

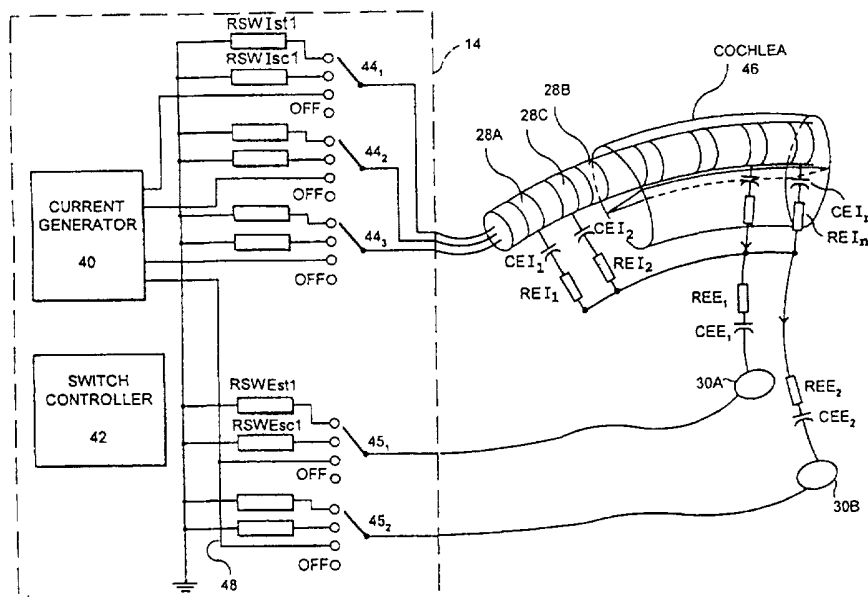


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(54) Title: COCHLEAR IMPLANT SYSTEM WITH SOFT TURN ON ELECTRODES



(57) Abstract

An implanted device such as a cochlear implant system includes a housing containing stimulating pulse generating circuitry (40), and a plurality of electrodes (28) external of the housing and receiving the pulses. Between the pulses, parasitic voltages may build up between the electrodes (28). In order to control the inrush current due to these parasitic voltages, multi-position switches (44, 45) are provided which selectively couple the electrodes to resistors selected to dissipate the voltages at a preselected maximum current to protect the body organs.

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COCHLEAR IMPLANT SYSTEM WITH SOFT TURN ON ELECTRODES

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A. Field of Invention

5 This invention pertains to cochlear implant systems using a plurality of electrodes to apply stimulation to a patient's auditory nerve to simulate ambient sounds, and more particularly to a system adapted to reduce inrush current through the electrodes when the electrodes are activated.

B. Description of the Prior Art

10 The subject invention pertains primarily to cochlear implant systems. These cochlear systems are used to provide therapy to a patient suffering from different illnesses. All of these systems require two sections: an internal or implanted section, and an external section. The external section includes a microphone for receiving ambient sounds and converting them to electrical sig-
15 nals. These electrical signals are processed and sent to the implanted section. The implanted section then generates excitation signals used to excite the auditory nerve of the patient between an intra-cochlear electrode array and one or more extra-cochlear electrodes. Prior to excitation, the electrodes are normally shorted to each other to equalize the electrode voltages.

20 A major disadvantage of these systems is as follows. When implanted, the extra-cochlear electrodes make contact with a different body fluid than the intra-cochlear electrodes. As a result, while they are idle, the electrodes tend to build up a potential difference which may range from 0 to 60 mV. Moreover during stimulation, a voltage of up to 300 mV may build up due to
25 electrochemical effects of the electrode tissue interface. This relatively high voltage may be maintained between the electrodes for several minutes after stimulation. As a result, when the electrodes are shorted, a relatively large inrush current can result between the electrodes. This large current inrush is undesirable because it can cause unwanted stimulation. In fact, the nerve can
30 be sensitive to currents of about 10 microamps if sustained for a long enough period (typically a few milliseconds). Any current exceeding this threshold affects the auditory nerve and produces a response therein. As a result, the

patient may be subjected to unwanted stimulation.

OBJECTIVES AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In view of the above-mentioned disadvantages of the prior art, it is an objective of the present invention to provide a cochlear implant system wherein
5 the electrodes can be safely discharged prior to the application of a stimulating pulse.

A further objective is to provide a means of operating the electrodes of an implanted cochlear system without producing unwanted stimulation.

Yet a further objective is to provide a cochlear implant system
10 incorporating the above-mentioned safety procedure without substantial increase in costs or complexity.

