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(54) **ULTRASOUND PROBE COUPLERS AND RELATED METHODS**

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(52) **U.S. Cl.**
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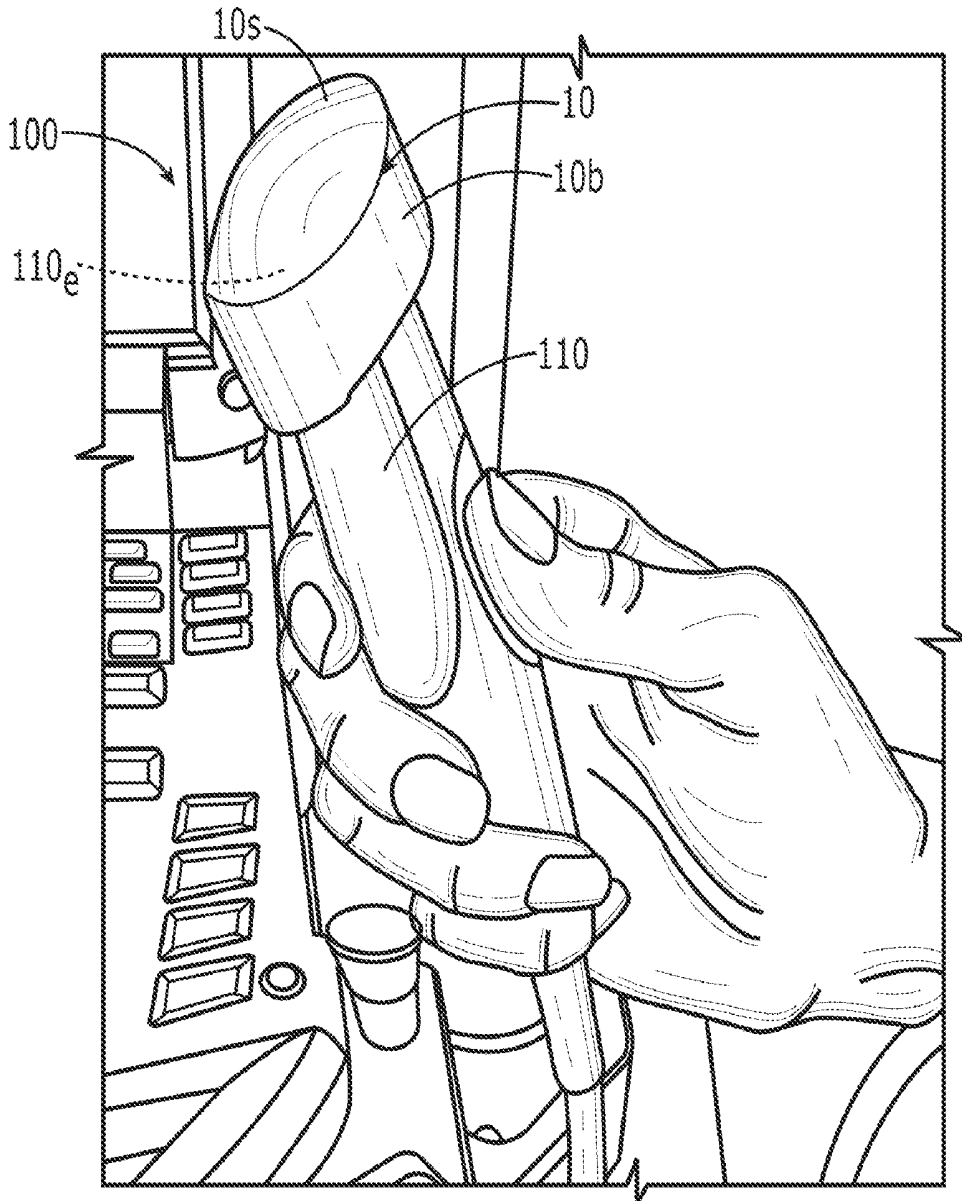
(57) **ABSTRACT**

(22) Filed: **Dec. 31, 2015**

Couplers for ultrasound probes can have a solid coupler body with a cavity having a malleable shape so as to be able to conform to and/or self-attach to the end of the probe by a user pressing the coupler body against the ultrasound probe so that the coupler body takes on the underlying shape of the ultrasound probe while the exterior body can retain its pre-attached shape.

Related U.S. Application Data

(60) Provisional application No. 62/101,098, filed on Jan. 8, 2015.



