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(54) **Ergonomic housing for electroacoustic transducers and ultrasound probe with said housing**

(57) Ergonomic housing for electroacoustic transducers, particularly for ultrasound imaging, comprising at least an inner space (4) housing one or more electroacoustic transducers (5) and possible further electric and/or electronic components (6/7), which housing (1) has at least an acoustic window (2) at which the one or more electroacoustic transducers (5) are placed and at least an handle part (101) composed of an opposing gripping surface having a shape that is ergonomically fitted for being gripped by an hand or a part thereof, characterized in that the gripping surface has such a shape or profile (301) to be ergonomically fitted for being gripped by inserting it in the hollow between two adjacent fingers of the hand, i.e. by holding it between the fingers.

The invention relates also to a probe with a housing of said type and an ultrasound machine in combination with said probe.

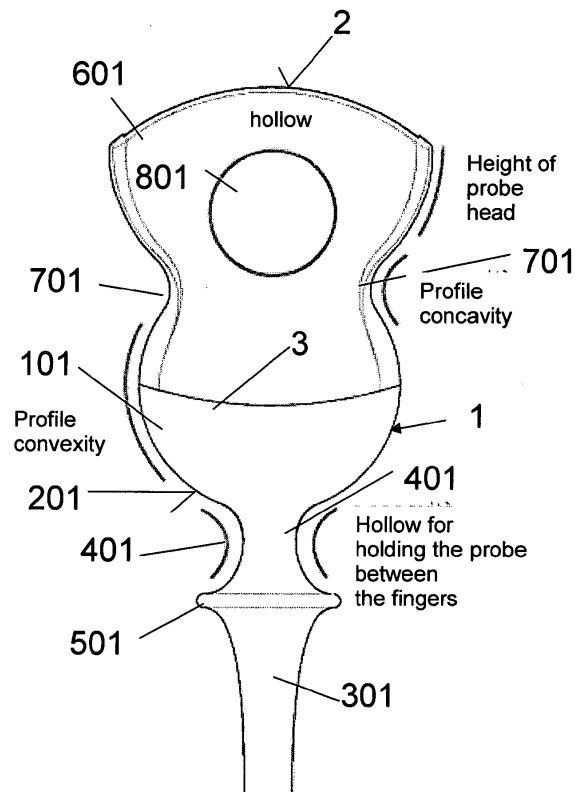


Fig. 1

Description

[0001] The present invention relates to an ergonomic housing for electroacoustic transducers, particularly for ultrasound imaging, comprising at least an inner space housing one or more electroacoustic transducers and possible further electric and/or electronic components:

which housing has at least an acoustic window at which the one or more electroacoustic transducers are placed
and an handle part composed of an opposing gripping surface having a shape that is ergonomically fitted for being gripped by an hand or a part thereof.

[0002] Housings of said type are known in the technical field. The ultrasound imaging is considerably widespread and it is often used. By means of studies in the field it has been found that users of ultrasound systems have muscle-skeletal diseases of the hand, wrist, neck and back coinciding with the use of ultrasound probes.

[0003] In order to avoid or at least to reduce above drawbacks, housings whose shape has been ergonomically modified are known. However the difficulty is that on one hand observed diseases can be eliminated or reduced by allowing the hand and the muscle-skeletal structure associated thereto to have relaxation moments, however without losing the control of the probe such that when the examination is carried out the probe can be gripped with a sufficient security in order to guide it and to exert the necessary pressure against the patient.

[0004] A solution to this drawback is described in the document WO2005/053537 (Koninklijke Philips electronics N.V.) wherein in the location opposite to the acoustic window from which soundproofing pulses are emitted the probe housing has a cap-like surface that is enough wide and it is such to allow the surface of the palm of the hand to grip the housing. Said gripping surface called palmar gripping surface is a kind of spherical or spheroidal gripping member that is gripped by the hand as a ball.

[0005] A similar solution is provided in the document US2006/0173331 (Siemens Corporation). In this case the housing of the probe provides a palmar gripping surface provided in an opposite location with respect to the acoustic window.

[0006] However said palmar grip does not completely solve the above drawback, since it does not allow to relax the hand without losing the grip on the housing of the probe. So the hand has to remain substantially tight on the surface of the housing forming the manual handle part. Even if during rest moments the tightening force can somewhat be relaxed, the hand cannot be absolutely stretched in the correct relaxation position of the muscle-skeletal structure.

[0007] Even if such configuration of the housing for ultrasound probes providing the palmar grip increases somewhat the situation with respect to the conventional

pen type grip by which the probe is held between the fingers (position called pinching in the technical jargon) for performing the scanning (task defined pushing in the field jargon), probes providing a palmar grip do not allow to alternatively grip the probe by a pen type grip (pinching).

[0008] Considering the above, the invention aims at providing an ergonomic housing for electroacoustic transducers, particularly for ultrasound imaging, allowing to overcome drawbacks of known housings and above all allowing to surely hold the probe in the hand even in a position of substantial complete relaxation of the muscle-skeletal structure thereof.

[0009] The invention aims also at improving said housing such to avoid drastic changes to the conventional structure of probes and moreover such to make simpler and to rationalize the manufacturing of ultrasound probes.

[0010] The invention achieves above aims by providing an ergonomic housing for electroacoustic transducers, particularly for the ultrasound imaging, of the type described hereinbefore, wherein the housing has such a shape or profile to be ergonomically fitted for being gripped between two adjacent fingers of the hand, i.e. to be inserted in the hollow between two adjacent fingers of the hand.

[0011] Advantageously the shape and sizes of the housing are such that the adjacent fingers of the hand holding the housing do not force fingers of the hand to be opened wide or to be tightened leading fingers to not be relaxed. On the contrary, particularly the shape and sizes of the housing are such to allow the holding between the two fingers in a natural relative spacing position thereof.

[0012] An advantageous embodiment provides the gripping surface of the housing to have a gripping surface that is ergonomically shaped in order to be gripped between the fingers, i.e. by interposing it in the hollow between two adjacent fingers of the hand.

[0013] The gripping extension to be held between the fingers is shaped such to be anatomically adapted to be engaged in the hollow between the fingers between two adjacent fingers of the hand, particularly between the forefinger and the middle finger or between the middle finger and the forefinger.

[0014] Advantageously the gripping surface of the housing from which the gripping extension to be held between the fingers comes out has a resting part that is like a spherical or spheroidal cap or dome and that is provided opposing the acoustic window, the gripping extension to be held between the fingers being provided at the top of said resting part.

[0015] The gripping extension to be held between the fingers may have various shapes and sizes. It can be also composed of an elongated member like a pin or the like having a rounded shape in section.

[0016] According to a further characteristic improving the security of grip between the fingers, the gripping ex-

tension to be held between the fingers has at least a pair of opposite gripping recesses with a laid down U-shaped section, each of which is intended for housing one of the two adjacent fingers for the engagement between the fingers of said gripping extension.

[0017] As a further improvement, the gripping extension to be held between the fingers has an annular recess having substantially a laid down U-shaped section, whose bottom surface is formed by a band of shell axial surface connected in a rounded way with the two side surfaces that are formed by surfaces transversal to the longitudinal axis of the extension and connected to said bottom surface, possibly only one or both in a rounded way, while one of said two side surfaces of the annular recess is composed of the resting part of the gripping surface and the other side surface is composed of the surface of a radial annular enlargement provided at a certain distance from said resting part of the gripping surface.

[0018] The gripping extension to be held between the fingers may have a rotation symmetrical shape or a not circular shape of the section, with a greater axis substantially oriented towards the fingers gripping it and/or in the antero-posterior direction of the hand and/or in the direction of the hollow between the fingers and with a smaller axis oriented in the direction transversal to the longitudinal axis of the fingers and/or to the antero-posterior direction of the hand.

[0019] Still according to an advantageous characteristic, the gripping extension to be held between the fingers is a sleeve for the introduction of an electrical cable for connecting the transducer.

[0020] Various relative arrangements of the acoustic window with respect to the gripping surface and with respect to the gripping extension to be held between the fingers are possible. A particular choice for example provides gripping extension to be held between the fingers to have a longitudinal axis that coincides with the prolongation of a vector perpendicular to the center of the acoustic window.

[0021] As regards the acoustic window, it has to be shaped in a way corresponding to the array of electroacoustic transducers that can be linear, i.e. flat or curved such as in convex probes or the curvature may be according to two axes that are perpendicular one with respect to the other or anyway they are not parallel. In this case, the acoustic window is composed of a flat member or it has a curved configuration respectively only according to a curvature axis or according to two or more curvature axes there being possible also the fact that the curvature can be opposite to the one of the gripping surface.

[0022] In order to allow the gripping of the housing with a so called pen type grip (pinching), the housing has such a shape and such a thickness at least in a direction perpendicular to the longitudinal axis to be gripped with a position of the hand corresponding to the so called pen type grip, said shape and said thickness being provided

for a part of the housing associated to the end having the acoustic window.

[0023] Other manufacturing variants improving the gripping comfort may provide said housing to have two opposite recesses with a section rounded shape, at an intermediate region of the housing, between the gripping surface and the acoustic window. Moreover the housing may have, from said intermediate region and in the direction of the acoustic window, two different thicknesses in the direction of each one of two axes perpendicular one with respect to the other and enclosed in the plane perpendicular to the axis of the gripping extension to be held between the fingers or in a plane tangential or parallel to the acoustic window.

[0024] The handle part of the housing forming the cap-like gripping surface opposite to the acoustic window, is advantageously composed of a spheroidal body that is flattened on two sides that are diametrically opposite one with respect to the other such to have two different diameters a greater one and a smaller one in the plane perpendicular to the axis of the gripping extension to be held between the fingers, the two opposite side recesses provided in the intermediate region of the housing being made as hollow ones in the direction of said greater axis.

