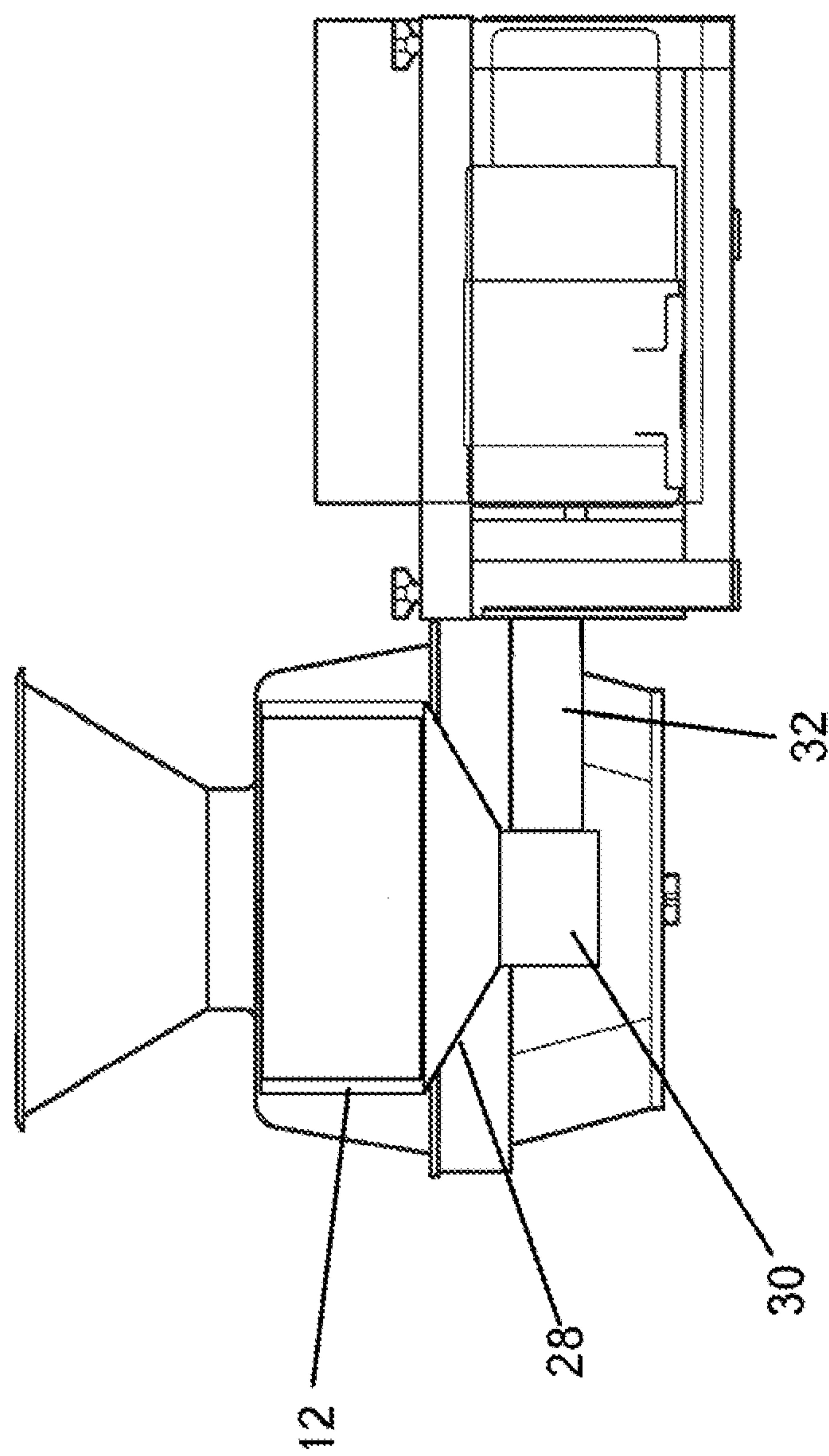


FIG. 1
(Prior Art)

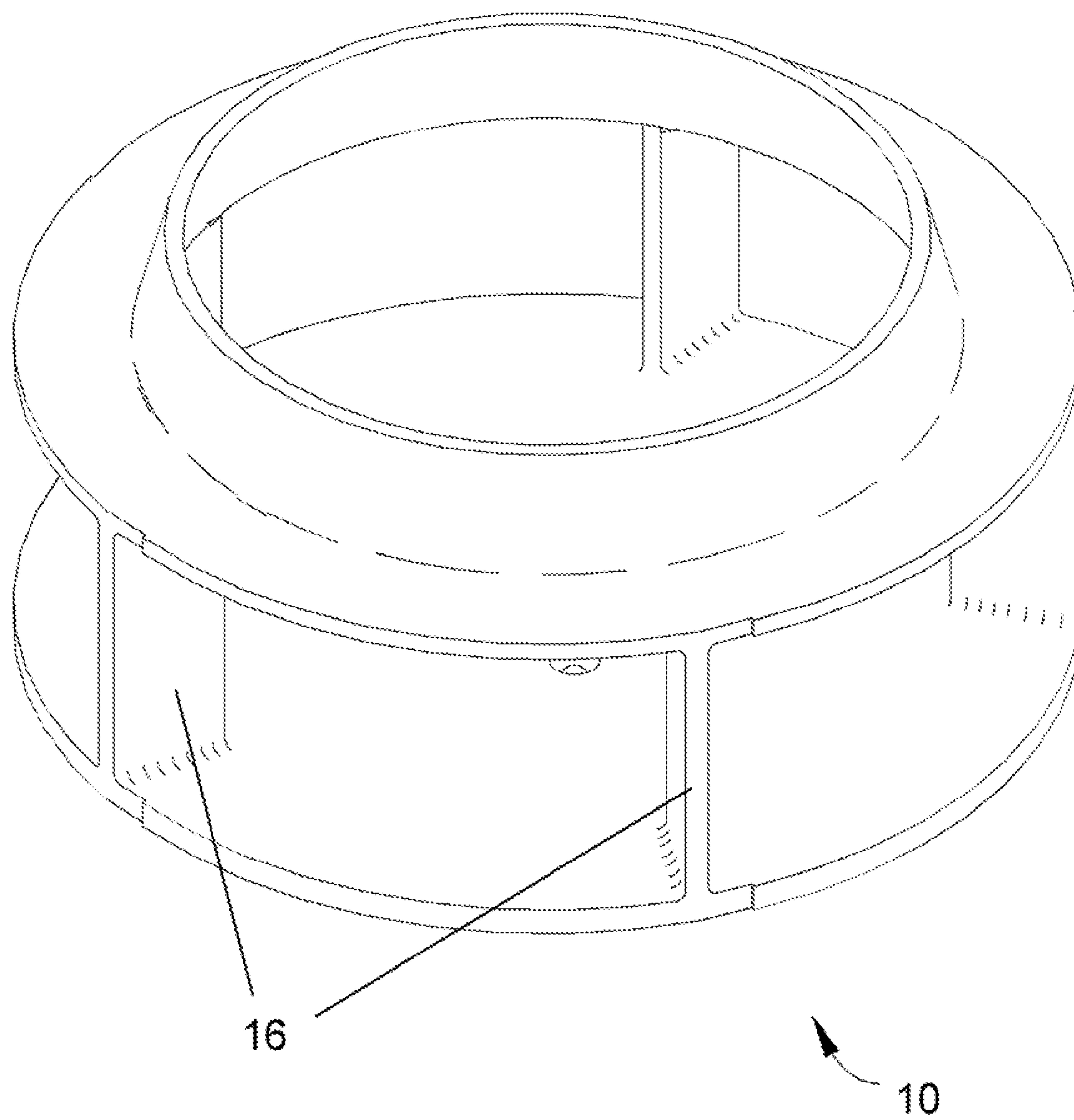



FIG. 2
(Prior Art)



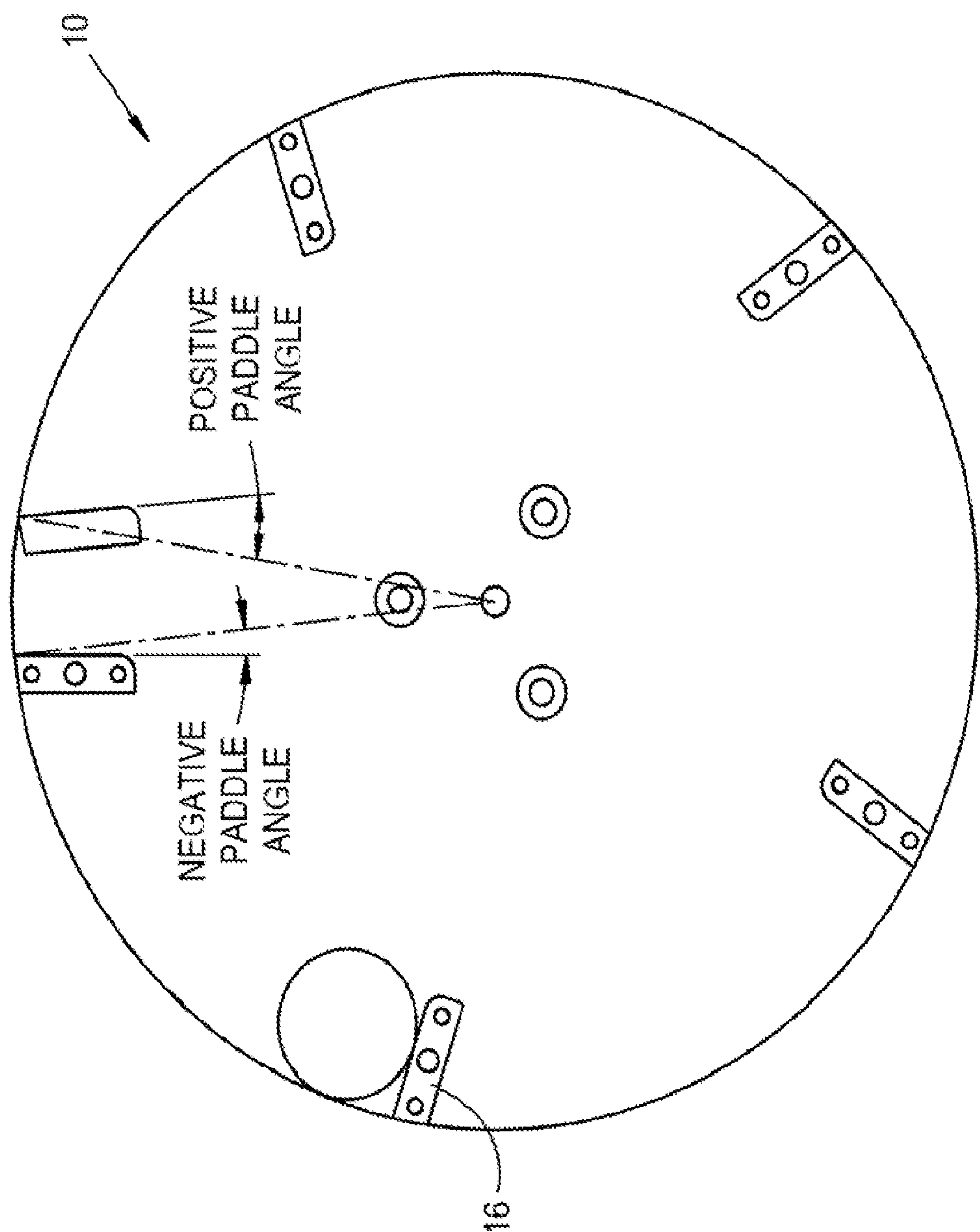


Fig. 4
(Prior Art)

