



US00RE44796E

(19) **United States**
(12) **Reissued Patent**
Czaplicki et al.

(10) **Patent Number:** **US RE44,796 E**
(45) **Date of Reissued Patent:** **Mar. 11, 2014**

(54) **BLADDER SYSTEM FOR REINFORCING A PORTION OF A LONGITUDINAL STRUCTURE**

(75) Inventors: **Michael J. Czaplicki**, Rochester, MI (US); **Thomas L. Coon**, Lapeer, MI (US)

(73) Assignee: **Zephyros, Inc.**, Romeo, MI (US)

(21) Appl. No.: **10/718,509**

(22) Filed: **Nov. 20, 2003**

3,493,257 A	2/1970	Fitzgerald et al.	
3,665,968 A	5/1972	DePutter	
3,746,387 A	7/1973	Schwenk	
3,757,559 A	9/1973	Welsh	
3,890,108 A	6/1975	Welsh	
4,019,301 A	4/1977	Fox	
4,029,128 A *	6/1977	Yamagishi	138/89
4,082,825 A	4/1978	Puterbaugh	
4,083,384 A *	4/1978	Horne et al.	138/93
4,090,734 A	5/1978	Inami et al.	
4,238,540 A	12/1980	Yates et al.	
4,269,890 A	5/1981	Breitling et al.	
4,378,394 A	3/1983	Miura et al.	

(Continued)

Related U.S. Patent Documents

Reissue of:

(64) Patent No.: **6,321,793**
Issued: **Nov. 27, 2001**
Appl. No.: **09/591,877**
Filed: **Jun. 12, 2000**

FOREIGN PATENT DOCUMENTS

CA 913319 10/1972
DE 2747721 A1 4/1979

(Continued)

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

PCT WO 99/08854 Harrison et al. Publication Date Feb. 25, 1999.*

(Continued)

(51) **Int. Cl.**
F16L 55/12 (2006.01)
B29C 61/04 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
USPC **138/93**; 138/89; 138/90; 138/172;
296/205; 296/187.02; 264/263; 264/267

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
USPC 138/93, 172, 89, 90; 296/187.02,
296/187.12, 187.03, 205; 206/304;
228/119; 521/54

See application file for complete search history.

Primary Examiner — Patrick F Brinson
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — The Dobrusin Law Firm, PC

(57) **ABSTRACT**

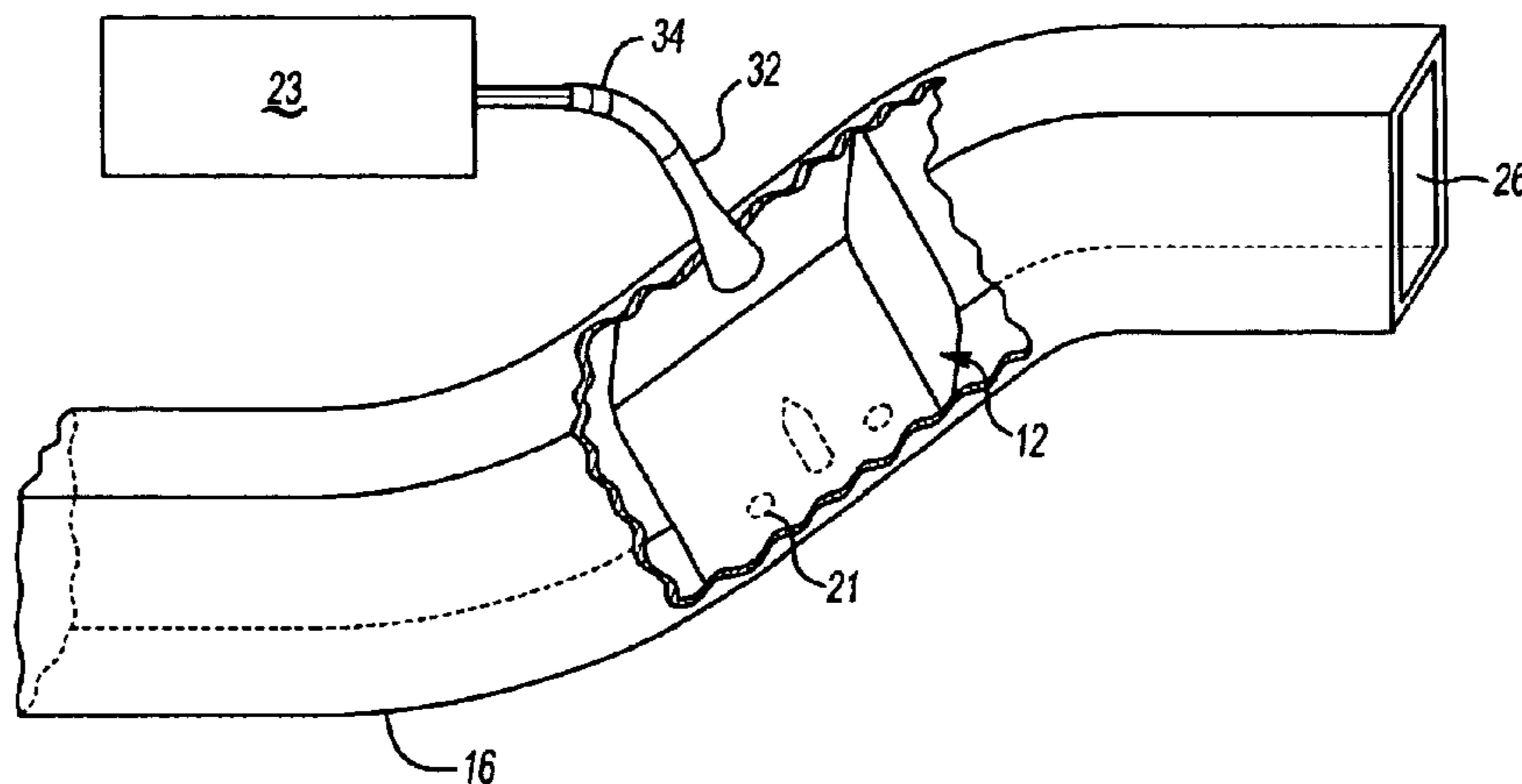
A bladder system and method for reinforcing at least a portion of a structural member, including a flexible barrier member for dividing at least a portion of the structural member being reinforced into one or more sections; and a reinforcement material for filling one or more sections bounded by the flexible barrier member. The reinforcement material filling one or more sections of the structural member can be a pumpable polymeric material, and the flexible barrier member can be a polymeric material.

33 Claims, 2 Drawing Sheets

(56) **References Cited**

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

1,814,677 A *	7/1931	Fennema	138/93
3,054,636 A	9/1962	Wessells, III	
3,123,170 A	3/1964	Bryant	
3,310,615 A	3/1967	Bender	
3,400,182 A	9/1968	Kolt	



(56)

References Cited

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

4,378,395 A 3/1983 Asoshina et al.
 4,397,490 A 8/1983 Evans et al.
 4,436,120 A 3/1984 Josien et al.
 4,440,434 A 4/1984 Celli
 4,457,555 A 7/1984 Draper
 4,559,274 A 12/1985 Kloppe et al.
 4,610,836 A 9/1986 Wycech
 4,613,177 A 9/1986 Loren et al.
 4,705,716 A 11/1987 Tang
 4,732,806 A 3/1988 Wycech
 4,751,249 A 6/1988 Wycech
 4,762,352 A 8/1988 Enomoto
 4,803,108 A 2/1989 Leuchten et al.
 4,810,548 A 3/1989 Ligon, Sr. et al.
 4,836,516 A 6/1989 Wycech
 4,853,270 A 8/1989 Wycech
 4,861,097 A 8/1989 Wycech
 4,898,630 A 2/1990 Kitoh et al.
 4,901,500 A 2/1990 Wycech
 4,908,930 A 3/1990 Wycech
 4,917,435 A 4/1990 Bonnett et al.
 4,922,596 A 5/1990 Wycech
 4,923,902 A 5/1990 Wycech
 4,978,562 A 12/1990 Wycech
 4,989,913 A 2/1991 Moore, III
 4,995,545 A 2/1991 Wycech
 5,102,188 A * 4/1992 Yamane 296/205
 5,122,398 A 6/1992 Seiler et al.
 5,124,186 A 6/1992 Wycech
 5,194,199 A 3/1993 Thum
 5,213,391 A 5/1993 Takagi
 5,255,487 A 10/1993 Wieting et al.
 5,266,133 A 11/1993 Hanley et al.
 5,344,208 A 9/1994 Bien et al.
 5,373,027 A 12/1994 Hanley et al.
 5,395,135 A 3/1995 Lim et al.
 5,506,025 A 4/1996 Otto et al.
 5,560,672 A 10/1996 Lim et al.
 5,575,526 A * 11/1996 Wycech 296/205
 5,580,120 A 12/1996 Nees et al.
 5,642,914 A 7/1997 Takabatake
 5,648,401 A 7/1997 Czaplicki et al.
 5,649,400 A 7/1997 Miwa
 5,652,039 A 7/1997 Tremain et al.
 5,707,098 A 1/1998 Uchida et al.
 5,725,272 A 3/1998 Jones
 5,731,069 A 3/1998 Delle Donne et al.
 5,755,486 A 5/1998 Wycech
 5,766,719 A 6/1998 Rimkus
 5,785,376 A 7/1998 Nees et al.
 5,786,394 A 7/1998 Slaven
 5,803,533 A 9/1998 Schulz et al.
 5,804,608 A 9/1998 Nakazato et al.
 5,806,915 A 9/1998 Takabatake
 5,806,919 A 9/1998 Davies
 5,819,408 A 10/1998 Catlin
 5,855,094 A 1/1999 Baudisch et al.
 5,866,052 A 2/1999 Muramatsu
 5,878,784 A * 3/1999 Sales et al. 138/93
 5,884,960 A 3/1999 Wycech
 5,885,688 A 3/1999 McLaughlin
 5,888,600 A 3/1999 Wycech
 5,888,642 A 3/1999 Meteer et al.
 5,901,528 A 5/1999 Richardson
 5,901,752 A * 5/1999 Lundman 138/93
 5,904,024 A 5/1999 Miwa
 5,932,680 A 8/1999 Heider
 5,934,737 A 8/1999 Abouzahr
 5,941,597 A 8/1999 Horiuchi et al.
 5,984,389 A 11/1999 Nuber
 5,985,435 A 11/1999 Czaplicki et al.
 5,988,734 A 11/1999 Longo et al.
 5,992,923 A 11/1999 Wycech
 5,994,422 A 11/1999 Born et al.
 6,003,274 A 12/1999 Wycech