[0025] Therefore the invention provides a housing made of a first housing part and a second housing part, which parts are harmonically completed one with the other and are divided along an intermediate separation plane between a part that is shaped such to form a gripping handle with a pencil type grip position and a gripping handle part that is shaped such to be hold by gripping it between fingers.

[0026] It is possible to provide said two housing parts to be integrally made or to be movably fastened one to the other or it is possible to provide said two housing parts to be movably fastened one to the other.

[0027] Still according to an advantageous characteristic of the invention, the housing is provided in combination with one or more transducers, an electronic circuit, a cable connecting the electronic circuit to remote processing and control devices and a member connecting the cable to the electronic circuit, a part of the two cooperating connector parts being integral with the first housing part and the other one being integral with the second housing part and the two connector parts being automatically engaged and disengaged one with the other contemporaneously when said two housing parts are fastened and separated.

[0028] By the latter characteristic, it is possible to provide a first housing part that is firmly associated to transducers and to possible circuits and electric or electronic components, different combinations of first housing parts and transducers and possible circuits and electronic components that are different one with respect to the other being provided, while it is possible to provide only a second housing part that is firmly associated to the control cable, all first housing parts having a movable fastening end that is the same and it can be fastened and

separated from only a second housing part.

[0029] Differently from present machines, by means of the above for different probes it is possible to provide the same cable that can be firmly integrated in the frame of an ultrasound machine for example or possibly by providing also automatic winding means as in supplying and control cables of dental tools in so called dental drill units.

[0030] The invention relates also to an ultrasound probe comprising a housing of the type described hereinbefore and a combination of ultrasound machine and probe with the housing described above and comprising the control and supplying cable of the ultrasound probe that is firmly integrated in the machine structure and it is mounted on automatic unwinding and winding means.

[0031] Further improvements of the housing, of the probe and of the ultrasound machine according to the present invention are object of sub-claims.

[0032] Characteristics of the invention and advantages deriving therefrom will be more clear from the following description of some not limitative embodiments shown in annexed drawings wherein:

Fig. 1 is a side elevation view taken on the larger side of an ultrasound probe according to the present invention.

Fig. 2 is a side elevation view of the probe according to figure 1 but taken from the smaller side thereof.

Figs. 3 and 4 show conditions of the hand in positions holding the probe between the fingers under the relaxed condition of the hand and under the operating condition when the hand firmly grasps the probe and corresponding to functionalities that can be achieved by conventional gripping modes known as pinching and pushing.

Figs. 5A to 5E are different positions for gripping a convex probe according to the present invention for alternatively the pen type grip and the grip between the fingers.

Figs. 6A to 6E are different positions for gripping a linear probe according to the present invention for alternatively the pen type grip and the grip between the fingers.

Figures 7 and 8 are two views similar to figures 1 and 2 of a convex probe according to the present invention and wherein the probe housing can be separated in two parts thereof along a median plane one of which part is the pen type grip part and the other part is the gripping part to be held between the fingers.

Figures 9 and 10 are two views similar to figures 1 and 2 of a linear probe according to the present invention and wherein the probe housing can be separated in two parts thereof along a median plane one of which part is the pen type grip part and the other part is the gripping part to be held between the fingers.

Figure 11 is a variant embodiment of probes according to figures 7 to 10 wherein the pen type gripping

part and housing electroacoustic transducers and possible electronics of different configurations of probes can be movably fastened to an housing part composing the between-finger gripping part that is identical for all probes.

Figs. 12 and 13 are a cross-section according to a median plane longitudinal and parallel to the wider face of a convex probe and a linear probe respectively and wherein the array of electroacoustic transducers and the possible electronics or electric circuitry are schematically indicated.

Figs. 14 and 15 schematically show a linear probe according to the present invention and according to previous figures 11 to 13.

Fig. 16 schematically shows an ultrasound machine wherein the cable communicating and controlling the probe is firmly mounted in the machine by automatic winding means and at its end connected to the probe it has a between-finger gripping member composing a housing part that can be movably fastened to an housing part associated to the probe according to the example of figures 11 to 15.

[0033] In figures 1 and 2 there is shown a probe of the type called convex and i.e. wherein electroacoustic transducers generating ultrasound pulses and receiving reflected ultrasound pulses being part of a transducer set, so called array, are arranged on a curved surface or are moved along a curved surface.

[0034] In this case the probe has an housing 1 that at one end, the one proximal to the object to be examined and particularly to the epithelial region coinciding with the anatomical region to be examined, has an acoustic window 2 behind which there is arranged the transducer array housed in a space enclosed by the housing 1.

[0035] The acoustic window 2 is composed of a wall portion that is permeable i.e. transparent to ultrasound pulses, both the ones transmitted by transducers and the ones reflected towards the transducers.

[0036] The housing extends from the acoustic window in the direction of a distal end i.e. an end opposite to the one of the acoustic window. At such end the housing 1 forms an handle part 101 having a gripping and/or resting surface 201 that is rounded like a spherical or spheroidal cap or dome extending in the direction opposite to the end provided with the acoustic window 2 by a gripping extension to be held between the fingers denoted by 301. Such extension having a shape with a rounded cross section is connected to the gripping or resting surface 201 by at least two diametrically opposite recesses being shaped like a laid down U denoted by 401 and which recesses 401 have a rounded bottom wall connected to a first side wall radially oriented with respect to the axis of the gripping extension 301 to be held between the fingers and composed of the region of the top of said gripping/resting surface 201. The opposite wall laterally delimiting the opposite U shaped recesses 401 is composed of two diametrically opposite radial enlargements

of the gripping extension 301 to be held between the fingers.

[0037] Advantageously such as shown in examples of figures instead of two opposite laid down U shaped recesses it is advantageous to provide an annular groove of the gripping extension 301 to be held between the fingers delimited by two radial walls spaced in the direction of the axis of said extension and one of which is composed of the top portion of the gripping/resting surface 201, while the other one is composed of the radial annular surface of a radial enlargement 501 of said extension 401 that is provided as being spaced to a certain extent from the gripping/resting surface 201. The bottom of the annular groove is connected to said two annular, radial walls in a rounded and harmonic way.

[0038] Advantageously the distance between said two annular radial walls substantially corresponds to the average diameter or it is adapted to said average diameter of two adjacent fingers of an hand such that they can be partially housed in said groove or in said opposite recesses and such that the annular radial surface that is more far away from the acoustic window 2 partially overlaps the top of the hand and so of the corresponding two adjacent fingers between which the gripping extension to be held between the fingers is intended to be gripped.

[0039] The section of said extension is advantageously rounded and it can have different shapes.

[0040] In order to avoid the two adjacent fingers, generally but not exclusively the forefinger and the middle finger to take an unnatural and too much wide apart position at least at the region of the two opposite laid down U-shaped recesses 401 or of the annular groove, the section of the extension part corresponding to the region of the bottom of the groove is not round but it is flattened at the sides intended to be faced towards the two adjacent fingers. Therefore, in this case, the section is made oval or flattened such to have a smaller axis in the direction transversal to the fingers and to the hollow therebetween and a greater axis in the direction parallel to the longitudinal extension of the fingers and of the hollow therebetween. This allows to reduce the spreading of fingers such to have such a position guaranteeing a relaxed condition of the muscle-skeletal structure of the hand during the gripping condition between the fingers but also to guarantee a condition for the sufficient control or holding of the extension between the two fingers by means of an increased surface contacting the fingers in the longitudinal direction thereof.

[0041] The gripping/resting surface 201 is composed of an handle part like a spheric or spheroidal member or however a rounded member that is not a palmar gripping surface and having a maximum outwardly projecting equatorial line beyond which said handle part tapers connecting with a thinned handle part having a pen type grip denoted by 601 and ending by the end provided of the acoustic window 2.

[0042] The spheroidal handle part is connected to the tapered handle part 601 having the pen type grip with

two hollow recesses 701 at diametrically opposite sides and that in the gripping condition between the fingers condition are a recess for gripping or housing the thumb of the hand. Said two opposite recesses 701 are provided at the two side ends of the larger sides of the the pen type grip tapered handle part 601, while the two narrower sides of said the pen type grip tapered handle part are connected by a continuous flaring to the spheroidal handle part such as shown in figure 2.

[0043] In the median region of the two wider sides of the pen type grip tapered part 601 of the probe, said two wider sides have a hollow 801 for gripping or housing fingertips of the fingers in the pen type grip respectively.

[0044] Even if such characteristic is not to be considered a limitative one, but it is a simple advantageous configuration, in the shown embodiments the gripping extension 301 to be held between fingers is tubular and it is opened both at the end for the connection to the housing and to the opposite end and it is a sleeve for passing the cable for a cable for the control and communication of transducers and possible electronic and/or electric components associated to transducers with other units of an ultrasound machine. Such characteristic is seen in greater details by sections according to diametral planes of figures 12 and 13. However such double functionality of the gripping extension 301 to be held between fingers is only a particular case and it can be provided also in combination with an housing provided with different inlets for the control and communication cable (not shown in details in figures).

[0045] The above housing has such a shape that at an head end and particularly at the head end proximal to or contacting the epithelium of the patient is provided with an acoustic window 2 composed of a surface having a narrower side and a longer side. Said surface may be flat or curved in a convex way. To said proximal head end there is connected a first pen type grip handle part denoted by 601 that is flattened having two wider sides parallel or substantially parallel to longer sides of the acoustic window and two narrower sides that are oriented in the direction of the narrower sides of the acoustic window 2.