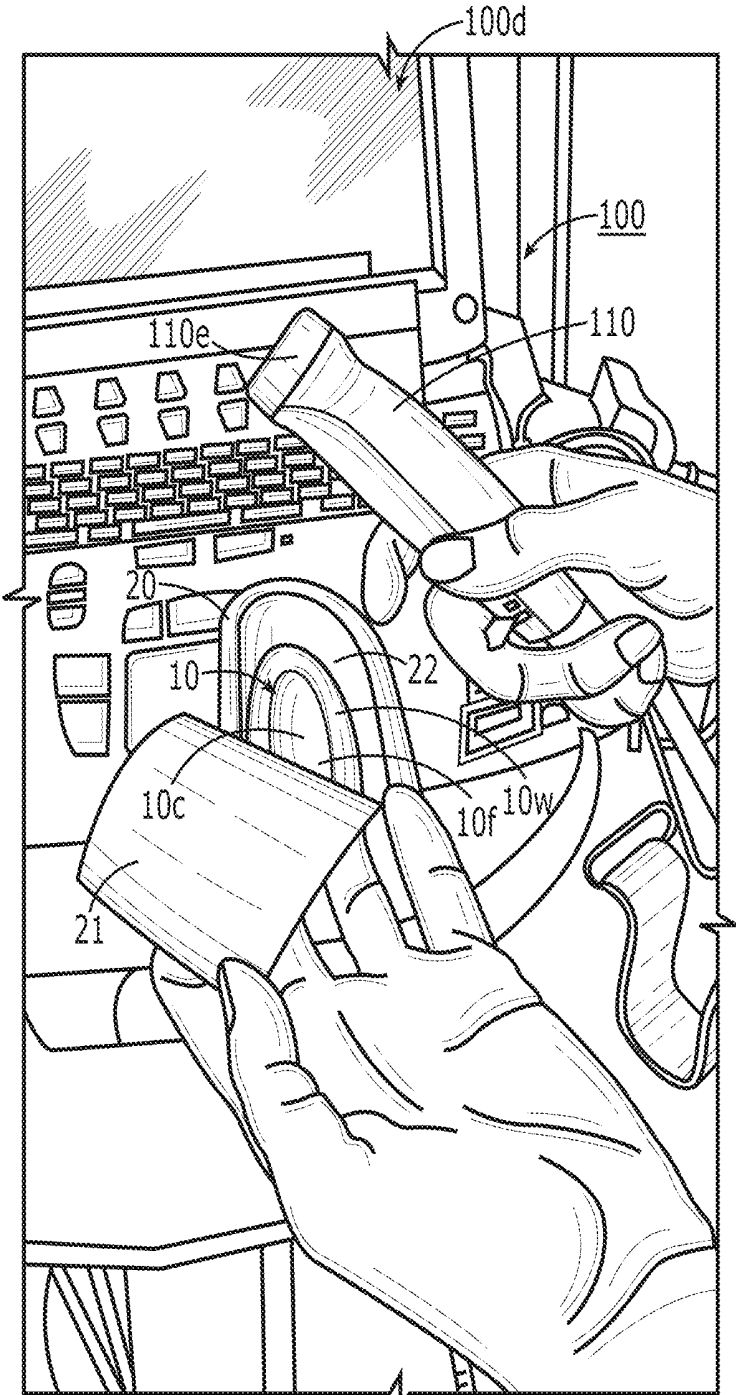


FIG. 1

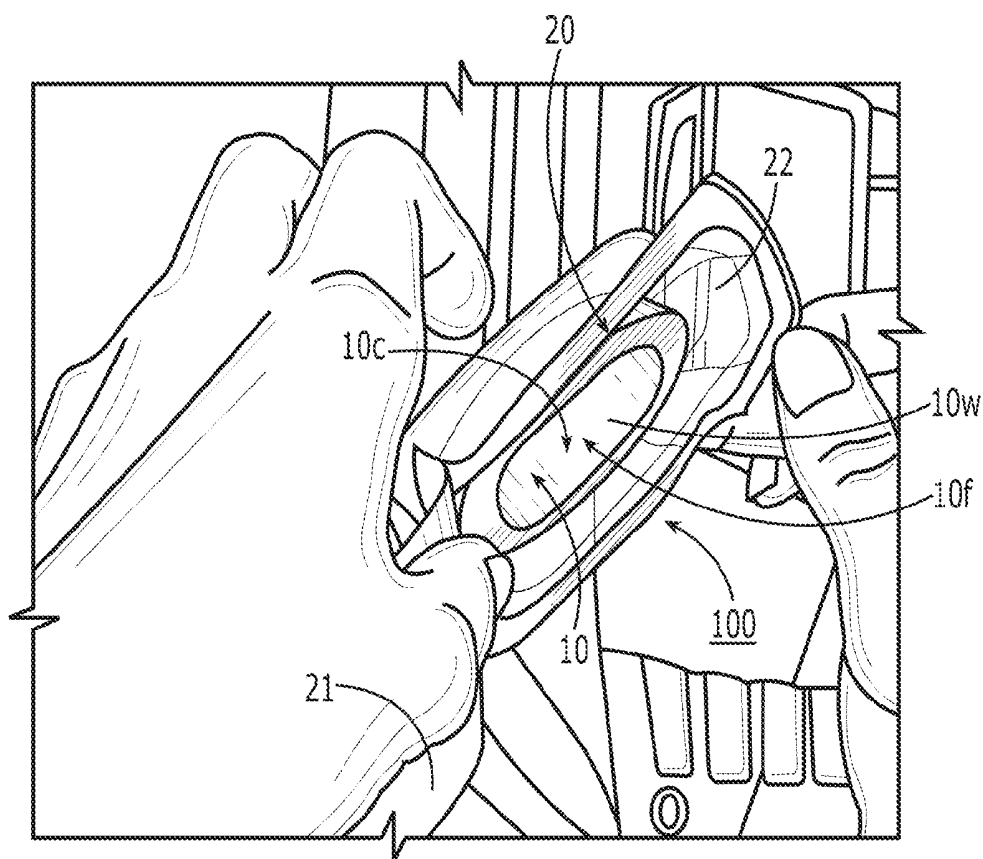


FIG. 2A

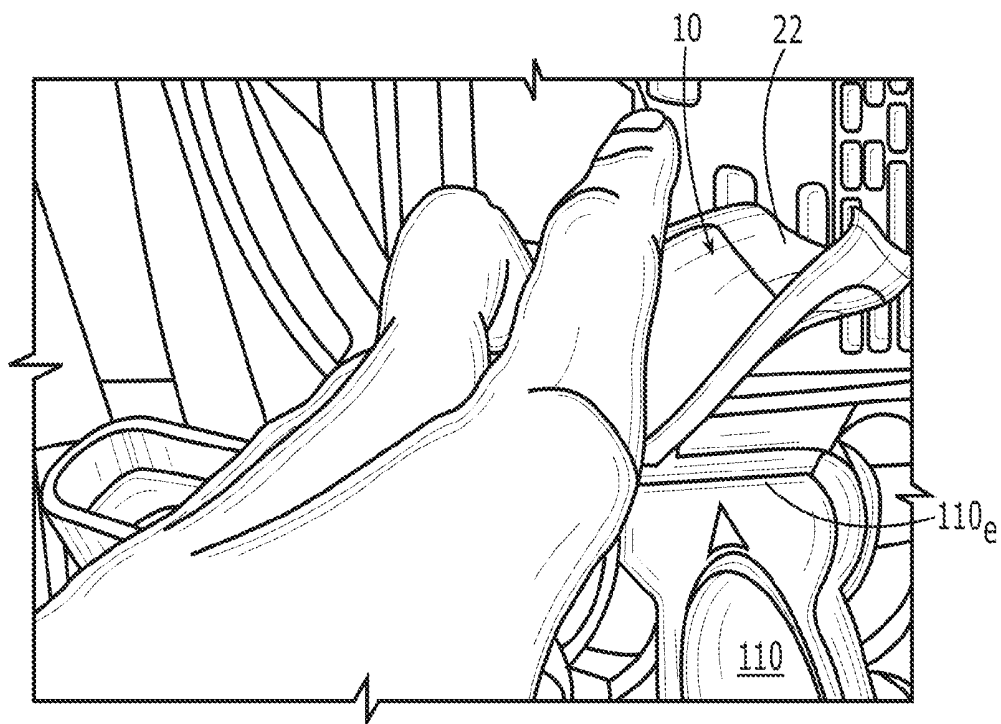


FIG. 2B

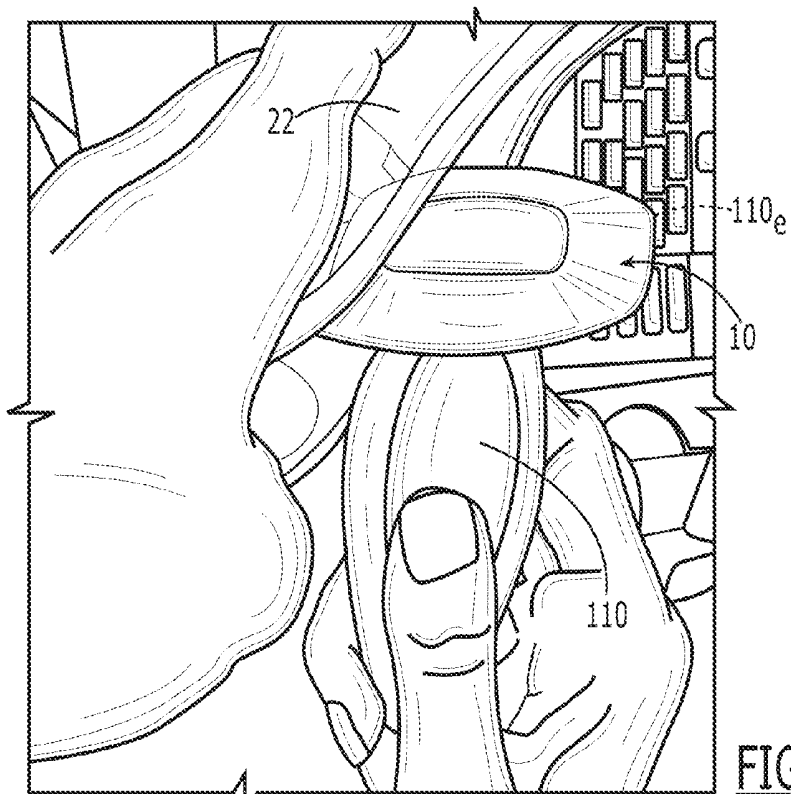


FIG. 2C

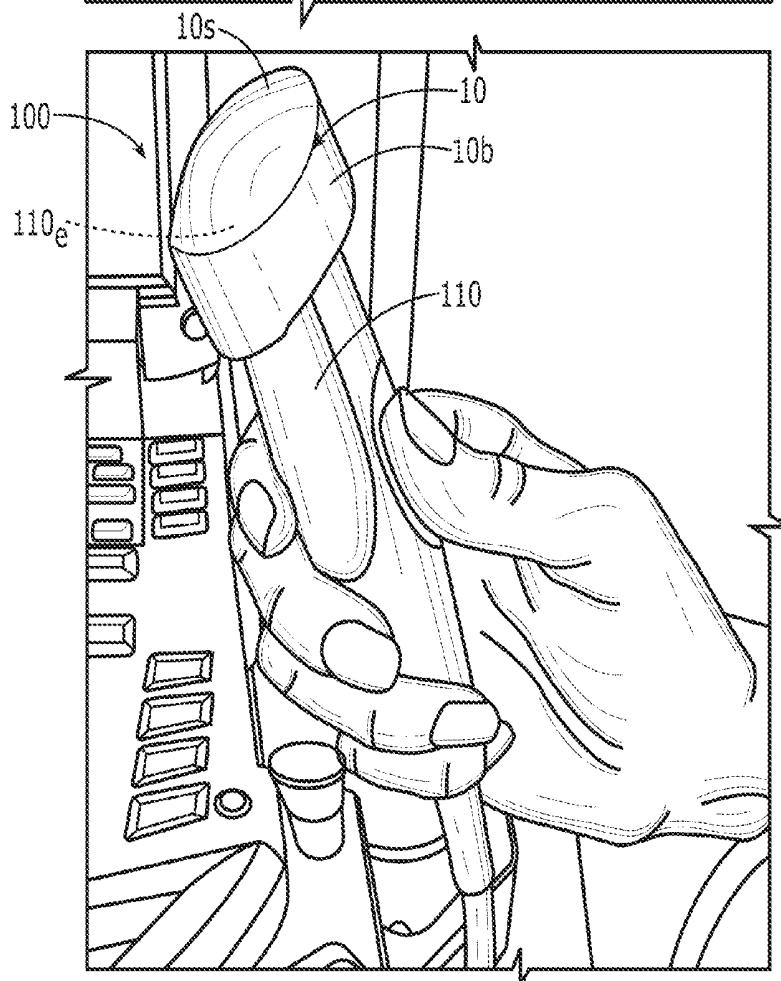


FIG. 2D

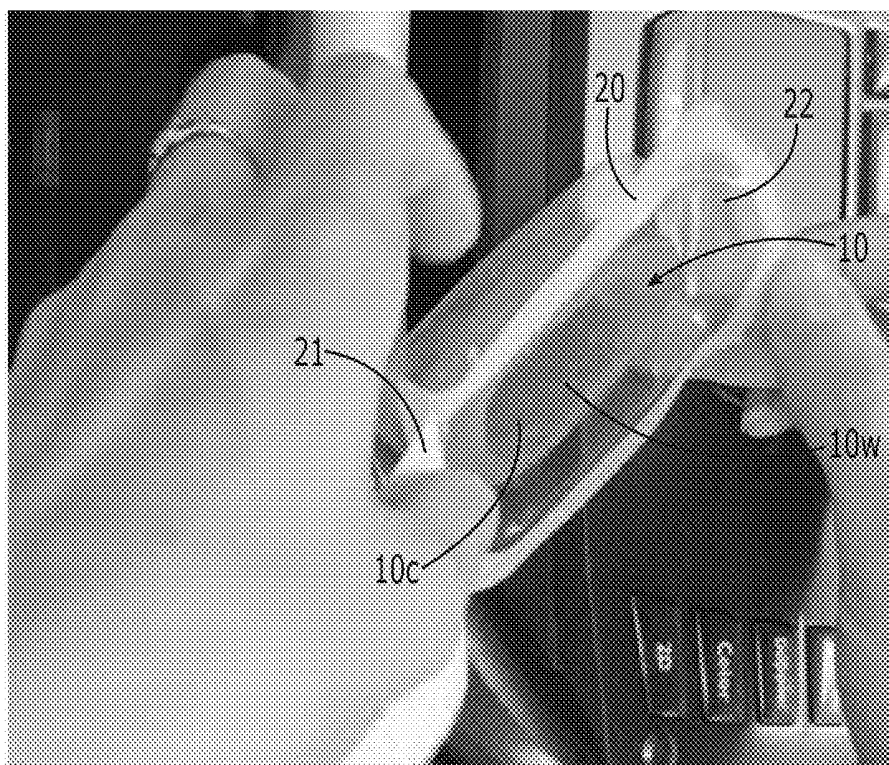


FIG. 2E

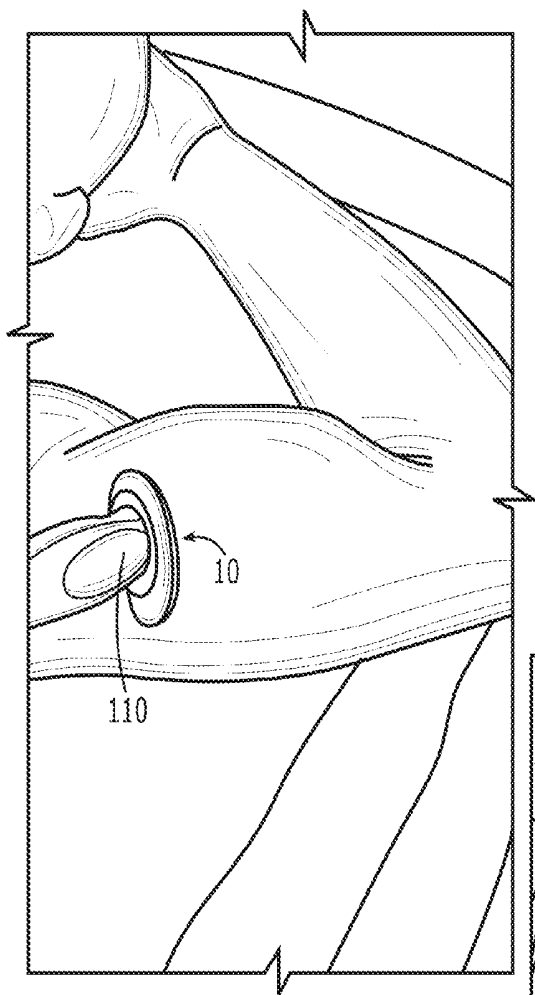


FIG. 3A

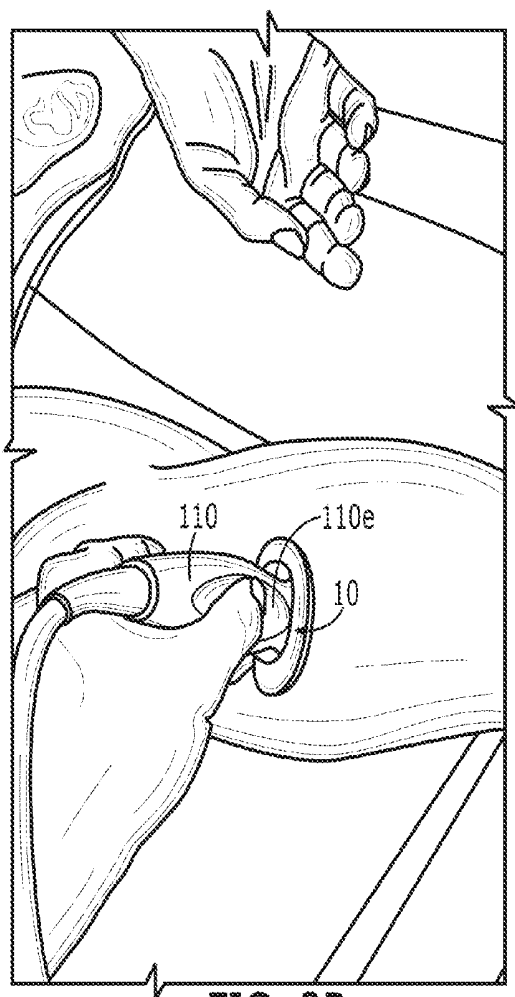


FIG. 3B

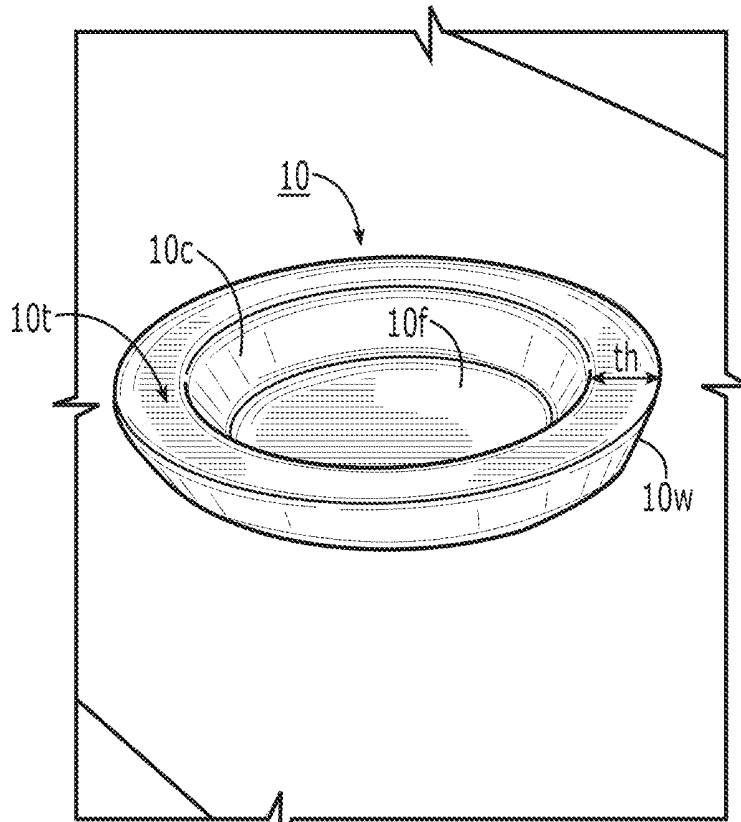


FIG. 4A