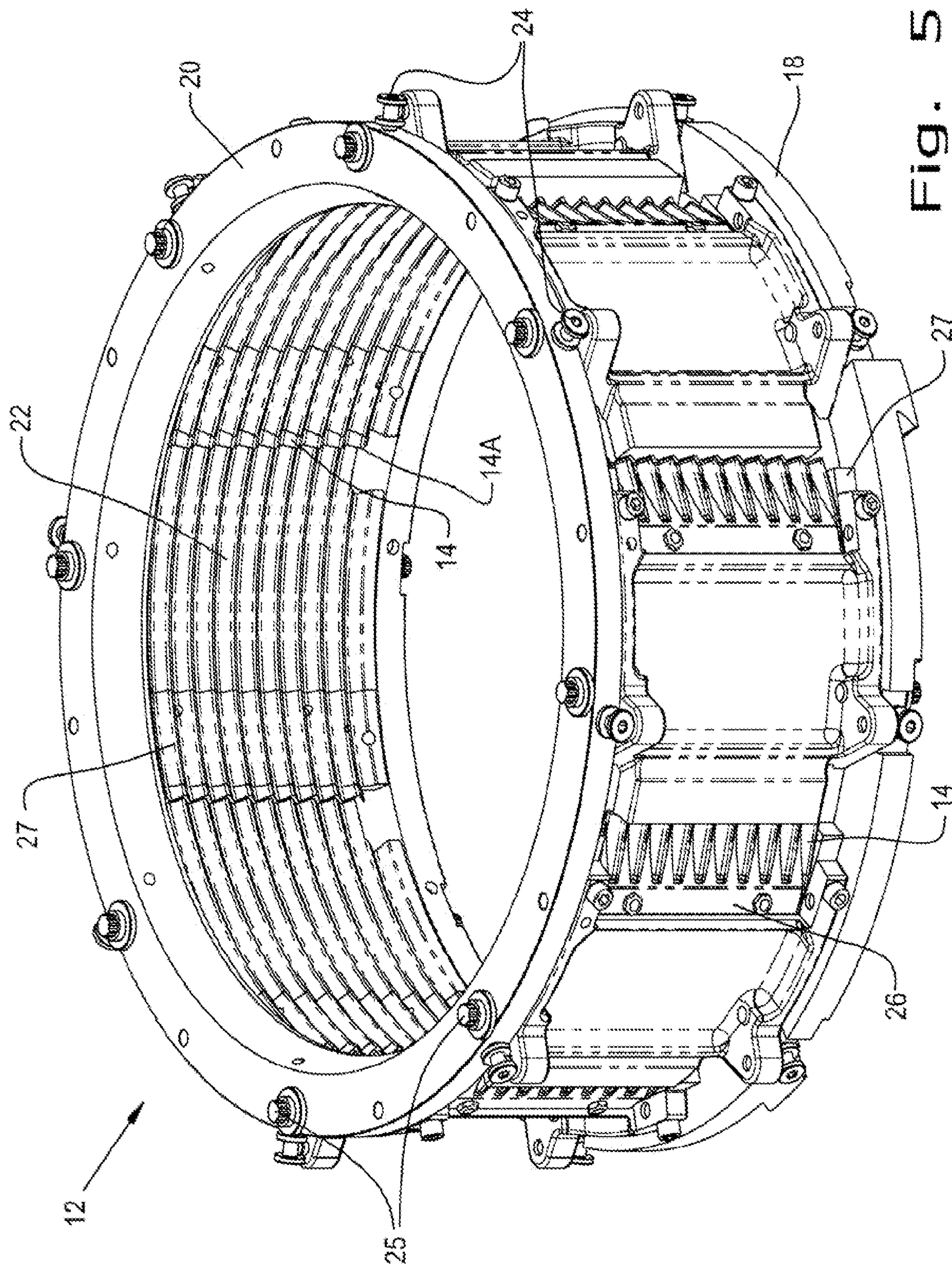
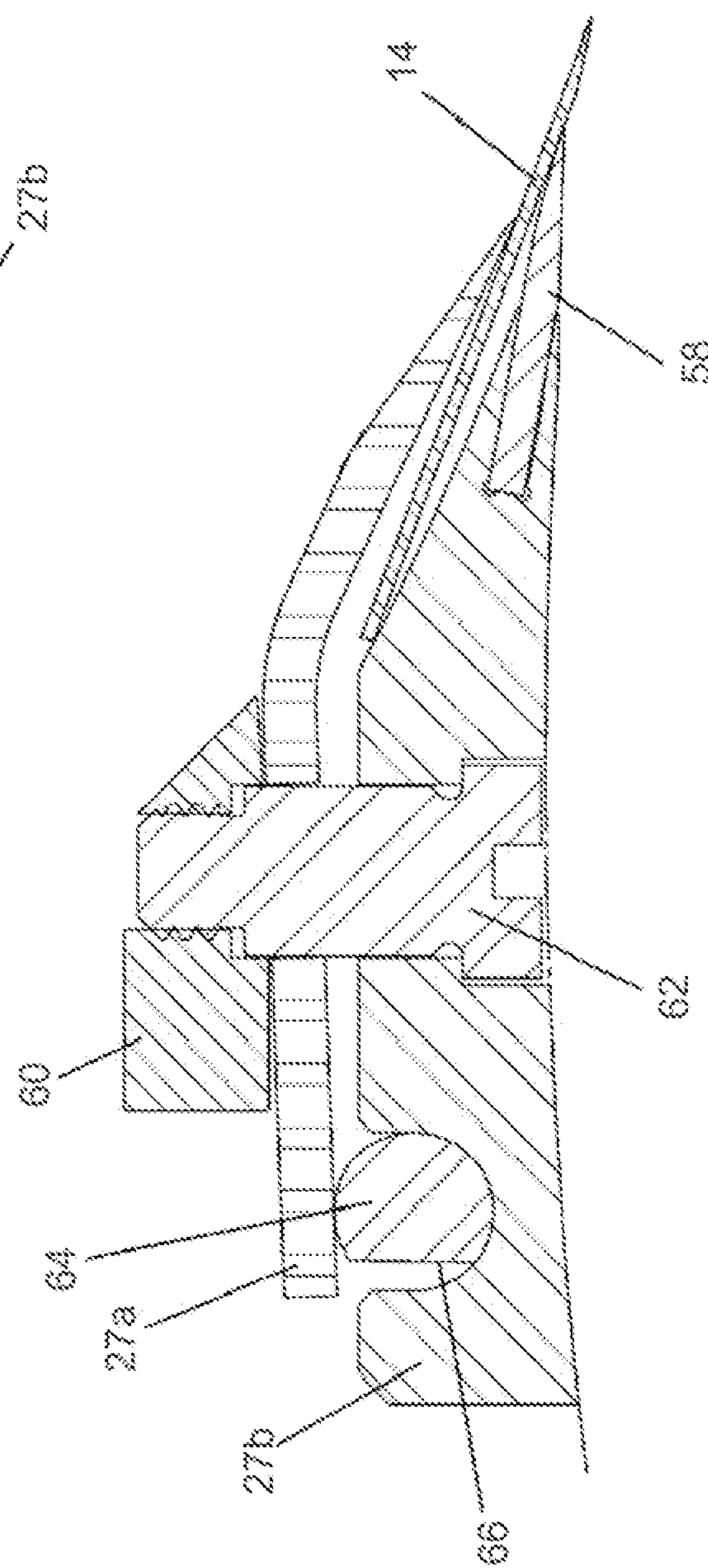
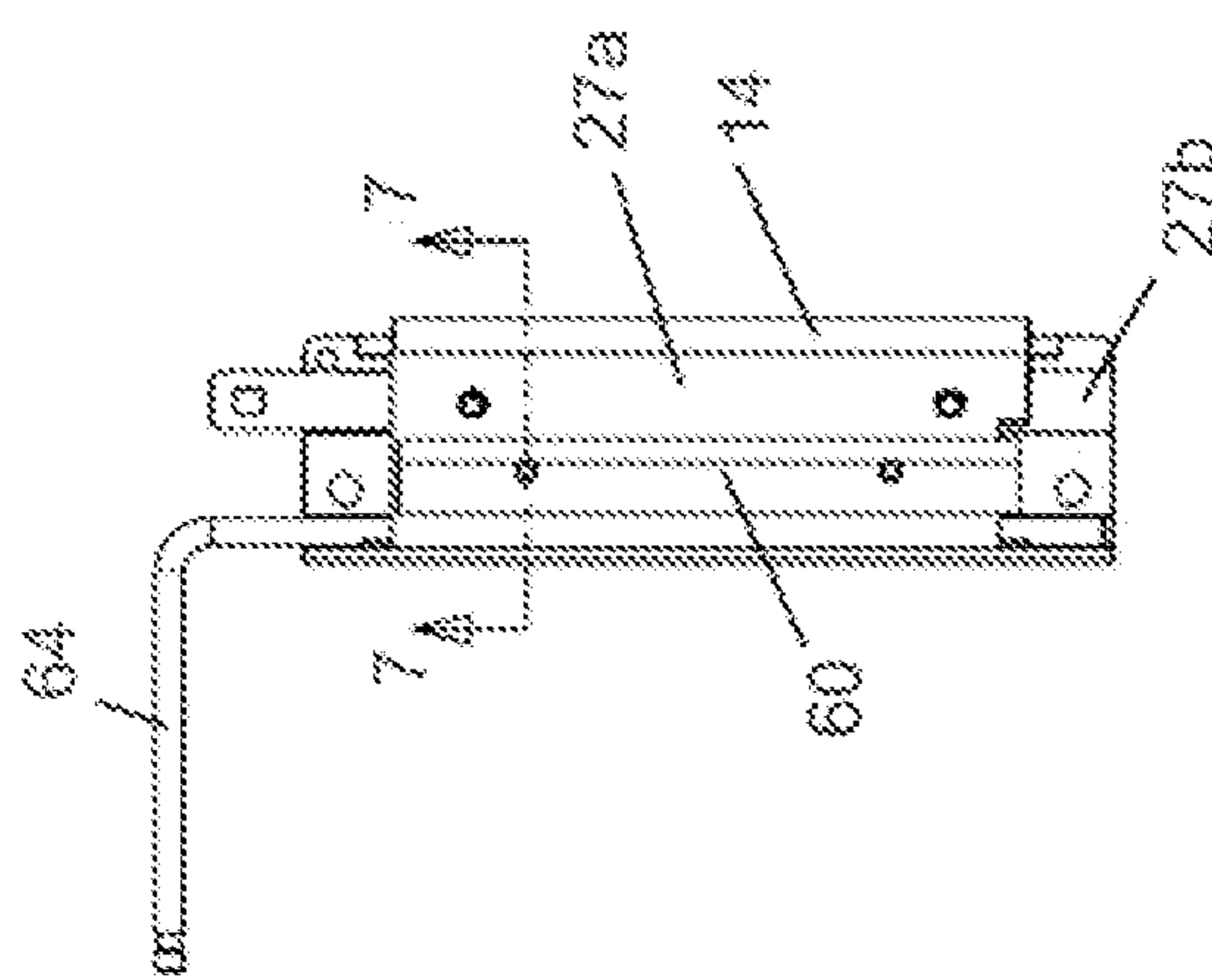


