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(54) Title: METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR SAMPLE ALIQUOT STORAGE

(57) Abstract: A method and system of sample aliquot storage for automated immunochemistry or chemistry instruments are provided. The method and system provide a sample aliquot storage unit having a sample storage wheel for storing sample vessels containing sample aliquots in a chilled enclosed environment, which are accessible by both a sample pipettor of a sample aliquoting station and a pick-and-place gripper. The pick-and-place gripper transports the sample vessels containing sample aliquots to multiple independent reagent pipetting stations respectively for sample aspiration of subsequent assay, and thereafter transports the sample vessels containing remaining sample aliquots back to the sample storage wheel to be stored in the chilled environment for reflex testing. When all the tests are completed, the pick-and-place gripper transports the sample vessels to a waste storage area.



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METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR SAMPLE ALIQUOT STORAGE

Related Patent Application

This is a continuation-in-part of the U.S. patent application serial number 09/815,088, entitled "Method and System For Automated Immunochemistry Analysis,"
5 filed on March 16, 2001, the content of which is incorporated herein in its entirety.

Background of the Invention

Area of the Art

The present invention relates generally to automated immunochemistry instruments and methodologies, and more particularly to methods and systems for
10 sample aliquot storage used in connection with automated immunochemistry instruments.

Description of the Prior Art

Automated immunochemistry instruments are widely used in clinical chemistry sampling and analyzing applications for performing various assays. Such automated
15 immunochemistry instruments often incorporate a sample aliquot unit for aliquoting samples to be analyzed. The following references are found to be pertinent to the field of the present invention:

- United States Patent No. 3,607,099 issued to Scordato *et al.*;
- United States Patent No. 4,166,094 issued to Froehlich *et al.*;
- 20 United States Patent No. 4,363,245 issued to Schmid;
- United States Patent No. 5,182,083 issued to Barker *et al.*;
- United States Patent No. 5,204,269 issued to Barker *et al.*;
- United States Patent No. 5,229,074 issued to Heath *et al.* ("Heath '074 Patent");
- United States Patent No. 5,236,666 issued to Hullette *et al.*;
- 25 United States Patent No. 5,350,564 issued to Mazza *et al.*;
- United States Patent No. 5,366,896 issued to Margrey *et al.*;
- United States Patent No. 5,580,524 issued to Forrest *et al.* ("Forrest '524 Patent");
- United States Patent No. 5,587,129 issued to Kurosaki *et al.*;
- United States Patent No. 5,597,733 issued to Bell *et al.* ("Bell '733 Patent");

United States Patent No. 5,646,046 issued to Fischer *et al.*;
United States Patent No. 5,670,120 issued to Degenhardt *et al.*;
United States Patent No. 5,814,277 issued to Bell *et al.* ("Bell '277 Patent"); and
United States Patent No. 5,989,499 issued to Catanzariti *et al.*

5 The Forrest '524 Patent disclosed an automated multi-test capability assay apparatus in modular form for the non-sequential processing of samples for the assay. The apparatus includes a device for ensuring solid phase suspension which includes a housing, a rotatable support having means for independently rotatably mounting a vessel around a circumference of the support, and a drive wheel for rotating the mounted vessel,
10 where the housing includes a driving surface having longer circumferential dimensions than the drive wheel and surrounding the drive wheel and engageable therewith.

 The Kurosaki '129 Patent disclosed an apparatus for automatically analyzing a specimen. The apparatus includes a first dispensing means for dispensing the specimen in a sample vial into a stock vial, a second dispensing means for dispensing the specimen
15 in the stock vial into an assay vial, and a third dispensing means for dispensing the reagent into the assay vial. A cooling device is provided below a stock vial turntable for cooling the specimens contained in the stock vials.

 The Heath '074 Patent, the Bell '733 Patent, and the Bell '277 Patent also disclosed various arrangements of using a turntable with a cooler for cooling the samples
20 and reagent contained in the turntable.

 While various sample aliquot units for automated immunochemistry instruments have been developed, as disclosed in the above references, there is still a need to create and develop a new sample aliquot and storage unit that can accommodate the following two new emerging trends that are evolving in the clinical laboratory. First, there is an
25 increase in the use of automatic sample reflex testing. Second, the laboratory automation has increased the demands for the quick release of sample tubes. These two new trends require new sample aliquot units to be capable of storing the samples for reflex testing, while supporting the high throughput of the automated immunochemistry instruments.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention is directed to a new method and system of sample aliquot storage for an automated immunochemistry instrument.

