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**SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR PRODUCING ASYNCHRONOUS NEURAL RE-
SPONSES TO TREAT PAIN AND/OR OTHER PATIENT CONDITIONS**

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(62) Divisional of:
2010208187

(71) Applicant(s)
Nevro Corporation

(72) Inventor(s)
Fang, Zi-Ping;Caparso, Anthony V.;Walker, Andre B.

(74) Agent / Attorney
Pizzeyes, PO Box 291, WODEN, ACT, 2606

ABSTRACT

Systems and methods for producing asynchronous neural responses to treat pain and/or other patient conditions are disclosed. A method in accordance with a particular embodiment includes selecting a target stimulation frequency that is above a threshold frequency, with the threshold frequency corresponding to a refractory period for neurons of a target sensory neural population. The method can further include producing a patient sensation of paresthesia by directing an electrical signal to multiple sensory neurons of the target sensory neural population at the stimulation frequency, with individual neurons of the sensory neural population completing corresponding individual refractory periods at different times, resulting in an asynchronous sensory neuron response to the electrical signal.

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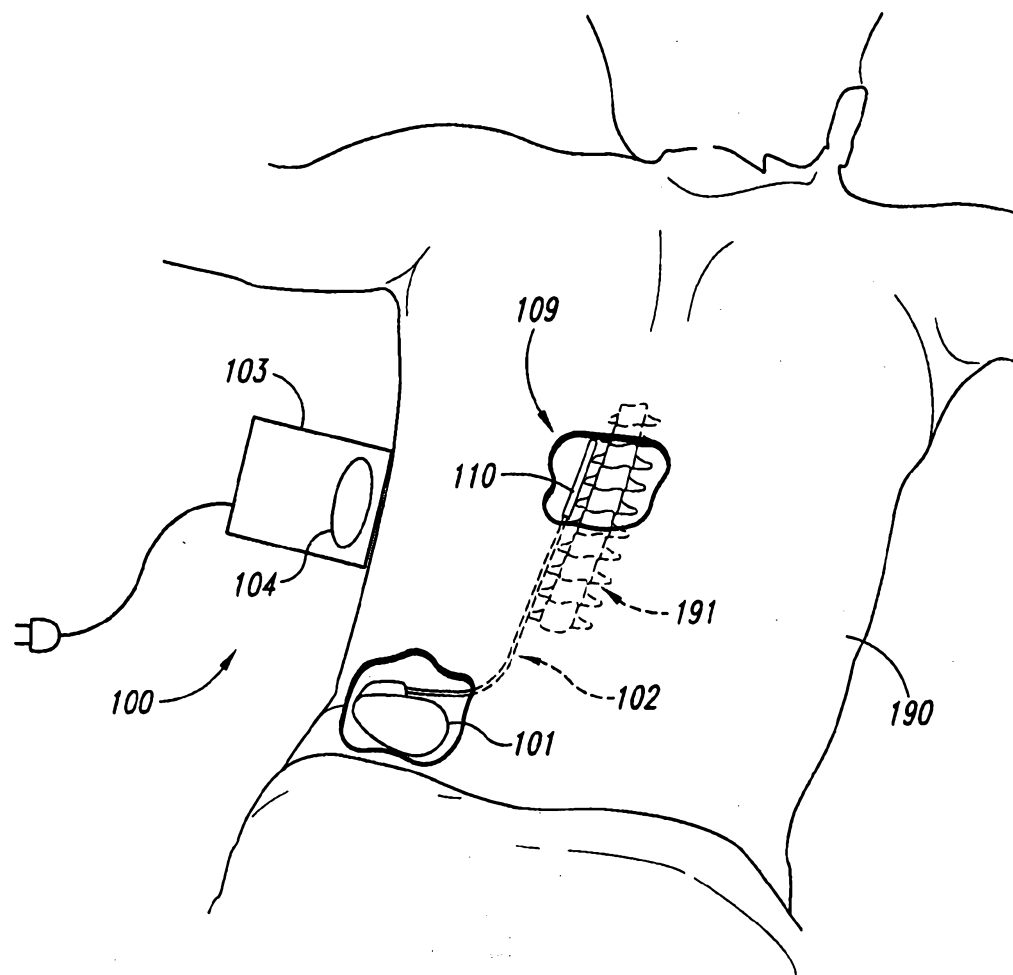