6,004,425 A 12/1999 Born et al.
 6,022,066 A 2/2000 Tremblay et al.
 6,050,630 A 4/2000 Hochet
 6,053,210 A * 4/2000 Chapman et al. 138/46
 6,058,673 A 5/2000 Wycech
 6,059,342 A 5/2000 Kawai et al.
 6,068,424 A 5/2000 Wycech
 6,077,884 A 6/2000 Hess et al.
 6,079,180 A 6/2000 Wycech
 6,082,811 A 7/2000 Yoshida
 6,090,232 A 7/2000 Seeliger et al.
 6,092,864 A 7/2000 Wycech et al.
 6,094,798 A 8/2000 Seeliger et al.
 6,096,403 A 8/2000 Wycech et al.
 6,096,791 A 8/2000 Born et al.
 6,099,948 A 8/2000 Paver, Jr.
 6,102,379 A 8/2000 Ponslet et al.
 6,102,473 A 8/2000 Steininger et al.
 6,103,341 A 8/2000 Barz et al.
 6,103,784 A 8/2000 Hilborn et al.
 6,110,982 A 8/2000 Russick et al.
 6,129,410 A 10/2000 Kosaraju et al.
 6,131,897 A 10/2000 Barz et al.
 6,135,542 A 10/2000 Emmelmann et al.
 6,149,227 A 11/2000 Wycech
 6,150,428 A 11/2000 Hanley, IV et al.
 6,152,260 A 11/2000 Eipper et al.
 6,153,709 A 11/2000 Xiao et al.
 6,165,588 A 12/2000 Wycech
 6,168,226 B1 1/2001 Wycech
 6,207,244 B1 3/2001 Hesch
 6,263,635 B1 7/2001 Czaplicki
 6,270,600 B1 8/2001 Wycech
 6,332,731 B1 12/2001 Wycech
 6,382,635 B1 5/2002 Fitzgerald
 6,444,713 B1 9/2002 Pacht et al.
 6,491,336 B1 12/2002 Beckmann et al.
 2001/0020794 A1 9/2001 Ishikawa
 2002/0033618 A1 3/2002 Kwon
 2002/0066254 A1 6/2002 Ebbinghaus
 2002/0164450 A1 11/2002 Lupini et al.

FOREIGN PATENT DOCUMENTS

DE 2919046 5/1979
 DE 3826011 2/1990
 DE 3826011 A1 2/1990
 DE 3838655 5/1990
 DE G9011147.8 9/1990
 DE 4028895 C1 2/1992
 DE 4039135 6/1992
 DE G9320333.0 6/1994
 DE 19635734 A1 4/1997
 DE 19648164 A1 5/1998
 DE 19812288 C1 5/1999
 DE 19858903 A1 6/2000
 EP 82102135.9 3/1982
 EP 0061131 9/1982
 EP 0268416 5/1988
 EP 90202150.0 8/1990
 EP 9110546.6 3/1991
 EP 91104546.6 3/1991
 EP 94101343.5 1/1994
 EP 95913082.4 3/1995
 EP 0775721 A1 5/1997
 EP 0 891 918 A1 1/1999
 EP 0 893 331 A1 1/1999
 EP 0 893 332 A1 1/1999
 FR 2115177 11/1971
 FR 2539693 7/1984
 FR 2539693 A1 7/1984
 FR 2684622 6/1993
 FR 2749263 A1 5/1996
 FR 2749263 12/1997
 GB 628863 3/1947
 GB 8028960 9/1980
 GB 8725028 10/1987
 JP 59-214628 12/1984
 JP 61118211 6/1986

(56)