Other objectives and advantages shall become apparent from the following description. Briefly, in accordance with this invention, a cochlear implant system is provided with a switching network adapted to selectively short
15 the electrodes together for charge balancing. Importantly, the switching means is provided with current limiting resistors which limit the current transients. Preferably a first resistor is provided for each switch for limiting the initial or inrush current and a second resistor which normally consists of the 'on' resistance of the switch connecting the electrode to the common return bus.
20 The second resistor limits the current after the current has decayed substantially.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 shows a block diagram for a cochlear system constructed in accordance with this invention;

25 Figure 2 shows an electrical circuit with the electrode arrays and the body tissue therebetween shown as lumped elements;

Figure 2A shows a first equivalent circuit for the soft turn-on period for the lumped circuit of Figure 2;

Figure 2B shows a second equivalent circuit for a short circuit period
30 following the soft turn-on period;

Figure 3 shows the current flowing through the circuits of Figures 2A and 2B;

Figure 4 shows a somewhat diagrammatic detail of the current limiting circuitry used in the invention; and

Figure 5 shows details of a switch arrangement for the embodiment of Figure 4.

5

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring now to Figure 1, a cochlear system 10 constructed in accordance with this invention consists of an external portion 12, and an internal portion 14. The external portion 12 receives electrical signals from a microphone 16, which electrical signals correspond to ambient sounds. These signals are processed by a signal processor 18 and sent to a transmitter 20. The transmitter sends the signals from processor 12 to the implant section 14, using for example, inductive coupling.

In the implant portion 14, the signals are received by receiver 22. These signals are decoded and the appropriate stimulating signals generated. These stimulating signals are sent via a cable 26 to an electrode array 28 implanted into the patient's cochlea. One or more extra-cochlear return electrodes 30 may be provided for current to return to the implant section 14. In Figure 1, the return electrodes 30 are shown as being separate from the implanted portion housing 32, however it should be understood the housing itself, or a portion of the housing may act as the return electrode. Typically, the electrode array 28 is immersed in the cochlear fluid so that the currents and electrical fields generated by its individual electrodes (not shown) stimulate the nerve 34.

As previously mentioned, a voltage may build up between electrodes 28 and 30 prior to the application of a stimulation. In accordance with the present invention, prior to the application of excitation to the electrode arrays, two successive periods are provided for discharging this electrode voltage. The first period is referred to as the soft turn-on (st) period and has a duration of T1 seconds. The second period is referred to as the short circuit (sc) period and has a duration T2. Figure 2 shows an electrical circuit of the implant and the electrode arrays prior to the application of excitation signals. In this Figure all the electrodes of array 28 and the interfaces between the electrodes and the cochlea (including the cochlear fluid) are shown lumped into a resistor REI and

a capacitor CEI. Similarly the extra-cochlear electrodes 30 and their interfaces are shown lumped as a resistor REE and a capacitor CEE. According to this invention, these lumped elements are connected in series with each other, as shown, and are also selectively grounded through resistors by respective
 5 switches SWE and SWI. During the soft turn-on period, switch SWI connects array 28 to a resistor RSWIst. Similarly switch SWE connects array 30 to a resistor RSWEst. At the end of the soft turn-on period, to be determined as discussed below, switches SWI and SWE switch the respective arrays to corresponding resistors RSWIsc and RSWEsc, as shown. These resistors
 10 actually represent the internal resistances of the switches SWE and SWI, respectively, at different positions. A simplified equivalent circuit for the soft turn-on period is shown in Figure 2A. The capacitance C in this circuit is given by the following:

$$C=CEE*CEI/(CEE+CEI).$$

15 The equivalent resistance RTst is the total series resistance of the circuit of Figure 2 during the soft turn-on period and is given by:

$$RTst=REE+REI+RSWEst+RSWIst.$$

Initially, i.e. at t=0, the capacitor C is charged to a voltage VE. During the soft turn on period, the voltage across the capacitor C is

20
$$Vst(t)=VE*exp(-t/Tst)$$

where Tst is the time constant of the circuit of Figure 2A, i.e.,

$$Tst=RTst*C.$$

The current flowing through the circuit of Figure 2A is given by

$$Ist(t)=Vst(t)/RTst=(VE/RTst)*exp(-t/Tst).$$

25 Current Ist(t) is illustrated in Figure 3 and its maximum amplitude is VE/RTst. This current Ist(t) flows from one electrode array to the other and, as explained above, if its amplitude is large enough, it may be perceived by nerve 34. It has been found experimentally that in general nerve 34 is sensitive to currents exceeding 10 microamps. Therefore, in this invention, the maximum
 30 amplitude of the current flowing between the electrodes is limited to a threshold value ILIM which is preferably 10 microamps, although it may be lower as well.

Therefore in the above expression:

$$ILIM = VE / RT_{st} = VE / (REE + REI + RSWE_{st} + RSWI_{st})$$

The values of VE, REE and REI are determined experimentally.

The values of the switch resistances, RSWI_{st} and RSWR_{st} can then be determined from the above expression so that when the soft turn-on period starts the peak value of current I_{st}(t) decays to an adequately low level, as illustrated below.