FIG. 5



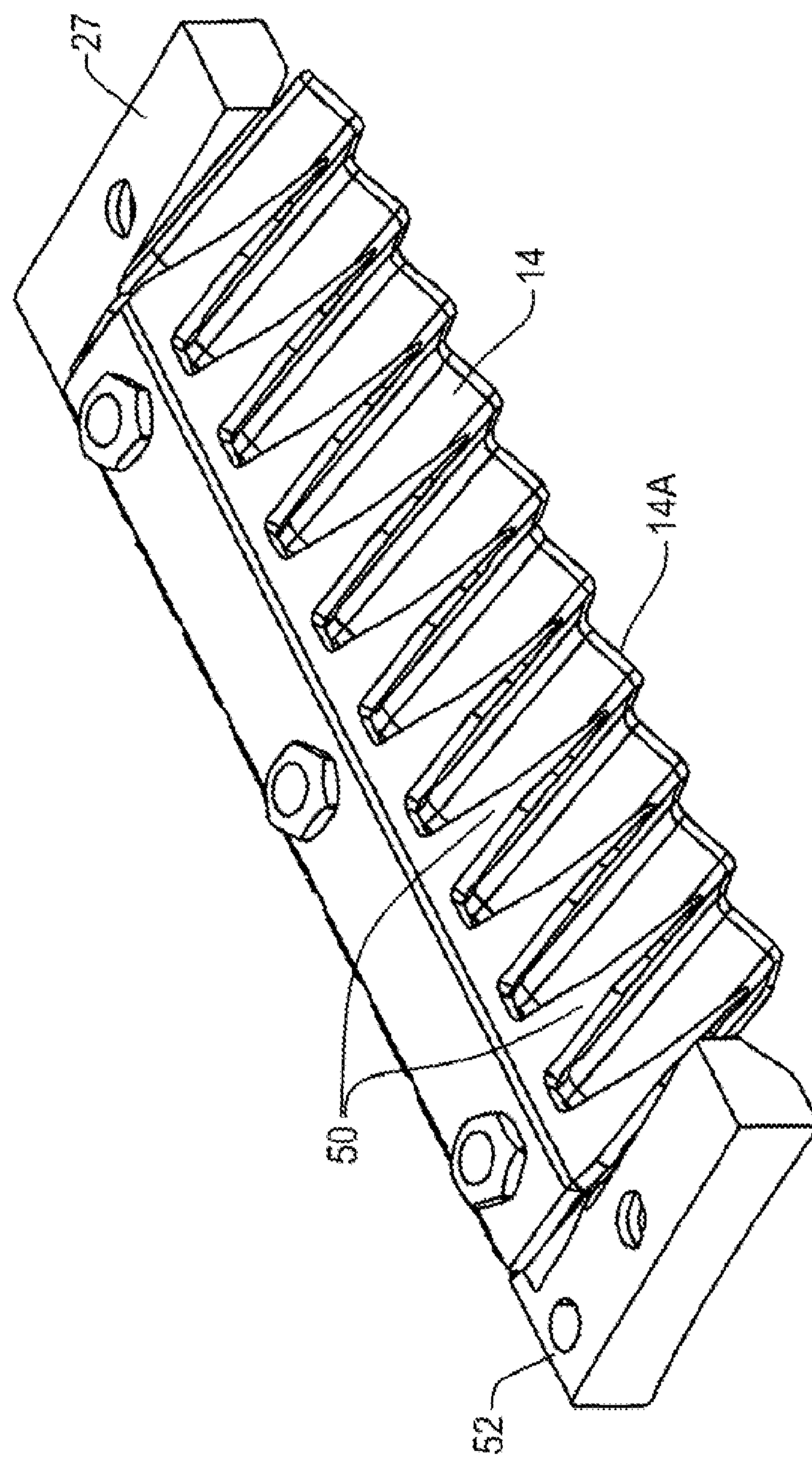
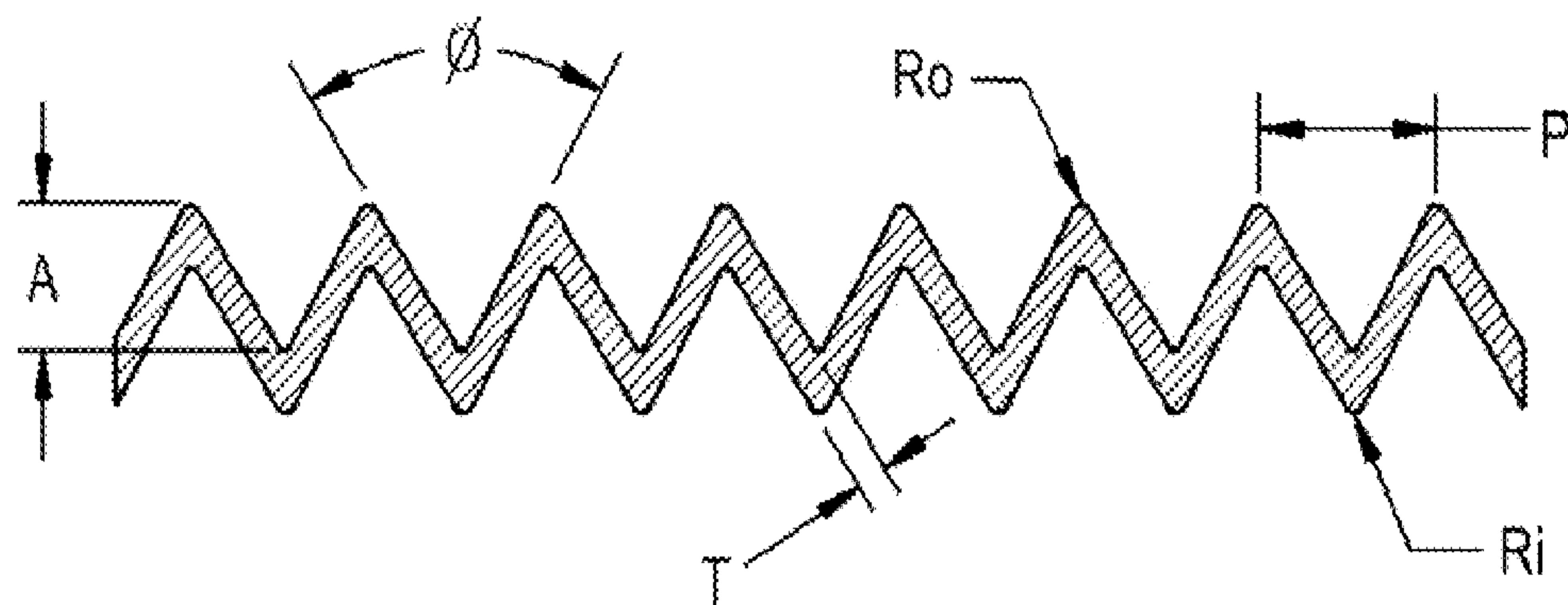


Fig. 8

$A \approx$ AMPLITUDE
 \emptyset = INCLUDED ANGLE
 T = WEB THICKNESS
 R_o = OUTSIDE (PEAK) RADIUS
 R_i = INSIDE (VALLEY) RADIUS
 $P \approx$ PITCH



PRIOR ART
RUFFLES SLICE

Fig. 9

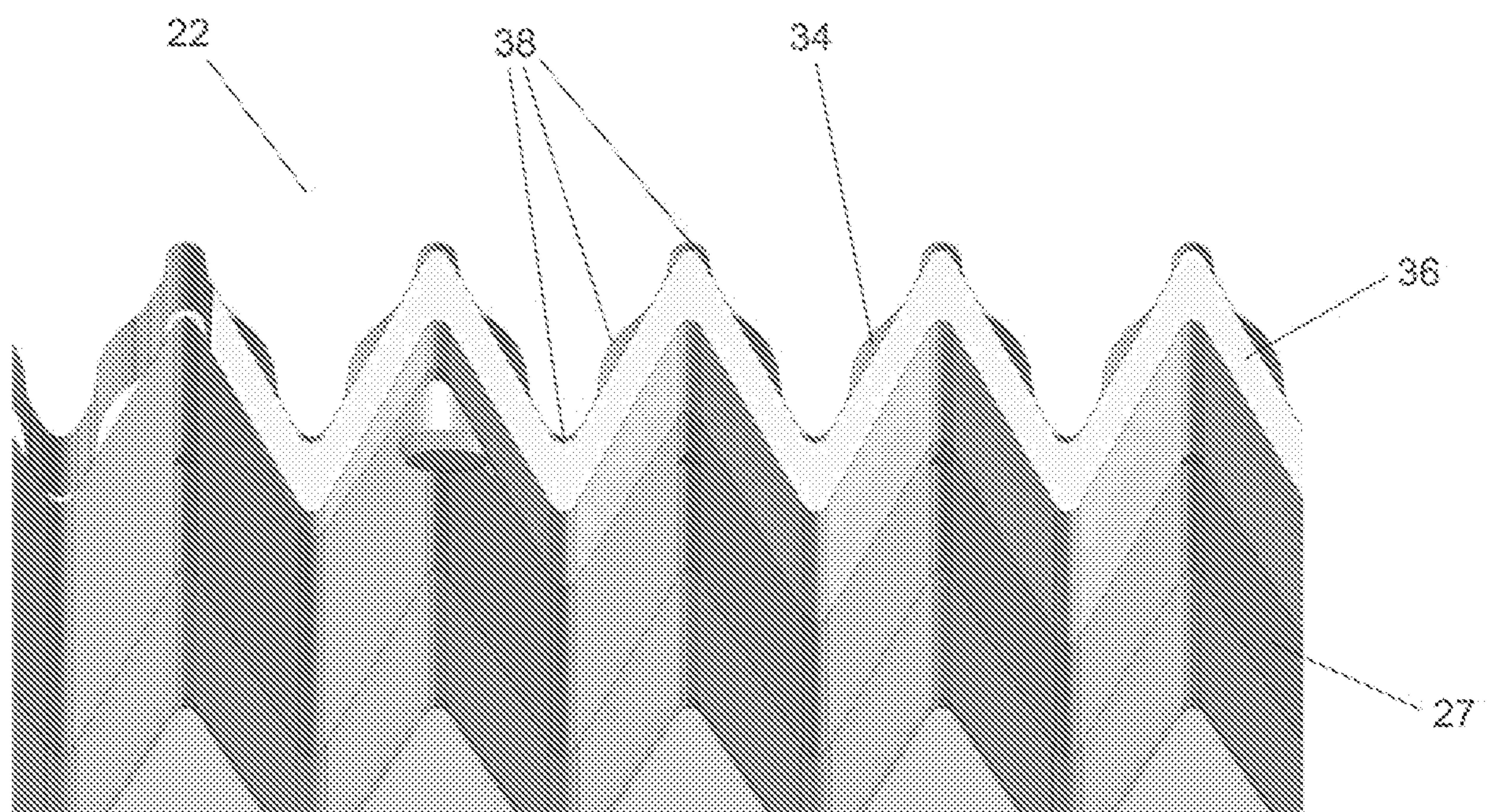


FIG. 10

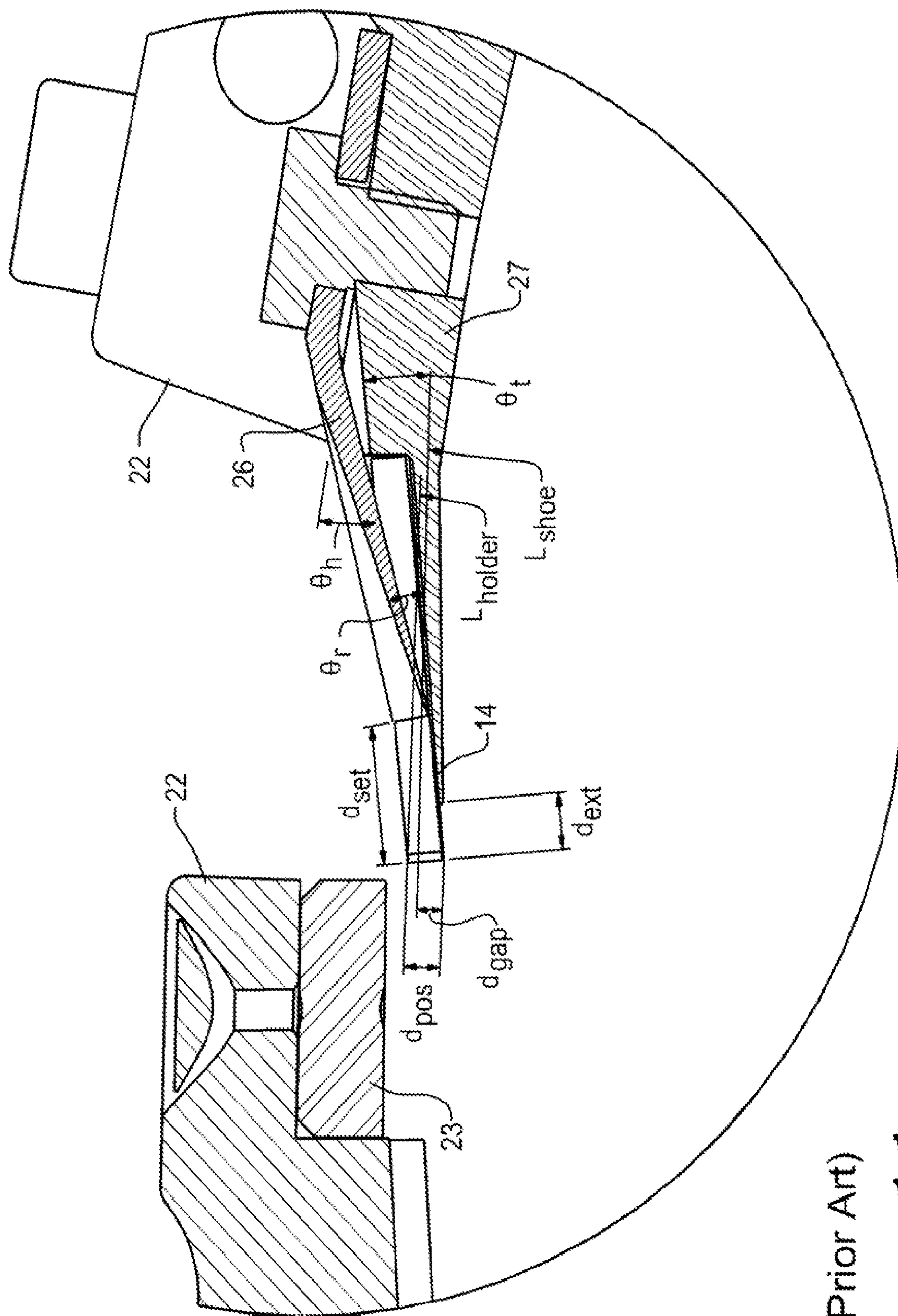


Fig. 11a
(Prior Art)