5 It is one of the primary objects of the present invention to provide a new method and system of sample aliquot storage for an automated immunochemistry instrument that is capable of performing automatic sample reflex testing.

It is also a primary object of the present invention to provide a new method and system of sample aliquot storage for an automated immunochemistry instrument that is capable of having a higher throughput.

10 It is another primary object of the present invention to provide a new method and system of sample aliquot storage for an automated immunochemistry instrument that is capable of working with multiple pipetting modules for running different samples simultaneously.

15 In addition, it is a primary object of the present invention to provide a new method and system of sample aliquot storage for an automated immunochemistry instrument that ensures sample integrity and low evaporation by incorporating an enclosed large capacity chilled sample storage area.

20 These and other objects and advantages may be achieved by a sample aliquot storage system of the present invention. In accordance with the embodiment of the present invention, a sample aliquot storage system of the present invention, which is used as part of an automated immunochemistry instrument, has a chilled storage for storing multiple sample vessels containing aliquoted samples that may be used for reflex testing. The sample vessels containing aliquoted samples can be moved to one of the multiple independent pipetting stations. Each of the multiple independent pipetting stations has a
25 pipettor for aspirating a required amount of sample from the sample vessels and dispensing it into an reaction vessel. This allows the immunochemistry instruments to run different samples simultaneously (while their respective cycles may be offset in time).

Such an arrangement has been found to provide a number of advantages. As explained in greater detail below, the new method and system of sample aliquot storage of the present invention support automatic reflex testing of the samples as well as a high throughput of the automated immunochemistry instrument.

5 The new method and system of sample aliquot storage of the present invention also allow the immunochemistry instrument with multiple pipetting stations to run different samples simultaneously.

 The system of the present invention may be used in connection with other chemical analyzers, such as, but not limited to, chemistry and hematology diagnostic
10 instrumentation.

 The invention is defined in its fullest scope in the appended claims and is described below in its preferred embodiments.

Description of the Figures

 The above-mentioned and other features of this invention and the manner of
15 obtaining them will become more apparent, and will be best understood by reference to the following description, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings. These drawings depict only a typical embodiment of the invention and do not therefore limit its scope. They serve to add specificity and detail, in which:

 FIGURE 1 is an illustrative block diagram showing the basic structural and
20 functional modules of an automated immunochemistry instrument incorporating the sample aliquot storage system of the present invention;

 FIGURE 2 is a perspective view showing the arrangement of the main sample pipetting station of the automated immunochemistry instrument and the sample aliquot storage system of the present invention incorporated in the automated immunochemistry
25 instrument; and

 FIGURE 3 is an exploded perspective view showing the arrangement of the sample aliquot chiller assembly of the sample aliquot storage system of the present invention.

FIGURE 4 is a side sectional view of one embodiment of the sample aliquot storage unit of the present invention.

Detailed Description of the Invention

5 The present invention is directed to a new method and system of sample aliquot storage for an automated immunochemistry instrument. The new system of the present invention includes a sample aliquot storage unit incorporated in the automated immunochemistry instrument, and the method of the present invention includes the procedures for storing and transporting sample vessels containing sample aliquots to be automatically reflex tested by the automated immunochemistry instrument.

10 Referring to Figure 1, there is shown an illustrative block diagram demonstrating the basic structural and functional modules of the automated immunochemistry instrument, incorporating the sample aliquot storage of the present invention. A detailed description of the functions and operations of the automated immunochemistry instrument is provided in the Assignee's co-pending patent application for "Method and
15 System For Automated Immunochemistry Analysis," serial number 09/815,088, and the content of which is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference.

As shown in Figure 1, the basic structural and functional modules of the automated immunochemistry instrument include a sample presentation unit 1, a main sample aliquoting station 2, a bulk vessel feeder 3, first dual reagent pipetting stations 4
20 and 5, second dual reagent pipetting stations 6 and 7, first pick-and-place gripper 8, a second pick-and-place gripper 9, a third pick-and-place gripper 10, a sample aliquot storage unit 11 of the present invention, an incubator/wash/read station 12, and a reagent storage 13.

The sample presentation unit 1 is used to transport the entire required test
25 samples to and from the main sample aliquoting station 2. A detailed description of the configurations and functions of one embodiment of the sample presentation unit 1 is provided in the Assignee's co-pending patent application for "Sample Presentation Unit," serial number 09/848,450, and is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference. However, it should be understood that other lab automation systems or automated track

conveyance systems may also used as long as they are capable of transport the entire required test samples to and from the main sample aliquoting station 2.