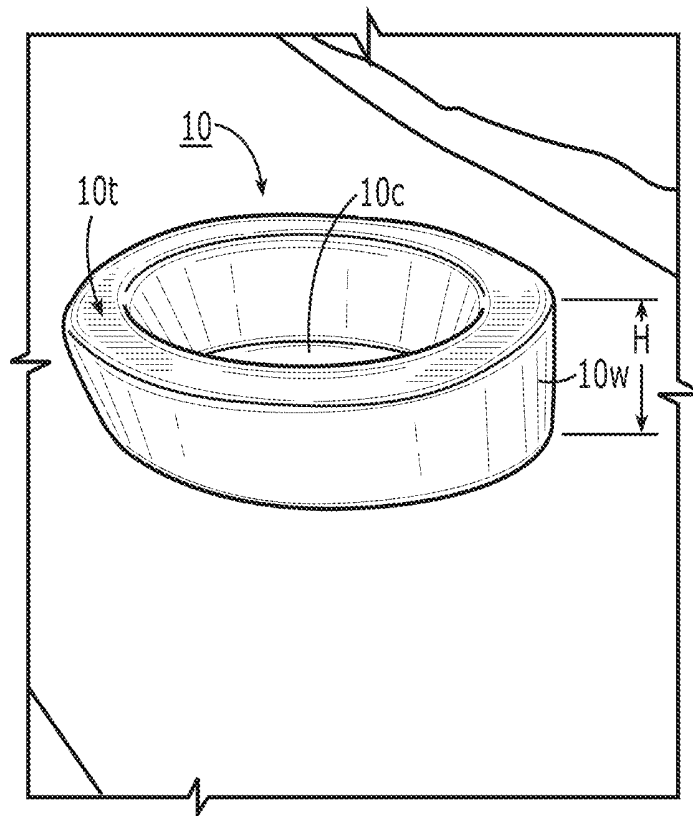


FIG. 4B

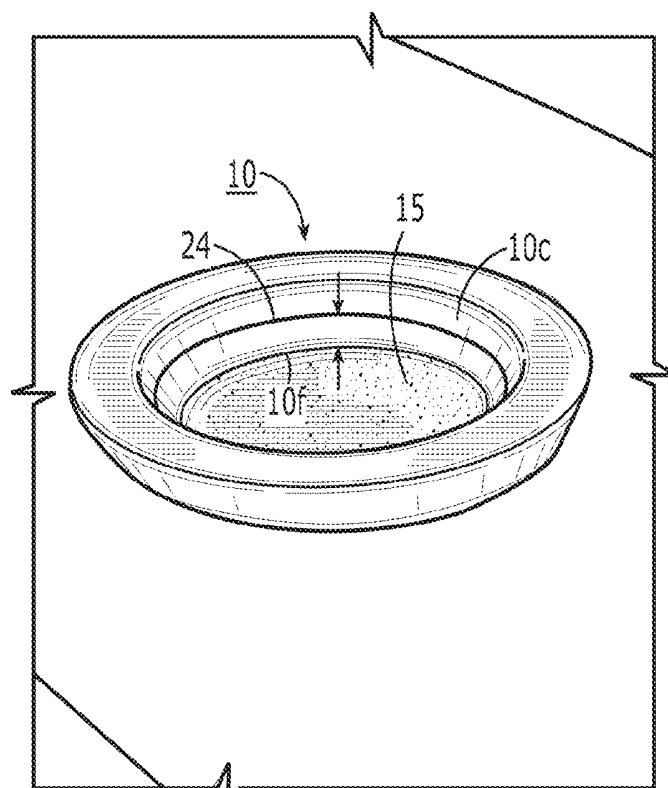


FIG. 4C

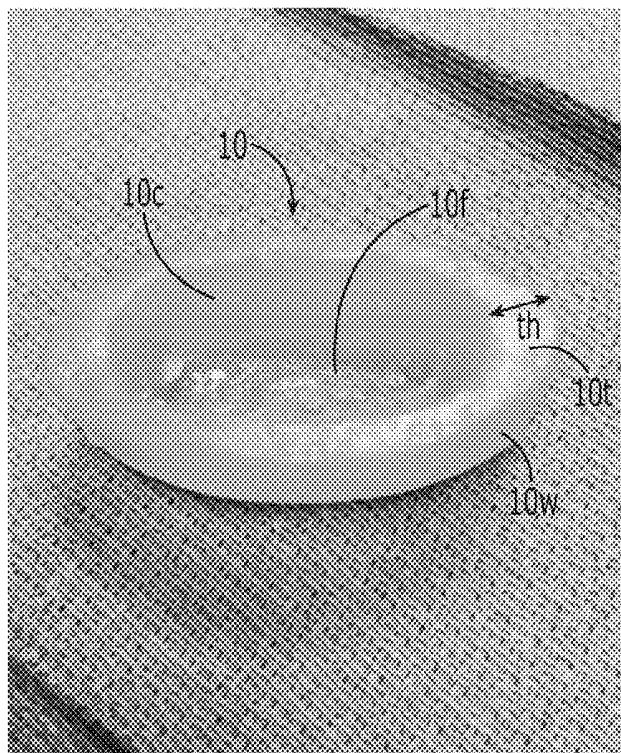
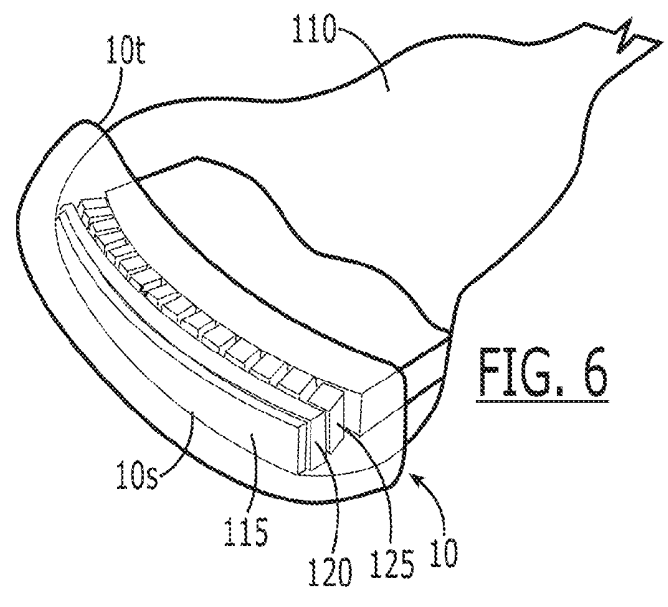
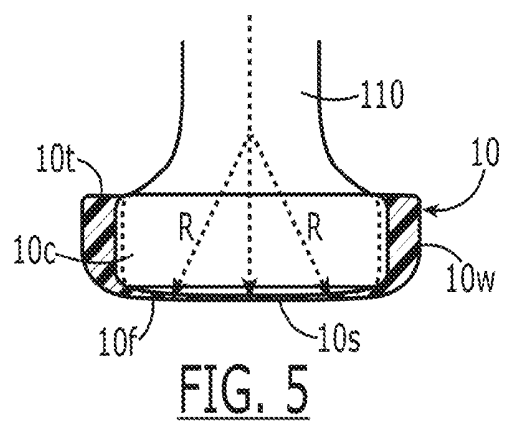
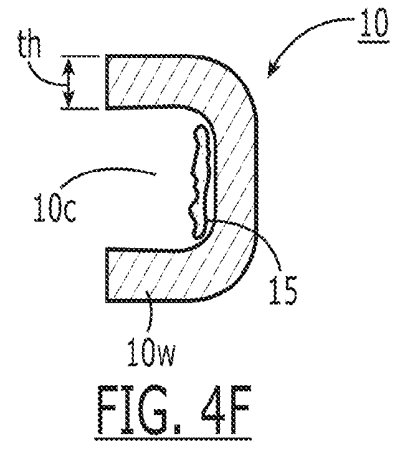
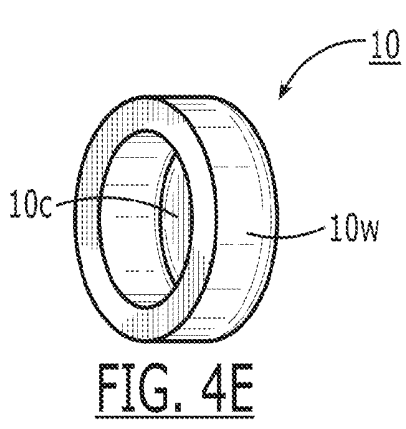


FIG. 4D



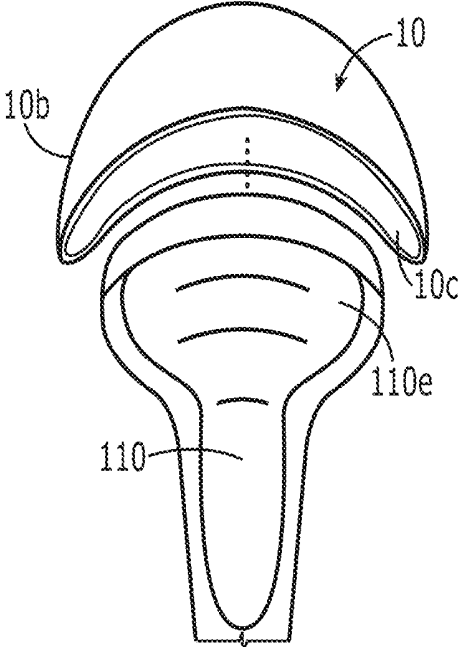


FIG. 7A

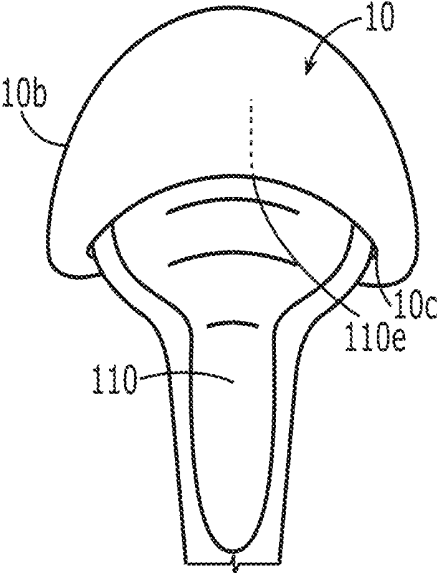
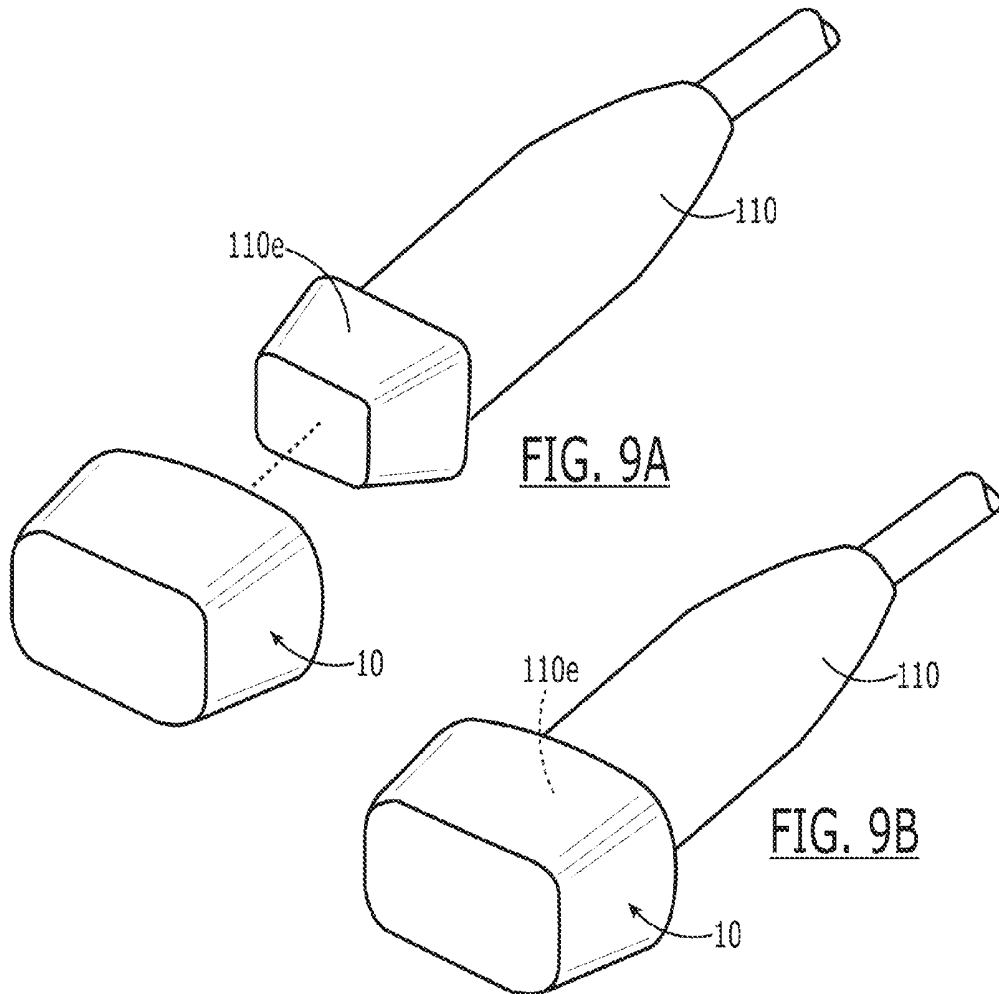
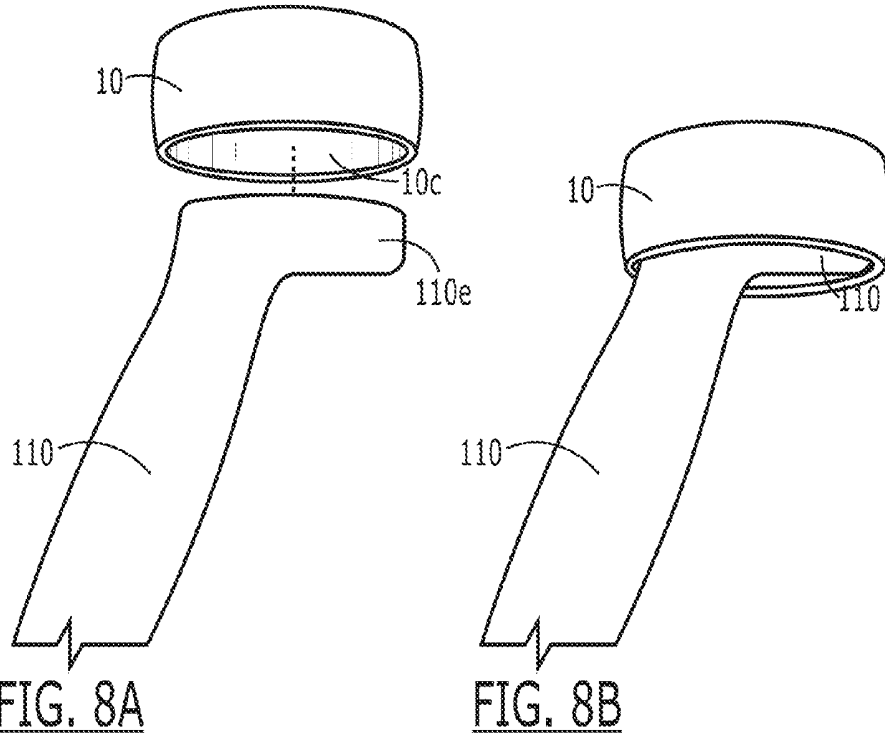