[0046] The width of the two narrower sides, that is the distance between the two wider sides is such that said pencil type grip handle part 601 can be easily gripped between the fingers of the hand with said pen type grip and substantially it has a size corresponding to the thickness of a pen with a more or less large diameter.

[0047] In the central region of the two wider sides of the pen type grip handle part 601 there are provided two depressions or hollows 801 for easily tightening said part 601. These hollows allow to close the opposite fingers like pliers when holding the probe like a pen, thus overcoming a circumference with an arc of 180° formed by pen type grip opposite fingers.

[0048] The pen type grip handle tapered part 601 is connected by two opposite side hollows made in the wider side walls to an handle spheroidal part 101 to be held

between the fingers that is composed of a spheroidal member having a greater diameter in the direction parallel to wider sides of the pen type grip handle part 601 and a smaller diameter in the direction parallel to narrower sides of said pen type grip handle part 601. Said spheroidal member on the side faced towards the end provided with the acoustic window 2 forms wall faces of recesses 701 in wider sides of the pen type grip handle part 601 and on the opposite side it forms a resting cap or dome that in its top region has the gripping extension 301 to be held between fingers with the annular groove 401 engaging the two adjacent gripping fingers delimited on one side by said cap or dome of the resting or gripping member 101 and on the other side by the radial enlargement 501.

[0049] In the particular embodiment the housing 1 has a longitudinal axis that coincides with a vector passing through the centre of the acoustic window and perpendicular to the surface tangential to said acoustic window in said centre such axis being coincident with the longitudinal axis of the gripping extension 401 to be held between the fingers and perpendicular to the greater and smaller diameter of the spheroid 101 in the equatorial plane thereof.

[0050] Figures 3 and 4 clearly show the advantage of gripping the housing between the fingers according to the present invention. In this example the skeletal structure of the hand is schematized by using an arrangement of articulated rods. Joints are indicated by circles. The greatest circle is the wrist. Figure 3 clearly shows the fact that by means of the gripping extension to be held between the fingers it is possible to relatively firmly and securely grip the probe even if the hand is in its substantial resting and stretched position. In this case the probe is not subjected to any pressures and the grip is secure as regards the holding and the control of the probe when the hand and the probe are not stressed.

[0051] On the contrary figure 4 shows the holding between the fingers with the hand in its operating control condition wherein the probe is held not only by gripping it between the fingers, but also by tightening it or holding it like tongs along the resting and gripping cap or dome like surface 301. In this condition the thumb rests against the region of the handle spheroidal member under the equatorial line and connected to the pen type grip handle part 601. It is to be noted that the tongs-like or tightening grip occurs contemporaneously to the gripping between the fingers and however it is not a palmar grip. Moreover in this position tightening the holding between the fingers the spheroidal handle part 101 the joint of the wrist is not stressed i.e. the axis of the forearm and the one of the thumb are substantially aligned, thus reducing stresses to the carpal tunnel.

[0052] At the same time the possibility of resting the middle finger and/or other fingers of the hand on the cap or dome on the side of the spheroidal gripping part opposite to the acoustic window 2, on the distal side of the equatorial line of said spheroidal part allows to exert on

the probe the necessary pushing pressure indicated by the arrow F1 in figure 4 and so to properly control the probe.

[0053] The following series of figures 5A to 5E and 6A to 6E clearly show the modes for gripping the housing and so the probe according to the present invention with reference to a probe of the convex type and to a probe of the linear type.

[0054] Figures 5A and 6A show the gripping condition by the holding between the fingers with the hand in the stretched and resting condition. Figure 5B and figure 6C show the condition when the housing is gripped between the fingers and the spheroid resting and gripping part 101 is tightened the wider faces of the housing and more precisely of the pen type grip handle part 601 or longer sides of the acoustic window 2 being oriented transversally to the longitudinal direction of fingers.

[0055] Figures 5C and 6B show the variant wherein the housing is gripped by tightening and holding between fingers the spheroid gripping and resting part 101 by using the wider faces of the housing and more precisely of the pen type grip handle part 601 or with the longer sides of the acoustic window 2 substantially oriented in the longitudinal direction of fingers.

[0056] Figures 5D and 5E and figures 6E and 6D show the housing gripped by the pen type grip with the probe in said two positions respectively with respect to the longitudinal axis of the hand respectively and that is in the two positions of the probe or housing corresponding to an orientation of the wider sides of the housing or of the flattened part 601 of the probe transversal to the axis of the forearm or parallel thereto respectively.

[0057] Figures 7 to 15 show probes of the convex type and of the linear type according to what has been previously described.

[0058] As it is clear from figures 7 to 15, the two housing parts 101 and 601 composing the spheroidal handle gripping or resting part and the pen type grip handle part respectively, are advantageously made as being movably fastenable along a substantially equatorial separation plane of the spheroidal part 101. Such plane coincides with the line separating the walls of the two housing parts 101 and 601 denoted by 3 in figures 7 to 15.

[0059] The two housing parts 101 and 601 can be made of different materials and particularly the spheroidal gripping one can be made of a soft material and the pen type grip handle one can be made of a more rigid material.

[0060] The softer material can be also an outer layer covering a more rigid supporting layer. Similarly it is also possible for one part 101 or the other one 601 to have regions with covering inserts or layers made of soft material in locations contacting the fingers or other parts of the hand, such as for example hollows 801 or islets 901 in recesses 401.

[0061] Advantageously this characteristic allows to make housings for ultrasound probes and ultrasound probes such that the cap-like or dome-like part bearing

the gripping extension 301 to be held between the fingers is in common to a series of probes which have as the probe housing the pen type grip handle part 601 and the spheroidal gripping part extending to the substantially equatorial separation surface.

[0062] In this case, such as shown in figures 12 to 15, in the housing space 4 of the housing there is the enclosed the array of electroacoustic transducers 5 placed at the acoustic window 2, a terminal board composed of a printed circuit 6 or it can be composed of simple conducting paths or it can also comprise an electronic circuit with corresponding electronic components and a connector 7 mounted on the printed circuit and connecting a control and communication cable (not shown) to the printed circuit and to transducers.

[0063] In figures 11 to 15 the two housing parts are defined by reference numbers 1A and 1B since the fact of being different is not related to the gripping task but it is related to the two parts that can be coupled or uncoupled and from a functionality point of view they coincide only partially with definitions of spheroidal gripping and resting part 101 and pen type grip handle part 601. Particularly as it results from figures 14 and 15, the connector 7 is made of two parts 107 and 207 that can be coupled and uncoupled both mechanically and electrically, said two parts being firmly mounted one 107 to the printed circuit 6 in the housing part 1B and the other one 207 in the housing part 1A wherein it is firmly connected to the control and communication cable (not shown) passing inside said housing part 1A through the gripping extension 301 to be held between the fingers.

[0064] The two connector parts are made and mounted such that the mechanical and electric coupling of said two connector parts 107, 207 occurs by the same or a part of the same relative movement coupling or uncoupling the two housing parts 1A and 1B, so that contemporaneously to the fastening of said two housing parts 1A and 1B and contemporaneously to the separation of said two housing parts 1A and 1B also the mechanical and electric coupling and the mechanical and electric uncoupling of the two connector parts 107 and 207 occur respectively.

[0065] In the schematic example of figures 14 and 15, the two housing parts 1A and 1B and the corresponding two connector parts 107 and 207 are coupled by approaching and compressing them in the direction of arrows F2 and F3 of figure 14 and they are uncoupled by pulling and bringing them farther away according to the double arrow F4 in figure 15. Said arrows are oriented parallelly to the longitudinal axis coinciding with the central axis of the acoustic window 2 that is perpendicular to the plane tangential to the centre of said acoustic window and that possibly it also coincides with the axis of the gripping extension 301 to be held between the fingers.

[0066] It is to be noted that in the case of the example of figures 11 to 15, the probe housing is composed of a part 1A that is always the same and it is both the terminal connecting the control and communication cable of the

ultrasound machine to the ultrasound probe intended as the array of transducers and circuits associated thereto inside the probe, and a part of the spheroidal resting and gripping part 101 and more precisely the dome or cap-like part provided at the distal end of the probe housing and opposite to the acoustic window 2 and moreover it comprises the gripping extension 301 to be held between the fingers.

[0067] The other housing part 1B on the contrary becomes the real housing part of the probe firmly housing transducers and circuits associated thereto and it is different for each different probe, moreover said housing part 1B being composed of the pen type grip handle part 601 and of the part of the spheroidal gripping and resting part 101 connected to said pen type grip handle part and that is interposed between it and the substantially equatorial plane or line of separation 3, while all different probes have a housing composed of said housing part 1B and all said housing parts 1B have the same configuration and the identical coupling means, as well as an identical connector part 107 by means of which each of them can be coupled to the housing part 1A and to the corresponding connector part 207.

[0068] This embodiment allows to achieve a considerable advantage as it is shown in figure 16. In this figure by the number 11 a general machine for acquiring ultrasound images is indicated. The machine comprises circuits 12 controlling the ultrasound probe 1 and processing signals kept by said probe as images that are displayed on a screen 13 or by other alternative displaying means. The probe 1 is connected to control and processing circuits 12 by a control and processing cable 14. This cable is made as firmly connected or coupled to the ultrasound machine and particularly to control and processing circuits 12, while it ends with an housing part 1A with a connector part 207 to which a probe can be connected and whose housing is composed of an housing part 1B with a connector 107 according to what has been described with reference to figures 11 to 15. In this case, therefore for changing the type of probe it is not necessary to replace the control and communication cable 14, but only the probe. Moreover this arrangement in combination with the cable 14 allows to provide automatic means 15 for winding the cable 14 on a reel for example composed of a reel upon which a certain length of the cable is wound and that is rotatable in the unwinding direction against the action of spring means operating the rotation of the reel in the winding direction. Said means, for example a spiral spring, are loaded by the rotation of the reel when unwinding the cable occurring by means of the pulling action exerted by the user, so when the pulling force is released, the reel is rotationally dragged in the opposite direction i.e. in the winding direction and the cable is automatically rewound.