References Cited

FOREIGN PATENT DOCUMENTS

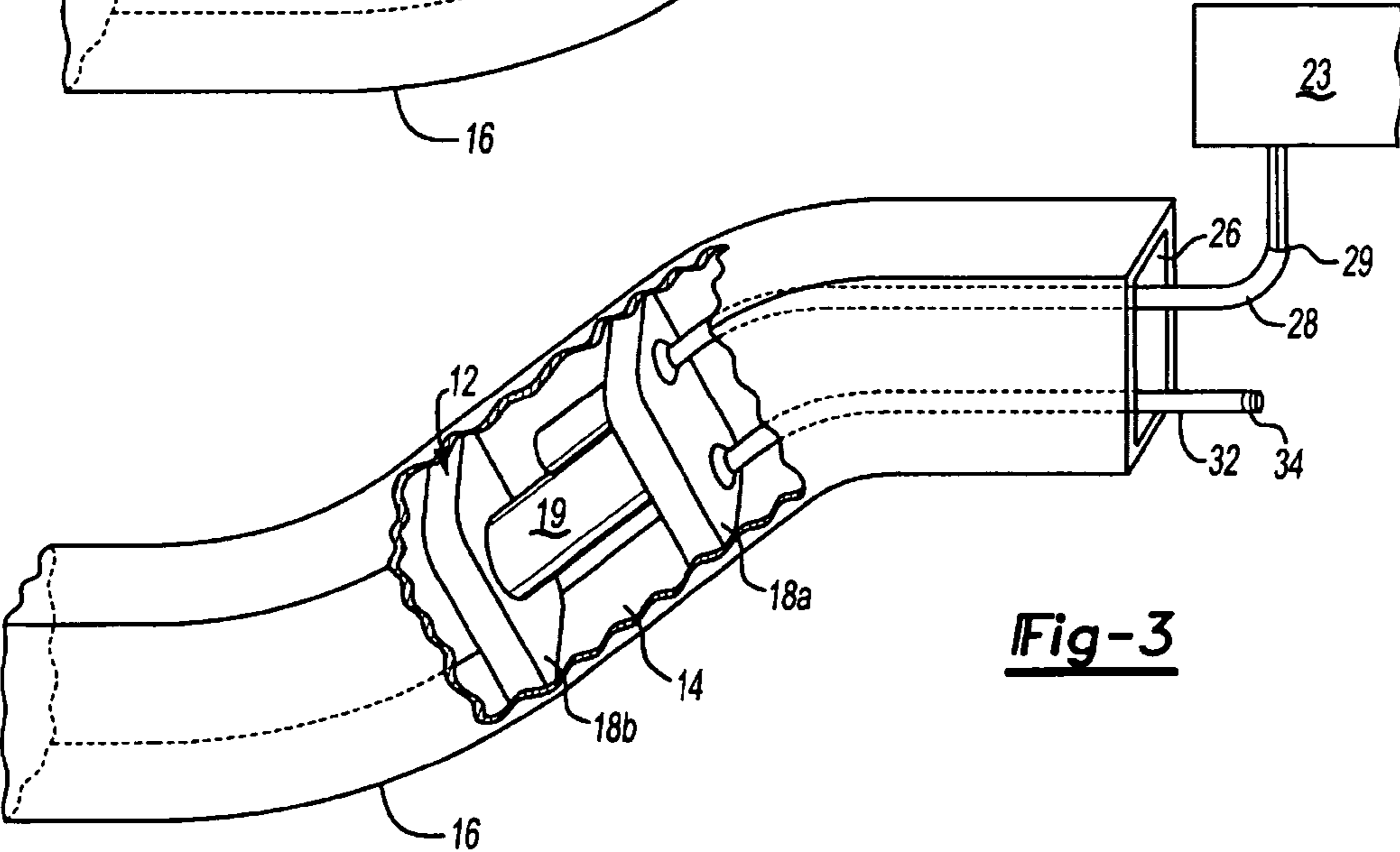
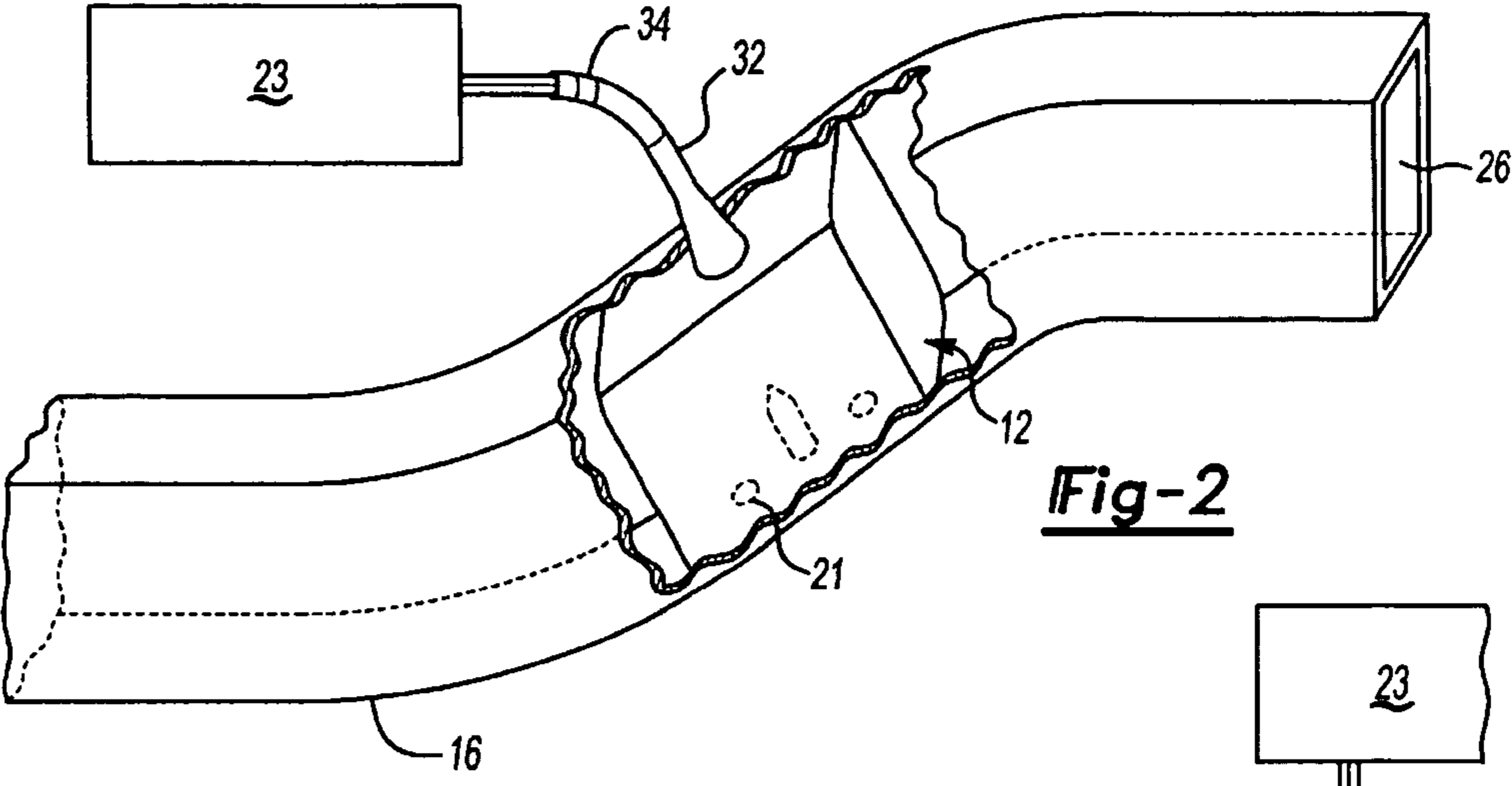
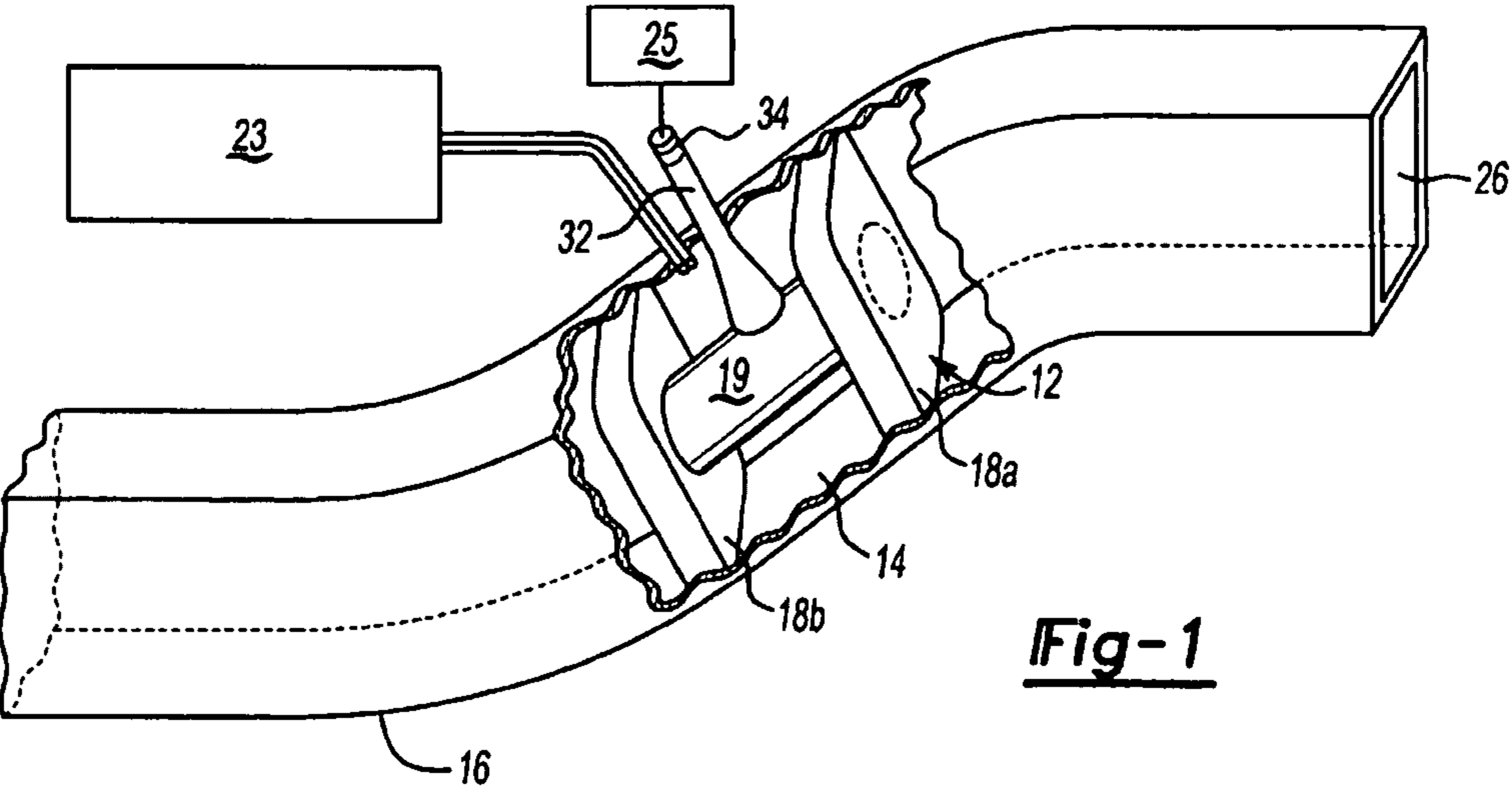
JP	61205109	A	9/1986
JP	63-54217		3/1988
JP	63173611		7/1988
JP	63-231913		9/1988
JP	64-69308		3/1989
JP	64-69309		3/1989
JP	01069308		3/1989
JP	1164867		6/1989
JP	01164867		6/1989
JP	2-206537		8/1990
JP	4-158009		6/1992
JP	4158009	A	6/1992
JP	5-38992		2/1993
WO	PCT/JP88/00029		1/1988
WO	PCT/AU92/00468		9/1992
WO	93/05103	A1	3/1993
WO	WO 93/05103		3/1993
WO	PCT/EP95/00896		3/1995
WO	PCT/US95/05749		5/1995
WO	PCT/US96/11155		7/1996
WO	WO 97/02967		1/1997
WO	PCT/US97/10693		6/1997
WO	PCT/US97/07644		11/1997
WO	PCT/US97/19981		11/1997
WO	PCT/US98/08980		5/1998
WO	PCT/US98/16461		8/1998
WO	PCT/US98/17994		9/1998
WO	98/50221	A1	11/1998
WO	PCT/US99/00035		1/1999
WO	PCT/US99/00770		1/1999
WO	PCT/US98/16461		2/1999
WO	PCT/US99/01855		2/1999
WO	PCT/US99/01865		2/1999
WO	PCT/US99/04263		3/1999
WO	PCT/US99/04279		3/1999
WO	PCT/CA99/00424		5/1999
WO	PCT/US99/10441		5/1999
WO	PCT/US99/11109		5/1999