FIG. 7B



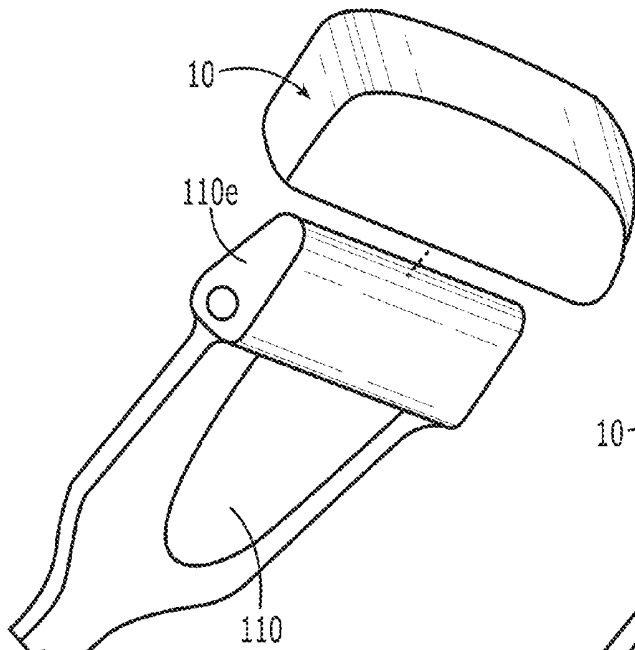


FIG. 10A

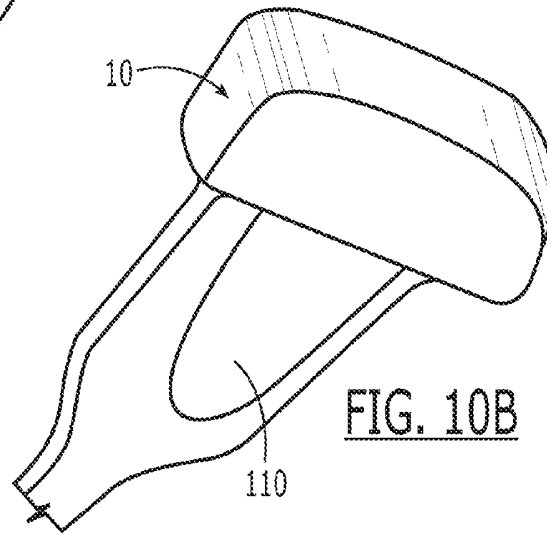


FIG. 10B

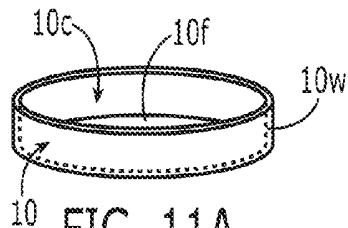


FIG. 11A

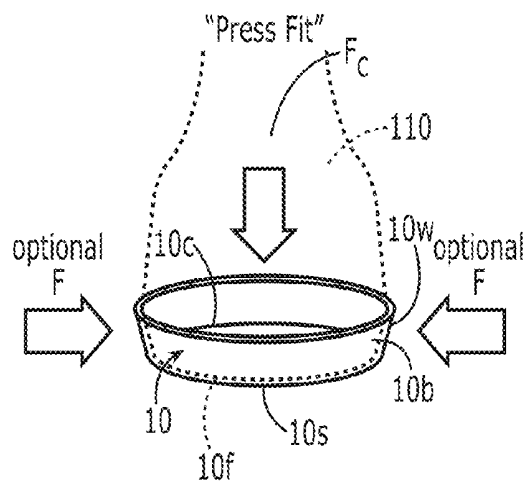


FIG. 11B

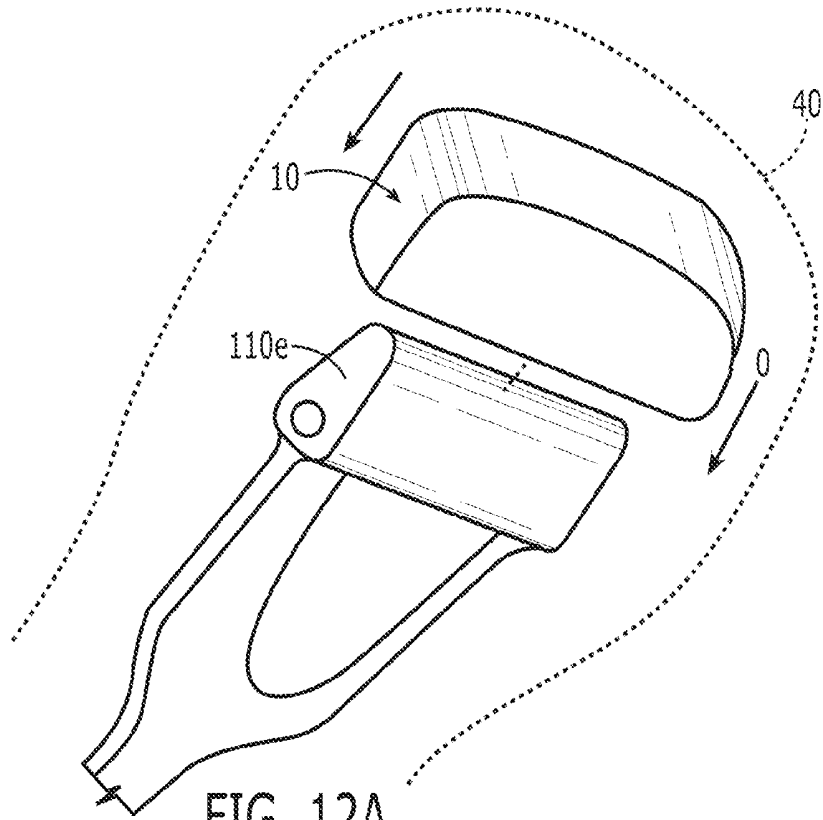


FIG. 12A

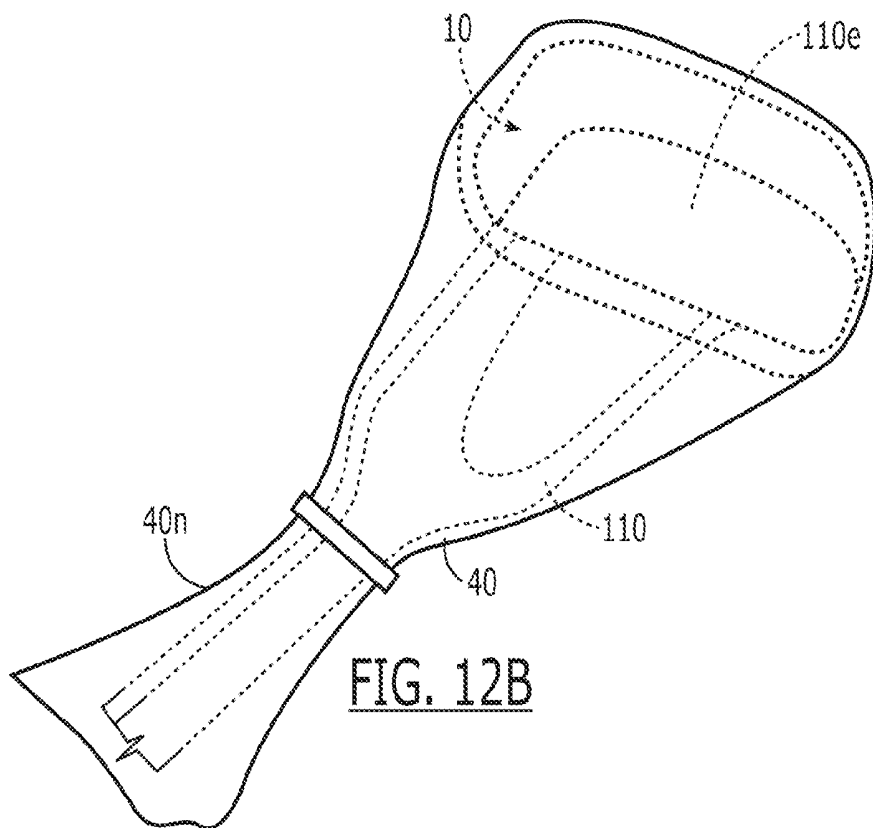
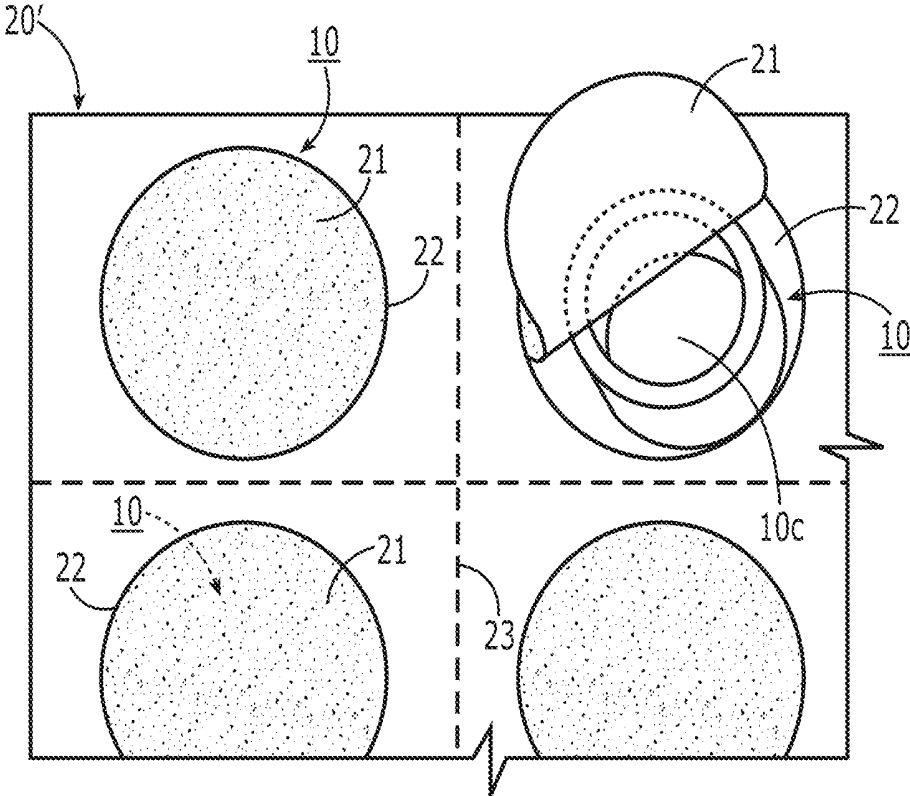


FIG. 12B



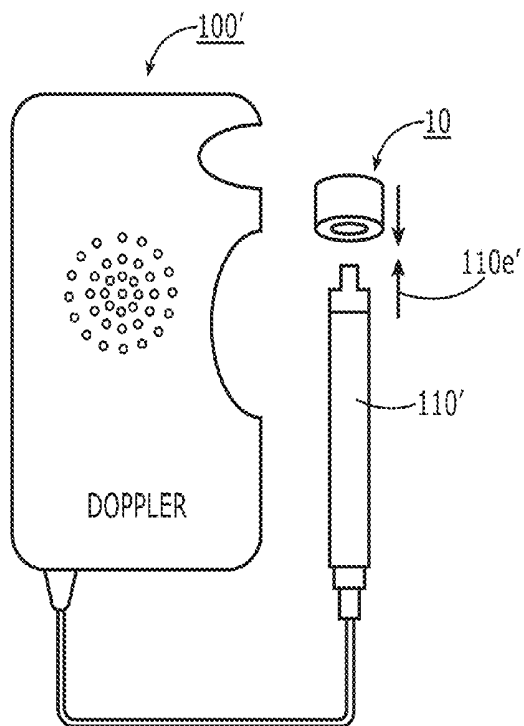


FIG. 14A

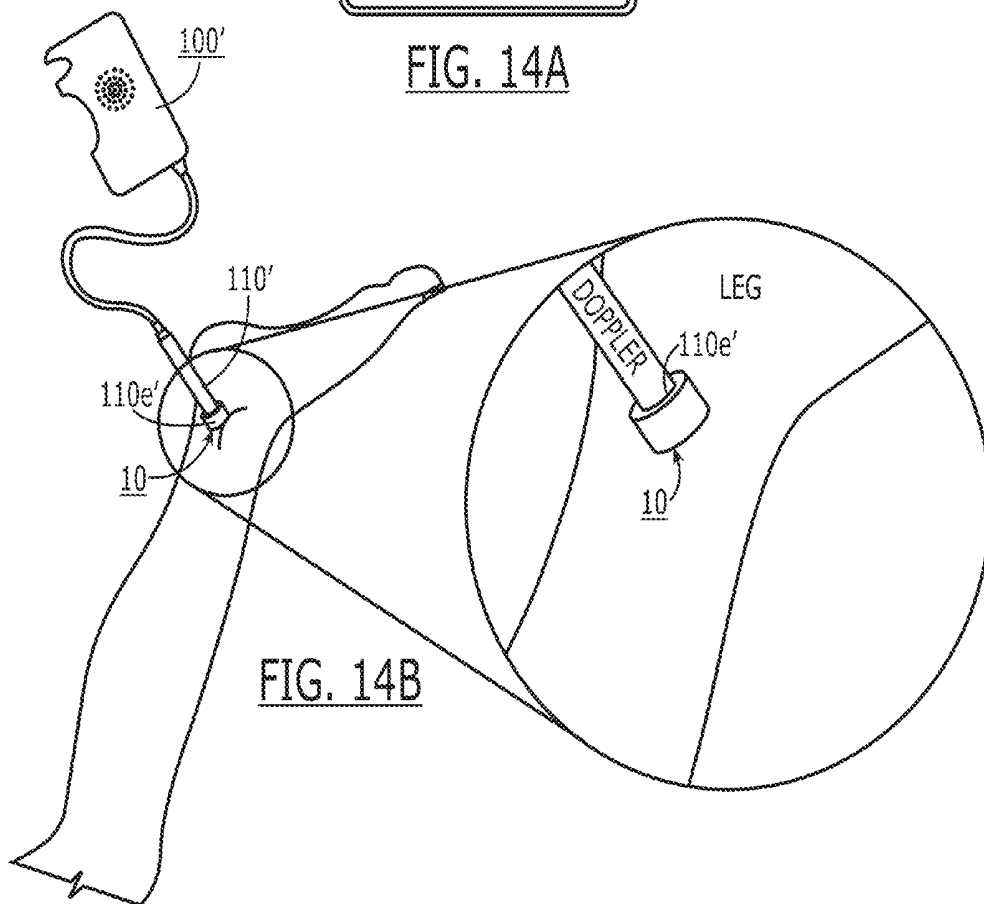


FIG. 14B

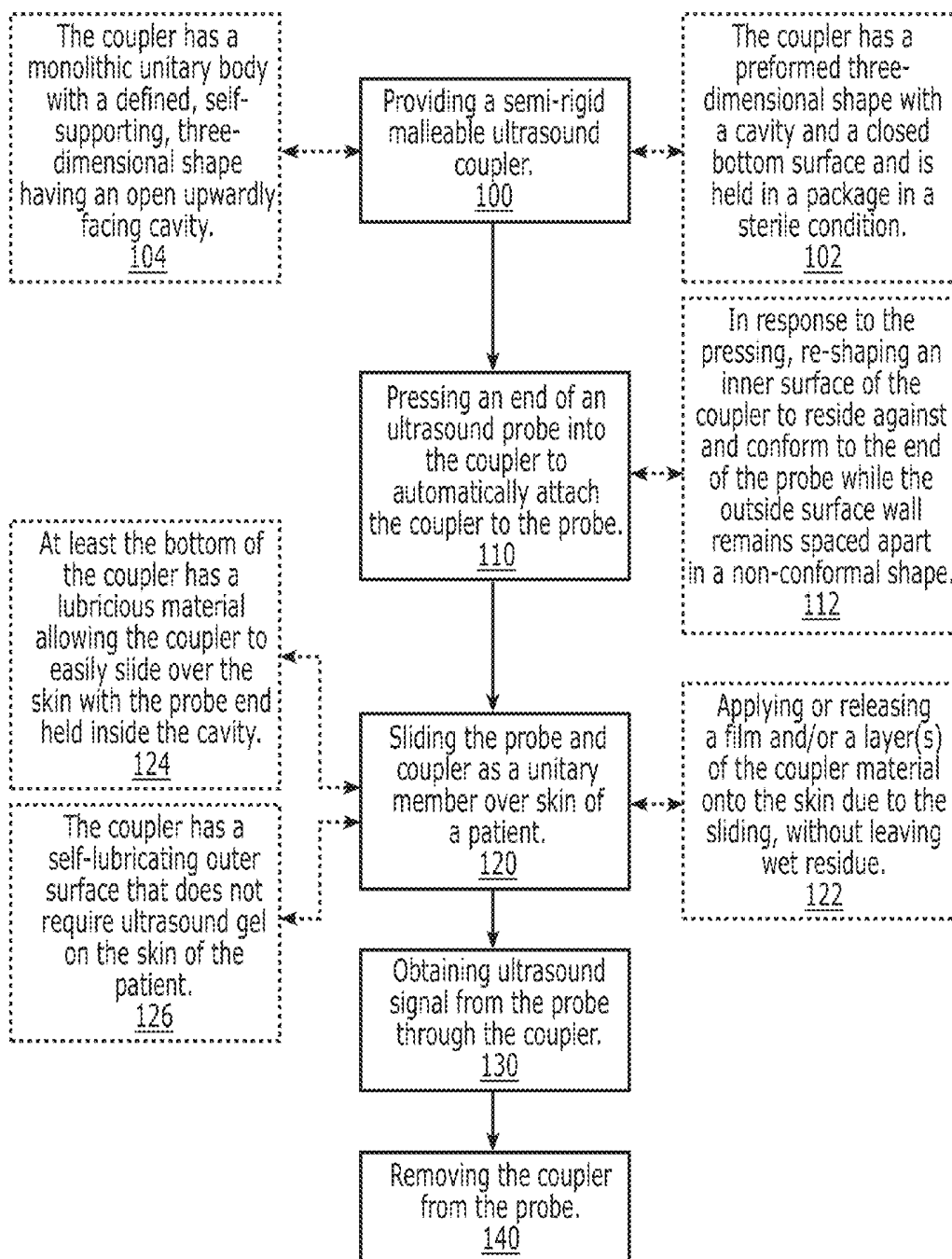


FIG. 15



Gel

FIG. 16A



New device

FIG. 16B

ULTRASOUND PROBE COUPLERS AND RELATED METHODS

RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of and priority to U.S. Provisional Application Ser. No. 62/101,098, filed Jan. 8, 2015, the contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference as if recited in full herein.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to ultrasound imaging systems.