The main sample aliquoting station 2 is used to aspirate sample aliquots out of the sample tubes and dispense them into sample vessels supplied by the bulk vessel feeder 3. A detailed description of the configurations and functions of one embodiment of the bulk vessel feeder 3 is provided in the Assignee's co-pending patent application for "Bulk Vessel Feeder," serial number 09/777,750, and is incorporated herein by reference. However, it should be understood that other vessel supply mechanism that is capable of supplying sample vessels may also be used for the purpose of the present invention.

The four reagent pipetting stations 4, 5, 6, and 7 are used to mix sample aliquots with reagents for the subsequent assay. The four reagent pipetting stations 4, 5, 6, and 7 are arranged as two dual reagent pipetting stations and are independent to each other, each having its own fluid pumps and valves, wash towers, reaction vessel carriages, and pipettor. The individual structures and functions of each of these reagent pipetting stations 4, 5, 6, and 7 conform to existing arrangements used in the Access Instruments (Beckman Coulter, Inc., CA), which are known to those of ordinary skill in the art, and therefore will not be described in detail here.

The three vessel pick-and-place grippers 8, 9, and 10 are used to transport sample and reaction vessels among the various modules of the automated immunochemistry instrument. The first pick-and-place gripper 8 is used to transport sample vessels among the bulk vessel feeder 3, the sample aliquot storage unit 11, and the reagent pipetting stations 4, 5, 6, and 7. The second pick-and-place gripper 9 is used to transport reaction vessels between the reagent pipetting stations 4, 5, 6, and 7 and the incubator of the incubator/wash/read station 12. The third pick-and-place gripper 10 is used to transport reaction vessels between the incubator wheel and the wash wheel of the incubator/wash/read station 12. A detailed description of the configurations and functions of one embodiment of the vessel pick-and-place grippers 8, 9, and 10 is provided in the Assignee's co-pending patent application for "Method and System for Picking and Placing Vessels," serial number 09/7771,471, and is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference. However, it should be understood that other pick-and-place

mechanism that is capable of transporting sample and reaction vessels among the various modules of the automated immunochemistry instrument is also contemplated for the purpose of the present invention.

5 The sample aliquot storage unit **11** of the present invention is used for storing the sample aliquots contained in the sample vessels in a controlled environment enclosure at a low temperature for a certain period of time, *e.g.*, up to three (3) hours, so that the samples may be used for reflex testing. When a test is requested on a patient sample, the test outcome may drive a request for additional testing. This automatic request for additional tests is reflex testing.

10 The time delay from the first aspiration to knowing if another test will be started can range to as long as 45 minutes or more. To hold a sample tube for such a period of time prevents the sample from being used in other places. If the tube is passed to other instruments, it may be difficult for a laboratory technician to find the tube and reload it on the instrument requesting the reflex test.

15 To allow a single quick sample draw on sample tubes that might require reflex testing, a single aspiration (aliquot) can be taken with sufficient test material for the possible reflex test(s). However, to insure that the test materials do not evaporate or deteriorate, the sample aliquots need to be enclosed and refrigerated on board the automated immunochemistry instrument.

20 Referring to Figure 2, there is shown the arrangement of the main sample aliquoting station **2** and the sample aliquot storage unit **11** of the present invention incorporated in the automated immunochemistry instrument. The pipettor of the main sample aliquoting station **2** first aspirates sample aliquots from the sample tubes presented by a sample presentation mechanism, such as the sample presentation unit or a
25 lab automation conveyance system (not shown in figure 2), and then moves into a position above the sample aliquot storage unit **11**. Meanwhile, the sample aliquot storage unit **11** receives an empty sample vessel from the bulk vessel feeder **3** by the pick-and-place gripper **8**, and moves the empty sample vessel under the pipettor of the main sample aliquoting station **2**. The aspirated sample aliquot is then dispensed into the
30 empty sample vessel. Insulation and doors **18** are provided to control the environment in

the chilled sample storage **11**.

The sample aliquot storage unit **11** has a precision controlled and refrigerated (chilled) sample aliquot storage wheel **19** with multiple storage locations capable of receiving and transferring sample vessels for or filled with sample aliquots.