More particularly, the combined switch on resistance RSW₁ of all the switches used to energize the electrodes during a soft turn-on comprises the sum of the parallel resistance of all the soft turn-on resistors that are connected to the electrodes. Therefore, the total switch resistance during the soft turn-on RSW_{Tst} is given by:

$$RSW_{Tst} = RSWE_{st} + RSWI_{st} = (VE / ILIM) - REE - REI$$

Figure 3 shows current I_{st}(t) as a function of time. From t=0 to t=T₁, the current I_{st}(t) decays exponentially from ILIM until it reaches a value I₁.

At the end of the turn on period, i.e., T₁, the switches SWE, SWI connecting the electrode arrays are switched to a different, lower impedance state for a time which is referred to as the short circuit period (sc). The equivalent circuit for the short circuit period is shown in Figure 2B. In this figure, the capacitor C is charged to a voltage equal to the voltage on capacitor C at the end of the soft turn-on period. Thus, the voltage on capacitor C during the second stage is given by:

$$V_{sc}(t') = VS * \exp(-t'/T_{sc})$$

$$\text{where } VS = V_{st}(T_1) = VE \exp(-T_1/T_{st})$$

and t' = t - T₁. (i.e. the time from the beginning of the second period).

Similarly, the current during second period is given by:

$$I_{sc}(t') = V_{st}(t') / RT_{sc}$$

At the beginning of the short circuit period, the current I_{sc} must not exceed the threshold ILIM. Therefore,

$$I_{sc}(t'=0) = ILIM = VS / RT_{sc}$$

$$RT_{sc} = VS / ILIM = (VE * \exp(-T_1/T_{st})) / ILIM$$

$T1 \geq Tst * Ln (VE/(ILIM * RTsc))$ (where Ln signifies the natural log).

Thus the above expression defines the minimum duration of the soft turn on stage T1. Alternatively, if the duration T1 is selected, then the total switch
5 resistance RSWTsc must be:

$$RSWTsc > (RSWTst + REE + REI) * \exp (-T1/Tst) - REE-REI$$

During the second period T2, the current IE decays exponentially to a value I2 at a faster time constant Tsc, as shown in Figure 3.

10 A more detailed illustration of the invention is shown in Figure 4. In this Figure implant section 14 includes a current generator 40, a switch controller 42 and two banks of switches 44, 45 controlled by switch controller 42. Each of the switches 44 are used to selectively control the current flow from one electrode in the intra-cochlear electrode array 28 disposed in cochlea 46 to any other
15 electrode, including extra-cochlear electrodes 30. More particularly, each electrode of array 28, such as electrodes 28A, 28B, 28C is connected to a respective switch 44₁, 44₂, 44₃. Similarly each extra-cochlear electrode 30A, 30B, is connected to a corresponding switch 45₁, 45₂. Each switch has four positions. In the first position shown in Figure 4, each switch is connected to a
20 high value resistor RSWIst_i, RSWEst_i, where i indicates the number of the switch. In the second position each switch is connected to a low value resistor RSWI_{sci}, RSWE_{sci}. In the third position, each switch is connected to the current generator 40. As seen in the Figure 4, preferably each electrode of array 28 is individually connected to the current generator 40, while the extra-cochlear
25 electrodes 30 are connected to the current generator by a common return bus 48. Finally, the fourth position of each switch 44, 45 is an OFF position. The resistors are also connected to a common ground bus 50 and correspond to resistor RSE and RSI in Figure 2.

In addition, Figure 4 shows the interface for each intra-cochlear electrode
30 and the cochlear fluid and/or tissue as a capacitor CEI_i in series with a resistor REI_i. Similarly, the interface with each extra-cochlear electrode is represented

as a capacitor CEE_i in series with a resistor REE_i . These individual parameters corresponds to the lumped parameters discussed above as follows:

$$5 \quad REE = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{REE_1} + \frac{1}{REE_2}}$$

$$REI = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{REI_1} + \frac{1}{REI_2} + \dots + \frac{1}{REI_n}}$$

$$10 \quad CEE = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{CEE_1} + \frac{1}{CEE_2}}$$

$$15 \quad CEI = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{CEI_1} + \frac{1}{CEI_2} + \dots + \frac{1}{CEI_n}}$$

$$RSW_{lst} = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{RSW_{lst_1}} + \frac{1}{RSW_{lst_2}} + \dots + \frac{1}{RSW_{lst_n}}}$$

$$20 \quad RSW_{lsc} = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{RSW_{lsc_1}} + \frac{1}{RSW_{lsc_2}} + \dots + \frac{1}{RSW_{lsc_n}}}$$

$$RSW_{Est} = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{RSW_{Est_1}} + \frac{1}{RSW_{Est_2}}}$$