[0069] Said functionality can be achieved also by means of other means for example with similar alternative means or by means substantially identical to means associated to cables or ducts controlling and supplying

dental tools in so called dental drill units.

[0070] From the above advantages of the present invention are clear consisting in a better condition for using the probe as regards the gripping thereof and consequences of an extended use on the health conditions of the muscle-skeletal structure of the hand and/or of the wrists of the user and at the same time in modifying the present manufacturing of probes by providing a combination of a series of probes that can be coupled to a sole connector connecting a control and communication cable that is firmly associated to the ultrasound machine and therefore it can be provided in combination with automatic lengthening and shortening mechanisms. In this case costs are reduced since all probes are connected to the same cable, and moreover the security and comfort in using the device drastically increases.

Claims

1. Ergonomic housing for electroacoustic transducers, particularly for the ultrasound imaging, comprising at least an inner space (4) housing one or more electroacoustic transducers (5) and possible further electric and/or electronic components (6/7), which housing (1) has at least an acoustic window (2) at which the one or more electroacoustic transducers (5) are placed and at least an handle part (101) composed of an opposing gripping surface having a shape that is ergonomically fitted for being gripped by an hand or a part thereof, **characterized in that** the gripping surface has such a shape or profile (301) to be ergonomically fitted for being gripped by inserting it in the hollow between two adjacent fingers of the hand, i.e. by gripping it between the fingers.
2. Housing according to claim 1, **characterized in that** the gripping surface (101) provides a gripping extension (301) that is ergonomically shaped to be gripped between fingers, i.e. by interposing it in the hollow between two adjacent fingers of the hand.
3. Housing according to claims 1 or 2, **characterized in that** the gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers is shaped such to be anatomically fitted for the engagement in the space between the fingers between two adjacent fingers of the hand, particularly between the forefinger and the middle finger or between the middle finger and the ring finger.
4. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the gripping surface (101) has a resting part (201) that is shaped like a spherical or spheroidal cap or dome and it is provided opposite to the acoustic window (2), the gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers being provided at the top of said resting part.
5. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers is composed of an elongated member like a pin, sleeve, bushing, tube or the like having a rounded shape.
6. Housing according to claim 5, **characterized in that** the gripping extension (301) has at least a pair of opposite gripping recesses with a laid down U-shaped section, each of which is intended for housing one of the two adjacent fingers for the engagement between the fingers of said gripping extension.
7. Housing according to claim 6, **characterized in that** the two gripping recesses have a bottom wall that is oriented in the axial direction of the gripping extension and two side walls transversal or perpendicular to the axis of the gripping surface, one of said two side surfaces being composed of a region of the resting part of the gripping surface and the other side wall being provided at a distance anatomically adapted to sizes of fingers, especially to average sizes of fingers.
8. Housing according to one of claims 6 or 7, **characterized in that** the gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers has an annular recess or an annular groove (401) having substantially a laid down U-shaped section, whose bottom surface is formed by a band of shell axial surface connected in a rounded way with the two side surfaces that are formed by surfaces transversal to the longitudinal axis of the extension and connected to said bottom surface, possibly only one or both in a rounded way, while one of said two side surfaces of the annular recess (401) is composed of the cap or dome-like resting part (201) of the gripping surface (101) and the other side surface is composed of the surface of a radial annular enlargement (401) provided at a certain distance from said cap or dome-like resting part (201) of the gripping surface (101).
9. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers has a rotation symmetrical shape.
10. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers, has a not circular section shape, with a greater axis substantially oriented in the direction of fingers gripping it and/or in the antero-posterior direction of the hand and/or of the hollow between fingers and with a smaller axis oriented in the direction transversal to the longitudinal

nal axis of fingers and/or to the antero-posterior direction of the hand.

11. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers constitutes a sleeve for the introduction of an electrical cable for connecting the transducer. 5
12. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the gripping extension (301) to be held between fingers has a longitudinal axis that coincides with the prolongation of a vector perpendicular to a surface tangential to the centre of the acoustic window (2). 10
13. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the acoustic window (2) is composed of a flat member. 15
14. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims 1 to 12, **characterized in that** the acoustic window (2) has a curved arrangement according to a sole axis of curvature or according to two or more axes of curvature the curvature being opposite to the one of the resting dome or cap (201) of the gripping surface (101). 20
15. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** at an intermediate region of the housing between the gripping surface (101) and the acoustic window (2) the housing has two opposite recesses (701) having a rounded section shape. 25
16. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the handle part of the housing (1) forming the gripping surface (101) is composed of a spheroidal body flattened on two diametrically opposite sides such to have two different diameters at least in the equatorial plane and one of which is a greater diameter and the other one is a smaller diameter in the plane, the two opposite side recesses (401) provided at the intermediate region of the housing being made hollow in the direction of said greater axis. 30
17. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** the spheroidal gripping surface (101) is gripped by being tightened by fingers of the hand in addition to holding between the fingers the gripping extension (301) to be held between fingers, fingers of the hand adhering to said spheroidal gripping surface beyond the equatorial line thereof. 35
18. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** it has two different 40

thicknesses in the direction of each one of the two axes perpendicular one with respect to the other and enclosed in the plane perpendicular to the axis of the gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers. 45

19. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** it is shaped such to allow the gripping with the hand in the position like a pen type grip. 50
20. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** in the part thereof between the spheroidal gripping surface (101) and the acoustic window (2), the housing has a flattened part (601) whose thickness substantially corresponds to the size of a pen or of a thick pen and however it has such a thickness to be gripped by the hand like a pen. 55
21. Housing according to claim 20, **characterized in that** in the two opposite faces of said pen type grip handle flattened part (601) and at the end of the two opposite fingers for example thumb and forefinger said surfaces have opposite depressions (801) for the positioning of said fingers. 60
22. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** it comprises an acoustic window (2) provided on the head side of a pen type grip handle flattened part (601), which extends in the direction opposite to the acoustic window (2) with a spheroidal gripping handle (101) provided at the top opposite to the acoustic window of a gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers. 65
23. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims, **characterized in that** it is made of a first housing part (1A) and a second housing part (1B), which parts are harmonically completed one with the other and are separated along an intermediate separation plane (3) between a part shaped such to form at least a part of a pen type grip handle (601) and at least a part of a gripping handle shaped such to be held between the fingers. 70
24. Housing according to claim 23, **characterized in that** the first and second housing part (1A;1B) can be movably fastened one with the other. 75
25. Housing according to claim 24, **characterized in that** it is provided in combination with one or more transducers (5), an electronic and/or electric circuit (6), a cable connecting the electronic or electric circuit to remote processing and control devices and a member (7) connecting the cable to the electronic and/or electric circuit, the connector being made of two parts (107, 207) that can be mechanically and electrically coupled and uncoupled and a connector 80

- part (107) being provided integral with the first housing part (1B) and the other connector part (207) being provided integral with the second housing part (1A) and the two connector parts being automatically engaged and disengaged one with the other contemporaneously when said two housing parts (1A, 1B) are fastened and separated.
26. Ultrasound probe comprising one or more electroacoustic transducers (5), that are connected to a communication cable, said transducers (5) being housed in a space (4) of an housing (1) of said probe, **characterized in that** said housing has an acoustic window (2) at which electroacoustic transducers (5) are provided and at least an handle part (101) comprising at a location opposite to the acoustic window (2) ergonomically shaped means (301) to be held between the fingers, i.e in the hollow between two adjacent fingers of the hand.
27. Probe according to claim 26, **characterized in that** ergonomically shaped means (301) to be held between the fingers, i.e. in the hollow between two adjacent fingers of the hand are composed of a gripping extension to be held between the fingers.
28. Ultrasound probe according to claim 27, **characterized in that** it comprises an housing with one or more of the characteristics of claims 1 to 25.
29. Ultrasound probe comprising one or more electroacoustic transducers (5), that are connected to a communication cable, said transducers (5) being housed in a space (4) of an housing (1) of said probe and to which a communication cable is connected, **characterized in that** the communication cable is connected to the electroacoustic transducer or transducers (5) by a connector (7) comprising a first connector part (107) connected to electroacoustic transducers (5) and a second connector part (207) that can be movably engaged with the first connector part (107), the housing (1) being formed of two housing parts (1A, 1B) that can be fastened and separated, the separation plane or surface (3) between said housing parts (1A, 1B) being provided at an intermediate region of the housing (1) between an acoustic window (2) at which electroacoustic transducers (5) are provided and a tubular extension (301) for passing the cable, while the two connector parts (7, 107, 207) are firmly fastened one to a first part (1A) of the two housing parts and the other one to a second part (1B) of the two housing parts, such that when said two housing parts (1A, 1B) are fastened or separated the two parts (107, 207) of the connector (7) associated to said first and said second housing part (1A, 1B) respectively are automatically electrically and possibly mechanically engaged and disengaged one with the other.
30. Set of ultrasound probes each one comprising one or more electroacoustic transducers (5), that can be connected to a communication cable, said electroacoustic transducers (5) being housed in a space (4) of an housing part (1B) of said probe, which housing part (1B) forms the partial region of a gripping handle (601) of the probe, and wherein the communication cable is connected to the electroacoustic transducer or transducers (5) by a connector (7) comprising a first connector part (107) connected to electroacoustic transducers (5) and associated to the housing part (1B) of the probe and a second connector part (207) connected to the communication cable, the two part (107, 207) of the connector (7) being movably engageable and disengageable one with respect to the other and the second part (207) of the connector (7) being associated to a connector housing part (1A) forming the remaining handle part of the probe and that can be movably fastened and separated from the end of the housing part (1A) of the probe at which there is provided the first part (107) of the connector (7), so when any probe housing (1A) is fastened or separated from the connector housing (1B) for the cable said two housings (1A, 1B) are automatically engaged and disengaged one with the other the outer surfaces of said two housings being harmonically and without interruption completed one with the other and the two parts (107, 207) of the connector (7) associated to said first and to said second housing part (1A, 1B) respectively are automatically engaged and disengaged one with the other.
31. Set of ultrasound probes according to claim 30, **characterized in that** the housing (1B) of the probe has a shape that is anatomically adapted for being gripped by a pen type grip, while the housing (1B) of the connector has a gripping extension (301) to be held between the fingers.
32. Set of probes according to claim 31, **characterized in that** when the probe housing (1A) and the connector housing (1B) are coupled together they form a spheroidal gripping part (101) for gripping it by tightening the fingers of the hand.
33. Housing according to one or more of the preceding claims 1 to 29, **characterized in that** the handle part and/or also the gripping extension to be held between the fingers are made of or are externally covered by a soft material.
34. Ultrasound machine comprising means for controlling an ultrasound probe and means for processing receiving signals of the ultrasound probe and an ultrasound probe connected to said means by a control and communication cable, characterized in that the cable is firmly associated to the machine there being provided with a terminal for the connection to the