5 Referring to Figure 3, there is shown an arrangement of the sample aliquot chiller assembly **20** of the sample aliquot storage unit **11** of the present invention incorporated into the automated immunochemistry instrument. The construction of the sample aliquot chiller assembly **20** utilizes Peltier coolers **21** connected to a cold plate **22** and a heatsink **23**. Heat is removed by blowing air over the heatsink **23**. These components are
10 mounted on a base **24** and insulated with covers and doors **25**. Sample vessels containing sample aliquots are stored within the cooled area on a closed spaced storage plate **26** and kept in the cool environment until needed for testing or reflex testing.

Referring to Figure 4, the sample aliquote storage unit further includes means for driving and controlling said sample storage wheel to position said sample vessels for
15 access by the pipettor of the sample aliquoting station and the pick-and-place gripper. In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, the driving and controlling means of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a stepper motor **28** and an encoder **30** to accurately position the storage wheel.

The incubator/wash/read station **12** is used for the incubating, washing, and
20 reading steps of the assays. It may include one or more incubators, washers, and readers, such as a photomultiplier tube (PMT) detector. The individual structures and functions of each of these units conform to existing arrangements of the Access Instruments (commercially available from Beckman Coulter, Inc., CA), which are known to those of ordinary skill in the art, and therefore will not be described in detail here.

25 The reagent storage **13** is used for storing reagents used for the assays. It serves as the means for an operator to load reagent packs into the automated immunochemistry instrument. The reagent storage **13** includes a mechanism for transporting and sorting multiple reagent packs. A detailed description of the configurations and functions of one embodiment of such a mechanism for transporting and sorting multiple reagent packs is
30 provided in the Assignee's co-pending patent application for "Method and System for

Transporting and Storing Multiple Reagent Packs and Reagent Packs Used Therein,” serial number 09/594,331, and is incorporated herein by reference. Other structures and functions of the reagent storage 13 conform to existing arrangements known to those of ordinary skill in the art, and therefore will not be described in detail here.

- 5 The basic operating procedures of the sample aliquot storage unit 11 of the present invention incorporated in the automated immunochemistry instrument for sample aliquot storage and reflex testing include the following steps:
1. Loading a sample tube containing a sample to be assayed to the sample presentation unit or a sample tube presented by a lab automation conveyance system;
 - 10 2. Aspirating an aliquot of the sample from the sample tube by a pipettor of the sample pipetting station;
 3. Placing an empty sample vessel on the sample storage wheel of the sample aliquot storage unit;
 4. Positioning the empty sample vessel under the sample pipettor to receive
15 the sample aliquot;
 5. Storing the sample vessel containing sample aliquot in a chilled environment on the sample storage wheel;
 6. Moving the sample vessel containing sample aliquot to one of the reagent pipetting stations by a pick-and-place gripper;
 - 20 7. Aspirating an adequate amount of sample aliquot from the sample vessel for performing an assay;
 8. Moving the sample vessel containing remaining sample aliquot back to the chilled sample storage wheel by the pick-and-place gripper;
 9. Storing the sample vessel containing remaining sample aliquot in the
25 chilled environment on the sample storage wheel for reflex testing;

10. When reflex testing is required, moving the sample vessel containing remaining sample aliquot to one of the reagent pipetting stations by the pick-and-place gripper;
11. Aspirating an adequate amount of sample aliquot from the sample vessel
5 for performing the reflex testing; and
12. If there is still sample aliquot remaining and further reflex testing may be required, then moving the sample vessel containing remaining sample aliquot back to the chilled sample storage wheel for storage in the chilled environment.
13. Once it is determined that there is no further testing required on the
10 sample aliquot, the sample vessel and any unused sample is moved to a waste container by the pick-and-place gripper.

The method and system of sample aliquot storage of the present invention for automated immunochemistry instrument has many novel and unique features and advantages. It provides the capability of performing reflex testing with a large capacity
15 chilled sample storage area. It also supports a high throughput of the automated immunochemistry instrument. It further enables the automated immunochemistry instrument with multiple independent reagent pipetting stations to run different samples simultaneously.

A very important novel feature of the method and system of sample aliquot
20 storage of the present invention is that, unlike in certain prior art systems where the sample vessels are always kept in the storage wheel and are pipetted in the storage wheel, in the present invention method and system, the sample vessels containing sample aliquots are transported to one of the multiplicity of reagent pipetting stations for pipetting. This transfer significantly increases the throughput of the instrument. For
25 example, if the pipetting process takes 36 seconds, the prior art method and system will take 36 seconds to perform pipetting of each sample vessel. If there are 4 different samples to be assayed, then the total time needed to complete the pipetting process of all 4 sample vessels would be 144 seconds.