WO	PCT/US99/11110	5/1999
WO	PCT/US99/11194	5/1999
WO	PCT/US99/11195	5/1999
WO	PCT/EP99/03832	6/1999
WO	PCT/EP99/06112	8/1999
WO	PCT/US99/18820	8/1999
WO	PCT/EP99/07143	9/1999
WO	PCT/US99/18832	9/1999
WO	PCT/US99/24795	10/1999
WO	PCT/DE99/04103	12/1999
WO	PCT/EP99/09541	12/1999
WO	PCT/EP99/09732	12/1999
WO	PCT/EP99/09909	12/1999
WO	PCT/EP99/10151	12/1999
WO	PCT/US99/29986	12/1999
WO	PCT/US99/29987	12/1999
WO	PCT/US99/29990	12/1999
WO	PCT/US99/29991	12/1999
WO	PCT/US99/29992	12/1999
WO	PCT/EP00/00021	1/2000
WO	PCT/US00/00010	1/2000
WO	PCT/US00/00497	1/2000
WO	PCT/US00/01644	1/2000
WO	WO 00/02747	1/2000
WO	PCT/EP00/01474	2/2000
WO	PCT/US00/02631	2/2000
WO	PCT/AT00/00123	5/2000
WO	WO 00/37302	6/2000

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

PCT WO 00/13958 Wycech, Publication Date Mar. 16, 2000.*
 PCT WO 99/61289 Wycech, Publication Date Dec. 2, 1999.*
 PCT WO 00/41916 Wycech, Publication Date Jul. 20, 2000.*
 Letter from the Opponent 01 of May 30, 2011, European Application
 No. 01942076.9, mailing date Jun. 9, 2011.
 Opposition to Application No./Patent No. 01942076.9-2425/
 1294605, filed on May 16, 2011 (translation from German to English
 included).