probe made according to one or more of the preceding claims 25 to 31 and the probe being made according to one or more of claims 25 to 31.

35. Ultrasound machine according to claim 34, **characterized in that** the control and communication cable is provided in communication with automatic means lengthening and shortening and/or winding and unwinding a reel.

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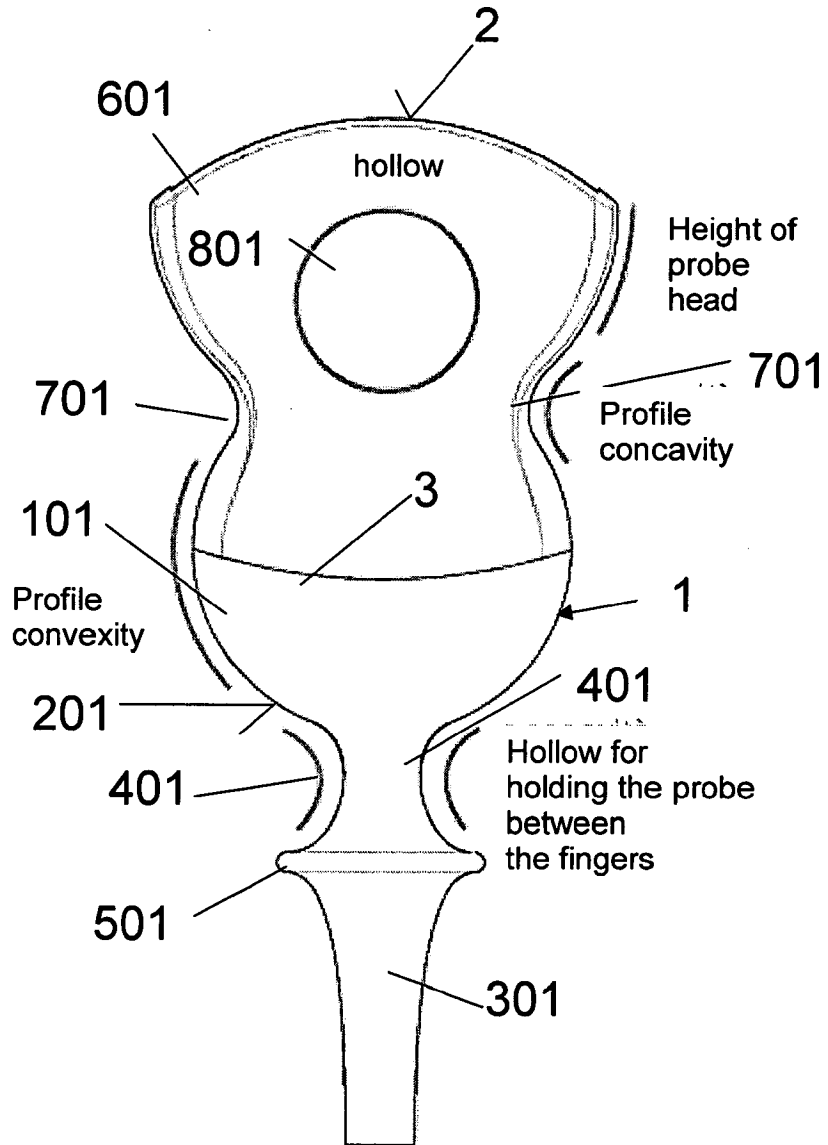