In the present invention method and system, the same task can be finished in 63 seconds. This is because in the present invention method and system, the sample vessels are transported to one of the 4 reagent pipetting stations for pipetting. These reagent pipetting stations are staggered, for example, 9 seconds apart (which is the time needed for the pick-and-place gripper to transport one sample vessel to a reagent pipetting station). As the first sample vessel is pipetted at the first reagent pipetting station, the second sample vessel is transported to the second reagent pipetting station after 9 seconds. After another 9 seconds, the third sample vessel is transported to the third reagent pipetting station. Finally, after the third 9 seconds, the fourth sample vessel is transported to the fourth reagent pipetting station. Since it takes 36 seconds to finish the pipetting process of the fourth sample vessel, the total time used for pipetting all 4 sample vessels in this example is only 63 seconds, which reduces more than half of the 144 seconds needed for the prior art method and system.

The foregoing is meant to illustrate, but not to limit, the scope of the invention. Indeed, those of ordinary skill in the art can readily envision and produce further embodiments, based on the teachings herein, without undue experimentation.

It is to be understood that the form of the system depicted in Figures 1 through 3 has been chosen only for the purpose of describing a particular embodiment and function of the invention, and that the arrangement of the invention can be addressed in various ways and incorporated in other types of devices, all of which will be evident to those working in the art.

It is to be understood that the particular arrangement of the present invention may vary, depending on the chemical analyzer instrument it is incorporated or working together with, but that the determination of necessary variation is well within the skill in the art in view of the instant disclosure.

Suitable components that are commercially available would be known to those of ordinary skill in the art in view of this disclosure.

It is further understood that any comparable means of accomplishing this goal is within the scope of this invention.

The present invention may be embodied in other specific forms without departing from its essential characteristics. The described embodiment is to be considered in all respects only as illustrative and not as restrictive. The scope of the invention is, therefore, indicated by the appended claims rather than by the foregoing description. All
5 changes which come within the meaning and range of the equivalence of the claims are to be embraced within their scope.

What Is Claimed:

1. An apparatus for automated immunochemistry or chemistry analysis, comprising:
 - a. a sample aliquot storage unit having a sample storage wheel;
 - b. a pick-and-place mechanism for transporting empty sample vessels from a
5 bulk vessel feeder to said sample storage wheel;
 - c. a sample aliquoting station having a sample pipettor for aspirating samples from sample tubes loaded, and aliquoting samples to said empty sample vessels on said sample storage wheel;
 - d. said sample aliquot storage unit further having a chiller assembly for
10 keeping said sample vessels containing sample aliquots in a chilled environment on said sample storage wheel;
 - e. said sample aliquot storage unit further having means for driving and controlling said sample storage wheel to position said sample vessels for access by said pipettor of said sample aliquoting station and said pick-
15 and-place gripper;
 - f. said pick-and-place mechanism transporting said sample vessels containing said sample aliquots to a multiplicity of independent reagent pipetting stations respectively for sample aspiration of subsequent assay; and
 - g. said pick-and-place mechanism also transporting said sample vessels
20 containing remaining sample aliquots back to said sample storage wheel to be stored in said chilled environment for reflex testing.
2. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a top cover with openings for access of said
25 sample vessels by both said pipettor of said sample aliquoting station and said pick-and-place mechanism.

3. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a cold plate for establishing and maintaining said chilled environment.
4. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises insulation means for establishing and maintaining said chilled environment.
5. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises cooler members for establishing and maintaining said chilled environment.
- 10 6. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a heatsink for establishing and maintaining said chilled environment.
7. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said driving and controlling means of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a stepper motor and an encoder to accurately position the storage wheel
- 15 8. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said sample aliquot storage unit further comprises a base.
9. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, further comprising an incubate and wash and read unit for performing said assay.
- 20 10. The apparatus as defined in claim 2, further comprising another pick-and-place gripper for transporting vessels between said multiplicity of reagent pipetting stations and said incubate and wash and read unit.
11. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said sample pipettor of said sample aliquoting station aspirates samples from sample tubes loaded by a sample presentation unit.
- 25 12. The apparatus as defined in claim 1, wherein said sample pipettor of said sample aliquoting station aspirates samples from sample tubes presented by a lab

automation system or an automated track conveyance system.