BACKGROUND

[0003] Ultrasound imaging can visualize and assess sub-surface tissues while posing extremely low risk to the patient and practitioner. As is well known, ultrasound systems produce ultrasound waves transmitted by the ultrasound probe to a subject. Ultrasound waves reflect off objects, tissue or other structure and are detected/received and used to create ultrasound images. An ultrasound “gel” is often applied onto skin by a clinician to facilitate or improve the transmission or reception of sound waves. The ultrasound gel can be provided in bulk or in individual pouches. However, when provide in bulk, the gel may not be maintained or portioned out for use on a patient in a sterile manner, particularly in emergency situations. Gel may need to be reapplied during a procedure and its thickness may vary, which can impact transmission/image clarity. Gel applied directly onto a patient is also messy and can be associated with a risk of infection if not kept sterile prior to use. The gel is also often cold, causing a patient some discomfort or sensitivity, slippery and relatively messy. Also, the ultrasound probe is subject to repeated cleanings that may harm or reduce the life span of a transducer. A recent investigation of current infection control practices for ultrasound coupling gel found medical professionals non-compliant, resulting in a contamination rate of 2.5% either from contamination of ultrasound gel manufacturers or human error. See, e.g., Reg Anesth Pain Med. 2013, September-October; 38(5): 415-24.

[0004] Gel pads are also available but are relatively costly. It is believed that gel pads are not favored for clinical use due to one or more of their cost, the fact that a clinician must pick-up and move a gel pad (it does not move with the ultrasound probe, e.g., they are placement dependent) and their use adds an extra step in prepping a patient/probe for ultrasound imaging.

[0005] There remains a need for alternative ultrasound probe couplers that are easy to use and can facilitate compliance and/or reduce infection rates.

SUMMARY OF EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

[0006] Embodiments of the invention are directed to ultrasound couplers that include a semi-rigid, malleable ultrasound coupler body having a self-supporting, three-dimensional shape with a sidewall extending about an open cavity over a floor.

[0007] The coupler body can be solid.

[0008] The floor can have a thickness that is less than a thickness of the sidewall.

[0009] The coupler body can be configured to be press-fit to a target ultrasound probe so that the end of the ultrasound probe resides in the cavity and the coupler self-attaches thereto.

[0010] The coupler body can be formed of a material that self-lubricates and dries as it is applied to skin of a subject to thereby facilitate sliding of the coupler and the probe as a unitary assembly.

[0011] The coupler body can have a bottom surface that comprises a material corresponding to a solid deodorant.

[0012] The floor can have a thickness between 0.1 mm and 12 mm.

[0013] The sidewall can have a (maximal) thickness that is between about 1 mm and about 12 mm.

[0014] The sidewall can extend above the floor a distance between about 5 mm and about 25 mm.

[0015] The sidewall can extend straight above the floor or tapers outward therefrom.

[0016] The sidewall can have a top surface that defines a top of the coupler.

[0017] The sidewall can have a thickness between about 1 mm and about 12 mm.

[0018] The sidewall can define a flat top surface of the coupler with a corresponding width and/or thickness.

[0019] The coupler body can be a monolithic unitary member.

[0020] The coupler body can include propylene glycol, dipropylene glycol, sodium stearate, and polypropylene glycol ether of myristyl alcohol.

[0021] The coupler body can have a bottom surface that is tacky or sticky to touch.

[0022] The coupler body can be held in a container prior to use (typically in a sterile condition).

[0023] The coupler body can include one or more of: a polyhydric alcohol, a thickening agent, and a surfactant.

[0024] The coupler can be used with an ultrasound probe. The ultrasound probe can have an end that is held in the cavity of the coupler.

[0025] An ultrasound gel can be present in and/or added to the cavity of the coupler.

[0026] Other embodiments are directed to methods of evaluating a subject by: (a) manually pressing a coupler with a self-supporting, three dimensional shape against an outer end portion of an ultrasound probe to attach the coupler to the probe with the coupler providing a skin to ultrasound probe interface; (b) sliding the probe and the coupler together as a unitary member over skin of subject to obtain ultrasound images; and (c) detaching the coupler from the probe after an ultrasound imaging session.

[0027] The coupler can have a semi-rigid ultrasound coupler body with a sidewall extending about an open cavity over a floor and the floor can have a thickness that is less than a thickness of the sidewall.

[0028] The coupler body can be solid and malleable and can include one or more of a polyhydric alcohol, a thickening agent, and a surfactant.

[0029] The method can include applying or releasing material of the bottom surface of the coupler body onto the skin of the subject in response to the sliding step.

[0030] In response to the sliding step, the coupler with the probe can release or sheds material that self-dries on the skin of the patient during the imaging session.

[0031] Still other embodiments are directed to an ultrasound coupler that includes polyhydric alcohol, a thickening agent, and a surfactant.

[0032] The polyhydric alcohol can be propylene glycol and/or dipropylene glycol.

[0033] The thickening agent can include a C_{4-22} fatty acid salt.

[0034] The thickening agent can be selected from sodium stearate, potassium stearate, magnesium stearate, aluminum monostearate, sodium oleate, sodium palmitate, sodium arachidate, sodium behenate, diethylamine stearate, triethylamine stearate, triethylemine oleate, and combinations thereof.

[0035] The surfactant can include a propoxylated fatty alcohol.

[0036] The surfactant can include a polyethylene glycol ether of a C_{12} - C_{22} fatty alcohol and/or a polypropylene glycol ether of a C_{12} - C_{22} fatty alcohol.

[0037] The ultrasound coupler can include and/or tetrasodium ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA).

[0038] The coupler can include polyhydric alcohol that can be present in a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 90% by weight of the coupler, a thickening agent that can be present in a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 15% by weight of the coupler, and a surfactant that can be present in a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 30% by weight of the coupler.

[0039] The coupler can include polyhydric alcohol with propylene glycol and dipropylene glycol, a thickening agent that includes sodium stearate, and a surfactant that includes polypropylene glycol ether of myristyl alcohol.

[0040] It is noted that aspects of the invention described with respect to one embodiment, may be incorporated in a different embodiment although not specifically described relative thereto. That is, all embodiments and/or features of any embodiment can be combined in any way and/or combination. Applicant reserves the right to change any originally filed claim or file any new claim accordingly, including the right to be able to amend any originally filed claim to depend from and/or incorporate any feature of any other claim although not originally claimed in that manner. These and other objects and/or aspects of the present invention are explained in detail in the specification set forth below.

[0041] Other systems and/or methods according to embodiments of the invention will be or become apparent to one with skill in the art upon review of the following drawings and detailed description. It is intended that all such additional systems, methods, and/or devices be included within this description, be within the scope of the present invention, and be protected by the accompanying claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0042] Other features of the present invention will be more readily understood from the following detailed description of exemplary embodiments thereof when read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

[0043] FIG. 1 is a front perspective view of an exemplary malleable ultrasound coupler for an ultrasound probe according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0044] FIGS. 2A-2D are side perspective views of a sequence of actions that can be used to attach the coupler to the ultrasound probe according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0045] FIG. 2E is a digital photograph of a prototype corresponding to the device shown in FIG. 2A.

[0046] FIG. 3A is a side perspective view of the ultrasound coupler shown in FIG. 1 attached to the ultrasound probe according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0047] FIG. 3B is a top perspective view of the ultrasound coupler attached to the ultrasound probe, sliding across skin of a patient for an ultrasound evaluation according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0048] FIG. 4A is an enlarged, top perspective digital photograph of an exemplary coupler according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0049] FIG. 4B is an enlarged, side perspective digital photograph of the exemplary coupler shown in FIG. 4A.

[0050] FIG. 4C is an enlarged, side perspective view of an exemplary coupler which includes a layer of ultrasonic fluid, e.g., gel held by the coupler according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0051] FIG. 4D is a digital photograph of a prototype of the device shown in FIG. 4A.

[0052] FIG. 4E is a top, side perspective view of an exemplary coupler according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0053] FIG. 4F is a sectional view of the coupler shown in FIG. 4E with optional gel in the cavity thereof according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0054] FIG. 5 is a schematic illustration of an ultrasound probe with a convex end attached to an exemplary coupler with an external convex shape according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0055] FIG. 6 is a schematic illustration of an exemplary ultrasound probe held inside an exemplary coupler according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0056] FIG. 7A is a schematic illustration of a pre-attached view of a coupler adjacent a target ultrasound probe according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0057] FIG. 7B is a schematic illustration of the assembled view of the coupler and probe shown in FIG. 7A.

[0058] FIG. 8A is a schematic illustration of a pre-attached view of a coupler adjacent a target ultrasound probe according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0059] FIG. 8B is a schematic illustration of the assembled view of the coupler and probe shown in FIG. 8A.

[0060] FIG. 9A is a schematic illustration of a pre-attached view of a coupler adjacent a target ultrasound probe according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0061] FIG. 9B is a schematic illustration of the assembled view of the coupler and probe shown in FIG. 9A.

[0062] FIG. 10A is a schematic illustration of a pre-attached view of a coupler adjacent a target ultrasound probe according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0063] FIG. 10B is a schematic illustration of the assembled view of the coupler and probe shown in FIG. 10A.

[0064] FIG. 11A is a schematic illustration of an exemplary coupler according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0065] FIG. 11B is a schematic illustration of the coupler shown in FIG. 11A with exemplary press-force vectors that can be used to detachably couple (releasably attach) the coupler to the end of the probe according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0066] FIGS. 12A and 12B are side perspective views of an ultrasound probe with a coupler and external sheath according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0067] FIG. 13 is a schematic illustration of a multiple pack package according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0068] FIG. 14A is a schematic illustration of a portable Doppler ultrasound system according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0069] FIG. 14B is a schematic illustration of the Doppler system in use on a patient with a coupler according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0070] FIG. 15 is a flow chart of exemplary actions that can be used to attach a coupler to the ultrasound and carry out an ultrasound procedure according to embodiments of the present invention.

[0071] FIG. 16A is a screen shot of a display with an ultrasound image obtained using conventional ultrasound gel on skin of a patient.

[0072] FIG. 16B is a screen shot of the display with an ultrasound image obtained using the semi-rigid coupler shown in FIGS. 4A, 4D.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

[0073] The present invention now is described more fully hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which embodiments of the invention are shown. This invention may, however, be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited to the embodiments set forth herein; rather, these embodiments are provided so that this disclosure will be thorough and complete, and will fully convey the scope of the invention to those skilled in the art.

[0074] Like numbers refer to like elements throughout. In the figures, the thickness of certain lines, layers, components, elements or features may be exaggerated for clarity. The term "Figure" is used interchangeably with the abbreviated versions "FIG." and "Fig." in the specification and figures. Broken lines illustrate optional features, actions or operations unless specified otherwise. One or more features shown and discussed with respect to one embodiment may be included in another embodiment even if not explicitly described or shown with another embodiment.

[0075] The terminology used herein is for the purpose of describing particular embodiments only and is not intended to be limiting of the invention. As used herein, the singular forms "a", "an" and "the" are intended to include the plural forms as well, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise. It will be further understood that the terms "comprises" and/or "comprising," when used in this specification, specify the presence of stated features, integers, steps, operations, elements, and/or components, but do not preclude the presence or addition of one or more other features, integers, steps, operations, elements, components, and/or groups thereof. As used herein, the term "and/or" includes any and all combinations of one or more of the associated listed items. As used herein, phrases such as "between X and Y" and "between about X and Y" should be interpreted to include X and Y. As used herein, phrases such as "between about X and Y" mean "between about X and about Y." As used herein, phrases such as "from about X to Y" mean "from about X to about Y."

[0076] Unless otherwise defined, all terms (including technical and scientific terms) used herein have the same meaning as commonly understood by one of ordinary skill in the art to which this invention belongs. It will be further understood that terms, such as those defined in commonly used dictionaries, should be interpreted as having a meaning that is consistent with their meaning in the context of the specifica-

tion and relevant art and should not be interpreted in an idealized or overly formal sense unless expressly so defined herein. Well-known functions or constructions may not be described in detail for brevity and/or clarity.

[0077] It will be understood that when an element is referred to as being "on", "attached" to, "connected" to, "coupled" with, "contacting", etc., another element, it can be directly on, attached to, connected to, coupled with or contacting the other element or intervening elements may also be present. In contrast, when an element is referred to as being, for example, "directly on", "directly attached" to, "directly connected" to, "directly coupled" with or "directly contacting" another element, there are no intervening elements present. It will also be appreciated by those of skill in the art that references to a structure or feature that is disposed "adjacent" another feature may have portions that overlap or underlie the adjacent feature.