* cited by examiner



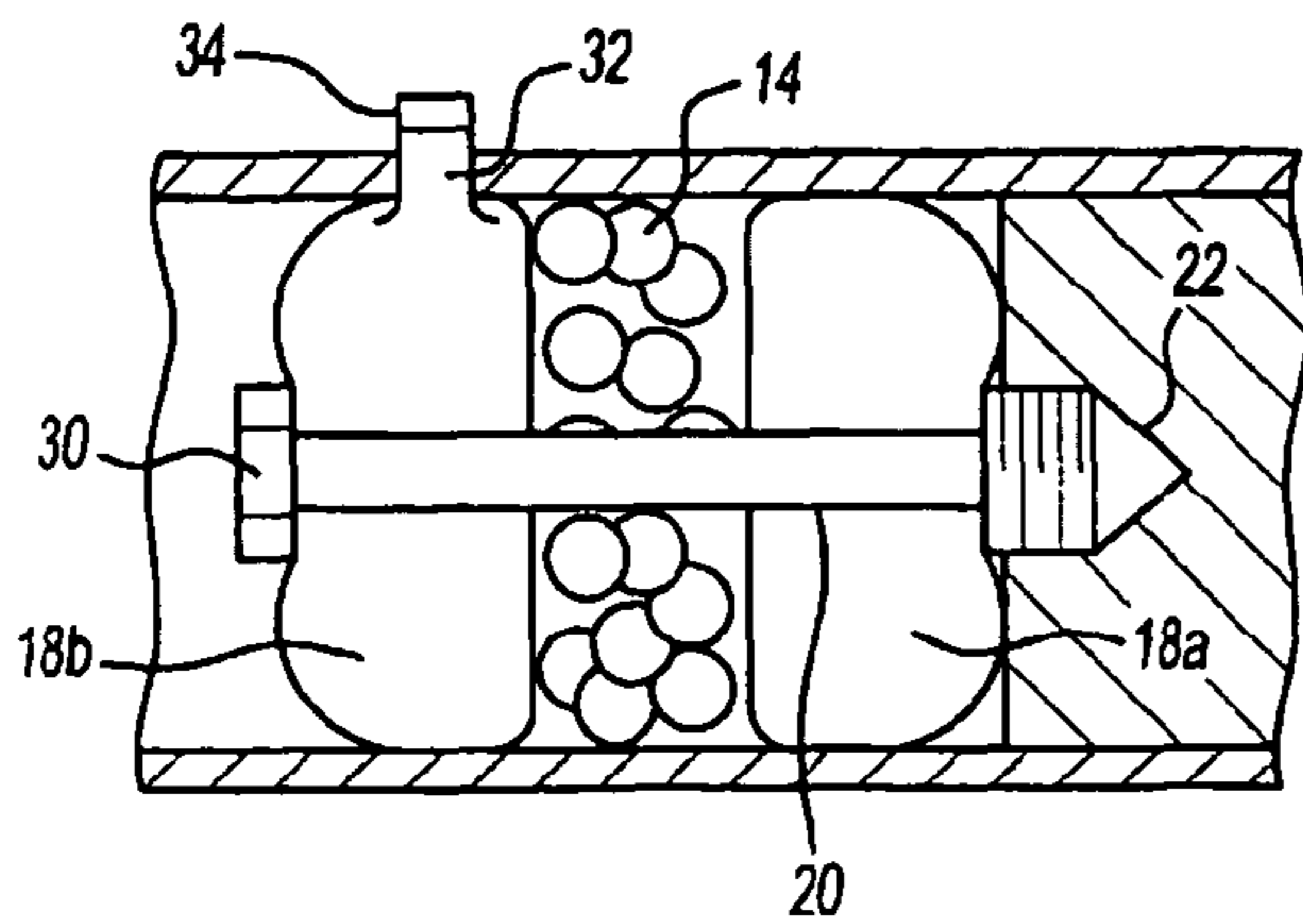


Fig-4

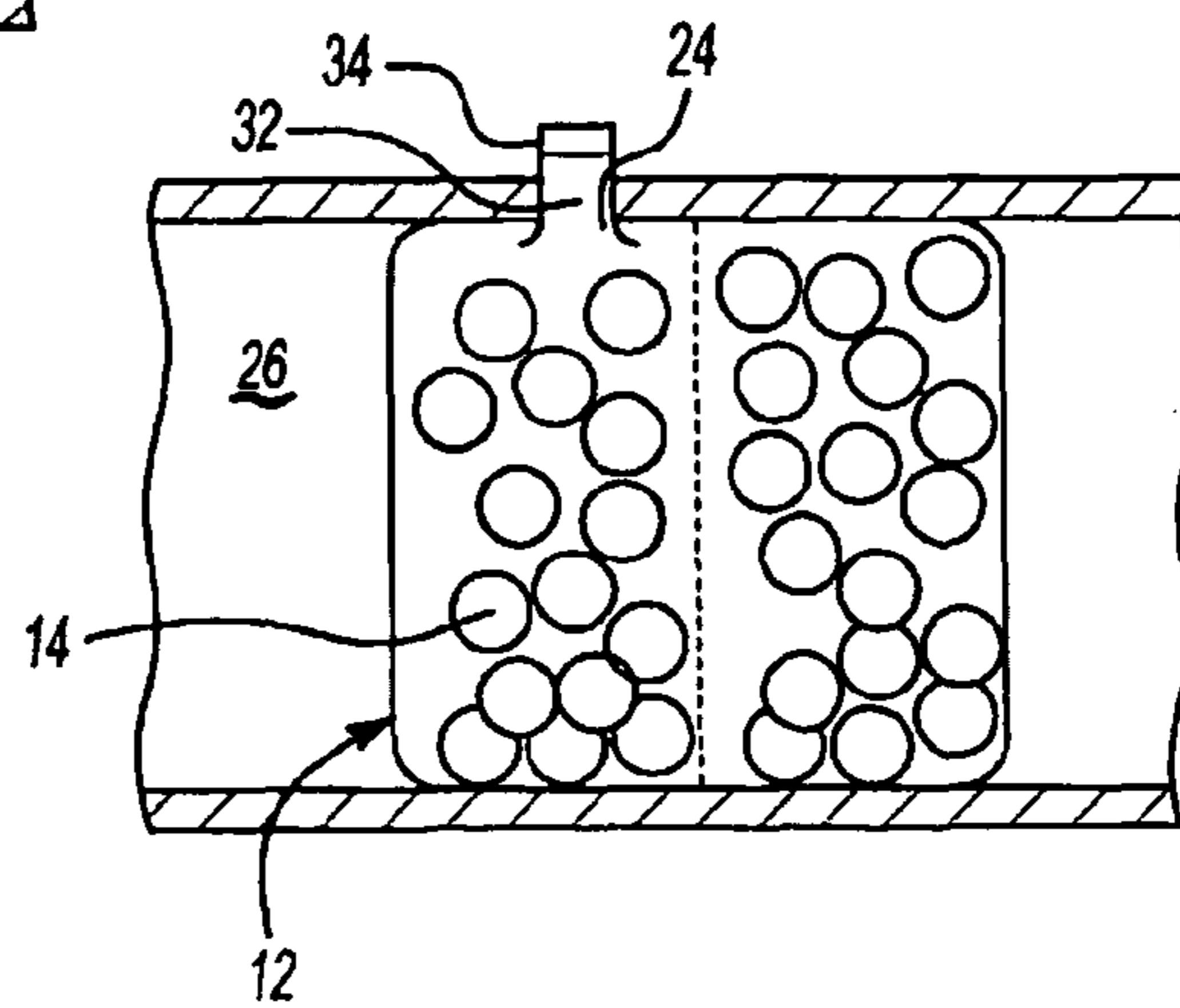


Fig-5

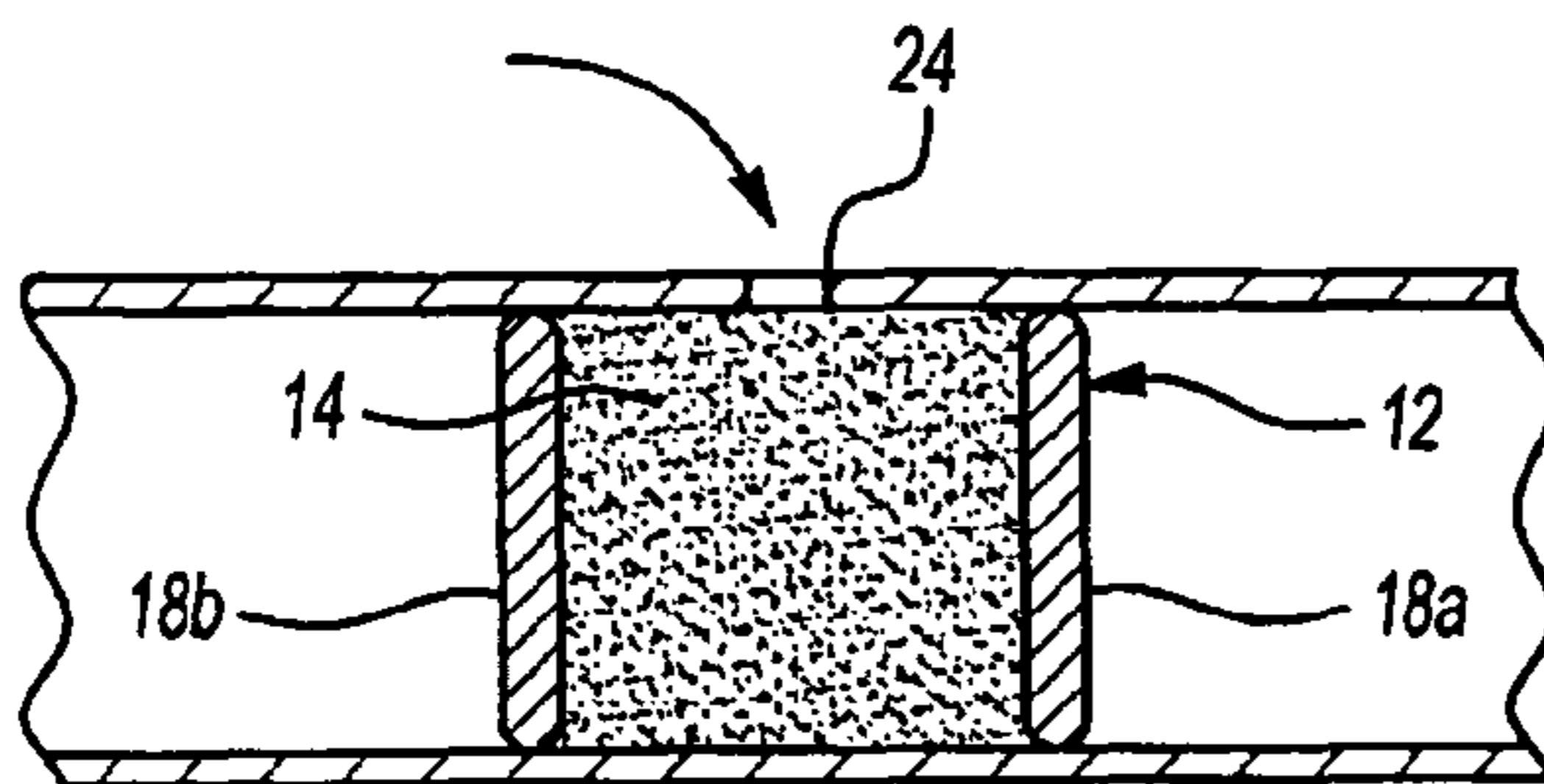


Fig-6

Fig-7A

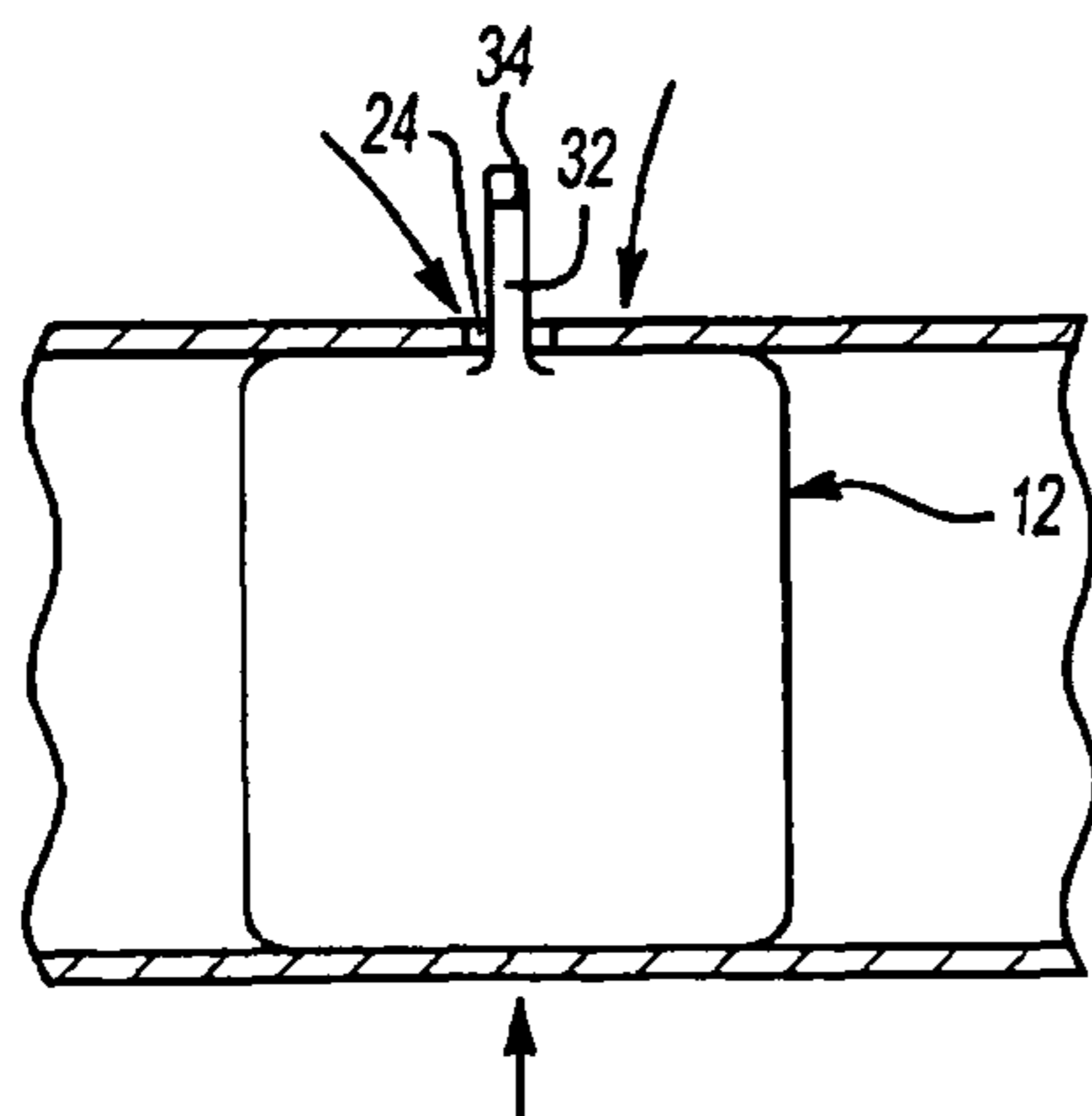
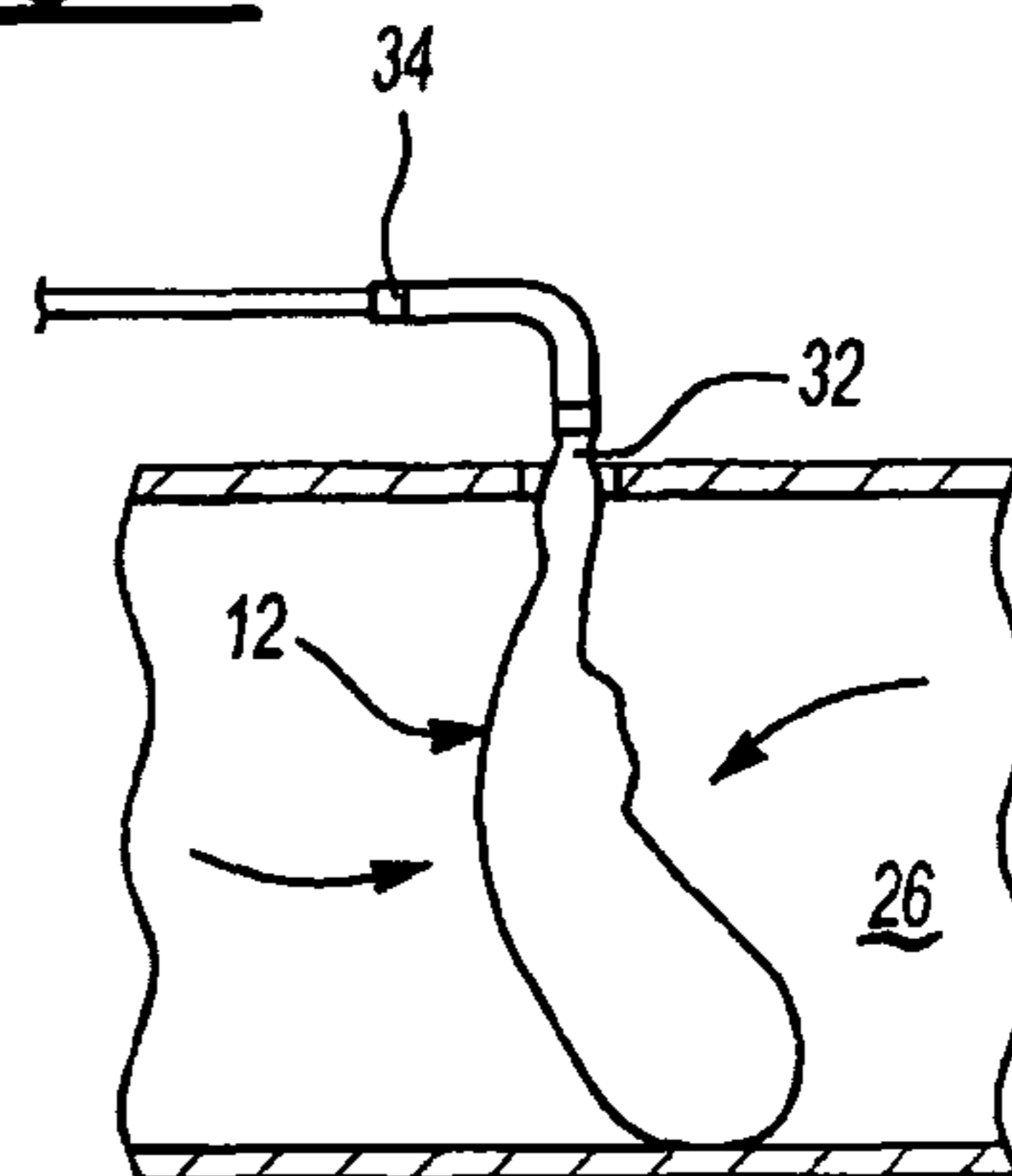