Fig. 1

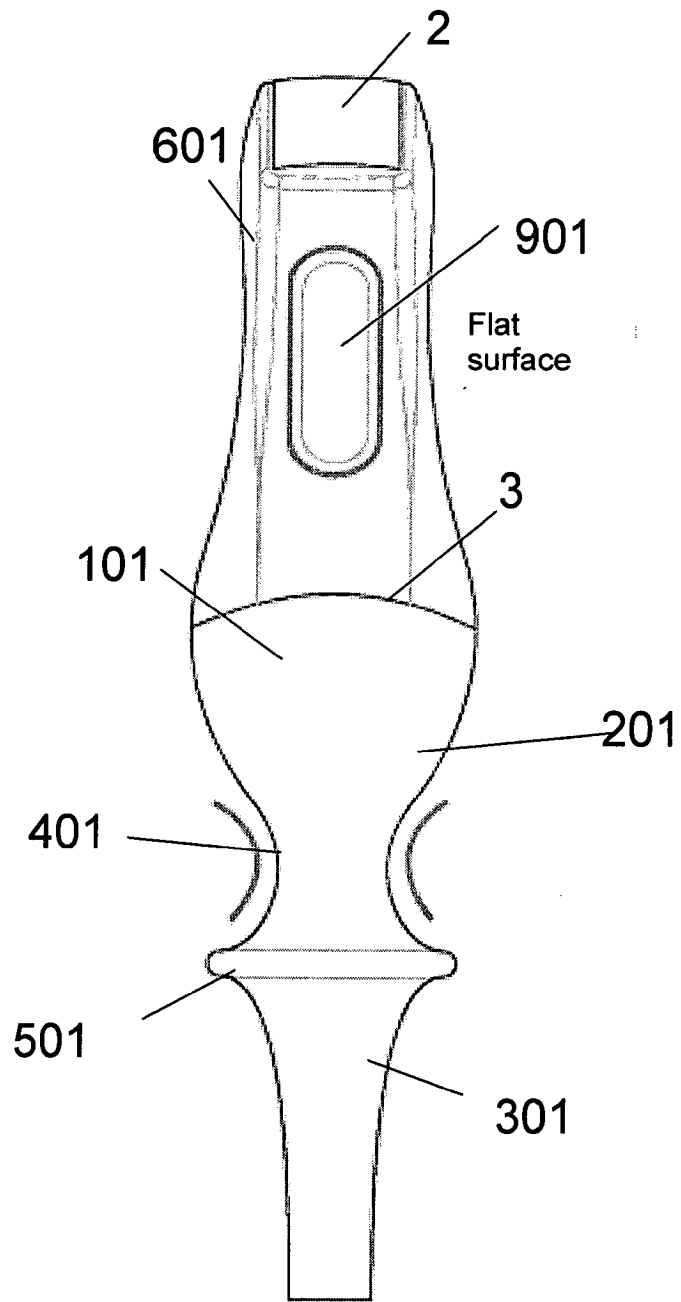


Fig. 2

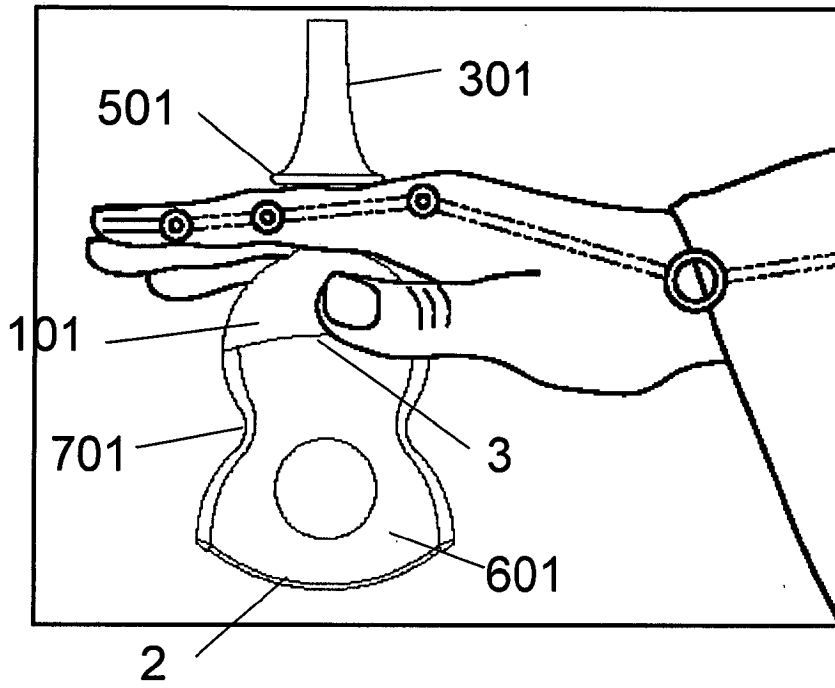


Fig. 3

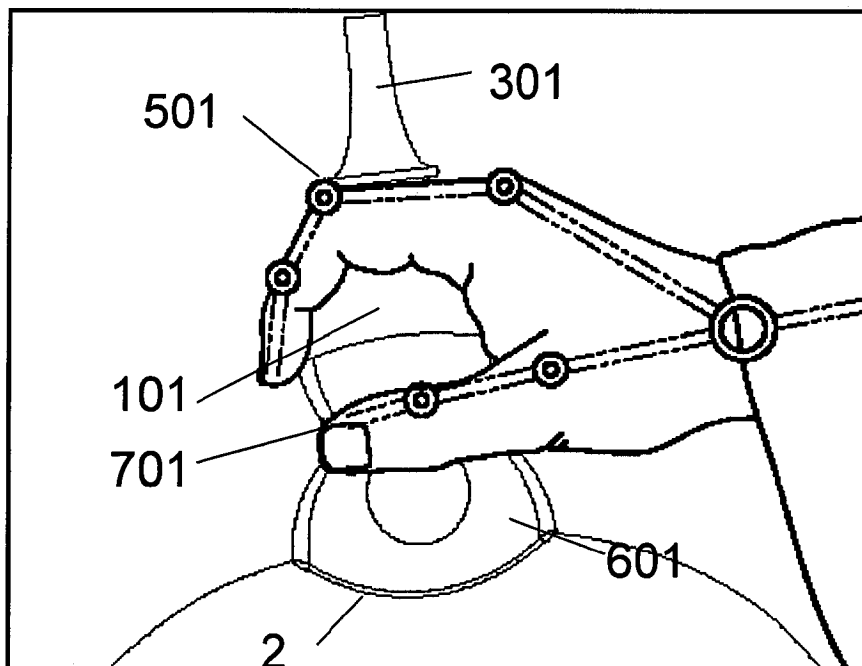


Fig. 4

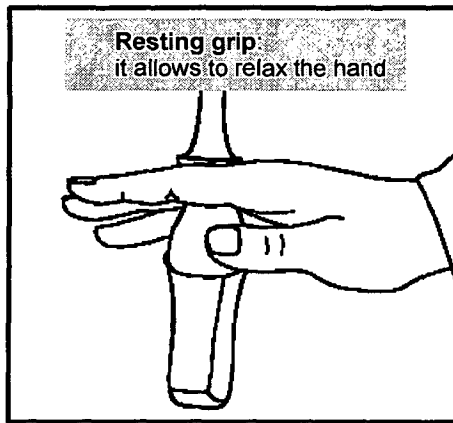


Fig. 5A



Fig. 5B



Fig. 5C



Fig. 5D

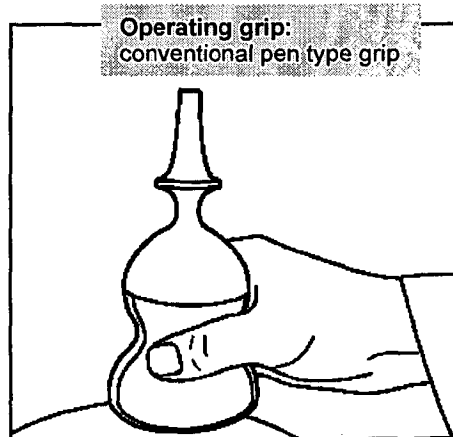


Fig. 5E