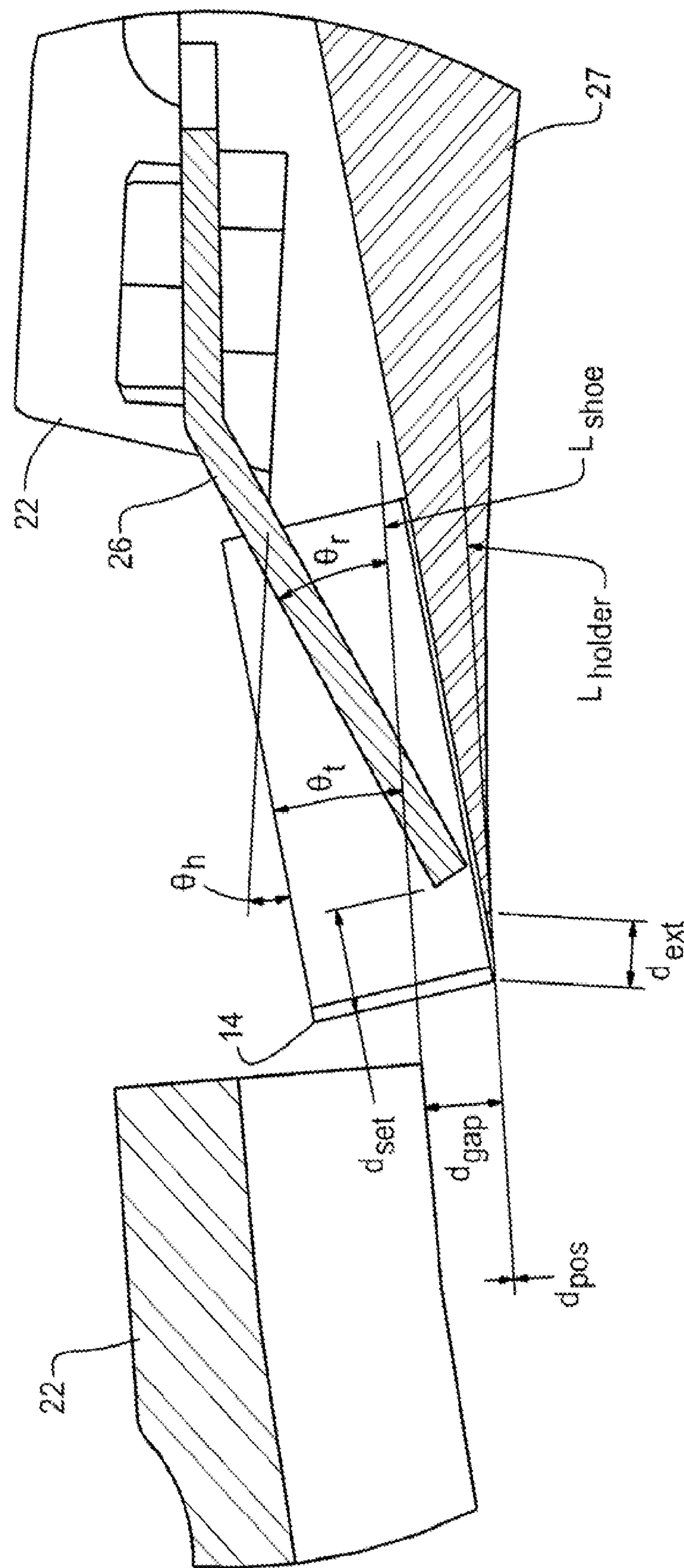


FIG. 11b

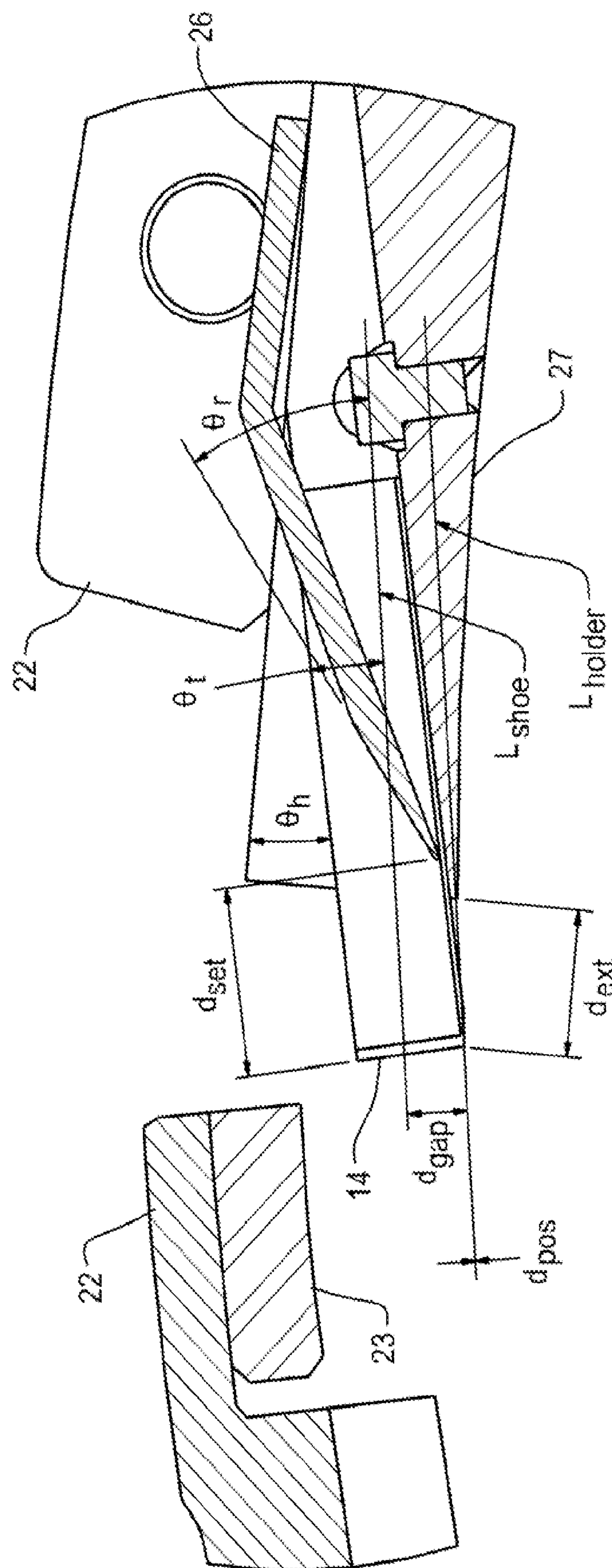


Fig. 11c

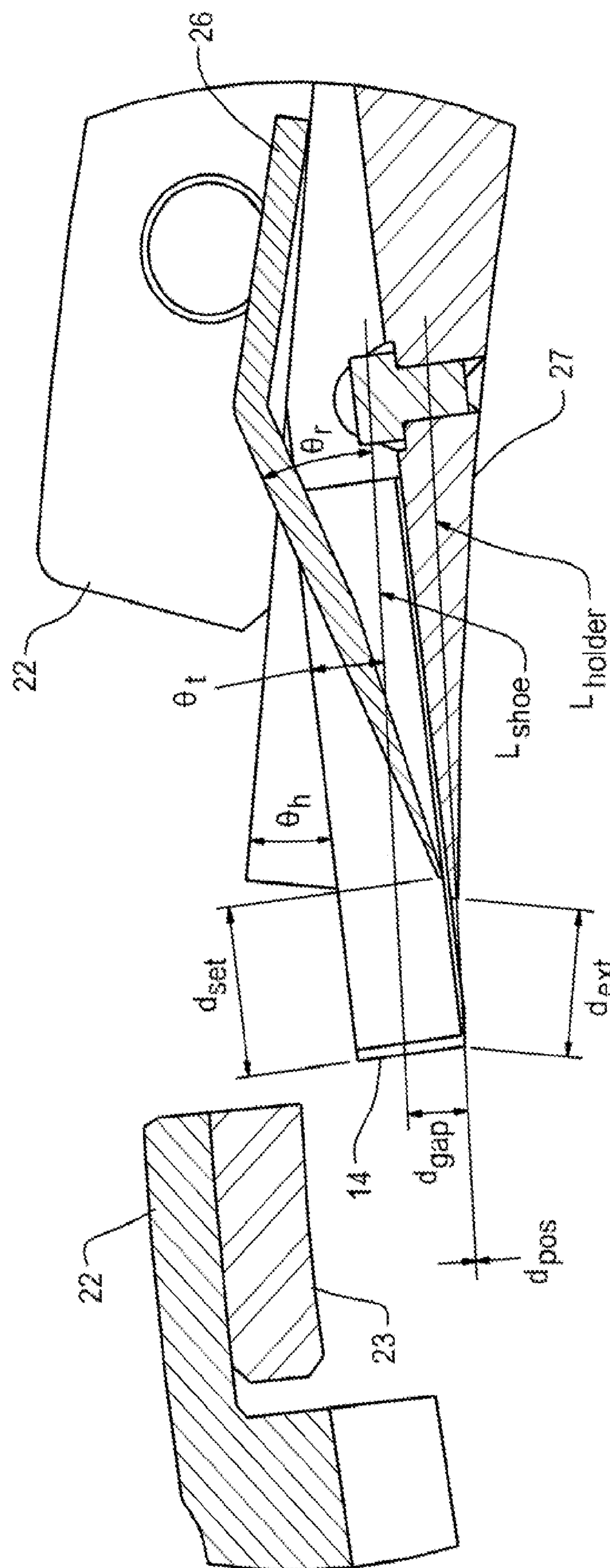


Fig. 11d

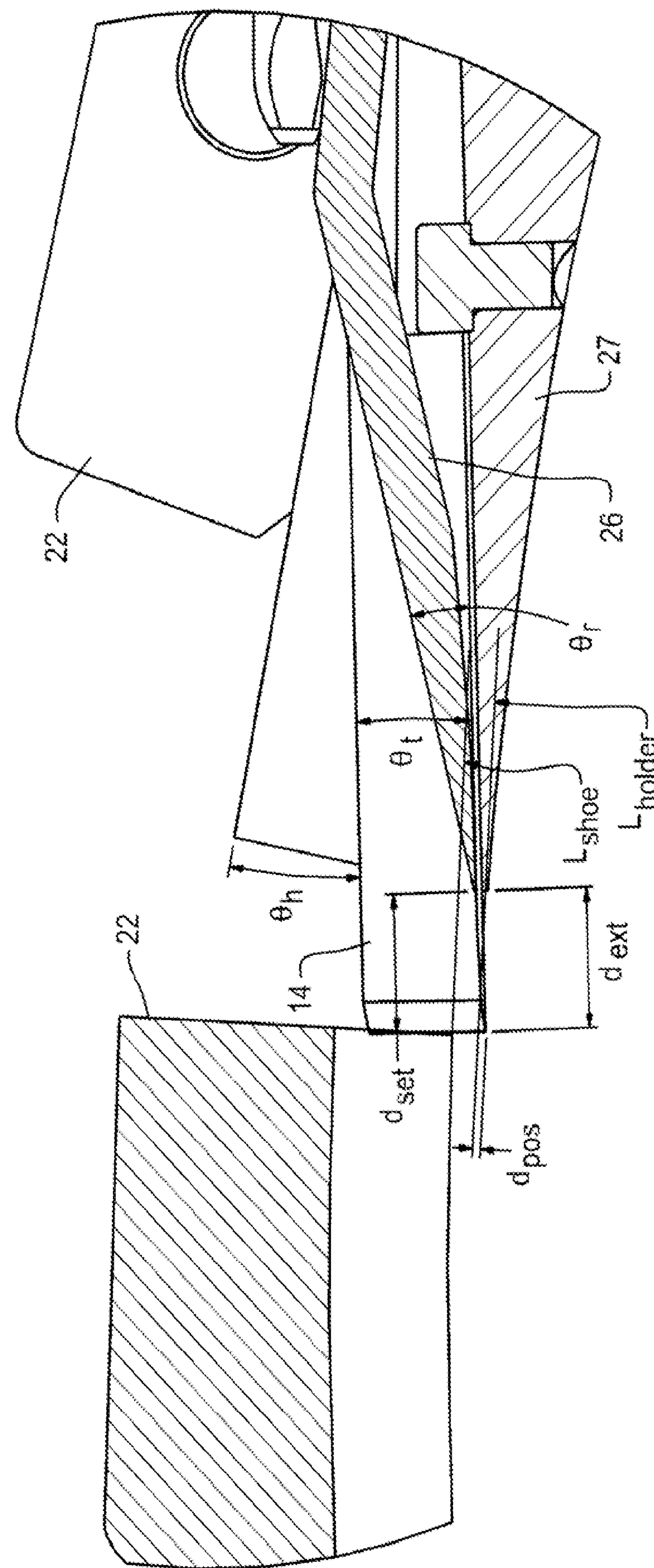


FIG. 11e

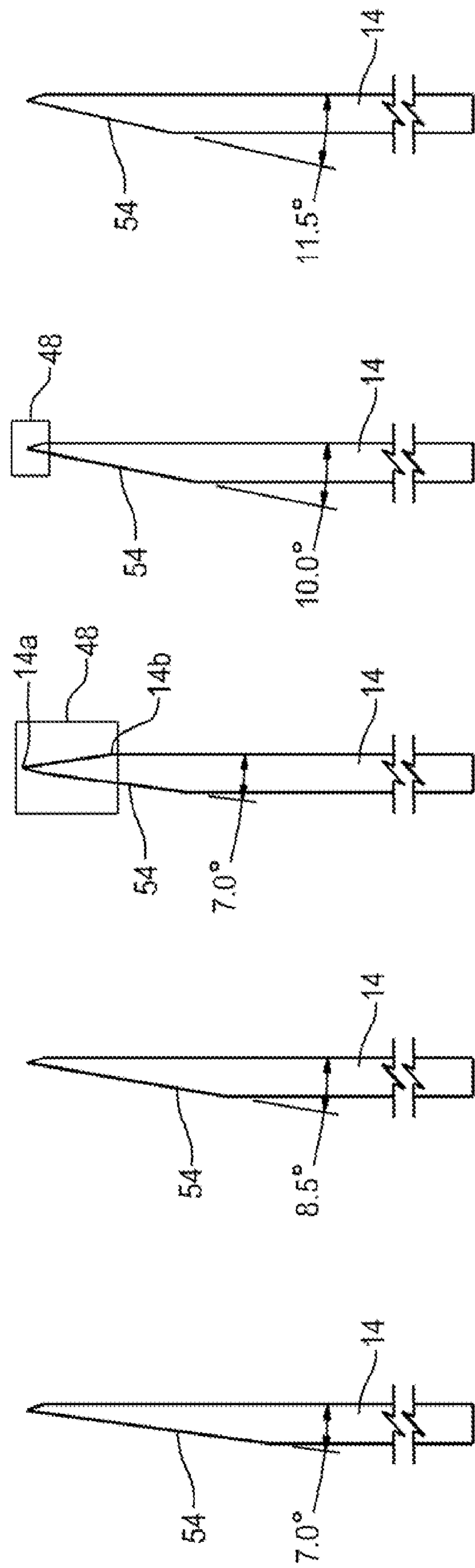