Fig-7B

1

BLADDER SYSTEM FOR REINFORCING A PORTION OF A LONGITUDINAL STRUCTURE

Matter enclosed in heavy brackets [] appears in the original patent but forms no part of this reissue specification; matter printed in italics indicates the additions made by reissue.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a bladder system for reinforcing a portion of a structural member. More particularly, the present invention relates to a bladder system for reinforcing a portion of a structural member having either an open or closed center portion, wherein the bladder system includes a flexible barrier member and a reinforcing material.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Prior barrier systems used for reinforcing a portion of a structural member having an open center using a two component pumpable product have included a metal or rigid barrier member placed within the open center. In many instances, the structural nature of the barrier member limited the applications for which the barrier system could be used. For instance, the structure and location of the member being reinforced made it difficult to insert a barrier member therein after the structural member had been incorporated into a frame system, e.g., an automobile frame. For example, once an automobile has been completed or partially assembled, the insertion of a barrier member into the center portion of a cavity of a structural member is often difficult and time consuming. Thus, there is needed a system and method that will permit local reinforcement of a structure at various stages throughout the manufacturing or assembly process concerning the member being reinforced.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to a bladder system for reinforcing at least a portion of a structural member. The bladder system includes a flexible barrier member for dividing at least a portion of the structural member into one or more sections; and a reinforcement material for filling one or more sections bounded by the flexible barrier member. The reinforcement material filling one or more sections of the structural member is a material that can be pumped, and the flexible barrier member is a polymeric material, that may or may not have adhesive characteristics.

The flexible barrier membrane is a thermosetting polymer with cure characteristics that may be activated in a variety of ways. For example heat, catalyst, or a combination of two or more chemically reactive ingredient may be used to activate the polymer.

The invention is also directed to a method for using the bladder system. The method for reinforcing at least a portion of a structural member having either an open or closed center, includes the steps of providing a structure; supporting a flexible barrier member along a portion of the structural member for dividing the area of the structural member into one or more sections; and filling one or more of the sections of the structural member with the reinforcement material.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The features and inventive aspects of the present invention will become more apparent upon reading the following detailed description, claims, and drawings, of which the following is a brief description:

2

FIG. 1 is a cross-section showing the bladder system formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention placed in a longitudinal cavity.

FIG. 2 shows a cross-section of another embodiment of a bladder system formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention.

FIG. 3 illustrates still another embodiment of a bladder system formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention.

FIG. 4 illustrates a fourth embodiment of a bladder system formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention, wherein the reinforcement material is undergoing curing.

FIG. 5 shows the bladder system of FIG. 4 prior to curing the reinforcement material.

FIG. 6 illustrates another embodiment of a bladder system formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention.

FIG. 7a shows the flexible barrier member of this invention coupled to a fill valve.

FIG. 7b shows the flexible barrier member of FIG. 7a after inflation.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The bladder system of the present invention generally includes a flexible barrier member and a reinforcing material retained by at least a portion of the flexible barrier member. In general application, the bladder system can be used to reinforce a portion of a structural member having either an open or closed center by inserting the flexible barrier member within the interior or along an exterior surface of the structure to be reinforced. The flexible barrier member thus divides the area to be reinforced into identifiable sections. Once the flexible barrier member is in place, a reinforcement material such as a polymer-based liquid, solid or semi-solid material, is received in one or more of the sections bounded by the flexible barrier member, which sections can include the area of the cavity defined by expanding the flexible member with the reinforcement material.

In a preferred embodiment, the bladder system can be used to reinforce a portion of a structural member having a hollow center. The flexible barrier member is inserted into the open center or cavity such that the flexible barrier member divides the cavity into one or more sections, and the reinforcement material is received in one or more of the sections.

FIGS. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7b show a cross-sectional view of a bladder system 10 formed in accordance with the teachings of this invention. The bladder system 10 includes a flexible barrier member 12 and a reinforcement material 14.

Turning now to the embodiment shown in FIG. 2, the flexible barrier member 12 can be an inflatable, flexible bag-like structure. One of skill in the art will appreciate that the structure of the flexible bag-like structure resembles that of a balloon as shown in FIGS. 7a, 7b. In the embodiment of FIG. 2, the flexible barrier member 12 includes a hollow center surrounded by a porous outer membrane. The porous outer membrane permits the flexible barrier member 12 upon inflation to conform to the shape of the area being reinforced. The bag-like structure can also include an integral neck portion 32 having an end portion 34 for coupling the flexible bag-like structure to a fluid pumping system for filling the interior of the flexible barrier member 12.

The porous membrane of the barrier member 12 can include perforations 21 located therein to allow adhesive to bleed through the bag and adhere to adjacent surfaces. Alter-

natively, the bag may be made of structural adhesive that is flexible, such structure would permit elimination of the perforations.

Another embodiment of a bag-like structure for the flexible barrier member is shown in FIG. 1. This embodiment includes two end members 18a, 18b joined by a center portion 19 which is in fluid communication with each end portion. The center portion includes a neck portion 32 that supports an end 34 for receiving a fluid under pressure for filling the center of the flexible barrier member 12.

A third embodiment of the flexible barrier member 12 is shown in FIG. 3. In this embodiment, the flexible barrier member 12 includes two end members 18a, 18b joined together by a center portion 19 in fluid communication with each of the end portions 18a, 18b. One of the end portions 18a supports a neck 32 and end 34, wherein the end 34 can be connected to a pumping system for filling the interior of the flexible barrier member 12 with a fluid under pressure. This end portion 18a also supports a neck 28 and end 29, wherein the end 29 can be coupled to a second fluid pumping system.