Fig. 1

SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR PRODUCING ASYNCHRONOUS
NEURAL RESPONSES TO TREAT PAIN AND/OR OTHER
PATIENT CONDITIONS

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] The present disclosure is directed generally to systems and methods for producing asynchronous neural responses, such as for the treatment of pain and/or other disorders.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Neurological stimulators have been developed to treat pain, movement disorders, functional disorders, spasticity, cancer, cardiac disorders, and various other medical conditions. Implantable neurological stimulation systems generally have an implantable pulse generator and one or more leads that deliver electrical pulses to neurological tissue or muscle tissue. For example, several neurological stimulation systems for spinal cord stimulation (SCS) have cylindrical leads that include a lead body with a circular cross-sectional shape and one or more conductive rings spaced apart from each other at the distal end of the lead body. The conductive rings operate as individual electrodes and in many cases, the SCS leads are implanted percutaneously through a large needle inserted into the epidural space, with or without the assistance of a stylet.

[0003] Once implanted, the pulse generator applies electrical pulses to the electrodes, which in turn modify the function of the patient's nervous system, such as altering the patient's responsiveness to sensory stimuli and/or altering the patient's motor-circuit output. In pain treatment, the pulse generator applies electrical pulses to the electrodes, which in turn can generate sensations that mask or otherwise alter the patient's sensation of pain. For example, in many cases, patients report a tingling or paresthesia that is perceived as more pleasant and/or less uncomfortable than the underlying pain sensation. While this may be the case for many patients, many other patients may report less beneficial effects and/or results. Accordingly,

there remains a need for improved techniques and systems for addressing patient pain.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0004] Figure 1 is a schematic illustration of an implantable spinal cord stimulation system positioned at the spine to deliver therapeutic signals in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure.

[0005] Figure 2 is a flow diagram illustrating a process for selecting a frequency in accordance with which stimulation is provided to a patient in an embodiment of the disclosure.

[0006] Figure 3 is a flow diagram illustrating a representative process for treating a patient in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure.

[0007] Figure 4 is a timing diagram illustrating an electrical therapy signal having parameters selected in accordance with a representative embodiment of the disclosure.

[0008] Figure 5 is a flow diagram illustrating a process for selecting parameters for delivering multiple electrical signals in accordance with another embodiment of the disclosure.

[0009] Figure 6 is a timing diagram illustrating signal delivery parameters for two signals delivered in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure.

[0010] Figure 7 is a timing diagram illustrating parameters for delivering two signals in accordance with another embodiment of the disclosure.

[0011] Figure 8 is a timing diagram illustrating a process for delivering three signals in accordance with still another embodiment of the disclosure.

[0012] Figure 9 is a schematic illustration of an electrode configured to deliver two signals in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure.

[0013] Figure 10 is a partially schematic, cross-sectional illustration of a patient's spine illustrating representative locations for implanted lead bodies in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure.

[0014] Figure 11 is a partially schematic illustration of a lead body configured in accordance with another embodiment of the disclosure.

[0015] Figure 12 is a partially schematic, cross-sectional illustration of the patient's spine illustrating representative locations for implanted lead bodies in accordance with still further embodiments of the disclosure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A. Overview

[0016] The present disclosure is directed generally to systems and methods for producing asynchronous neural output or responses, such as to treat pain. Specific details of certain embodiments of the disclosure are described below with reference to methods for stimulating a target neural population or site of a patient, and associated implantable structures for providing the stimulation. Although selected embodiments are described below with reference to stimulating the dorsal root and/or other regions of the spinal column to control pain, the leads may in some instances be used for stimulating other neurological structures, and/or other tissue (e.g., muscle tissue). Some embodiments can have configurations, components or procedures different than those described in this section, and other embodiments may eliminate particular components or procedures. A person of ordinary skill in the relevant art, therefore, will understand that the invention may have other embodiments with additional elements, and/or may have other embodiments without several of the features shown and described below with reference to Figures 1-12.