13. An apparatus for automated immunochemistry or chemistry analysis, comprising:
- a. a sample aliquot storage unit having a sample storage wheel for storing sample vessels;
 - 5 b. a sample aliquoting station having a sample pipettor for aliquoting samples to said sample vessels on said sample storage wheel;
 - c. said sample aliquot storage unit, further having a chiller assembly for keeping said sample vessels containing sample aliquots in a chilled environment on said sample storage wheel;
 - 10 d. said sample aliquot storage unit, further having means for driving and controlling said sample storage wheel to position said sample vessels for access by said pipettor of said sample aliquoting station;
 - e. a pick-and-place mechanism for transporting said sample vessels containing said sample aliquots to a multiplicity of independent reagent pipetting stations respectively for sample aspiration of subsequent assay;
 - 15 and
 - f. said pick-and-place gripper also transporting said sample vessels containing remaining sample aliquots back to said sample storage wheel to be stored in said chilled environment for reflex testing.
- 20 14. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said sample pipettor of said sample aliquoting station aspirates samples from sample tubes loaded by a sample presentation unit.
15. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said sample pipettor of said sample aliquoting station aspirates samples directly from sample tubes presented
- 25 by lab automation systems or automated track conveyance systems.
16. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said pick-and-place mechanism also transports empty sample vessels from a bulk vessel feeder to said sample

storage wheel.

17. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a top cover with openings for access of said sample vessels by both said pipettor of said sample aliquoting station and said pick-and-place gripper.
18. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a cold plate for establishing and maintaining said chilled environment.
19. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises insulation means for establishing and maintaining said chilled environment.
20. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises cooler members for establishing and maintaining said chilled environment.
21. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said chiller assembly of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a heatsink for establishing and maintaining said chilled environment.
22. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said driving and controlling means of said sample aliquot storage unit comprises a motor.
23. The apparatus as defined in claim 13, wherein said sample aliquot storage unit further comprises a base.
24. A method of automated immunochemistry or chemistry analysis, comprising the steps of:
- placing empty sample vessels on a sample storage wheel of a sample aliquot storage unit;
 - aliquoting sample aliquot to said empty sample vessels;

- c. storing said sample vessels containing sample aliquots in a chilled environment on said sample storage wheel;
 - d. transporting said sample vessels containing sample aliquots to a multiplicity of reagent pipetting stations respectively;
 - 5 e. aspirating sample aliquots from said sample vessels for subsequent assay; and
 - f. transporting said sample vessels containing remaining sample aliquots back to said chilled sample storage wheel for storage in said chilled environment for reflex testing.
- 10 25. The method as defined in claim 24, further comprising the step of transporting said sample vessels containing remaining sample aliquots from said chilled sample storage wheel to said multiplicity of reagent pipetting stations respectively for reflex testing.
- 15 26. The method as defined in claim 24, further comprising the step of transporting said sample vessels back from said multiplicity of reagent pipetting stations to said chilled sample storage wheel for storage in said chilled environment if there are still adequate amounts of sample aliquots left in said sample vessels for additional reflex testing.
- 20 27. The method as defined in claim 24, further comprising the step of transporting said sample vessels from chilled sample storage wheel to a waste location.
28. A method of automated immunochemistry or chemistry analysis, comprising the steps of:
- a. aliquoting the sample aliquots to sample vessels;
 - b. storing said sample vessels containing the sample aliquots in a chilled environment in a sample aliquot storage unit;
 - 25 c. transporting said sample vessels containing the sample aliquots to a multiplicity of reagent pipetting stations respectively for sample

aspiration for subsequent assay; and

- d. transporting said sample vessels containing remaining sample aliquots back to said chilled sample aliquot storage unit for storage in said chilled environment for reflex testing.

- 5 29. The method as defined in claim 28, further comprising the step of aspirating samples from sample tubes.
- 30. The method as defined in claim 28, further comprising the step of placing empty sample vessels in said sample aliquot storage unit for receiving sample aliquots.
- 31. The method as defined in claim 28, further comprising the step of transporting
10 said sample vessels containing remaining sample aliquots from said chilled sample aliquot storage unit to said multiplicity of reagent pipetting stations respectively for reflex testing.
- 32. The method as defined in claim 28, further comprising the step of transporting
15 said sample vessels back from said multiplicity of reagent pipetting stations to said chilled sample aliquot storage unit for storage in said chilled environment if there are still adequate amount of sample aliquots left in said sample vessels for additional reflex testing.
- 33. The method as defined in claim 28, further comprising the step of transporting said sample vessels said chilled sample aliquot storage unit to the waste location.