$$RSWEsc = \frac{1}{\frac{1}{RSWesc_1} + \frac{1}{RSWesc_2}}$$

5 The invention operates as follows. When the device is powered down all the switches of banks 44, 45 are in the OFF position, allowing the electrodes 28, 30 to float. As a result, a potential charge may be built up on these electrodes. When the device becomes powered up, but prior to the application of stimulation currents, each electrode switch of banks 44, 45 is flipped to position one
10 thereby connecting the electrodes 28, 30 to the ground bus 50 through the high value resistors $RSWEst_i$, $RSWlst_i$. As a result a current will flow from each intra-cochlear electrode 28 to at least one extra-cochlear electrode. In Figure 4, currents i_1 , i_2 , i_3 are shown as flowing from each electrode 28A, 28B, 28C to a extra-cochlear electrode 30A, 30B. It should be understood that in practice a
15 much lower number of extra-cochlear electrodes 30 may be used than intra-cochlear electrodes. Moreover, some manufacturers may prefer to provide a single extra cochlear electrode 30, preferably disposed on or made an integral part of the casing 32.

The high value resistors $RSWEst$, $RSWlst$ need not be identical but can
20 be selected to limit the individual current flowing from each electrode 28. In addition, the total current $I=i_1+i_2+i_3...$ should also be limited so that at the time the switches are turned to the first positioned, the current I is limited to a maximum initial value $ILIM$. Thereafter the total current I decays exponentially at a time constant defined by the total resistance and interface capacitance of
25 the electrodes, as shown during a first time period $T1$ in Figure 3.

Typical values for the various parameters discussed are as follows:

CEE = 20 μ F
CEI = 2.2 μ F
REE = 100 ohm
30 REI = 91 ohm
ILIM = 10 μ A
VE = 300 mV

Application of the previously developed equations generates the following values:

$$T1 = 200 \text{ msec}$$

$$RSWT_{st} = RSWI_{st} + RSWE_{st} = 30,000 \text{ ohms}$$

5 $RSWT_{sc} = RSWI_{sc} + RSWE_{sc} = 890 \text{ ohms}$

If desired, a larger number of stages of voltage discharge, n , may be employed, instead of two. In this case, each electrode would be connected to the common bus through the resistors, each one having a smaller value than the previous one. There would be n such periods of discharge, $T1$ to Tn .
 10 During $T1$ the electrodes would be connected to the common bus by the highest value resistor, during $T2$ they would be connected through the next highest and so on.

In this fashion, the current flowing through the electrodes 28, 30 are effectively limited during the electrode grounding thereby insuring that the
 15 patient does not perceive unwanted stimulation.

In Figure 4, switches 44, 45 are illustrated as being idealized switches having no resistance and being associated with discrete resistors. However, preferably, each multi-position switch 44, 45 is implemented as a plurality of
 20 electronic switches formed on an integrated circuit, with each switch having a different internal resistance. An example of this arrangement is shown in Figure 5. According to this embodiment, each switch 44 and corresponding resistors HR and HL are replaced by an IC switch assembly 100 consisting of three
 25 switches 102, 104, 106, each having a corresponding internal resistance 108, 110, 112. The resistance 108 corresponds to resistance HR, resistance 110 corresponds to resistance LR, while resistance 112 is very small so that it has virtually no effect on the current. The first, second and third positions described in conjunction with Figure 3 correspond respectively to switches 102, 104, 106 being closed, respectively. For the fourth position, switches 102, 104, 106 are open.

30 Although the invention has been described with reference to a preferred embodiment, it is to be understood that this embodiment is merely illustrative of the application of the principles of the invention. Accordingly, the embodiment

described in particular should be considered exemplary, not limiting, with respect to the following claims.

We claim:

1. An implantable device for providing therapy comprising:
 - a plurality of electrodes;
 - an implantable housing;
 - means disposed in said housing for delivering electrical signals to said electrodes;
 - means disposed in said housing for limiting a current through said electrodes caused by parasitic potential.
2. The device of claim 1 wherein said means for limiting includes impedance means selected to limit said current to a preselected maximum value.
3. The device of claim 2 further comprising switching means for selectively activating said impedance means.
4. The device of claim 2 wherein said impedance means includes a first impedance and a second, said first and second cooperating with said electrodes to provide a first and a second decay for said current, said first decay being slower than said second decay.
5. The device of claim 4 further comprising switching means for sequentially activating said first and second impedance means.
6. A cochlear implant system comprising:
 - a cochlear implant housing;
 - pulse generator means for generating pulses, said pulse generator means being disposed in said housing;
 - a plurality of electrodes arranged to receive said pulses, said electrodes being charged to a parasitic voltage between said pulses; and
 - parasitic voltage reducing means for reducing said parasitic voltage by providing a resistive path between said electrodes; and
 - current limiting means disposed in said housing for limiting a current through said resistive path to a predetermined maximum level.
7. The system of claim 6 wherein said electrodes includes a set of intra-cochlear electrodes, and at least one extra cochlear electrode, said

resistive path being established between said extra cochlear electrode and one of said intra-cochlear electrodes.