[0078] Spatially relative terms, such as "under", "below", "lower", "over", "upper" and the like, may be used herein for ease of description to describe one element or feature's relationship to another element(s) or feature(s) as illustrated in the figures. It will be understood that the spatially relative terms are intended to encompass different orientations of the device in use or operation in addition to the orientation depicted in the figures. For example, if the device in the figures is inverted, elements described as "under" or "beneath" other elements or features would then be oriented "over" the other elements or features. Thus, the exemplary term "under" can encompass both an orientation of over and under. The device may be otherwise oriented (rotated 90 degrees or at other orientations) and the spatially relative descriptors used herein interpreted accordingly. Similarly, the terms "upwardly", "downwardly", "vertical", "horizontal" and the like are used herein for the purpose of explanation only unless specifically indicated otherwise.

[0079] It will be understood that, although the terms first, second, etc. may be used herein to describe various elements, components, regions, layers and/or sections, these elements, components, regions, layers and/or sections should not be limited by these terms. These terms are only used to distinguish one element, component, region, layer or section from another region, layer or section. Thus, a first element, component, region, layer or section discussed below could be termed a second element, component, region, layer or section without departing from the teachings of the present invention. The sequence of operations (or steps) is not limited to the order presented in the claims or figures unless specifically indicated otherwise.

[0080] The term "about" means that the recited number or value can vary by +/-20%.

[0081] Embodiments of the invention are particularly suitable for human uses and/or veterinary uses.

[0082] The term "ultrasound systems" is well known and includes any commercially available system including, but not limited to: Acuson's Sequoia® and Aspen™ platforms; Philips/ATL's HDI® platforms; General Electric's LOGIQ™ platforms; Toshiba's PowerVision™ platforms; Hewlett-Packard's Sonos™ platforms; Siemen's Sonoline® and Elegra™ platforms and the like, as well as portable Doppler systems for various uses such as for limb or muscular evaluation, fetal monitoring, cardiovascular or intracranial uses, for example. The instant invention does not depend on the specific type of ultrasound platform or system used. The term "ultrasound probe" refers to the part of the ultrasound

system with the transducer/transducer array that contacts a patient to obtain ultrasound imaging data. The ultrasound probe may have different shapes for different uses and/or systems.

[0083] Turning now to the figures, FIGS. 1, 2A-2E, 3A and 3B illustrate an ultrasound system 100 with an ultrasound probe 110 and a semi-rigid ultrasound coupler 10. The ultrasound system 100 can include a display 100d that can show the obtained ultrasound images. The term “semi-rigid” means that the coupler 10 has a self-supported, pre-formed three-dimensional (typically solid) body shape with sufficient rigidity to retain the pre-formed, three-dimensional body shape when apart from the probe 110 (e.g., in a package prior to use, such as in a sterile pouch, bag or other container) but has a cavity 10c with a floor 10f and/or sidewall 10w that is sufficiently malleable or pliable to be able to change in shape when a sufficient (typically manual) compressive force is applied, e.g., a compressive force applied against the sidewall 10w and/or the floor 10f of the coupler 10. The word “malleable” means that at least a portion of the coupler 10 is able to change in shape so as to be able to be pressed permanently out the original pre-formed shape without breaking and/or cracking. Stated differently, the coupler 10 can be formed of a material that can deform under pressure (compressive stress) to a different three-dimensional shape and retain that shape, even after the compressive force is removed.

[0084] The coupler body 10b can have an external pre-formed three-dimensional shape that is the same after assembly to the probe 110. The coupler 10 can be solid and not inflatable.

[0085] The couplers 10, for respective ultrasound probes 110 of various shapes (e.g., FIGS. 1, 7A, 8A, 9A, 10A), can have a solid coupler body 10b with a cavity 10c having a semi-rigid, yet malleable shape so as to be able to conform to and/or self-attach to the end of the probe 110e by a user pressing the coupler against the end of the ultrasound probe 110e so that the coupler cavity, e.g., at least the floor 10f thereof and more typically the upwardly extending sidewall as well, takes on the underlying shape of the end of the ultrasound probe 110e while the exterior of the coupler can substantially, if not totally, retain its pre-attached shape. The coupler 10 can have an upwardly extending sidewall 10w forming a perimeter of a cavity 10c which can reside over a closed bottom surface 10f.

[0086] As shown in FIG. 1, 2A and 2E, for example, the coupler 10 can be provided in a package 20, such as a sterile container, which can be easily opened to expose the coupler 10. The package 20 can include a peelably releasable cover 21 over a package pocket 22. The pocket 22 can hold the coupler with a cavity 10c facing the cover 21. To assemble, as shown in FIG. 1, the package 20 can be held with the coupler cavity 10c facing up or as shown in FIG. 2B, with the coupler cavity 10c facing down as shown in FIG. 2B, to allow a user to merely insert the probe 110e into the cavity 10c (FIGS. 2B, 2C) and press the end of the probe 110e against the floor 10f (FIG. 4A) of the coupler cavity 10c to attach the coupler 10 to the probe 110 without requiring any attachment device or other user action (FIG. 2D). For example, unlike flexible thin stretchable/expandable sheaths which can be relatively cumbersome to attach to a probe 110, a press-fit and/or single-push action attachment is all that is required to attach the coupler 10 to the end of the probe 110e allowing for easier and faster assembly. This may facilitate compliance with use of the device, even during emergency situations, thereby pro-

moting sterile uses of the ultrasound probe between patients without requiring the use of ultrasound gel on the skin of the patient.

[0087] FIGS. 2A-2C illustrate an exemplary sequence of actions that can be carried out to easily attach the coupler 10 to the probe 110 to thereby provide a sterile and suitable patient interface for sliding the ultrasound probe 110 and coupler 10, attached together, over the skin of the patient while the end of the probe 110e is held inside the cavity 10c of the coupler, snugly attached to the coupler 10. FIG. 2D shows the secure attachment in a ready-to-use state of the assembly of the coupler 10 and ultrasound probe 110.

[0088] FIGS. 3A and 3B illustrate that the coupler 10 remains attached to the probe 110 during an ultrasound evaluation, sliding with the probe 110 as an integral unit or assembly, over the skin of the patient.

[0089] FIGS. 4A (and 4D) and 4B illustrate enlarged views of a prototype of an exemplary coupler 10. The coupler 10 can have a pre-formed cavity 10c of suitable depth so as to self-attach to an end of a target ultrasound probe 110e. The top of the coupler 10t can have a perimeter that extends about the open cavity 10c and can be sized and configured to expose a closed bottom floor 10f of the coupler that resides between the probe end 110e and the patient to provide a sterile interface/barrier. The sidewall 10w can taper out from the floor 10f or be substantially orthogonal to the floor 10f from the floor to the top 10t. FIG. 4D is a digital photograph of a prototype coupler 10 corresponding the coupler 10 shown in FIG. 4A.

[0090] FIG. 4E is a top, side perspective view of an exemplary coupler 10 illustrating the sidewall 10w and cavity 10c. FIG. 4F is a section view of the coupler shown in FIG. 4E illustrating an optional gel 15 in the cavity 10c of the coupler 10 over the floor of the coupler 10f according to some embodiments.

[0091] The sidewall 10w can have a thickness (th) that is less than, the same or greater than a thickness of the floor 10f. In some embodiments, the sidewall 10w can have a thickness that is between two and twenty times the thickness of the floor. In some embodiments, the floor 10f can have a thickness that is between about 0.1 mm and about 12 mm, such as about 0.1 mm, about 0.2 mm, about 0.3 mm, about 0.4 mm, about 0.5 mm, about 0.6 mm, about 0.7 mm, about 0.8 mm, about 0.9 mm, about 1 mm, about 2 mm, about 3 mm, about 4 mm, about 5 mm, about 6 mm, about 7 mm, about 8 mm, about 9 mm, about 10 mm, about 11 mm, and about 12 mm. In some particular embodiments, the floor 10f can have a thickness between about 0.5 mm and about 1 mm.

[0092] The cavity 10c can be encased by the perimeter sidewall 10w. In other embodiments, the sidewall 10w is not required to be continuous about the cavity and the thickness from one or both a top to bottom or about the perimeter can vary. The coupler 10 can have a pre-formed shape with an open top 10t that has a perimeter shape that remains substantially, if not totally, the same after attachment to the end of the probe 110.

[0093] The sidewall 10w can have thickness dimension “th”, on average, that is between about 0.1 mm and about 25 mm, more typically between about 1 mm and about 12 mm, such as about 1 mm, about 2 mm, about 3 mm, about 4 mm, about 5 mm, about 6 mm, about 7 mm, about 8 mm, about 9 mm, about 10 mm, about 11 mm, and about 12 mm. The sidewall 10w can define a cavity with a height H that is between about 0.1 mm and about 50 mm, more typically between about 10 mm and about 25 mm. The sidewall 10w

can extend above the floor **10f** a distance between about 5 mm and about 25 mm, in some embodiments.

[0094] The cavity **10c** can have a size and shape that corresponds to a shape of a target end of an ultrasound probe **110**. As shown, the cavity **10c** can be oval and/or have a long dimension that is about 2× to about 5× longer than a short dimension thereof, but other sizes and shapes are contemplated. FIGS. **5**, **6**, **7A**, **7B**, **8A**, **8B**, **9A**, **9B**, **10A** and **10B** illustrate examples of couplers **10** and correspondingly shaped ends **110e** of respective ultrasound probes **110**.

[0095] FIGS. **4C** and **4F** illustrate that the coupler **10** may optionally be used with a gel and/or liquid **15** in the cavity to facilitate a probe-coupler interface for facilitating suitable ultrasound transmission. The gel and/or liquid **15** may be pre-loaded in the probe for ease of use or a clinician may insert the gel or liquid prior to assembly of the coupler **10** to the probe **110**. The cavity **10c** may include visual indicia **24** to allow a user to visually confirm a constant or consistent amount of gel or liquid is used. If needed, a liner or cover can be used to keep the gel or liquid in place or the container **20** can be shaped so as to hold the gel/liquid **15** in the cavity prior to use, if pre-applied to the coupler **10**.

[0096] FIG. **5** illustrates that the floor **10f** can have a shape that is convex so as to have a radius of curvature **R** that corresponds to the end of the probe **110e**.

[0097] The coupler body can be entirely or have at least a bottom surface that is tacky to touch. The tackiness can be similar to that of a solid deodorant stick. To assess whether a material is tacky (sticky to the touch), a user can feel the coupler to see if it is sticky to the touch. This is in contrast to a slippery, wet liquid or gel, for example.

[0098] FIG. **6** illustrates the coupler **10** can be elongate with a long dimension greater than a short dimension both in a pre-formed, pre-attached shape and a post-attached shape. The shape of the cavity **10c** can correspond to the shape of the end of the probe **110e**. The coupler **10** sidewall **10w** can extend a short height **H** that can encase, reside above, an acoustic lens **115**, acoustic matching layer **120**, and/or transducer **125** in the end of the probe **110e**. It is contemplated that different couplers can have different shapes to fit different ultrasound probes and those shown herein are by way of example and are not intended to be limiting.

[0099] FIGS. **7A**, **7B**, **8A**, **8B**, **9A**, **9B**, **10A** and **10B** show examples of a press-fit attachment that allows the coupler **10** to self-attach to the end of the probe **110e** so as to be detachably, snugly coupled to the probe without requiring any further fixation.

[0100] In some embodiments, the end of the probe **110e** can be compressed against at least an inner surface of the floor **10f** to abut the outside surface of the end of the probe **110e** and/or to form the probe/skin interface. The end of the ultrasound probe **110** can press-fit against the floor **10f** and/or sidewall **10w** so as either (i) self-attach to the end of the probe and/or (ii) to conform to a shape of the adjacent portion of the probe **110**. Thus, for example, a user can press the end of the probe **110e** against a surface of coupler, e.g., a floor or a cavity, to cause (i) the coupler to attach to the probe and substantially maintain its pre-formed exterior shape and/or (ii) bottom shape change in a wall, surface or floor thereof, by a user manually applying a relatively small, finger or hand applied force, while maintaining a three-dimensional shape.

[0101] The coupler **10** is typically single-use disposable and releasably attachable to the probe **110**.

[0102] The coupler **10** can have a body that is formed of a unitary (single) monolithic material. In some embodiments, the coupler **10** can have a body that is formed of a plurality of different materials.

[0103] The coupler **10** can be configured to not require fixation devices as the coupler **10** can have a malleable body to be self-attaching to the probe **110**. However, the coupler **10** may be configured to cooperate with securing or attachment devices to attach to the probe **110**.

[0104] The coupler **10** can comprise a solid material composition corresponding to a solid deodorant stick with suitable (ultrasonic/acoustic) transmissive properties. In the prototype shown in FIGS. **4A**, **4D** and **4B**, an OLD SPICE® PURE SPORT deodorant stick (Red Zone Collection) was used to make the coupler **10**, which surprisingly had good ultrasound wave reception qualities as shown in FIG. **16B** (by way of comparison to ultrasound gel in FIG. **16A**).

[0105] The coupler **10** can have a monolithic unitary body with a defined, self-supporting, three-dimensional shape having an open upwardly facing cavity.

[0106] The coupler **10** can have at least the bottom surface with a lubricious material allowing the coupler **10** to easily slide over the skin with the probe end **110e** held inside the cavity. The coupler **10** can have a self-lubricating outer surface that does not require ultrasound gel on the skin of the patient. The self-lubricating outer surface **10s** can have a dry coat or a material that if tacky or wet, dries on contact with the skin without requiring any post-ultrasound clean-up and the patient/subject does not feel that the coupler **10** is cold to the touch in contrast to conventional use of ultrasound gel.

[0107] The probe **110** can be inserted into the coupler cavity **31** and pressed against the bottom of the cavity **10c** causing the coupler body **10b** to mold against and attach to the ultrasound probe. The coupler body has a sidewall **10w** and/or floor **10f** that can change its shape as it is compressed and closes against the ultrasound probe typically by inserting the ultrasound probe in the using one-press. To remove the coupler **30**, a user can simply pull the coupler body away from the probe **20**.

[0108] The coupler **10** can be visually and/or optically translucent or transparent. The coupler **10** can be visually opaque but ultrasonically transmissive so that the ultrasound waves are transmitted and received without undue loss of signal.

[0109] The coupler **10** can have a solid body **10b** with a lubricious bottom surface so as to be able to slide over skin without undue friction (e.g., a low sliding friction value). The bottom surface can have be “tacky” or somewhat “sticky” to touch, similar to a solid deodorant and/or antiperspirant stick.

[0110] The coupler **10** can be configured with a material that can easily slide over the skin of a patient while attached to the probe **110** without leaving wet residue, thus not requiring much, if any, post-use cleaning of the patient.