[0017] A representative method in accordance with a particular embodiment for treating a patient's pain includes selecting a target stimulation frequency that is above a threshold frequency. The threshold frequency corresponds to a refractory period for neurons of a target sensory neural population. The method can further include producing a patient sensation of paresthesia by directing an electrical signal to multiple sensory neurons of the target sensory neural population at the target stimulation frequency. Individual neurons of the sensory neural population can complete corresponding individual refractory periods at different times, resulting in an asynchronous sensory neuron response to the electrical signals. In at least some embodiments, it is expected that this method can produce an enhanced effect for the

patient, e.g. a smoother and/or a more pleasant sensation than that resulting from standard spinal cord stimulation.

[0018] In a further particular embodiment, directing the electrical signal in accordance with the foregoing method can include initiating the asynchronous sensory neuron response by directing to the target sensory neural population a generally constant stream of pulses at a frequency greater than the threshold frequency. The duration of the asynchronous sensory response can then be extended (e.g., beyond an initial period) by directing multiple electrical signals to the target sensory neural population. These signals can include a first electrical signal having pulses delivered at a first frequency that is at or above the threshold frequency, and a second electrical signal having pulses delivered at a second frequency, also at or above the threshold frequency. The pulses of the first and second signals can be interleaved, with individual pulses of the first electrical signal being followed by individual pulses of the second electrical signal, and spaced apart from the individual pulses of the first electrical signal by a first time interval less than the refractory period. Individual pulses of the second electrical signal are followed by individual pulses of the first electrical signal, and are spaced apart from the individual pulses of the first electrical signal by a second time interval that is also less than the refractory period.

B. Embodiments of Methods for Applying Neural Stimulation, and Associated Systems

[0019] Figure 1 schematically illustrates a representative treatment system 100 for providing relief from chronic pain and/or other conditions, arranged relative to the general anatomy of a patient's spinal cord 191. The system 100 can include a pulse generator 101, which may be implanted subcutaneously within a patient 190 and coupled to a signal delivery element 109. In a representative example, the signal delivery element 109 includes a lead body 110 that carries features for delivering therapy to the patient 190 after implantation. The pulse generator 101 can be connected directly to the lead body 110 or it can be coupled to the lead body 110 via a communication link 102. As used herein, the term lead body includes any of a number of suitable substrates and/or support members that carry devices for providing therapy signals to the patient 190. For example, the lead body 110 can

include one or more electrodes or electrical contacts that direct electrical signals into the patient's tissue, such as to provide for patient relief. In other embodiments, the signal delivery element 109 can include devices other than a lead body (e.g., a paddle) that also direct electrical signals and/or other types of signals to the patient 190.

[0020] The pulse generator 101 can transmit signals to the signal delivery element 109 that up-regulate (e.g. stimulate) and/or down-regulate (e.g. block) target nerves. Accordingly, the pulse generator 101 can include a machine-readable (e.g., computer-readable) medium containing instructions for generating and transmitting suitable therapy signals. The pulse generator 101 and/or other elements of the system 100 can include one or more processors, memories and/or input/output devices. The pulse generator 101 can include multiple portions, elements, and/or subsystems (e.g., for directing signals in accordance with multiple signal delivery parameters), housed in a single housing, as shown in Figure 1, or in multiple housings.

[0021] In some embodiments, the pulse generator 101 can obtain power to generate the therapy signals from an external power source 103. The external power source 103 can transmit power to the implanted pulse generator 101 using electromagnetic induction (e.g., RF signals). For example, the external power source 103 can include an external coil 104 that communicates with a corresponding internal coil (not shown) within the implantable pulse generator 101. The external power source 103 can be portable for ease of use.