8. The system of claim 6 wherein said current limiting means includes an impedance having a preselected value.

9. The system of claim 6 wherein said current limiting means includes a first resistance selected to provide a current decay having a first time constant, and a second impedance selected to provide said current decay at second time constants faster than said first time constant.

10. The system of claim 6 wherein said generating means includes switching means for selectively activating said current limiting means prior to said pulses.

11. A cochlear implant system comprising:
an array of electrodes for stimulating an auditory nerve;
a pulse generator for generating auditory stimulation pulses;
a plurality of switches for selectively coupling said stimulation pulses to corresponding electrodes;

current limiting means for limiting an inrush current between said electrodes, said switches being arranged to activate said current limiting means prior to said pulses.

12. The system of claim 11 wherein said switches each have multiple positions.

13. The system of claim 10 wherein said current limiting means includes a plurality of resistors selected to limit said current to a preselected maximum level, each resistor being activated when said switches are in a preselected position.

14. The system of claim 10 wherein said current limiting means includes a first set of resistors selected to decay said current at a first time constant, and a second resistor selected to decay said current at a second time constant, each resistor being connected to one of said switches.

15. The system of claim 14 further comprising control means for activating said first and second resistor sequentially.

16. The system of claim 14 wherein each said switches have a plurality of positions, including a first position coupled to said first resistor, a second position coupled to said second resistor and a third position coupled to said pulse generator.