Fig. 12

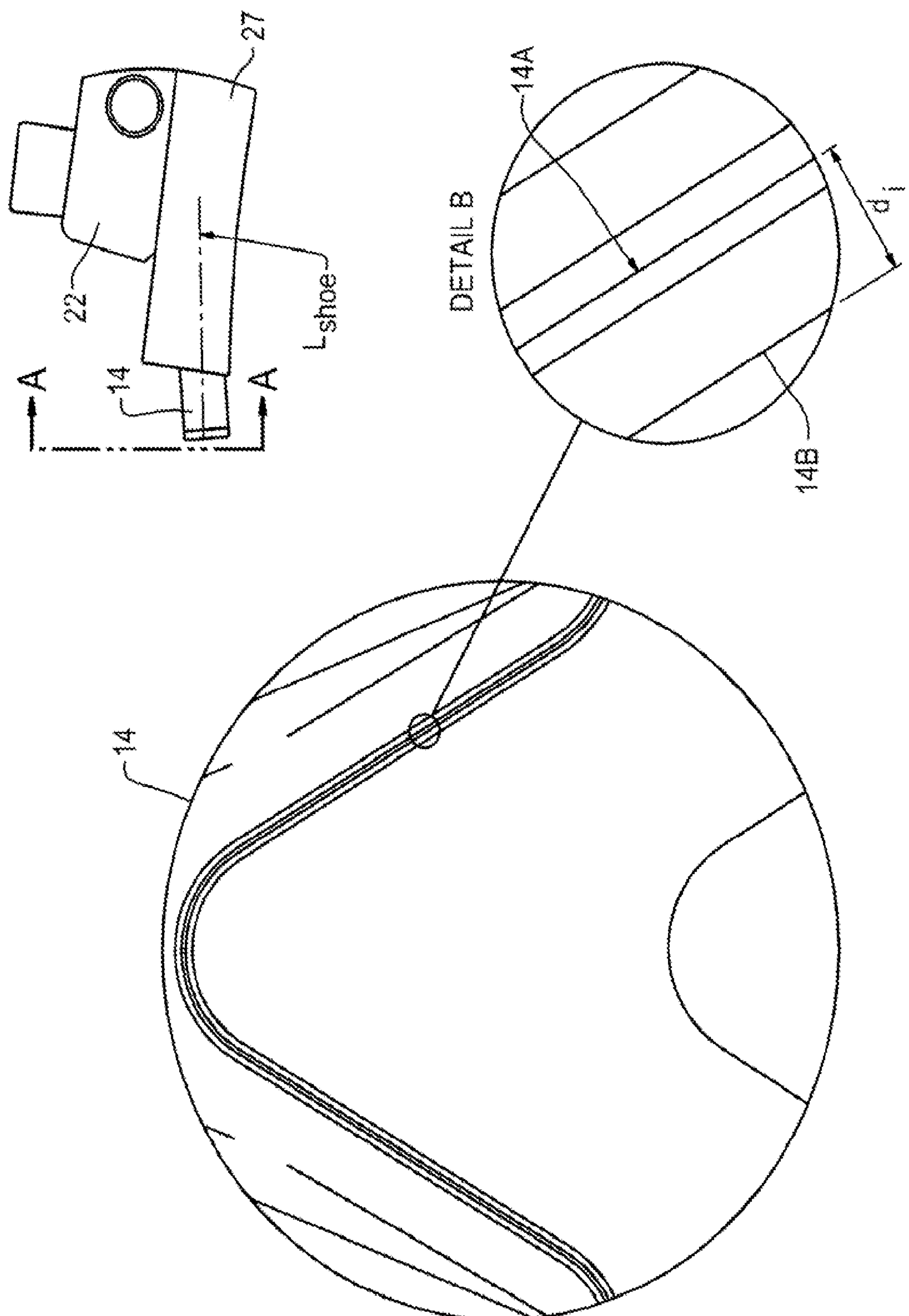


Fig. 13a

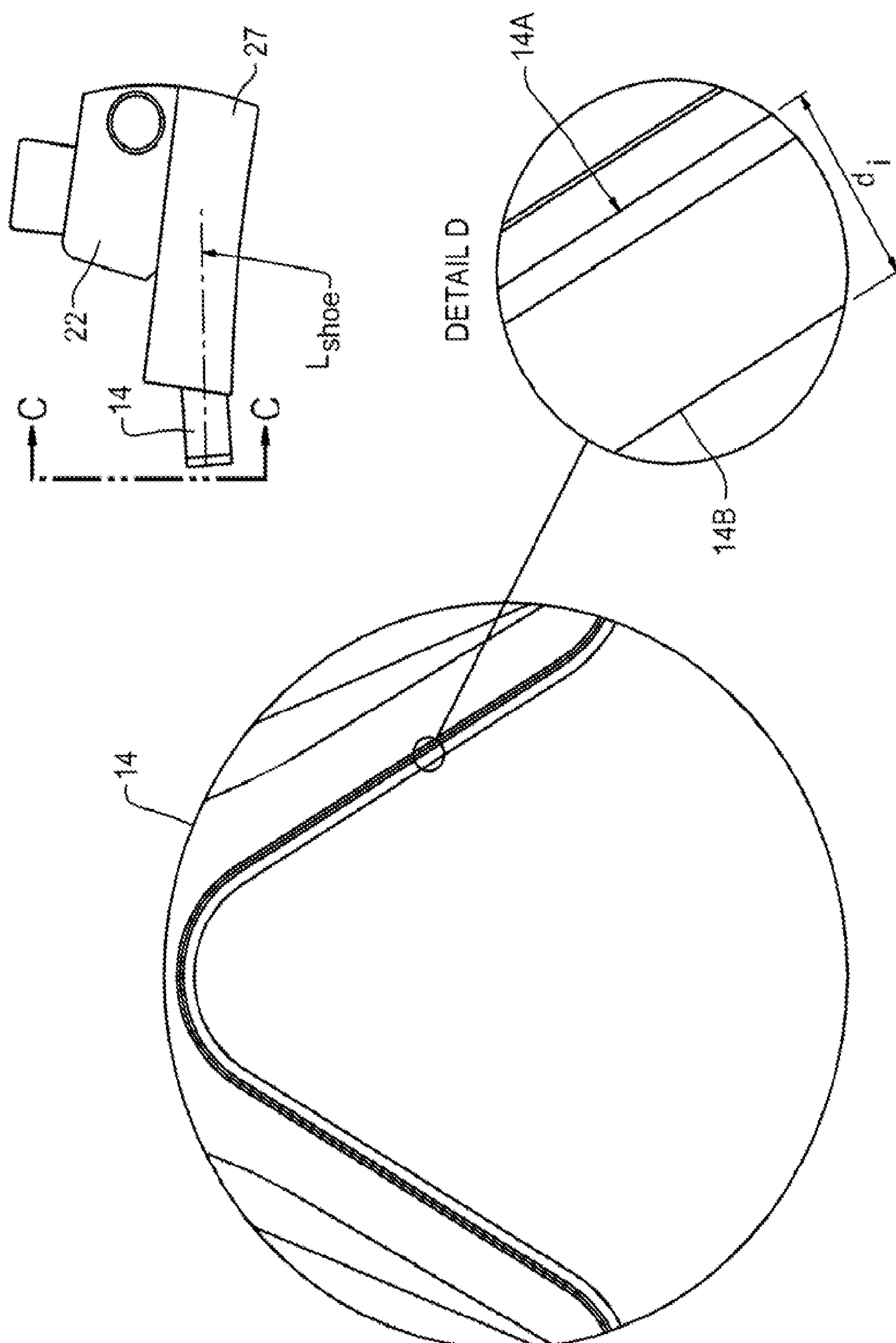


Fig. 13b

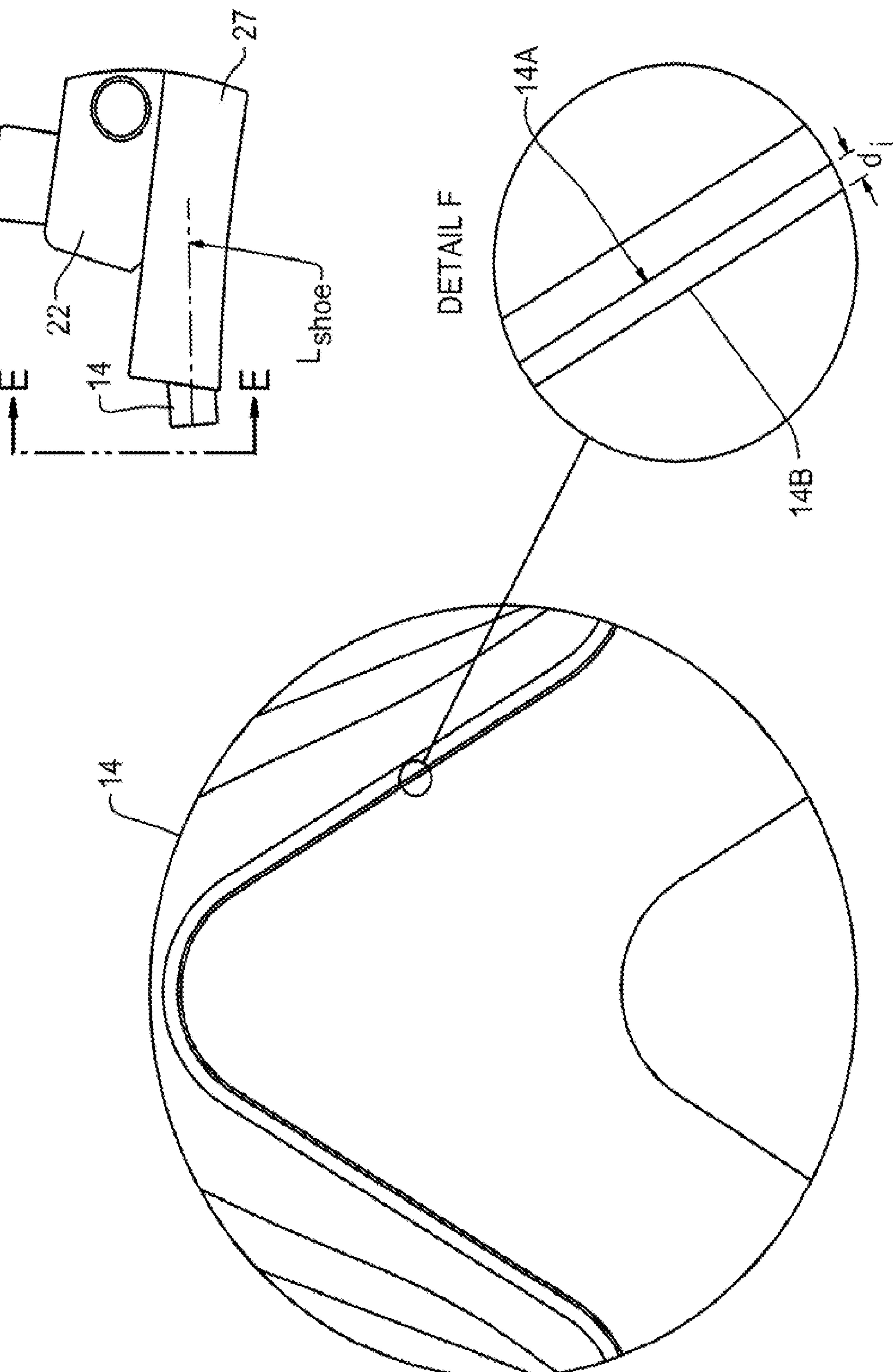


Fig. 13c

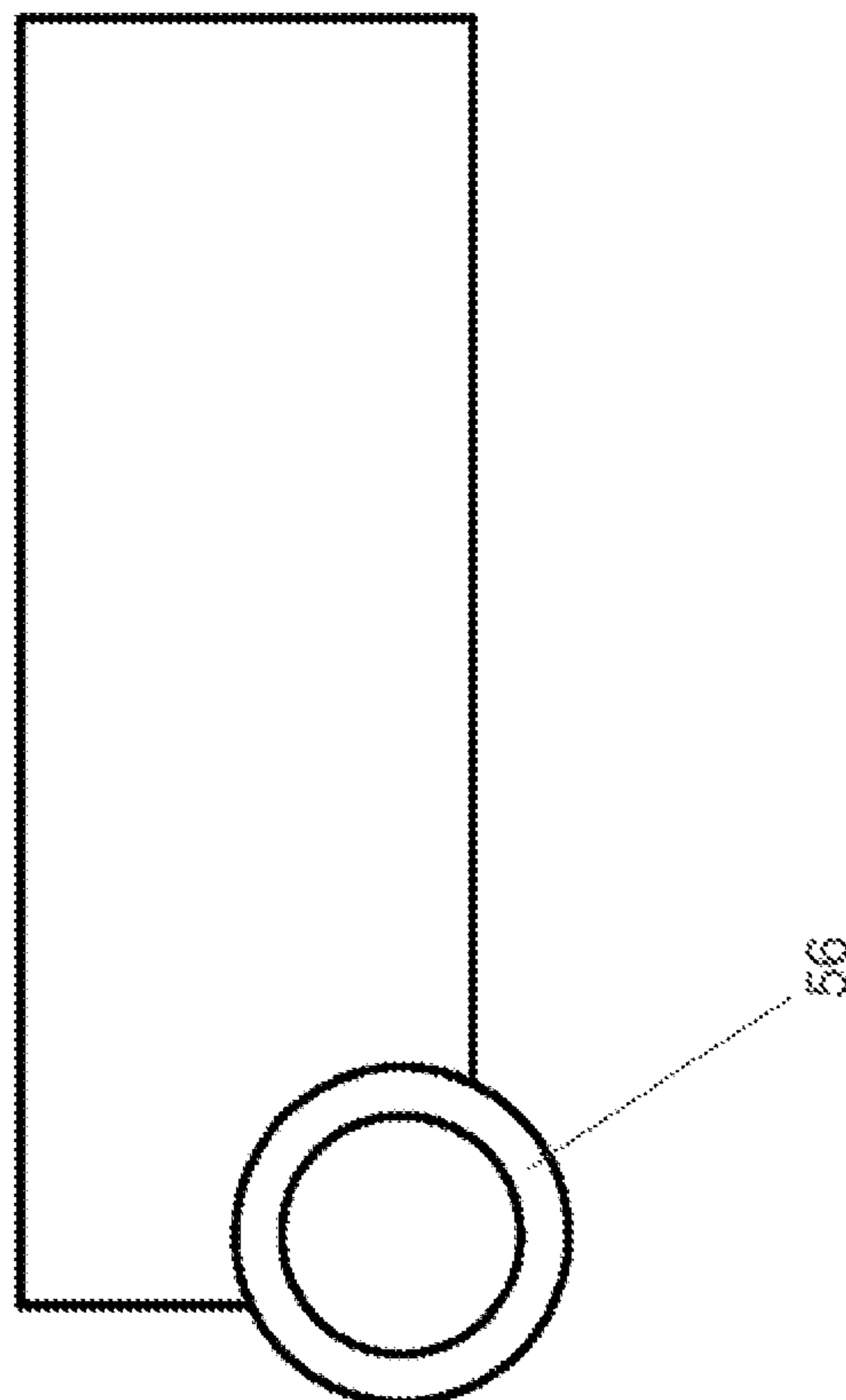
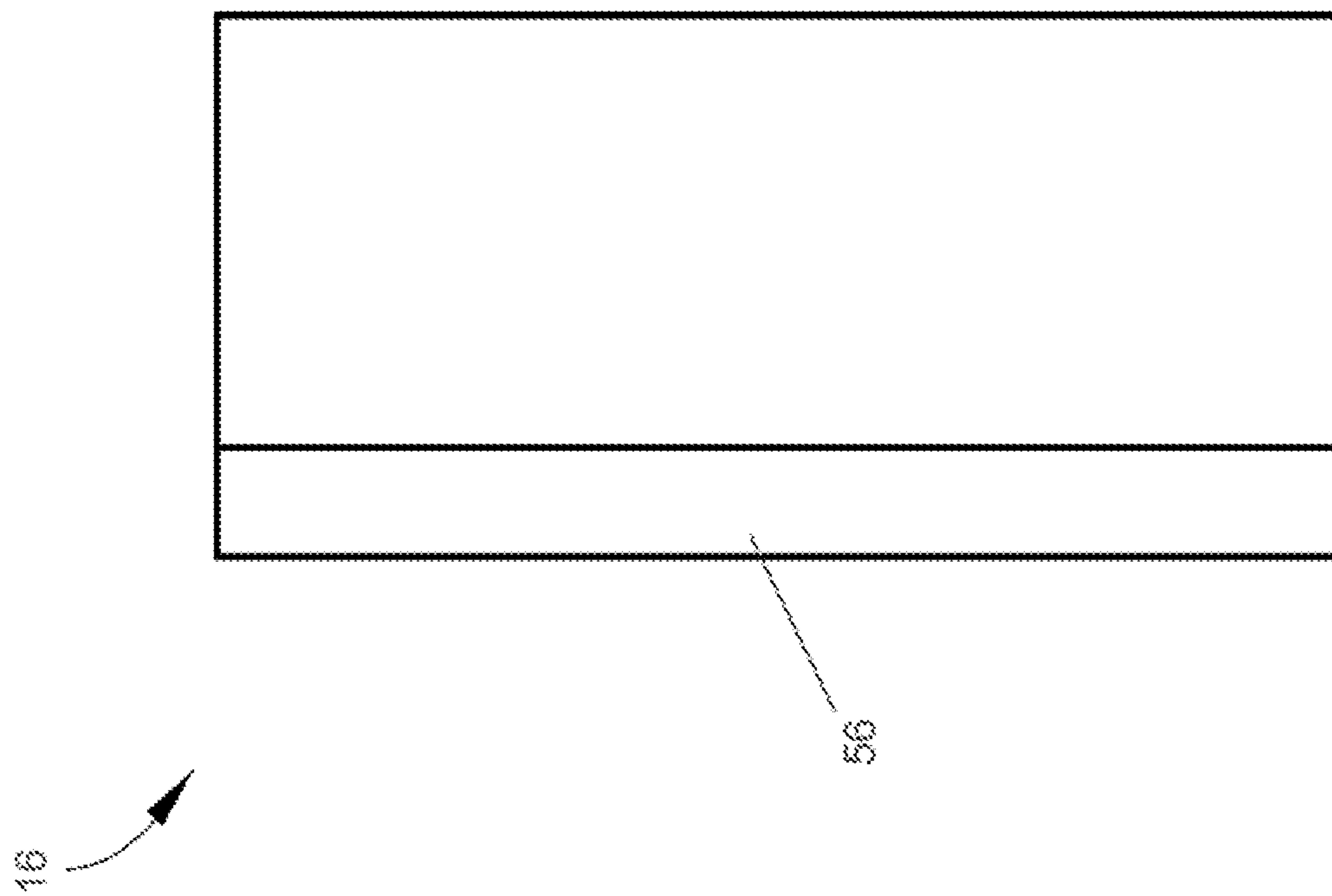