FIG. 4 shows a fourth embodiment of the flexible barrier member 12. In this embodiment, the flexible barrier member 12 is a two-piece movable structure. Each movable portion 18a, 18b is supported by a rod 20. One end of the rod 20 supports a pin head 30 and the opposite end supports a nut 22 or other similar device.

FIG. 6 shows still another embodiment of the flexible barrier member 12. In this embodiment, the flexible barrier member 12 is a single sheet of a flexible material. In the embodiment, the flexible barrier member 12 includes two single flexible sheets spaced a distance apart.

The above described embodiments of the flexible barrier member 12 merely illustrate the various forms in which the barrier member 12 can be constructed. One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that many other configurations and constructions of the barrier member 12 may be used in practicing the invention. For instance, the flexible barrier member 12 could be a reservoir for retaining the reinforcement material 14, or the flexible barrier member 12 could be used to meter/control flow of the reinforcement material 14 past the boundary of the flexible barrier member 12.

The flexible barrier member 12 can be a polymeric material such as an elastomer, polyethylene, ethylene-vinyl acetate copolymer, plasticized polyvinyl chloride film, polyamide, or various olefinic copolymer or terpolymer materials. One of skill in the art will appreciate that the bladder system 10 can be used for a wide variety of applications. Thus, the choice of material selected for the flexible barrier member 12 will depend upon the environmental conditions under which the flexible barrier member 12 will be used.

In one embodiment, the flexible barrier member 12 can be used to reinforce a portion of an automobile frame during initial assembly or in the automobile after market in body or paint shop applications during repair operations. In the aforementioned applications, the flexible barrier member 12 can be exposed to temperatures ranging from approximately 93° C. (200° F.) to approximately 204° C. (400° F.). In still another embodiment, the flexible barrier member 12 can be used in low temperature operations, including applications at sub-zero temperatures. Thus, the material selected for forming the flexible barrier member 12 should possess thermal properties that will permit the flexible barrier member 12 to maintain its structural integrity at a predetermined temperature or over a predetermined temperature range.

One of skill in the art will also appreciate that the size and specific physical dimensions of the flexible barrier member 12 will vary depending on the physical dimensions of the area to be reinforced.

Turning now to a discussion of the reinforcement material 14, the reinforcement material 14 can be any material that can be dispensed as a liquid, solid, or semi-solid material and later reacted or cured to create a substantially fused member. From a chemical standpoint, the reinforcement material 14 can be processed as a liquid prepolymer or a thermoplastic material before curing, and in one embodiment, after curing the reinforcement material can become thermoset. The preferred material is a polymeric material, with the most preferred material being a polymeric material that becomes thermoset after curing. Materials that can be used to form the reinforcement material 14 include, but are not limited to, epoxy, polyurethane, polyester, and acrylic based materials, which when compounded with appropriate ingredients may expand and cure in a reliable and predictable manner upon application of a curing stimulus. One of skill in the art will appreciate that various olefinic materials, elastomers, fluropolymers or other materials may be used to formulate the reinforcement material 14.

The reinforcement material 14 can be cured by reacting two or more materials that possess chemically reactive functional groups. Reaction can also be achieved by heating the reinforcement material 14 to a desired temperature, heating the reinforcement material 14 over a desired temperature range or by exposing the reinforcement material 14 to a predetermined change in ambient conditions. For example, the reinforcement material 14 can be cured by an induction heating application or by exposure to ambient conditions resulting in a change in atmospheric moisture conditions. In one embodiment, the reinforcement material 14 can be a thermally activated compound such that it expands upon exposure to a predetermined temperature.

As the reinforcement material 14 is cured, typically it expands to fill the area, or at least a portion of the area, to which it has been applied. Although this expansion provides structural benefits, it is not necessary. The reinforcement material 14 is formulated to permit the material 14 to adhere to adjacent surfaces. The adhesion and physical properties of the reinforcement material 14 are similar to that of known structural foams and other similar compounds known in the art.

As the reinforcement material 14 can be cured or caused to become chemically reactive upon exposure to certain environment and ambient conditions, an important consideration in selecting and formulating the material comprising the reinforcement material 14 is the temperature at which a chemical reaction or expansion, and possibly curing will take place. For instance, in most applications, it is undesirable for the reinforcement material 14 to become reactive unless triggered by combination of reactive components, application of heat, etc. As previously discussed, the reinforcement material 14 can be used in an automobile assembly plant or a body shop where it can be exposed to temperatures typically ranging from approximately 93° C. (200° F.) to approximately 204° C. (400° F.).

Upon curing, the strength and stiffness of the reinforcement material 14 are increased and the material is no longer capable of flowing. The strength and stiffness of the cured material help to increase the structural properties of article retaining the reinforcement material 14 without significantly adding to the overall weight of the article. Additionally, in the

5

cured state, the reinforcement material **14**, can have a density that does not add significantly to the weight of the article being reinforced.

Typically, the reinforcement material **14** is applied to an article to be reinforced at the desired point of reinforcement. In one embodiment, the reinforcement material **14** is a system capable of being pumped. The pumping system can be of a type that is capable of dispensing the specific formulation of the reinforcement material **14** to the site of reinforcement. Pumping systems that can be used to accomplish this task include, but are not limited to, two-part static mix dispensing machines, two-part dynamic mixing machines, impingement systems, and pressurized material dispensing vessels. One of skill in the art will appreciate that pumping systems of the type used in dispensing paint, adhesive, and thermosetting polymer products can be used to dispense the reinforcement material **14**. It will also be apparent to one of skill in the art that the type of dispensing machine chosen will depend on the nature of the chemical reaction required to cure the reinforcement material **14**.

USE OF THE BLADDER SYSTEM

The bladder system **10** can be used to reinforce a structural membrane having either an open or closed center. Where the bladder system **10** is used with a structural member having a closed center, the method for using the bladder system can include supporting a flexible barrier member along a portion of the structural member for dividing the area of the structural member into one or more sections and filling one or more of the sections formed by the of the flexible barrier member **12** with a reinforcement material **12**.

A similar method can be used in employing the bladder system **10** to reinforce a portion of a structural member having a hollow center. For example, the steps for reinforcing a structure having a hollow center can include inserting a flexible barrier member within the cavity (hollow center) for dividing the cavity into one or more sections and filling one or more sections of the cavity with a reinforcement material.

The embodiments shown in FIGS. **1-6** show use of the bladder system **10** to reinforce a structure having an open center. Referring to the embodiment of FIG. **1**, a structure **16** having a hollow center **26** is provided. An opening **24** (best seen in FIGS. **5**, **6**, and **7b**) is formed in a surface of the structure **16**. The flexible barrier member **12** is inserted into the hollow center **26** by collapsing the sidewalls of the flexible barrier member **12** and forcing the flexible barrier member **12** through the opening **24** such that the neck portion **32** of the flexible barrier member **12** projects outwardly from the opening **24** as shown in FIGS. **1-2**, **4-6**, and **7b**.

As shown in FIGS. **1** and **7(a)-7(b)**, a fluid valve **25** is coupled to the open end **34** of the neck portion **32** of the flexible barrier member **12**, permitting a fluid under pressure to fill the interior of the flexible barrier member **12**. One of skill in the art will appreciate that the fluid can be a gaseous mixture such as air. As the fluid fills the center of the flexible barrier member **12**, the flexible barrier member **12** expands and fills at least a portion of the hollow center **26**. This action, as shown in FIGS. **1-6**, causes the area of the structural member **16** bounded by the flexible barrier member **12** to be divided into one or more distinct sections.

The reinforcement material **14** can be either pumped or injected, using known techniques, into one or more of the distinct sections formed by the flexible barrier member **12**. As shown in FIG. **1**, a fill valve **23** can be placed in the opening **24** adjacent the neck portion **32** of the flexible barrier member **12**. The reinforcement material **14**, in liquid or pellet form, is

6

pumped into the portion of the hollow center **26** bounded by the flexible barrier member **12**, as shown in FIGS. **1** and **3**.

In the embodiment of FIGS. **1** and **3**, the ends of the flexible barrier member **12** form a liquid tight seal with the surfaces adjacent the area to be reinforced so as to reduce the amount, if any, of the reinforcement material **14** that may flow past the edges of the flexible barrier member **12**. The center portion of the flexible barrier member **12** is constructed to permit the reinforcement material **14** to flow downward into the bottom section formed by the flexible barrier member **12**. One of skill in the art will appreciate that the opening **24** can be sealed using known techniques.

In another embodiment, the fluid valve is connected to the flexible barrier member **12**, and the reinforcement material **14** is pumped directly into the flexible barrier member **12**, causing it to expand as shown in FIG. **2** to fill the hollow center **26**.

In still another embodiment, FIG. **3**, the flexible barrier member **12** can have a construction similar to that shown in FIG. **1**, except the flexible barrier member is inserted into the hollow center **26** of the longitudinal structure **16** from an open end of the structure **16**. The neck portion **32** of the flexible barrier member **12** extends along the length of the structure **16** and is integrally formed as part of an end portion **18a** of the flexible barrier member **12**.