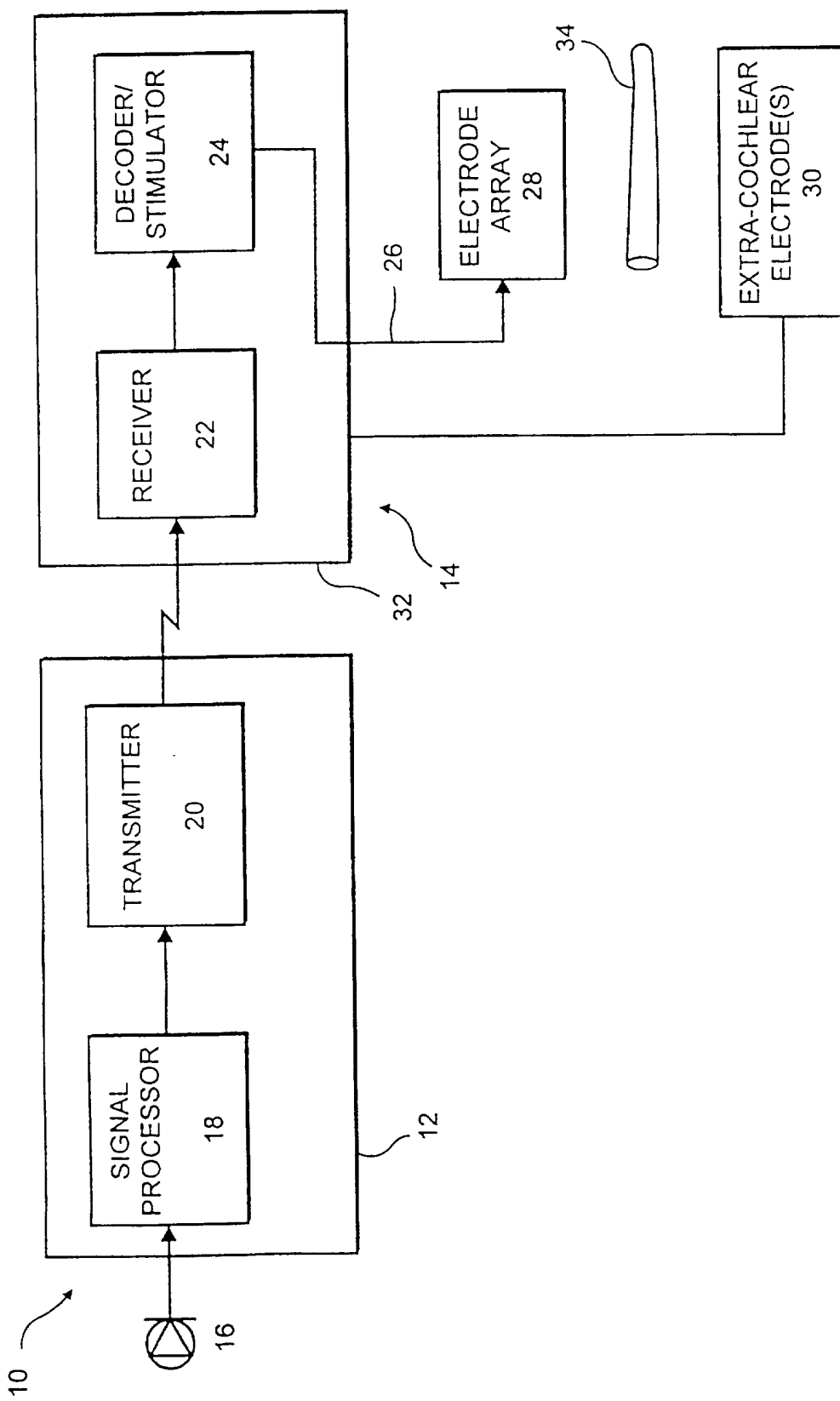


FIG. 1

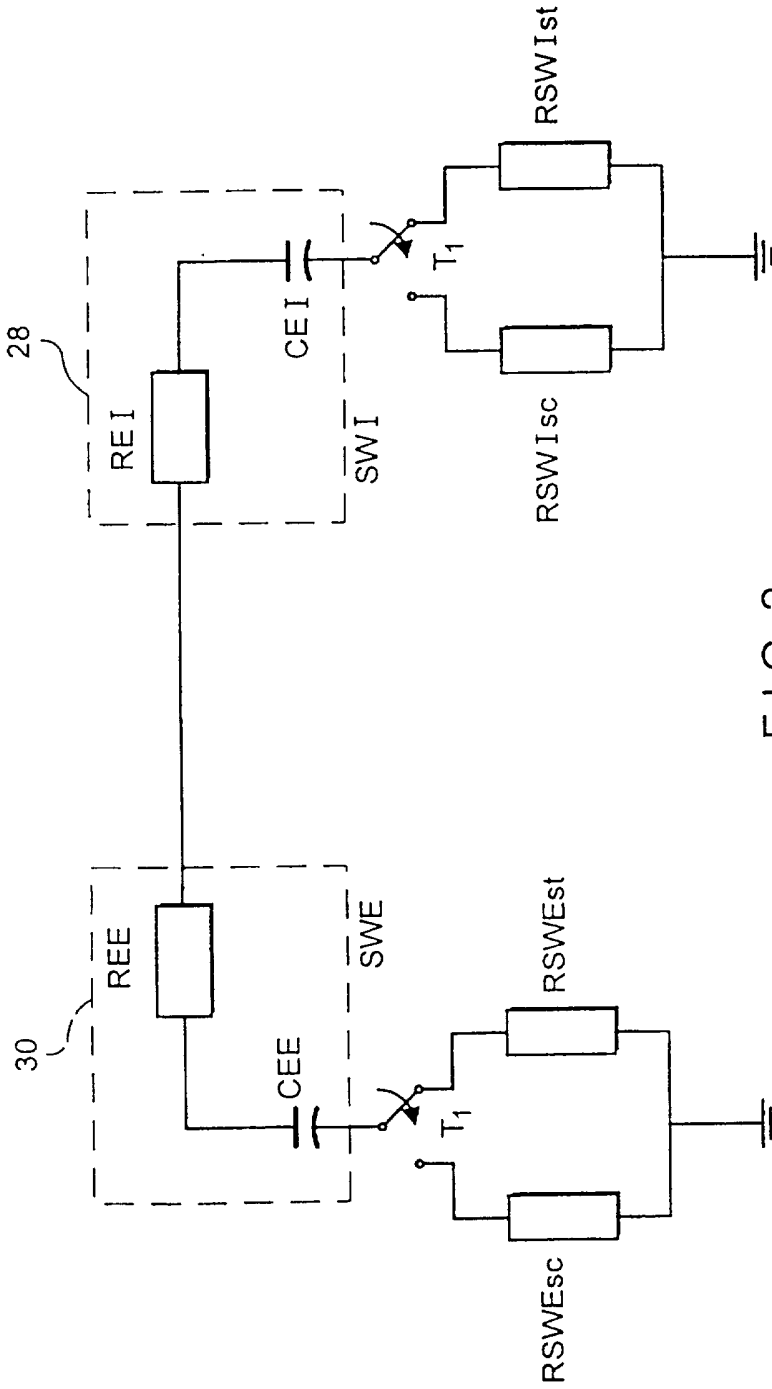


FIG. 2

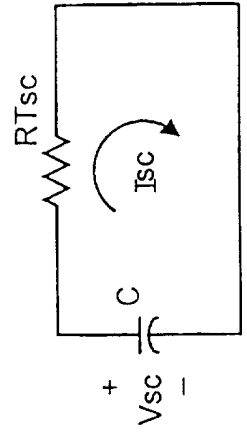


FIG. 2B

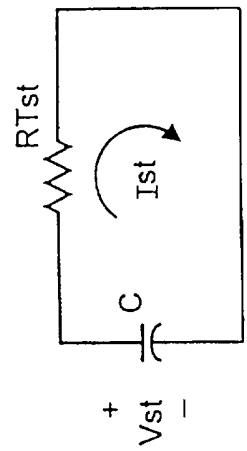


FIG. 2A

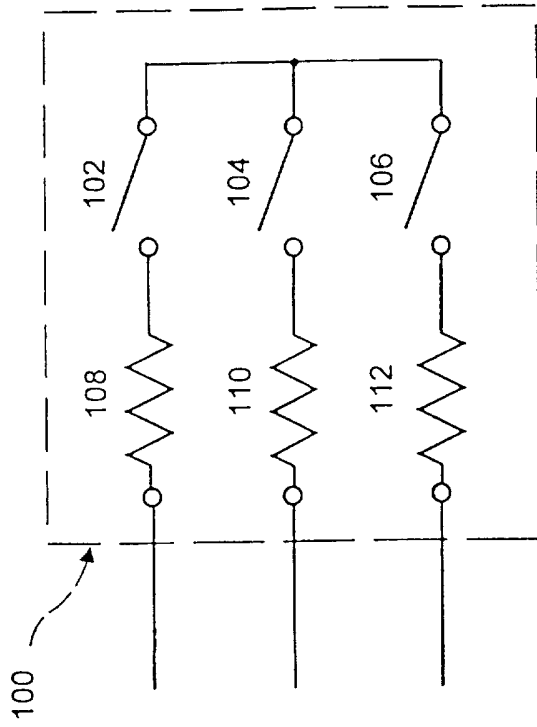


FIG. 5

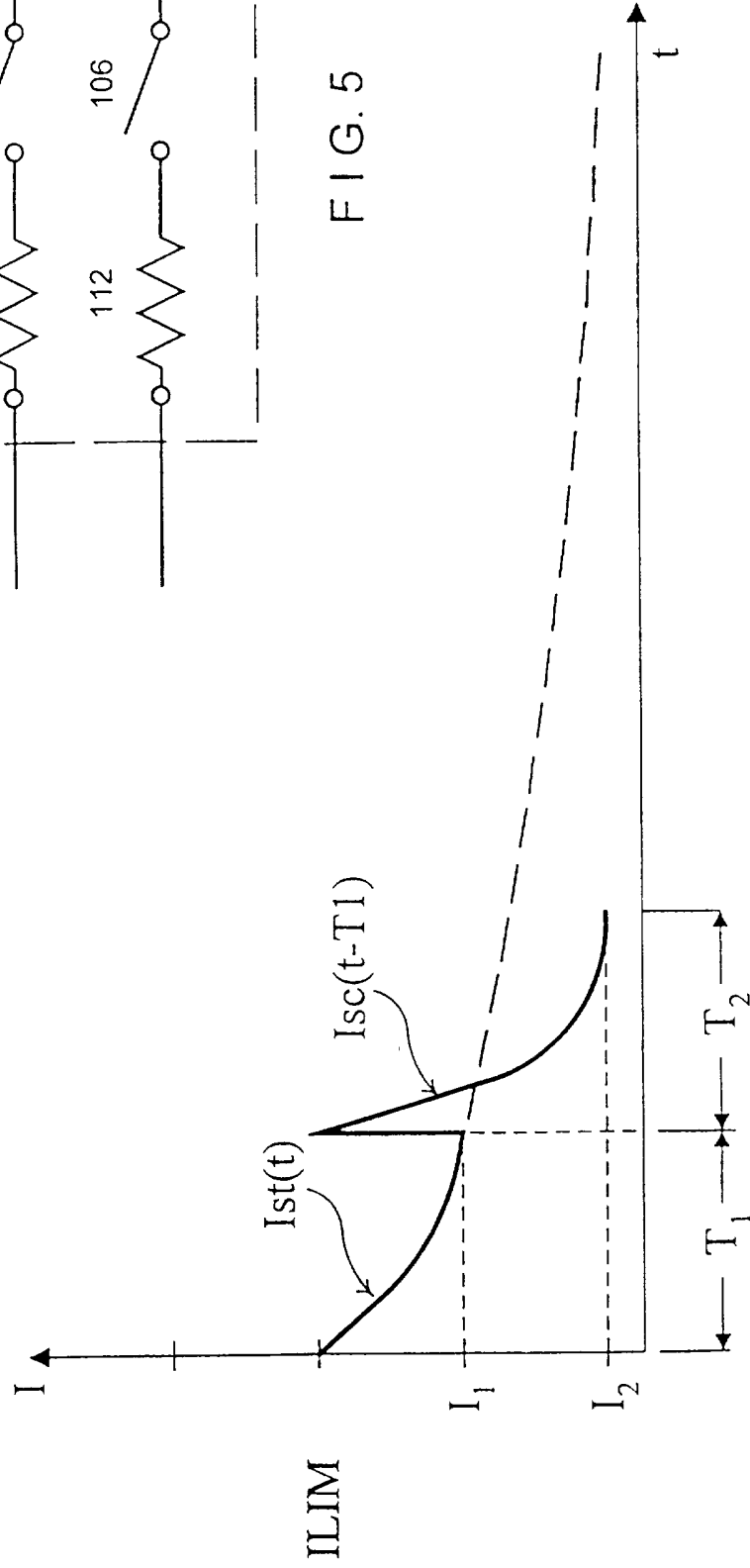


FIG. 3

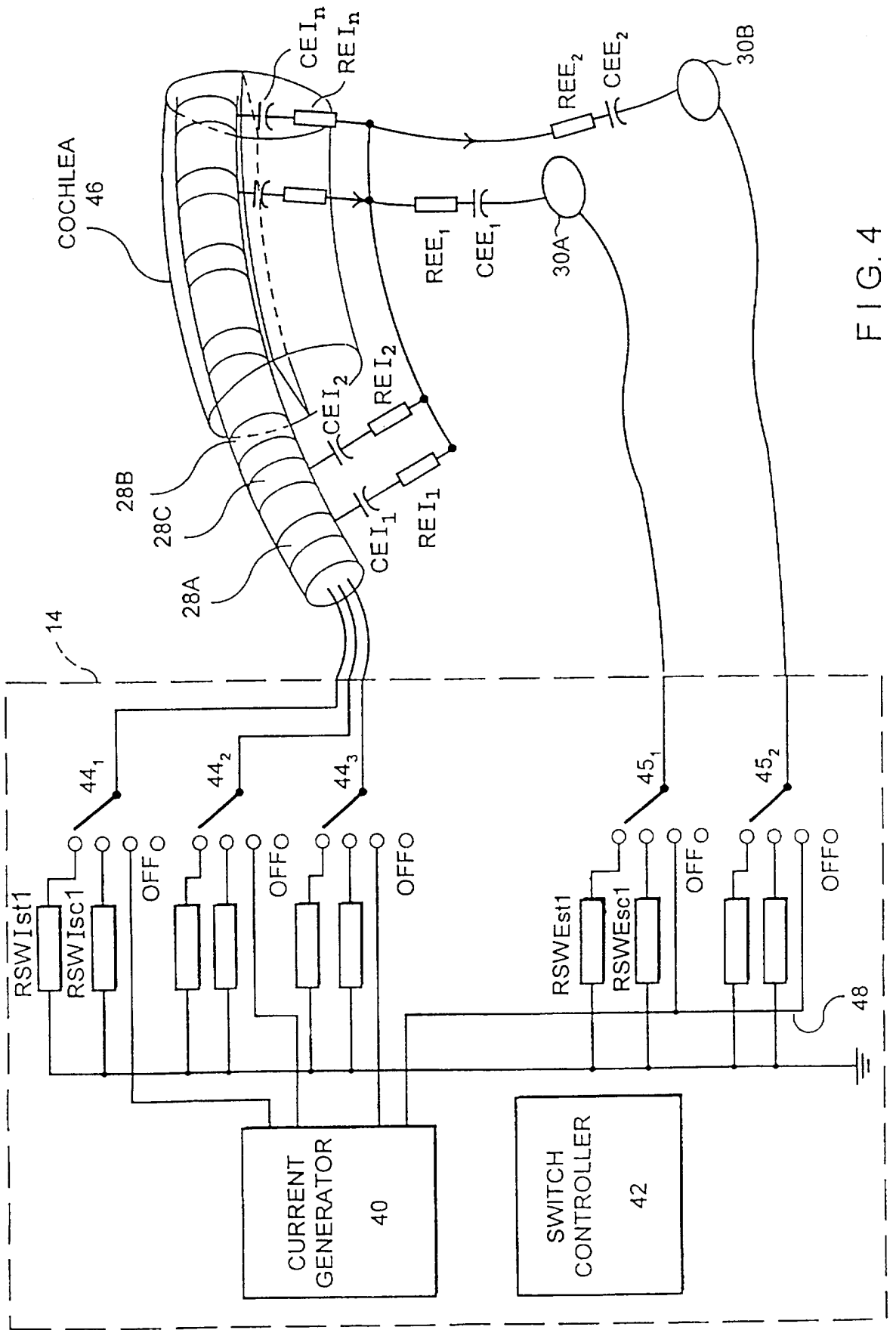


FIG. 4

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

Int Cl⁶: A61F 11/04, H04R 25/00

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

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
IPC : A61F 11/04, H04R 25/00

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched
AU : IPC as above

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

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
A	EP 247649 A (THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA) 2 December 1987 whole document	1-16
A	AU 46815/85 B (UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE) 13 March 1986 whole document	1-16

Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C See patent family annex

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Date of the actual completion of the international search 28 March 1996	Date of mailing of the international search report 3RD APRIL 1996.
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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT
Information on patent family members

International Application No.
PCT/AU 95/00864

This Annex lists the known "A" publication level patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned international search report. The Australian Patent Office is in no way liable for these particulars which are merely given for the purpose of information.

Patent Document Cited in Search Report		Patent Family Member					
AU	46815/85	US	4947844				
EP	247649	AU	26683/84	CA	1212501	DE	3482548
		JP	4012141	US	4532930		
END OF ANNEX							