Fig. 6A

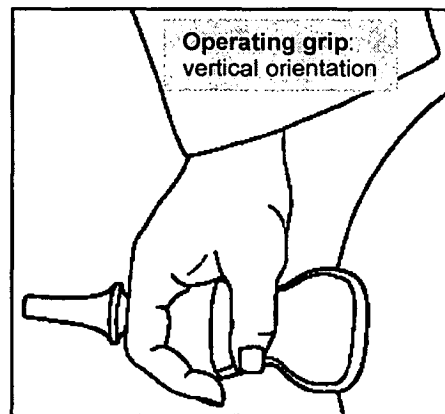


Fig. 6B

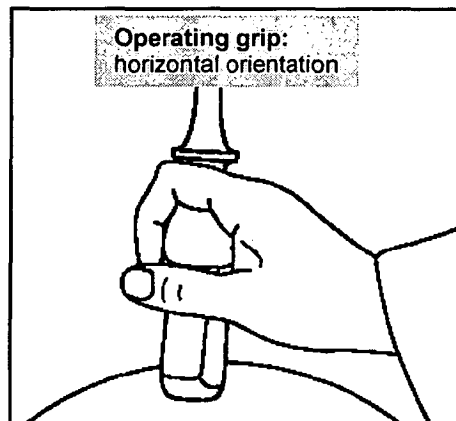


Fig. 6C



Fig. 6D

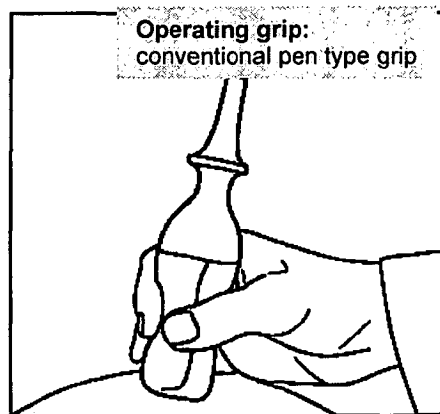
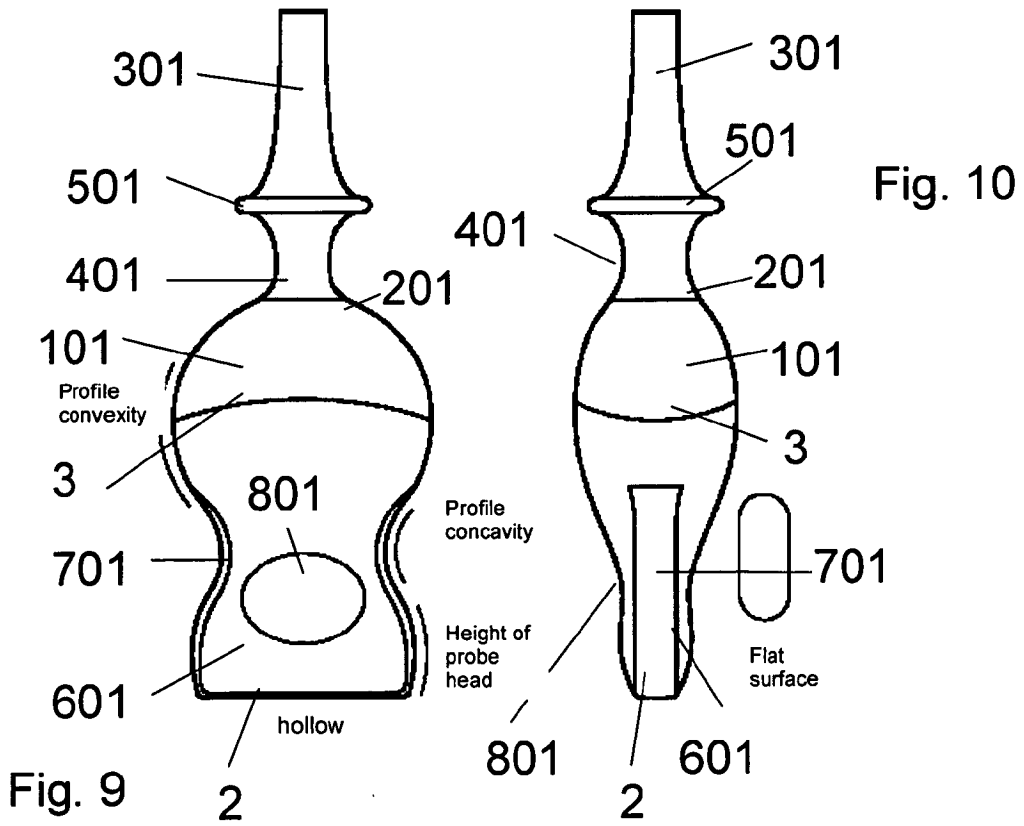
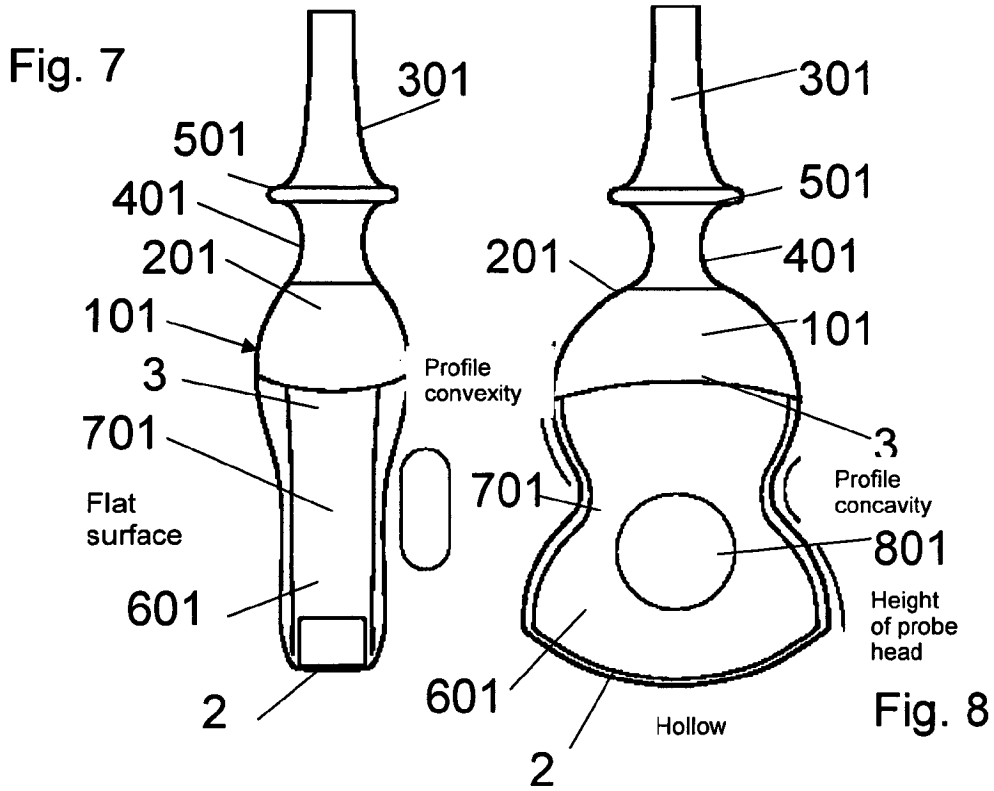
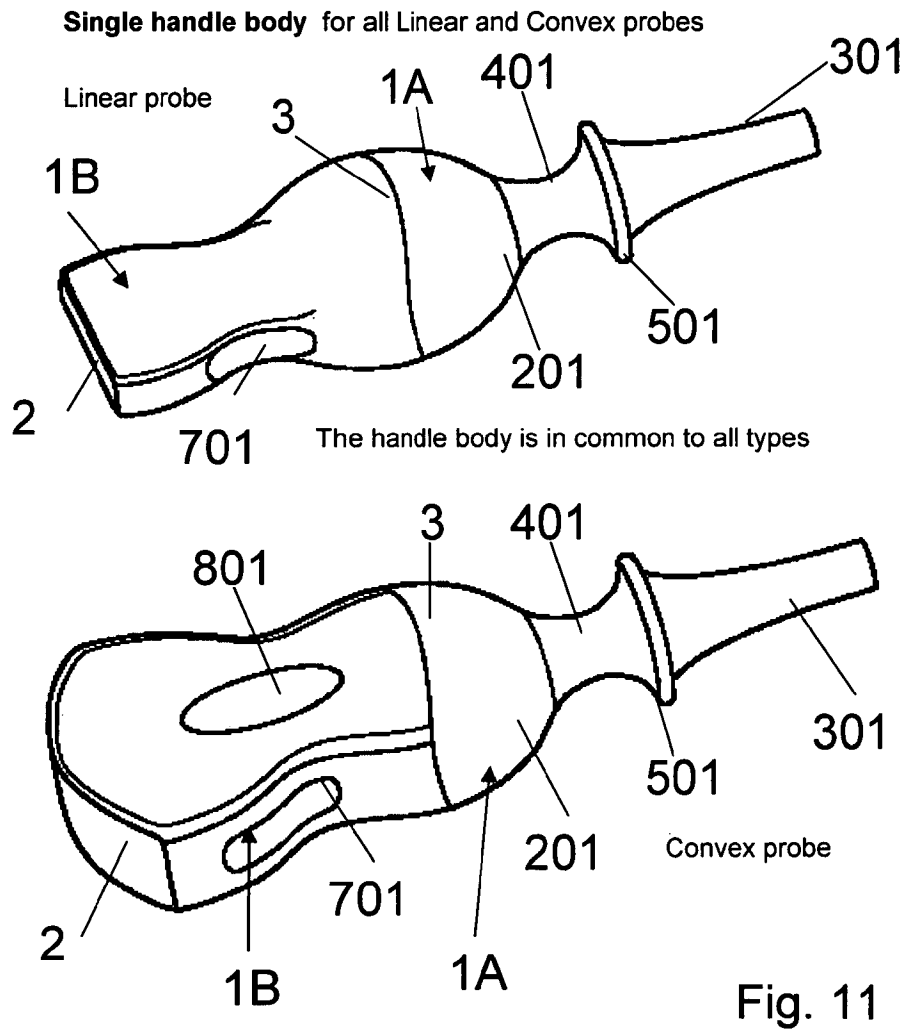