[0111] The coupler **10** can comprise a material that releases residue or small amounts of the material of the bottom (skin contact) surface **10s** of the coupler body **10b**, e.g., shed, release or apply micro-layers, as it is slides over skin of a patient, similar to the application of a deodorant stick. The temperature of the patient body may sufficiently heat the material to facilitate the release of the residue or small amounts of material in response to sliding over the skin. Thus, the coupler **10** while being configured to apply, release or shed material onto patient skin in response to sliding contact

therewith, as it is slid over the patient skin, can be configured to retain between 95-99.999% of its bottom floor thickness over an imaging session.

[0112] The coupler 10 may have a defined color and/or scent. For pediatric uses, the scents can be fruity and/or candy related scents. For example, the coupler can have a purple color and a grape scent, a red color and an apple scent or an orange color and orange scent. The coupler may have a 3-D toy or animal theme or shape, e.g., an animal head or foot shape.

[0113] FIGS. 11A and 11B schematically illustrate the couple 10 with a press-fit attachment to the end of the ultrasound probe 110e provided by embodiments of the invention. FIG. 11A shows a pre-formed three-dimensional semi-rigid coupler body 10b ready for attachment. FIG. 11B schematically illustrates an exemplary compressive force vectors F_c that is applied orthogonal to the floor 10f. FIG. 11B also illustrates optional side-side compressive force vectors F that may optionally be used to attach the coupler 10.

[0114] FIGS. 12A and 12B are side perspective views of an ultrasound probe 110e with a coupler 10 and an optional external sheath 40 according to embodiments of the present invention. The external sheath 40 can be flexible and bag-like (e.g., it can be rolled or folded and is not self-supporting) and can encase the distal end of the probe 110e as well as the coupler 10 attached thereto. The sheath 40 may provide a sterile interface between the patient and probe 110 and/or coupler 10. The sheath 40 can include a neck portion 40n that extends above the coupler and can be releasably attached to the probe 110.

[0115] FIG. 13 illustrates a multiple pack package 20' which can provide a plurality of couplers 10 in a sterile condition and ready for use. The package 20' can include a plurality of cavities 22 that hold respective couplers 10 and the couplers 10 can reside under peel-way covers 21 with coupler cavities 10c facing outward, for ease of access. The package 20' can optionally include perforated or thinner wall regions 23 to allow a user to separate segments of the package 20.

[0116] FIGS. 14A and 14B illustrate that the ultrasound system 100' can be a portable Doppler ultrasound system with an ultrasound probe 110' and a probe end 110e' configured to press-fit attach to the ultrasound coupler 10.

[0117] FIG. 15 illustrates exemplary actions that can be used to perform an ultrasound using a coupler 10. A semi-rigid, malleable ultrasound coupler is provided (block 100). An end of an ultrasound probe is pressed into the coupler to automatically attach the coupler to the probe (block 110). The probe and coupler are slid as a unitary member over skin of a patient (block 120). Ultrasound signal of the subject is obtained from the probe through the coupler (block 130). The coupler can be removed from the probe (block 140).

[0118] The coupler can have a preformed three dimensional shape with a cavity and a closed bottom surface and is held in a package in a sterile condition (block 102).

[0119] In response to the pressing, an inner surface of the coupler can be re-shaped to reside against and conform to the end of the probe while the outside surface wall remains spaced apart in a non-conformal shape (block 112).

[0120] A film and/or a layer(s) of the coupler material can be applied and/or released onto the skin due to the sliding, without leaving liquid wet residue to thereby avoid requiring post-clean up of gels like conventional ultrasound gel uses (block 122).

[0121] The coupler can have a monolithic unitary body with a defined, self-supporting, three-dimensional shape having an open upwardly facing cavity (block 104).

[0122] At least the bottom of the coupler can have a lubricious material allowing the coupler to easily slide over the skin with the probe end held inside the cavity (block 124).

[0123] The coupler can have a self-lubricating outer surface that does not require ultrasound gel on the skin of the patient (block 126).

[0124] FIG. 16A illustrates an ultrasound image obtained with an ultrasound probe and conventional ultrasound gel. FIG. 16B illustrates an ultrasound image obtained using the same ultrasound probe and the coupler shown in FIG. 4A. A coupler 10 of the present invention may comprise a polyhydric alcohol, a thickening agent, a surfactant, and/or water. In some embodiments, a polyhydric alcohol may be present in the coupler at a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 90% by weight of the coupler, a thickening agent may be present in the coupler at a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 15% by weight of the coupler, a surfactant may be present in the coupler at a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 30% by weight of the coupler, and/or water may be present in the coupler at a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 50% by weight of the coupler.

[0125] In some embodiments, a coupler 10 may comprise a polyhydric alcohol, a thickening agent, a surfactant, water, and/or ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) or a salt thereof, such as, for example, tetrasodium EDTA and/or disodium EDTA. In some embodiments, a coupler 10 may comprise two or more polyhydric alcohols, two or more thickening agents, and/or two or more surfactants. Some embodiments include that a coupler may comprise dipropylene glycol, propylene glycol, sodium stearate, polypropylene glycol ether of myristyl alcohol (PPG-3 myristyl ether), water, and tetrasodium EDTA. The concentration of various components in the coupler (e.g., the polyhydric alcohol, thickening agent, surfactant, water, etc.) may be chosen in order to provide one or more desired coupler properties, such as hardness, payout, and/or residue properties.

[0126] In some embodiments, a polyhydric alcohol may function as a solvent. A polyhydric alcohol may comprise 2 to 6 carbon atoms and 2 to 6 hydroxyl groups. Example polyhydric alcohols include, but are not limited to, ethylene glycol, propylene glycol, 1,3-propanediol, trimethylene glycol, butylene glycol, diethylene glycol, dipropylene glycol, glycerin, sorbitol, xylitol and combinations thereof. In some embodiments, a coupler may comprise at least two polyhydric alcohols, such as, for example, 2, 3, 4, 5, or more polyhydric alcohols. Some embodiments include a coupler 10 that comprises propylene glycol and/or dipropylene glycol.

[0127] A polyhydric alcohol may be present in a coupler 10 in any suitable amount. In some embodiments, the amount or concentration of a polyhydric alcohol in a coupler 10 may be selected and/or adjusted to provide the desired coupler properties. In some embodiments, a polyhydric alcohol may be present in a coupler 10 at a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 90% by weight of the coupler, such as, for example, about 5% to about 60%, about 5% to about 35%, about 15% to about 75%, about 20% to about 70%, about 40% to about 60%, or about 50% to about 90% by weight of the coupler. In some embodiments, a polyhydric alcohol may be present in a coupler 10 at a concentration of about 1%, 2%, 3%, 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8%, 9%, 10%, 11%, 12%, 13%, 14%, 15%, 16%, 17%, 18%, 19%, 20%, 21%, 22%, 23%, 24%,

25%, 26%, 27%, 28%, 29%, 30%, 31%, 32%, 33%, 34%, 35%, 36%, 37%, 38%, 39%, 40%, 41%, 42%, 43%, 44%, 45%, 46%, 47%, 48%, 49%, 50%, 51%, 52%, 53%, 54%, 55%, 56%, 57%, 58%, 59%, 60%, 61%, 62%, 63%, 64%, 65%, 66%, 67%, 68%, 69%, 70%, 71%, 72%, 73%, 74%, 75%, 76%, 77%, 78%, 79%, 80%, 81%, 82%, 83%, 84%, 85%, 86%, 87%, 88%, 89%, or 90% by weight of the coupler.

[0128] In some embodiments, a thickening agent may function as a gelling agent. In some embodiments, a thickening agent may comprise a fatty acid salt, such as, but not limited to, alkali metal, alkaline earth metal, aluminum, ammonium, and/or amine salts of C_{4-22} fatty acids. In some embodiments, a C_{4-22} fatty acid may be a salt of myristic acid, palmitic acid, stearic acid, behenic acid, oleic acid, margoric acid, linoleic acid, and/or linolenic acid. Example thickening agents include, but are not limited to, gelatin, starch (e.g., tapioca starch), xanthan gum, maltodextrin, pectin, agar, collagen, sodium stearate, potassium stearate, magnesium stearate, aluminum monostearate, sodium oleate, sodium palmitate, sodium arachidate, sodium behenate, diethylamine stearate, triethylamine stearate, triethylemine oleate, polysaccharides, guar gum, carrageenan, xanthan, gum tragacanth, gum Arabic, gum karaya, locust bean gum, coconut oil, beef tallow, lanolin, fish oil, beeswax, palm oil, peanut oil, olive oil, cottonseed oil, soybean oil, corn oil, rapeseed oil, and/or rosin acids. In some embodiments, the thickening agent comprises sodium stearate.

[0129] A thickening agent may be present in a coupler **10** in any suitable amount. In some embodiments, the amount or concentration of a thickening agent in a coupler **10** may be selected and/or adjusted to provide the desired coupler properties. In some embodiments, the concentration of a thickening agent in the coupler **10** may provide the desired hardness and/or firmness for the coupler **10**. In some embodiments, a thickening agent may be present in a coupler **10** at a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 15% by weight of the coupler **10**, such as, but not limited to, about 2% to about 10%, about 1% to about 5%, or about 5% to about 15% by weight of the coupler **10**. In some embodiments, a thickening agent may be present in a coupler **10** at a concentration of about 1%, 2%, 3%, 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8%, 9%, 10%, 11%, 12%, 13%, 14%, or 15% by weight of the coupler **10**.

[0130] In some embodiments, a surfactant may function as a clarifying agent, solubilizer, and/or an emulsifier. In some embodiments, a surfactant may comprise a hydrophobic portion and a hydrophilic portion and/or may reduce the surface tension of the composition in which it is present and/or dissolved in. A surfactant may be nonionic, anionic, cationic, amphoteric, or zwitterionic. Example surfactants include, but are not limited to, polyethylene glycol 20, sorbitan monolaurate (Polysorbate 20), polyethylene glycol 20 stearyl ether (Brij 78, Steareth 20), polyethylene glycol ether of lauryl alcohol (Laureth 23), polysorbate 80 (Tween 80), polytrimethylene ether glycol laurate, pentadoxynol-200, tetra(hydroxypropyl)diamine, 2-amino-2-methylpropanol, 2-amino-2-hydroxymethyl-1,3-propanediol, poly(C_{2-4} alkylene) glycol ethers of C_{2-22} fatty alcohols, propoxylated fatty alcohols, polypropylene glycol ether of $C_{12}-C_{22}$ fatty alcohols (e.g., polypropylene glycol ether of myristyl alcohol (PPG-3 myristyl ether)), laureth-10, laureth-20, laureth-30, laureth-40, polyethylene glycol ether of $C_{12}-C_{22}$ fatty alcohols (e.g., polyethylene glycol (PEG)-10 myristyl ether), steareth-10, steareth-20, steareth-40, steareth-100, PEG-50 stearyl ether, steareth-100, beheneth-20, polyoxyethylene 3-pentadecyl

phenyl ether, and combinations thereof. In some embodiments, the surfactant is a poly(C_{2-4} alkylene) glycol ether of a C_{2-22} fatty alcohol. In some embodiments, the surfactant is a propoxylated fatty alcohol. In some embodiments, the surfactant is a polypropylene glycol ether of a $C_{12}-C_{22}$ fatty alcohol and/or a polyethylene glycol ether of a $C_{12}-C_{22}$ fatty alcohol. In some embodiments, the fatty alcohol may be lauryl alcohol, myristyl alcohol, palm alcohol, stearyl alcohol and/or behenyl alcohol. In some embodiments, the surfactant may be PPG-3 myristyl ether.

[0131] A surfactant may be present in a coupler **10** in any suitable amount. In some embodiments, the amount or concentration of a surfactant in a coupler may be selected and/or adjusted to provide the desired coupler properties. In some embodiments, a surfactant may be present in a coupler at a concentration in a range of about 0.1% to about 30% by weight of the coupler, such as, but not limited to, about 1% to about 10%, about 0.1% to about 5%, or about 5% to about 20% by weight of the coupler. In some embodiments, a surfactant may be present in a coupler at a concentration of about 0.1%, 0.2%, 0.3%, 0.4%, 0.5%, 0.6%, 0.7%, 0.8%, 0.9%, 1%, 2%, 3%, 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8%, 9%, 10%, 11%, 12%, 13%, 14%, 15%, 16%, 17%, 18%, 19%, 20%, 21%, 22%, 23%, 24%, 25%, 26%, 27%, 28%, 29%, or 30% by weight of the coupler.

[0132] A coupler **10** may comprise water. In some embodiments, water may function as a solvent. Water may be present in a coupler in any suitable amount. In some embodiments, the amount or concentration of water in a coupler may be selected and/or adjusted to provide the desired coupler properties. In some embodiments, the balance or remainder of the composition weight may be water (i.e., water may make up the remaining weight percent to total 100%). In some embodiments, water may be present in a coupler at a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 50% by weight of the coupler, such as, but not limited to, about 1% to about 10%, about 1% to about 5%, about 5% to about 20%, about 10% to about 25%, about 1% to about 30%, about 25% to about 50%, about 20% to about 40%, or about 15% to about 20% by weight of the coupler. In some embodiments, water may be present in a coupler at a concentration of about 1%, 2%, 3%, 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8%, 9%, 10%, 11%, 12%, 13%, 14%, 15%, 16%, 17%, 18%, 19%, 20%, 21%, 22%, 23%, 24%, 25%, 26%, 27%, 28%, 29%, 30%, 31%, 32%, 33%, 34%, 35%, 36%, 37%, 38%, 39%, 40%, 41%, 42%, 43%, 44%, 45%, 46%, 47%, 48%, 49%, or 50% by weight of the coupler.

[0133] A coupler **10** may comprise EDTA or a salt thereof, such as for example, tetrasodium EDTA and/or disodium EDTA. In some embodiments, EDTA or a salt thereof may function as a preservative, chelating agent, and/or neutralizing agent. EDTA or a salt thereof may be present in a coupler in any suitable amount. In some embodiments, the amount or concentration of EDTA or a salt thereof in a coupler may be selected and/or adjusted to provide the desired coupler properties. In some embodiments, EDTA or a salt thereof may be present in a coupler at a concentration of less than about 10% by weight of the coupler. In some embodiments, EDTA or a salt thereof may be present in a coupler at a concentration of about 0.1%, 0.2%, 0.3%, 0.4%, 0.5%, 0.6%, 0.7%, 0.8%, 0.9%, 1%, 2%, 3%, 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8%, 9%, or 10% by weight of the coupler.