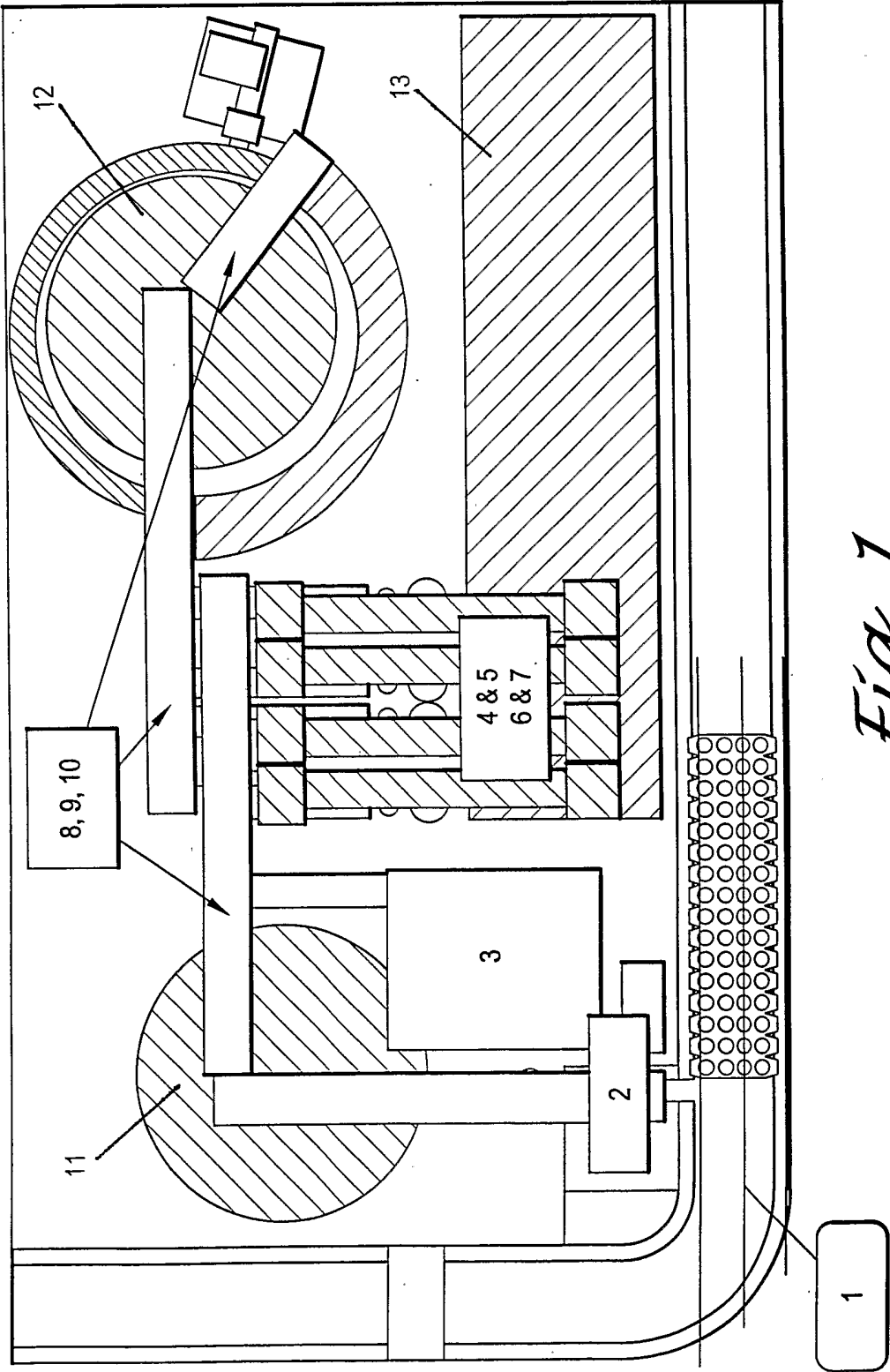
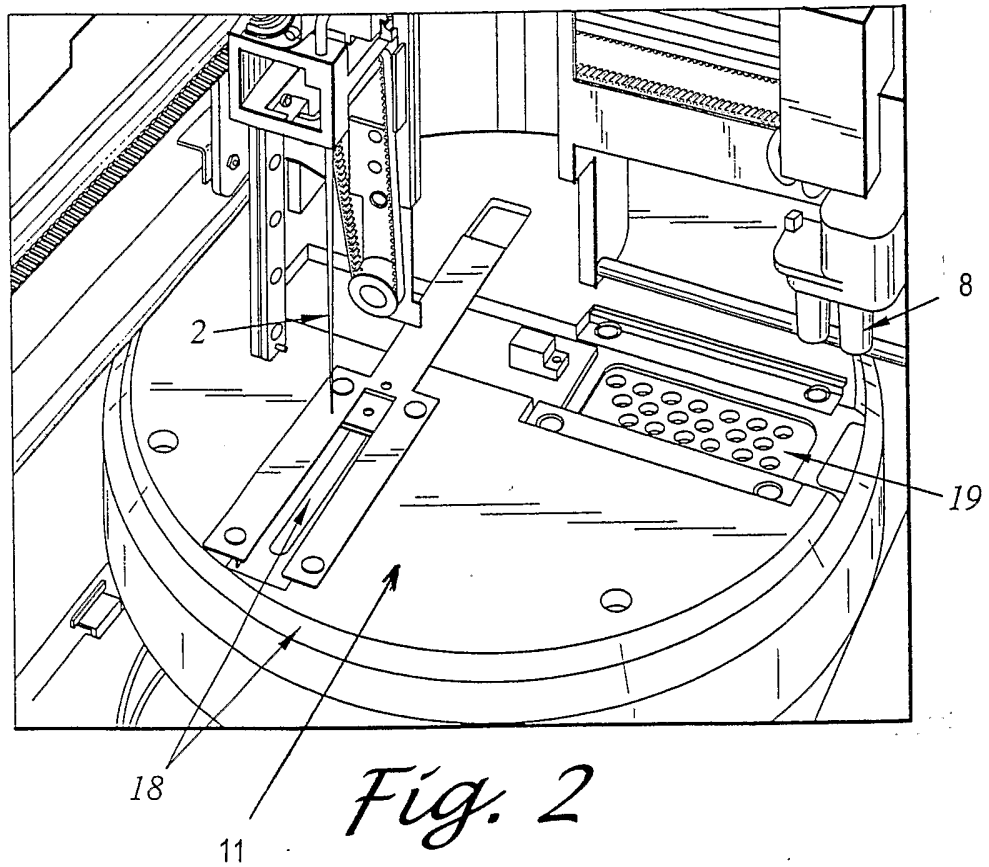