The end portion **18a** also supports a second neck portion **33**, which is placed in fluid communication with the portion of the hollow center **26** bounded by the flexible barrier member **12**. As previously described, a fluid under pressure is pumped into the center of the flexible barrier member **12** through the neck portion **32**, causing the flexible barrier member **12** to expand and fill a portion of the hollow center **26**. Once the flexible barrier member **12** has been inflated, the reinforcement material **14** is pumped into the selected area to be reinforced through the second neck portion **28** and valve stem end **29**.

In still another embodiment, FIGS. **4-5**, the flexible barrier member **12** includes at least two movable end portions **18a**, **18b** supported by a rod **20**. The flexible barrier member **12** is inserted into the opening **26**. The neck portion **32** of the flexible barrier member **12** is coupled to a pumping system and the reinforcement material **14** in the form of precast pellets is pumped into the flexible barrier member **12**. As the pellets are cured or caused to become chemically active, the pellets expand, causing the movable surfaces **18a**, **18b** of the flexible barrier member **12** to slide along the rod **20** in opposite directions. One end portion **18b** of the flexible barrier member **12** moves until it abuts a pin head **30** formed at a distal end of the rod **20**. The other end portion **18a** slides along the rod **20** until its movement is stopped by the nut **22** supported by the opposite end of the rod **20**.

In any of the embodiments discussed above, the flexible barrier member **12** can be secured in position by securing the neck portion **32** in place by adhesively coupling the neck portion **32** to the adjacent surface defining the opening **24**. One of skill in the art will also appreciate that a portion of the outer surface of the flexible barrier member **12** can be coated with an adhesive which will permit the flexible barrier member **12** once in the desired position to adhere to adjacent surfaces.

It will also be appreciated by one of skill in the art that in the embodiments where the flexible barrier member **12** is filled with the reinforcement material **14**, the flexible barrier member **12** can contain tiny slits or perforations that permit a small portion of the reinforcement material **14** to flow onto the exterior surface of the flexible member **12**, thus, coating the exterior surface thereof with a small amount of the reinforcement material **14**. During the curing stage, the reinforcement

material 14 can become bonded to adjacent structures. Furthermore, it is possible that the reaction exotherm of the curing material could cause the barrier member 12 to melt and thereby either bond to the metal, or displace to permit adhesion of the curing material to the metal.

Preferred embodiments of the present invention have been disclosed. A person of ordinary skill in the art would realize, however, that certain modifications would come within the teachings of this invention. Therefore, the following claims should be studied to determine the true scope and content of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of reinforcing at least a portion of a structure of an automobile frame during initial assembly, the method comprising:

[providing a structure;]

supporting a flexible barrier member along a portion of [the] an automobile frame structure during the initial assembly of the automobile for dividing the area of the structure into one or more sections; [and]

filling one or more of the sections of the structure with a thermally activated expandable polymeric reinforcement material, wherein the flexible barrier member retains the reinforcement material in a desired location [and wherein the reinforcement material substantially assists in increasing the strength and stiffness of the structure.] of reinforcement within the automobile frame; and

exposing the reinforcement material to an external heat source at a temperature ranging from approximately 93° C. to approximately 204° C. for thermally activating expansion of the reinforcement material, wherein the reinforcement material substantially assists in increasing the strength and stiffness of the automobile frame structure.

2. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier member is a polymeric material.

3. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier member is an inflatable membrane.

4. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier member is fabricated of an adhesive material.

5. The method as defined in claim 3, wherein the inflatable membrane is inflated by filling the interior portion thereof with a reinforcement material.

6. The method as defined in claim 5, wherein the inflatable membrane is inflated by filling the interior portion thereof with a pumpable substance.

7. The method as defined in claim 5, wherein the reinforcement material filling the flexible barrier member is a heat activated material.

8. The method as defined in claim 5, wherein the reinforcement material filling the flexible barrier member is cured by a change in ambient conditions.

9. The method as defined in claim 5, wherein the reinforcement material filling the flexible barrier member comprises a multiplicity of pellets.

10. The method as defined in claim 3, wherein the inflatable membrane is inflated by filling the interior portion thereof with a gas or liquid substance.

11. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the reinforcement material filling one or more sections of the structure being reinforced is a pumpable material.

12. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the reinforcement material filling one or more sections of the structure being reinforced is a polymeric material.

13. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the reinforcement material filling one or more sections of the structure being reinforced is a heat activated material.

14. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the reinforcement matter is a two component substance reactive at ambient conditions.

15. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the reinforcement material filling one or more sections of the structure being reinforced is cured by a change in ambient conditions.

16. The method as defined in claim 1, wherein the reinforcement material filling one or more sections of the structure being reinforced is a multiplicity of pellets.

[17. A method of reinforcing at least a portion of a hollow cavity, the method comprising:

providing a structure defining a hollow cavity;

inserting a flexible barrier member within the cavity for dividing the cavity into one or more sections; and

filling one or more sections of the cavity with a reinforcement material wherein the reinforcement material substantially assists in increasing the strength and stiffness of the structure.]

[18. A bladder system for reinforcing at least a portion of a structural member, comprising:

a flexible barrier member for dividing at least a portion of a structure to be reinforced into one or more sections; and

a reinforcement material for filling one or more sections bounded by the flexible barrier member, wherein the sections filled by the reinforcement material can be internal or external of the flexible barrier member and wherein the reinforcement material substantially assists in increasing the strength and stiffness of the structure.]

[19. A bladder system, as defined in claim 18, wherein the structure being reinforced is a portion of an automobile frame.]

[20. The bladder system as defined in claim 18, wherein the reinforcement material filling one or more sections of the longitudinal structure is a pumpable material.]

[21. The bladder system as defined in claim 18, wherein the flexible barrier member is a polymeric material.]

[22. A bladder system for reinforcing at least a portion of a structure having an open center, comprising:

a flexible barrier member for dividing a cavity into one or more sections; and

a reinforcement material for filling one or more sections bounded by the flexible barrier member, wherein the reinforcement material substantially assists in increasing the strength and stiffness of the structure.]

23. The method of claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier includes perforations to allow a small portion of the reinforcement material to flow onto an exterior surface of the flexible barrier.

24. The method of claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier comprises a structural adhesive.

25. The method of claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier has an integrated neck portion.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein the neck portion has an end portion for coupling the flexible barrier to a fluid pumping system for filling the interior of the flexible barrier.

27. The method of claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier has end portions joined by a center portion.

28. The method of claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier comprises two opposing movable end portions supported by a rod.

29. The method of claim 1, further comprising securing the flexible barrier member in position by securing a neck portion

of the flexible barrier member to an adjacent surface defining an opening in the frame structure with an adhesive.

30. The method of claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier is coated with an adhesive material.

31. The method of claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier includes an integrally formed neck as part of an end portion of the flexible barrier.

32. The method of claim 31, wherein the neck portion extends directionally along the length of the frame.

33. The method of claim 1, wherein, during the filling step, the thermally activated expandable polymeric reinforcement material is a liquid, and upon curing becomes a thermoset material.

34. The method of claim 1, wherein, prior to curing, the thermally activated expandable polymeric reinforcement material is a pellet, and upon curing becomes a thermoset material.

35. The method of claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier member includes two single flexible sheets spaced a distance apart.

36. A method of reinforcing at least a portion of a hollow cavity, the method comprising:

inserting a flexible barrier member within a cavity of a structure for dividing the cavity into one or more sections, the flexible member including two movable end portions supported by a rod; and

filling one or more sections of the cavity with a pellet reinforcement material; and

curing the pellet reinforcement material to cause the movable end portions to slide along the rod in opposite directions, wherein the reinforcement material substantially assists in increasing the strength and stiffness of the structure.

37. A method of reinforcing at least a portion of a hollow cavity, the method comprising:

inserting a flexible barrier member into a cavity of a structure from an open end of the structure;

inflating the flexible barrier member with a fluid under pressure;

filling one or more sections of the cavity with a thermally activated expandable polymeric reinforcement material; and

activating the thermally activated expandable polymeric reinforcement material to fill the cavity, wherein the reinforcement material substantially assists in increasing the strength and stiffness of the structure wherein:

(i) the filling step includes pumping thermally activated expandable polymeric reinforcement material into a neck portion of the flexible member that extends in the longitudinal direction of the structure; and

(ii) the fluid under pressure is introduced through another neck portion of the flexible barrier.

38. The method of claim 37, wherein the activating step includes exposing the reinforcement material to a temperature ranging from approximately 93° C. to approximately 204° C. for activating expansion of the reinforcement material and forming a structural foam, and wherein upon expansion the structural foam reinforcement material substantially assists in increasing the strength and stiffness of an automobile frame structure.

39. The method claim 1, wherein the flexible barrier member is formed of a polymeric material.

* * * * *