Fig. 6E





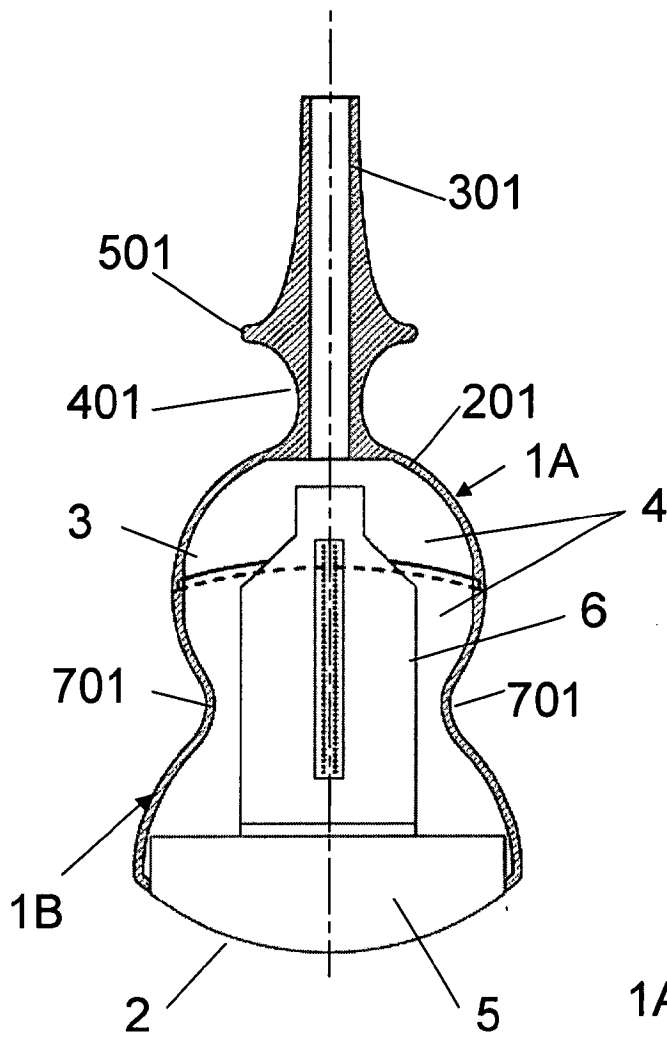


Fig. 12

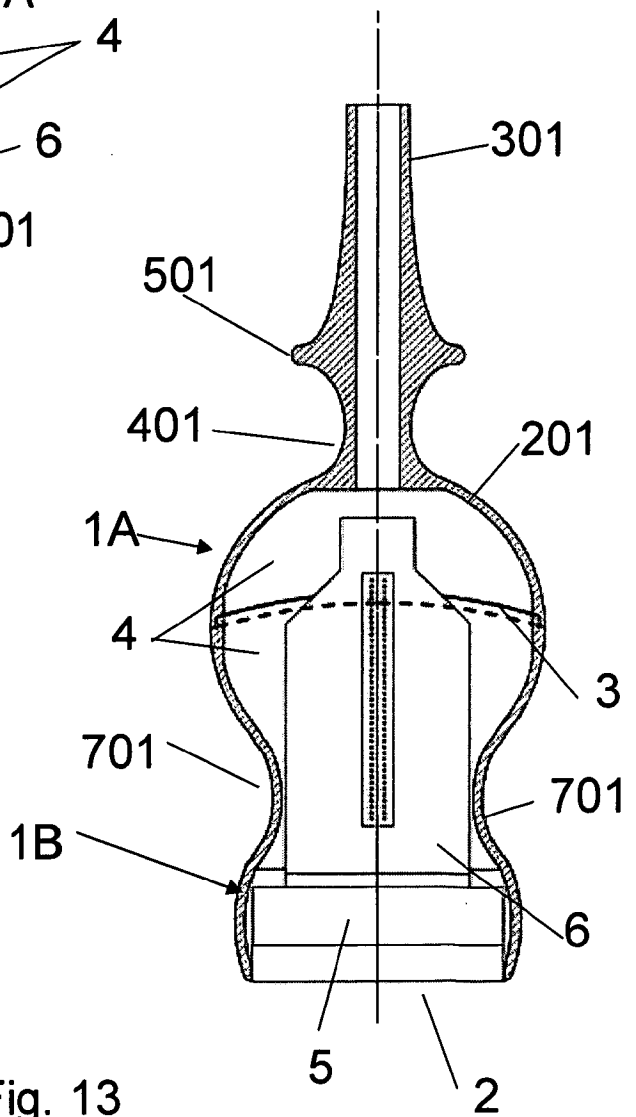


Fig. 13

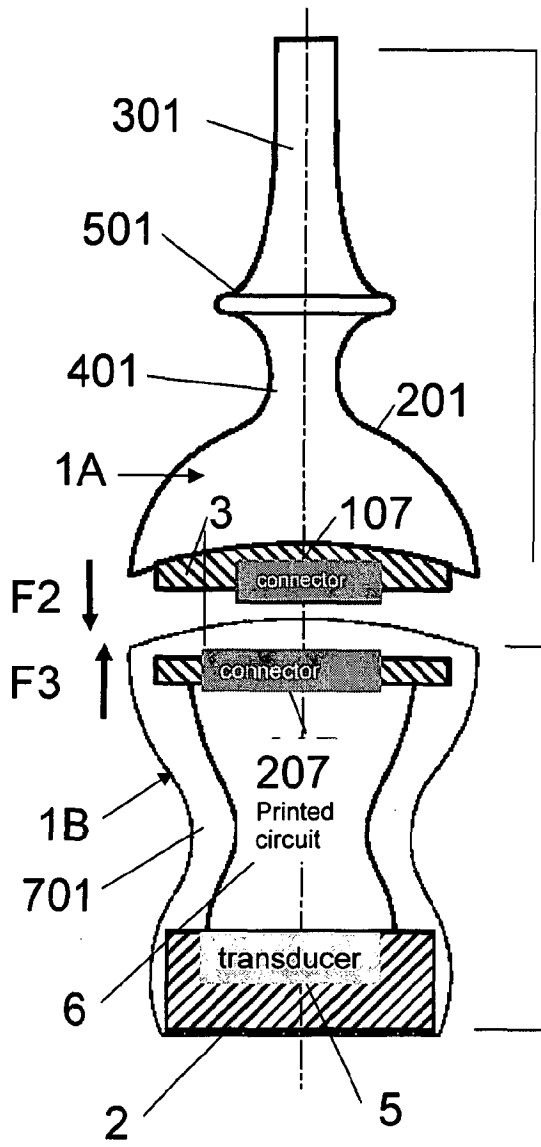


Fig. 14

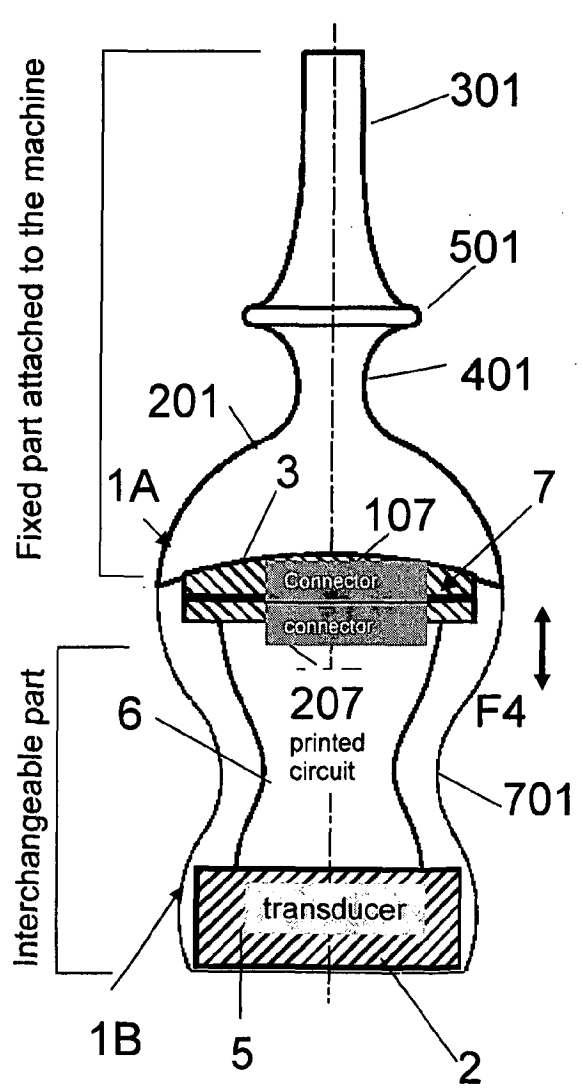


Fig. 15

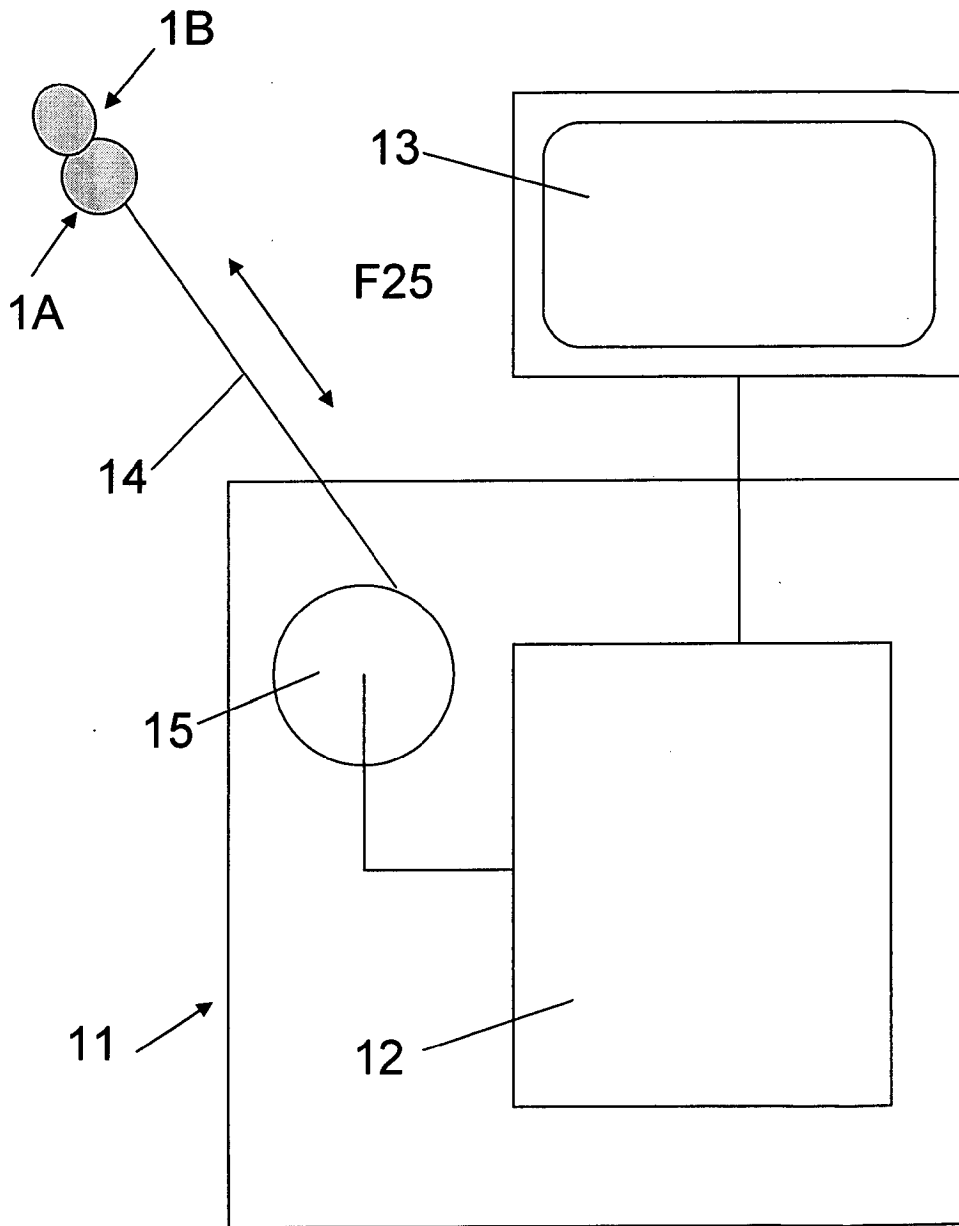


Fig. 16



DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (IPC)
X	US 2004/002658 A1 (MARIAN VAUGHN R [US] MARIAN JR VAUGHN R [US]) 1 January 2004 (2004-01-01)	1-19, 23-34	
Y	* paragraph [0021] - paragraph [0031] * * paragraph [0033] - paragraph [0035] * * figures 2-4 *	35	
Y	JP 2003 190151 A (GE MED SYS GLOBAL TECH CO LLC) 8 July 2003 (2003-07-08) * abstract *	35	
X	US 2003/036702 A1 (DAVIDSEN RICHARD EDWARD [US]) 20 February 2003 (2003-02-20) * paragraph [0029] - paragraph [0031]; figures 3,4 *	1,23-26, 29-34	
X	US 2004/015079 A1 (BERGER NOAH [US] ET AL) 22 January 2004 (2004-01-22) * paragraph [0107] - paragraph [0111]; figures 2,3a *	1,23-26, 29-34	
			TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (IPC)
The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search Berlin		Date of completion of the search 28 November 2007	Examiner Trachterna, Morten
CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document		T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document	

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EPO FORM 1503 03.02 (P04C01)

**CLAIMS INCURRING FEES**

The present European patent application comprised at the time of filing more than ten claims.

- Only part of the claims have been paid within the prescribed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for the first ten claims and for those claims for which claims fees have been paid, namely claim(s):
- No claims fees have been paid within the prescribed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for the first ten claims.

LACK OF UNITY OF INVENTION

The Search Division considers that the present European patent application does not comply with the requirements of unity of invention and relates to several inventions or groups of inventions, namely:

see sheet B

- All further search fees have been paid within the fixed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for all claims.
- As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying an additional fee, the Search Division did not invite payment of any additional fee.
- Only part of the further search fees have been paid within the fixed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for those parts of the European patent application which relate to the inventions in respect of which search fees have been paid, namely claims:
- None of the further search fees have been paid within the fixed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for those parts of the European patent application which relate to the invention first mentioned in the claims, namely claims:
- The present supplementary European search report has been drawn up for those parts of the European patent application which relate to the invention first mentioned in the claims (Rule 164 (1) EPC).



The Search Division considers that the present European patent application does not comply with the requirements of unity of invention and relates to several inventions or groups of inventions, namely:

1. claims: 1-24,26-28

A housing according to claim 1 further comprising means allowing the gripping with the hand in the position like a pen type grip.

2. claims: 25,29-35

An ultrasound probe comprising a first and a second electrical connector part said parts being integral with two housing parts.

**ANNEX TO THE EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT
ON EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION NO.**

EP 06 42 5843

This annex lists the patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned European search report. The members are as contained in the European Patent Office EDP file on
The European Patent Office is in no way liable for these particulars which are merely given for the purpose of information.

28-11-2007

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REFERENCES CITED IN THE DESCRIPTION

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