Fig. 1



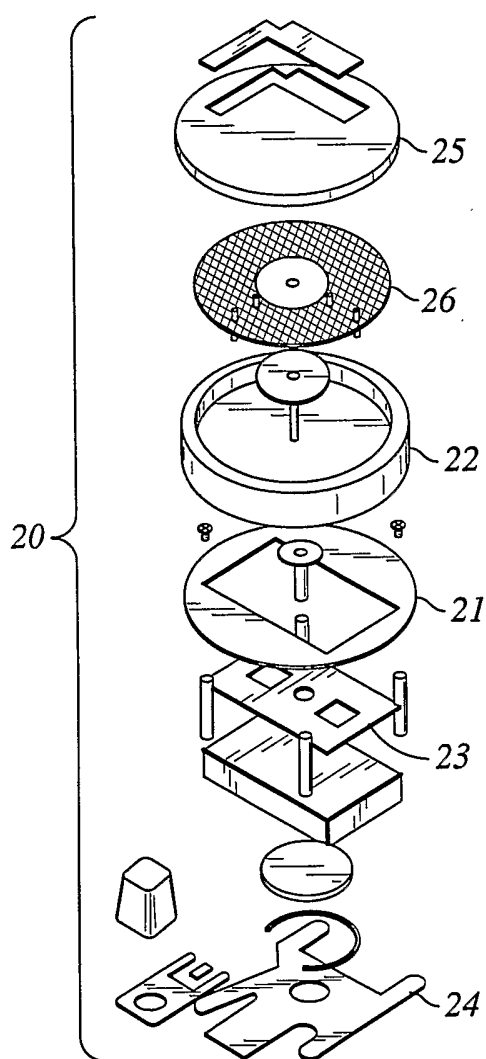
*Fig. 3*

Fig. 4