FIG. 14



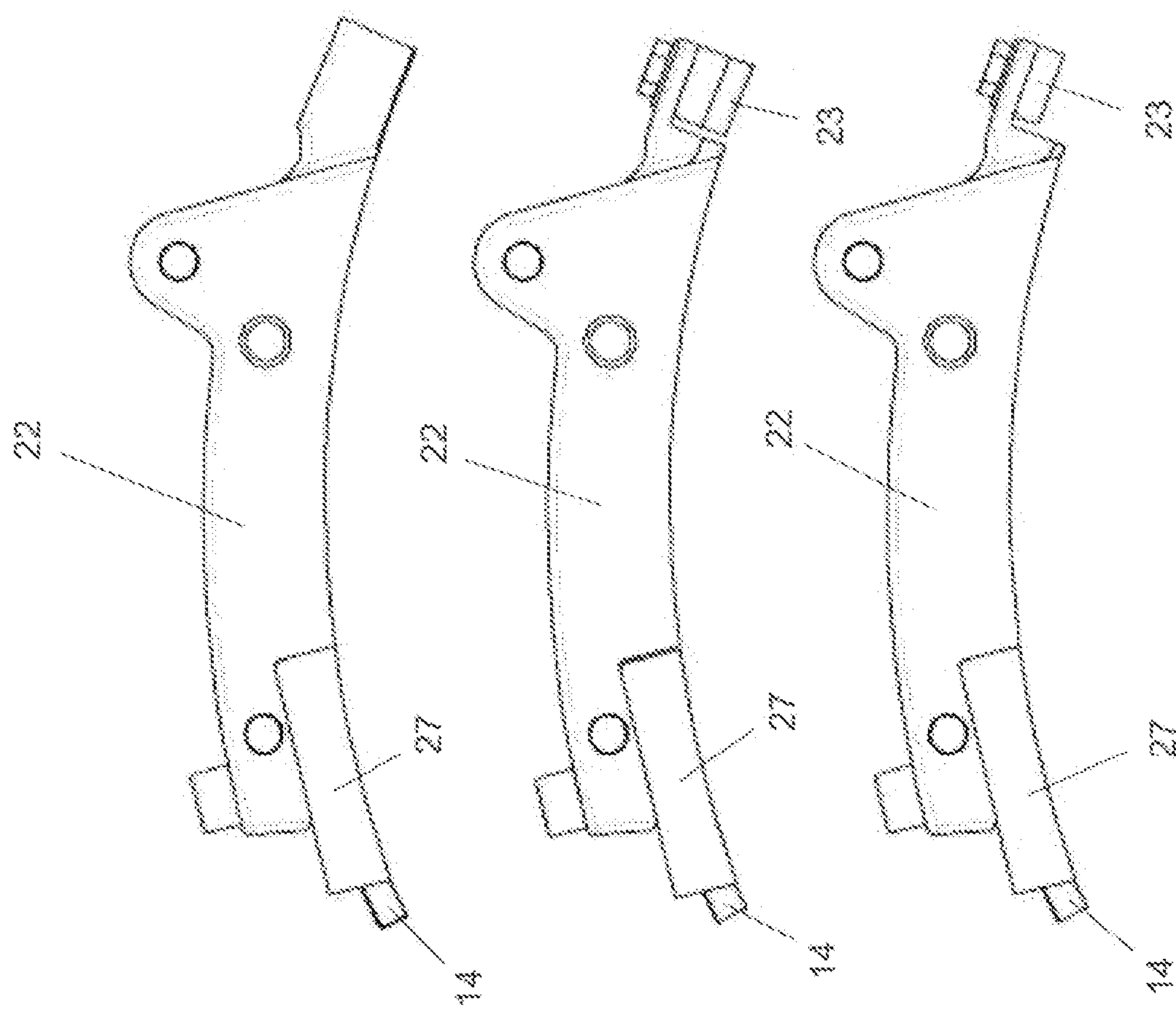


FIG. 15

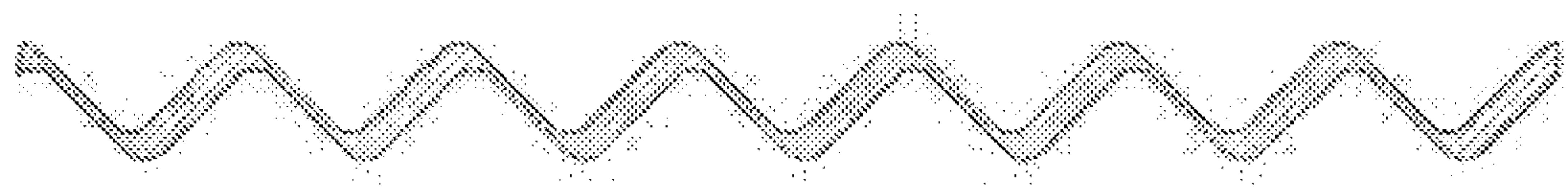
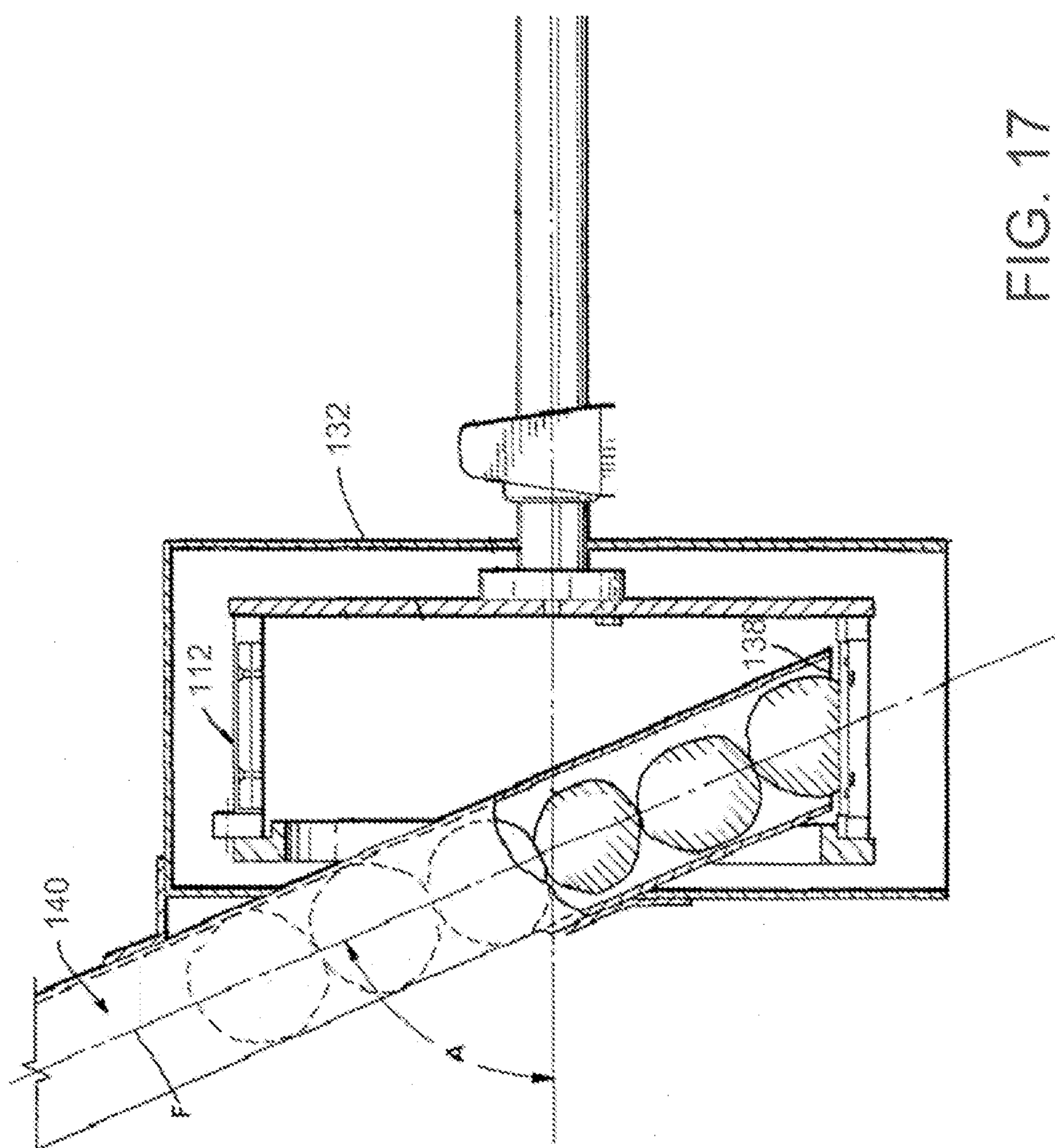