[0134] A coupler **10** may comprise one or more additional components including, but not limited to, antimicrobial agents (e.g., triclosan, silver chloride, botanical extracts,

etc.), therapeutic agents, preservatives, disinfectant agents, moisturizing agents, spreadability enhancing agents, glide agents, soothing agents, chelating agents (e.g., disodium EDTA, tetrasodium EDTA, etc.), neutralizing agents (e.g., aminomethyl propanol, poloxamine 1307, sodium hydroxide, tetrasodium EDTA, etc.), antioxidants (e.g., butylated hydroxytoluene, etc.), colorants, and/or fragrances. The one or more additional components may be selected to provide and/or improve the efficacy, stability, cosmetics, and/or aesthetics of a coupler, such as, for example the skin feel, glide properties, hardness, and/or payout. The one or more additional components may each be present in a coupler at a concentration of less than about 10% by weight of the coupler. In some embodiments, an additional component may be present in a coupler at a concentration of about 0.1%, 0.2%, 0.3%, 0.4%, 0.5%, 0.6%, 0.7%, 0.8%, 0.9%, 1%, 2%, 3%, 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8%, 9%, or 10% by weight of the coupler.

[0135] In some embodiments, a preservative may be present in a coupler **10** of the present invention. Example preservatives include, but are not limited to, benzyl alcohol, methyl paraben, propyl paraben, DMDM hydantoin, methylchloroisothiazoline, methylisothiazolinone, imidazolidinyl urea phenoxyethanol, sodium benzoate, benzoic acid, EDTA, and/or salts thereof. A preservative be present in a coupler at a concentration of less than about 10% by weight of the coupler. In some embodiments, a preservative may be present in a coupler at a concentration of about 0.1%, 0.2%, 0.3%, 0.4%, 0.5%, 0.6%, 0.7%, 0.8%, 0.9%, 1%, 2%, 3%, 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8%, 9%, or 10% by weight of the coupler.

[0136] In some embodiments, an alcohol may be present in a coupler **10** of the present invention. Example alcohols include, but are not limited to, denatured alcohol (e.g., specifically denatured alcohol), ethyl alcohol, isopropyl alcohol, and combinations thereof. An alcohol may be present in a coupler at a concentration of less than about 40% by weight of the coupler. In some embodiments, an alcohol may be present in a coupler at a concentration of about 1%, 2%, 3%, 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8%, 9%, 10%, 11%, 12%, 13%, 14%, 15%, 16%, 17%, 18%, 19%, 20%, 21%, 22%, 23%, 24%, 25%, 26%, 27%, 28%, 29%, 30%, 31%, 32%, 33%, 34%, 35%, 36%, 37%, 38%, 39%, or 40% by weight of the coupler.

[0137] Further examples of components including materials and/or chemicals and/or their concentration that may be used in couplers **10** of the present invention and/or methods for combining one or more components to form a solid include, but are not limited to, those described in U.S. Pat. Nos. 2,857,315; 4,617,185; and 5,650,140; U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2014/0271517; and International Publication No. WO 2009/046008, the contents of each of which are incorporated herein by reference for the portions relevant to this paragraph. The components and/or methods as described and/or incorporated herein may be used to form a coupler **10** that is ultrasonically transmissive or suitable for ultrasound rather than for use as a deodorant or antiperspirant. Thus, while these documents are referenced, they are intended to be by way of example only and different chemicals or features in one may be combined in any way with that from another or omit chemicals or materials not useful for or that may be undesired for the purposes of the devices of the present application.

[0138] Ultrasound couplers **10** of the present invention may have a satisfactory skin feel, satisfactory application aesthetics, satisfactory glide properties, satisfactory payout and/or no or minimal residue when contacted with the skin of a

subject during an ultrasound imaging session. In some embodiments, the coupler **10** may have a satisfactory payout during use with normally exerted user pressure. In some embodiments, a coupler **10** may have excellent esthetics (e.g., smoothness, a comfortable dry feel, etc.) and no or minimal visually perceptible residue when contacted and/or applied to the skin of subject. One or more properties of the coupler **10** may be evaluated by the user of the coupler and/or by the subject contacted with the coupler **10**.

[0139] The term “payout” as used herein, refers to the amount of material (e.g., the residue) that may be deposited on a subject’s skin and/or a test apparatus from the coupler during use (e.g., contact with the subject’s body and/or test apparatus). In some embodiments, the coupler may have a payout in an amount of about 0.1 mg/cm² to about 10 mg/cm², such as, for example, about 1 mg/cm² to about 6 mg/cm² or about 2 mg/cm² to about 4 mg/cm². In some embodiments, the coupler may have a payout in an amount of about 0.1, 0.2, 0.3, 0.4, 0.5, 0.6, 0.7, 0.8, 0.9, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10 mg/cm². Payout and/or other residue measurements (e.g., glide, flakeoff, Tan Delta, and Residue Grade values) may be as described in, for example, U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2011/0076309 and International Publication Nos. WO 2001/087252 and WO 2009/045557 and/or measured using known methods, such as, but not limited to, those described in U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2011/0076309 and International Publication Nos. WO 2001/087252 and WO 2009/045557, the contents of each of which are incorporated herein by reference for the portions relevant to this paragraph.

[0140] In some embodiments, a coupler **10** may have a hardness of about 150 gram-force to about 2,000 gram-force before residue is dispensed from the coupler, such as, for example, about 200 gram-force to about 400 gram-force, about 300 gram-force to about 600 gram-force, about 600 gram-force to about 800 gram-force, or about 800 gram-force to about 2,000 gram-force before residue is dispensed from the coupler. In some embodiments, a coupler **10** may have a hardness of about 150, 200, 250, 300, 350, 400, 450, 500, 550, 600, 650, 700, 750, 800, 850, 900, 950, 1000, 1100, 1200, 1300, 1400, 1500, 1600, 1700, 1800, 1900, or 2000 gram-force before residue is dispensed from the coupler. Hardness (e.g., penetration force (gram-force), static yield stress (Pa) values, and/or high shear stress viscosity) may be as described in, for example, U.S. Patent Application Publication Nos. 2014/0271516 and 2013/0108570 and International Publication No. WO 2001/087252 and/or measured using known methods, such as, but not limited to, those described in U.S. Patent Application Publication Nos. 2014/0271516 and 2013/0108570 and International Publication No. WO 2001/087252, the contents of each of which are incorporated herein by reference for the portions relevant to this paragraph.

[0141] In some embodiments, one or more different portions of a coupler **10** (e.g., the coupler outer surface **10s** and coupler sidewall **10w**) may have different hardness values. For example, the floor **10f** of the coupler **10** can have a hardness that is less than that of the sidewall **10w**. The reverse may also be true, the sidewall **10w** can have a hardness that is greater than that of the floor **10f**.

[0142] In some embodiments, the coupler **10** may comprise a single layer or two or more (e.g., 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, etc.) stacked layers of the same or different materials and/or the

same or different chemical compositions. The two or more layers may be combined and/or attached to form the shaped body of coupler 10.

[0143] In some embodiments, a coupler 10 may have a different composition in two or more different portions (e.g., two or more different layers) of the coupler 10. In some embodiments, the concentration of one or more ingredients may be different in two or more different portions and/or layers of a coupler 10 and/or a different ingredient may be present in at least one of the two or more different portions and/or layers of a coupler 10.

[0144] In some embodiments, the coupler 10 may comprise a first portion (e.g., first layer) and a second portion (e.g., second layer) and the first and second portions may have different compositions. In some embodiments, the composition of the first portion may more easily lubricate the skin of a patient and/or may be more lubricating compared to the composition of the second portion. Thus, the composition of the first portion may provide improved and/or increased lubrication to the skin of the patient and/or less force and/or friction on the skin of the patient compared to the composition of the second portion. In some embodiments, the portion and/or layer of the coupler 10 that includes the exterior surface of the floor 10f that may contact the skin of a patient may have a different composition that is more lubricating to the skin of a patient and/or more easy to lubricate the skin of a patient than another portion of the coupler 10.

[0145] In some embodiments, the coupler 10 may comprise at least two portions (e.g., layers) and one portion has a different concentration for at least one ingredient than another portion. For example, the concentration of an ingredient (e.g., a polyhydric alcohol, thickening agent, surfactant, and/or water) present in the exterior surface of the floor 10f that may contact the skin of a patient may be different than the concentration of the same ingredient in the interior surface of the floor 10f. In some embodiments, the concentration of an ingredient present in the floor 10f and/or coupler sidewall 10w may be different than the concentration of the same ingredient in the interior of cavity 10c. In some embodiments, the concentration of an ingredient present in the coupler outer surface 10s may be different than the concentration of the same ingredient in the coupler sidewall 10w. In some embodiments, a concentration gradient for at least one ingredient may be present in the coupler 10. For example, the coupler 10 may comprise water in a concentration gradient that increases in concentration as the coupler 10 extends distally from an ultrasound probe 110 or vice versa. Thus, the exterior surface of the floor 10f that may contact the skin of a patient may have a higher concentration of water than a portion of the coupler 10 that is closer to the ultrasound probe 110 (e.g., the portion of the floor 10f that is closer to and/or in contact with the ultrasound probe 110).

[0146] In some embodiments, the coupler 10 may comprise at least two portions (e.g., layers) and one portion may have a different ingredient than another portion. For example, one portion may include a surfactant and another portion may include a different surfactant. In some embodiments, the coupler 10 may comprise at least two portions (e.g., layers) and one portion may include an ingredient that is not present in another portion. For example, one portion may include a surfactant and another portion may not include a surfactant.

[0147] While the foregoing written description of the invention enables one of ordinary skill to make and use what is considered presently to be the best mode thereof, those of

ordinary skill will understand and appreciate the existence of variations, combinations, and equivalents of the specific embodiment, method, and examples herein. The invention should therefore not be limited by the above described embodiment, method, and examples, but by all embodiments and methods within the scope and spirit of the invention as claimed.

That which is claimed:

1. An ultrasound coupler, comprising:

a semi-rigid, malleable ultrasound coupler body having a self-supporting, three-dimensional shape with a sidewall extending about an open cavity over a floor.

2. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the coupler body is solid.

3. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the floor has a thickness that is less than a thickness of the sidewall.

4. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the coupler body is configured to be press-fit to a target ultrasound probe so that the end of the ultrasound probe resides in the cavity and the coupler self-attaches thereto.

5. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the coupler body is formed of a material that self-lubricates and dries as it is applied to skin of a subject to thereby facilitate sliding of the coupler and the probe as a unitary assembly.

6. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the coupler body has a bottom surface that comprises a material corresponding to a solid deodorant.

7. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the floor has a thickness between 0.1 mm and 12 mm, and wherein the sidewall has a thickness between about 1 mm and about 12 mm.

8. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the sidewall extends above the floor a distance between about 5 mm and about 25 mm.

9. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the sidewall extends straight above the floor or tapers outward therefrom, and wherein the sidewall has a top surface that defines a top of the coupler.

10. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the sidewall has a thickness between about 1 mm and about 12 mm.

11. The coupler of claim 9, wherein the sidewall defines a flat top surface of the coupler with a corresponding thickness.

12. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the coupler body is a monolithic unitary member.

13. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the coupler body comprises propylene glycol, dipropylene glycol, sodium stearate, and polypropylene glycol ether of myristyl alcohol.

14. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the coupler body has a bottom surface that is tacky or sticky to touch.

15. The coupler of claim 1, wherein the coupler body is held in a container prior to use, and wherein the coupler body comprises one or more of: a polyhydric alcohol, a thickening agent, and a surfactant.

16. The coupler of claim 1, in combination with an ultrasound probe, wherein the ultrasound probe has an end that is held in the cavity of the coupler.

17. The coupler of claim 1, further comprising an ultrasound gel in the cavity of the coupler.

18. A method of evaluating a subject, comprising:

manually pressing a coupler with a self-supporting, three dimensional shape against an outer end portion of an ultrasound probe to attach the coupler to the probe with the coupler providing a skin to ultrasound probe interface;

sliding the probe and the coupler together as a unitary member over skin of subject to obtain ultrasound images; and

detaching the coupler from the probe after an ultrasound imaging session.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein the coupler has a semi-rigid ultrasound coupler body with a sidewall extending about an open cavity over a floor, wherein the floor has a thickness that is less than a thickness of the sidewall.

20. The method of claim 18, wherein the coupler body is solid and malleable and comprises one or more of a polyhydric alcohol, a thickening agent, and a surfactant.

21. The method of claim 18, further comprising applying or releasing material of the bottom surface of the coupler body onto the skin of the subject in response to the sliding step.

22. The method of claim 18, wherein in response to the sliding step, the coupler releases or sheds material that self-dries on the skin of the patient during the imaging session.

23. An ultrasound coupler comprising polyhydric alcohol, a thickening agent, and a surfactant.

24. The ultrasound coupler of claim 23, wherein the polyhydric alcohol is propylene glycol and/or dipropylene glycol.

25. The ultrasound coupler of claim 23, wherein the thickening agent comprises a C_{4-22} fatty acid salt.

26. The ultrasound coupler of claim 23, wherein the thickening agent is selected from sodium stearate, potassium stear-

ate, magnesium stearate, aluminum monostearate, sodium oleate, sodium palmitate, sodium arachidate, sodium behenate, diethylamine stearate, triethylamine stearate, triethylamine oleate, and combinations thereof.

27. The ultrasound coupler of claim 23, wherein the surfactant comprises a propoxylated fatty alcohol.

28. The ultrasound coupler of claim 23, wherein the surfactant comprises a polyethylene glycol ether of a C_{12} - C_{22} fatty alcohol and/or a polypropylene glycol ether of a C_{12} - C_{22} fatty alcohol.

29. The ultrasound coupler of claim 23, further comprising water and/or tetrasodium ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA).

30. The ultrasound coupler of claim 23, wherein the polyhydric alcohol is present in a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 90% by weight of the coupler, the thickening agent is present in a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 15% by weight of the coupler, and the surfactant is present in a concentration in a range of about 1% to about 30% by weight of the coupler.

31. The ultrasound coupler of claims 24, wherein the polyhydric alcohol comprises propylene glycol and dipropylene glycol, the thickening agent comprises sodium stearate, and the surfactant comprises polypropylene glycol ether of myristyl alcohol.

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摘要(译)

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