FIG. 16



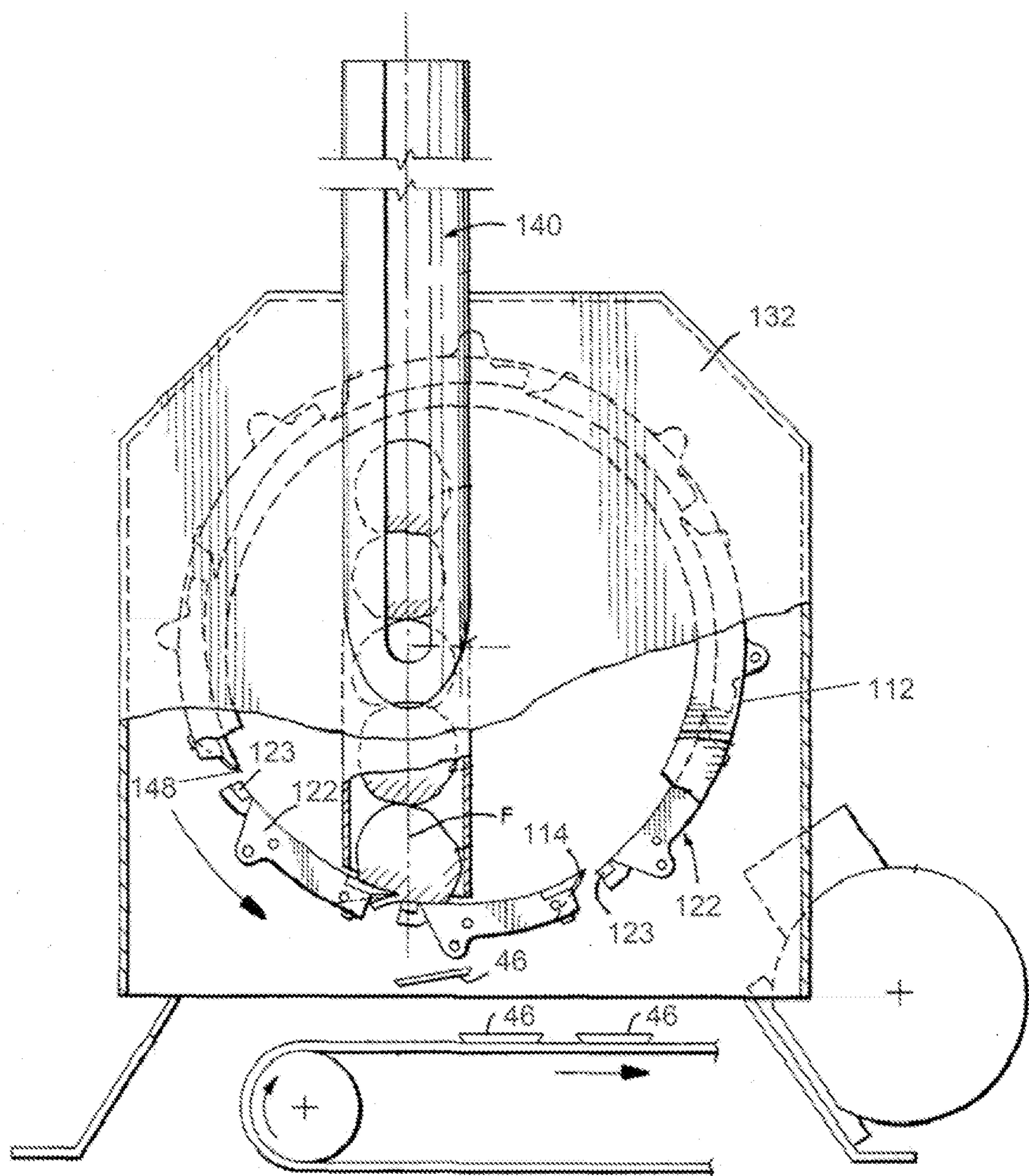


FIG. 18

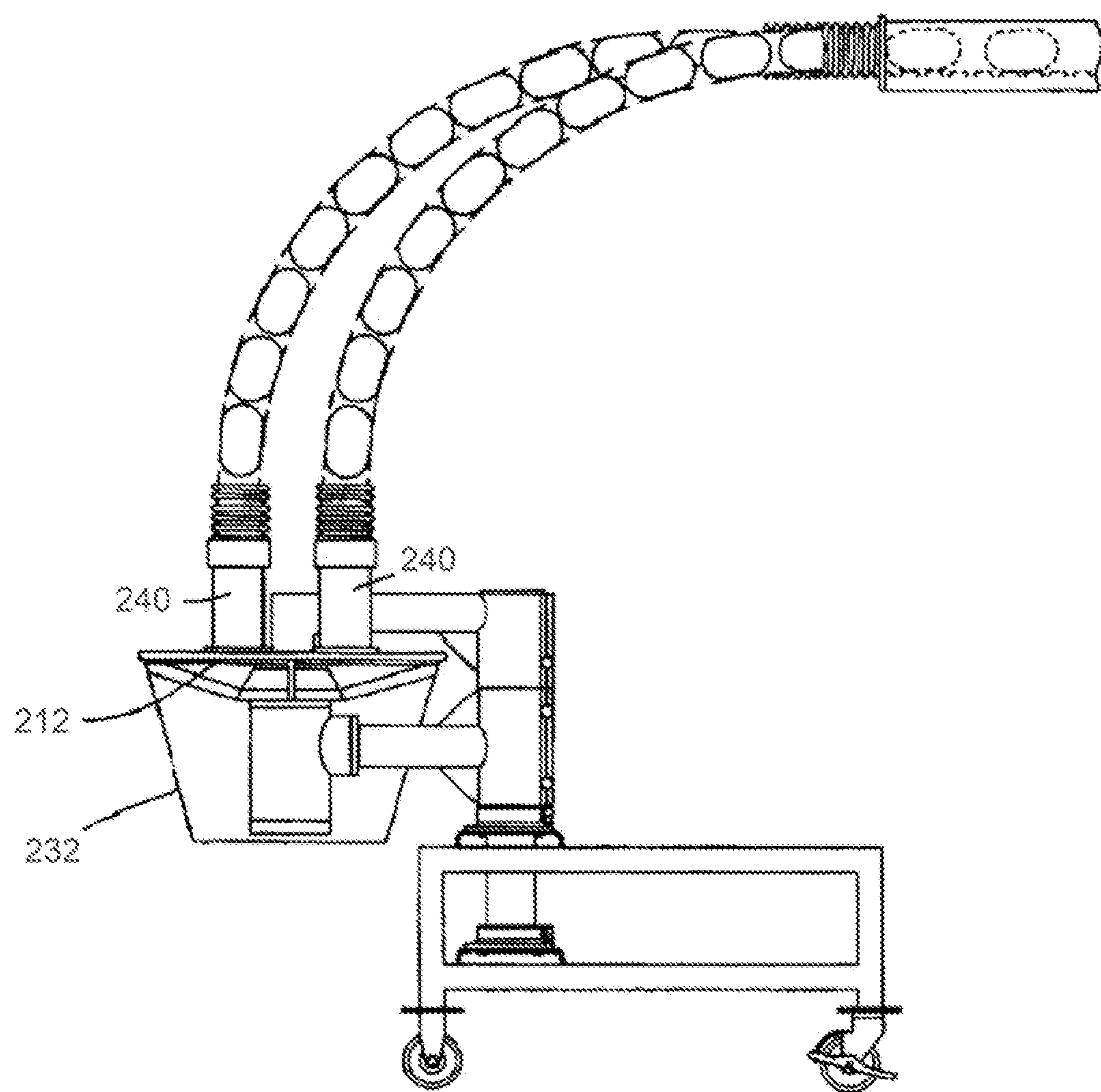


FIG. 19

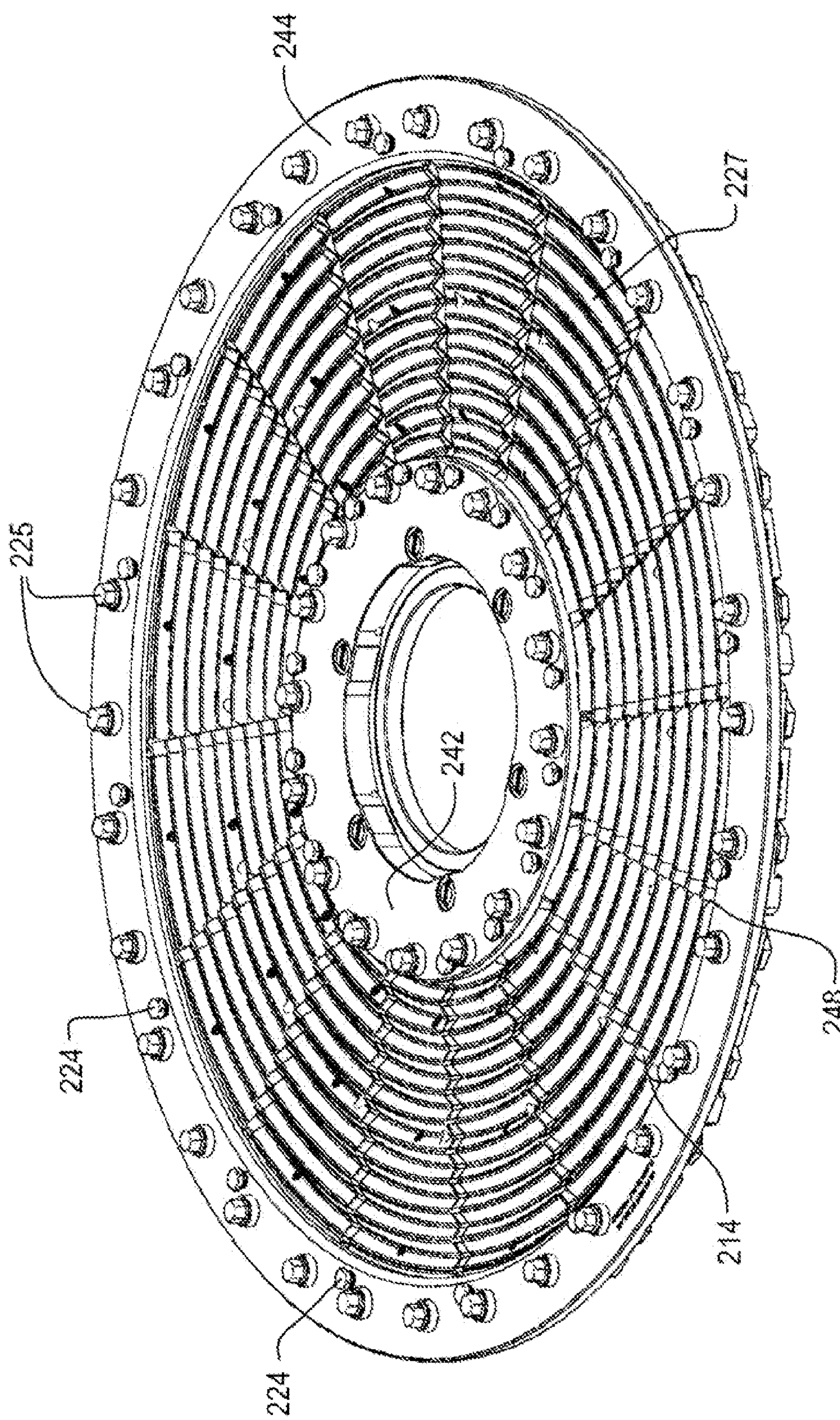


Fig. 20

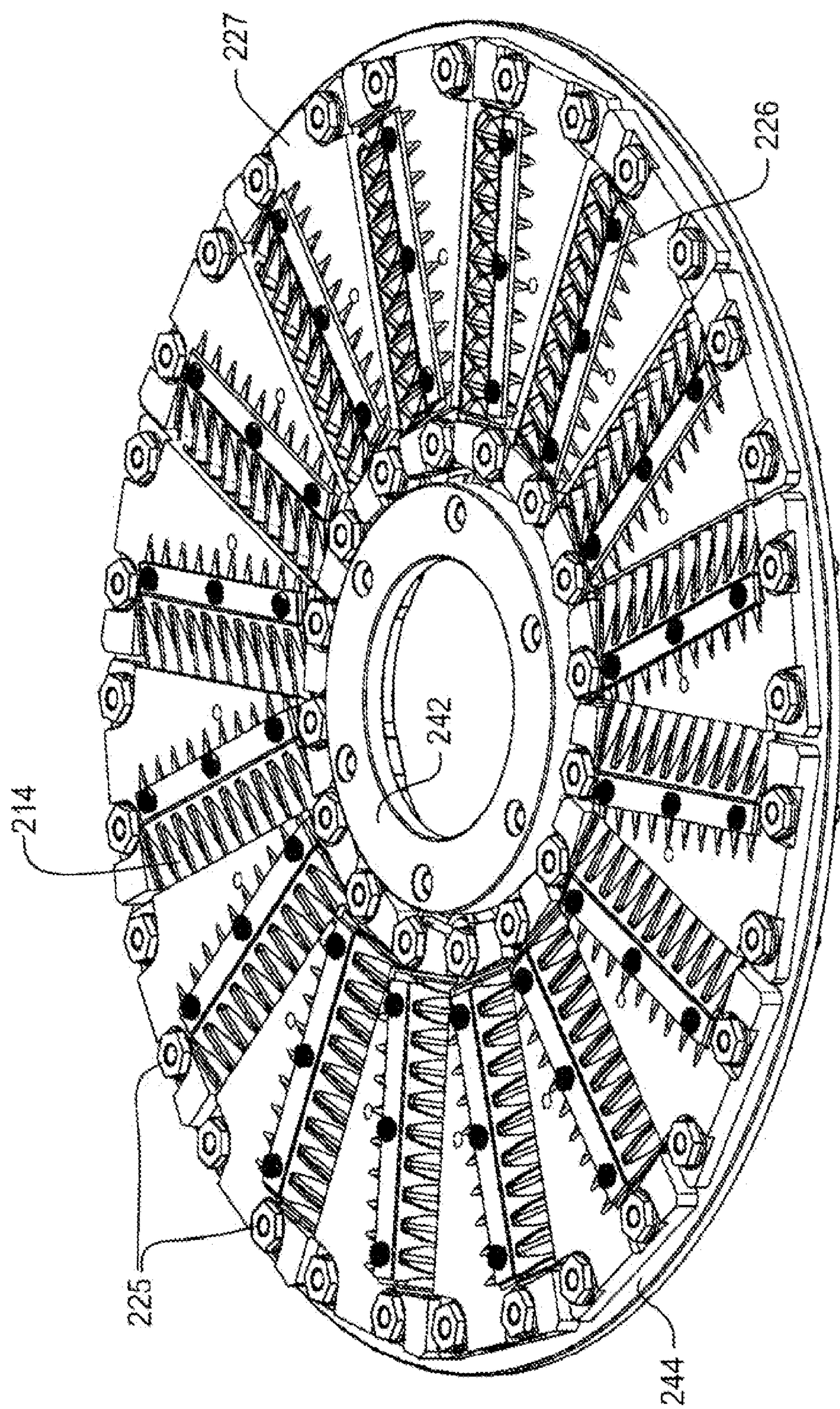


Fig. 21

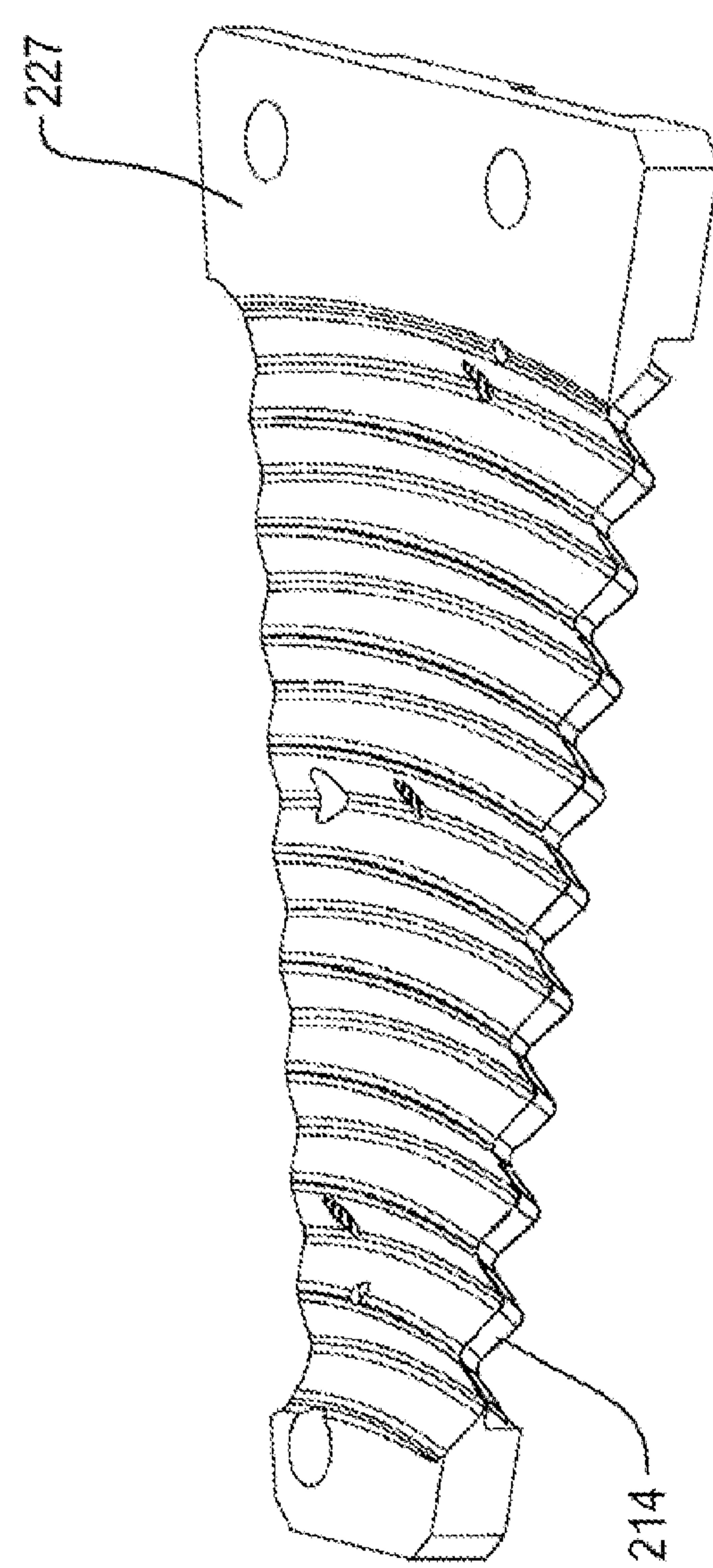


Fig. 22

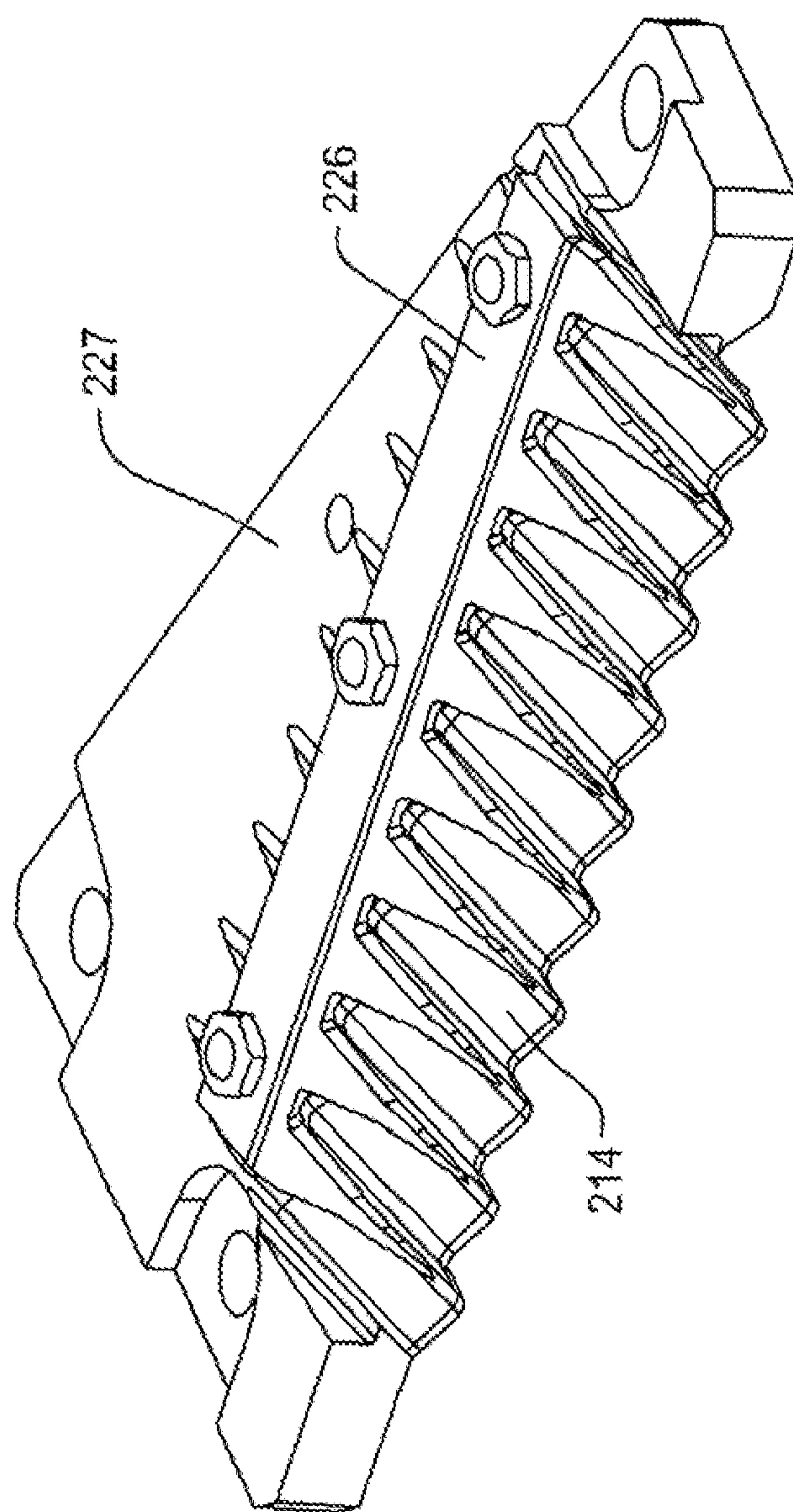


Fig. 23