[0022] In another embodiment, the pulse generator 101 can obtain the power to generate therapy signals from an internal power source, in addition to or in lieu of the external power source 103. For example, the implanted pulse generator 101 can include a non-rechargeable battery or a rechargeable battery to provide such power. When the internal power source includes a rechargeable battery, the external power source 103 can be used to recharge the battery. The external power source 103 can in turn be recharged from a suitable power source (e.g., conventional wall power).

[0023] In still further embodiments, an external programmer (not shown) can communicate with the implantable pulse generator 101 via electromagnetic induction. Accordingly, a practitioner can update the therapy instructions provided

by the pulse generator 101. Optionally, the patient may also have control over at least some therapy functions, e.g., starting and/or stopping the pulse generator 101.

[0024] Figure 2 is a flow diagram illustrating a process 270 for selecting signal delivery parameters in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure. Process portion 271 includes identifying a target sensory neural population. For example, the target sensory neural population can include a neural population (e.g., neural fibers) located at the spinal cord. Process portion 272 can include identifying a refractory period for neurons of the target neural population. As used herein, the refractory period refers generally to the period of time during which an activated neuron (e.g., a neuron that has fired an action potential) is unable to fire an additional action potential. The refractory period includes an absolute refractory period and a relative refractory period. The absolute refractory period refers generally to the period during which no new action potential can be produced, no matter the strength of the electrical signal applied, and the relative refractory period refers generally to the period during which a new action potential can be produced, but the stimulus strength must be increased. Unless otherwise noted, a refractory period as used herein generally refers to the entire or total refractory period, e.g., the combined absolute refractory period and relative refractory period. The refractory period can correspond to an average expected refractory period for a population of neurons, or to a refractory period of a particular neuron. The refractory period can be determined based on information obtained from a pool of patients or other generalized data, or a practitioner can determine a patient-specific refractory period. For example, the practitioner can use generalized refractory period data initially, (e.g., to establish a threshold frequency and a target frequency, as described below) and can then fine-tune the target frequency based on patient-specific requirements and/or feedback. In at least some cases, the refractory period may vary from one neural population to another. In such cases, the practitioner can identify or determine a refractory period for a specific neural population, or base an estimate for the refractory period on an established correspondence or similarity between neural populations.

[0025] Process portion 273 includes determining a threshold frequency based at least in part on the refractory period. Generally, process portion 273 includes taking the inverse of the refractory period to determine the threshold frequency. Process

portion 274 can include selecting a target stimulation frequency that is above the threshold frequency. For example, the target stimulation frequency can be selected so that neighboring pulses are spaced apart by less than the total refractory period, but more than the absolute refractory period. In other embodiments, the target stimulation frequency can be selected so that neighboring pulses are spaced apart by less than the absolute refractory period. The degree to which the target stimulation frequency exceeds the threshold frequency can be selected based (at least in part) upon factors that include the nature of the target sensory neural population, patient-specific feedback, and/or others. In particular embodiments, the target stimulation frequency can be about an order of magnitude (e.g., about a factor of 10) or more above the threshold frequency. In other embodiments, the target stimulation frequency can be double the threshold frequency, or another multiple of the threshold frequency greater than or less than 2, but greater than 1. For example, in a particular embodiment, the absolute refractory period for A β fibers has a value of from about 1 msec. to about 3 msec. (and a relative refractory period of about 1-2 msec.), corresponding to a frequency range of about 200 Hz - 1,000 Hz. The corresponding target stimulation frequency can have a value of 2,000 Hz, 3,000 Hz, 5,000 Hz, 8,000 Hz or 10,000 Hz. In a further particular embodiment, it is expected that frequencies between 3,000 Hz and 10,000 Hz will produce enhanced patient benefits. These values are higher than the standard spinal cord stimulation frequency, which is generally from 2 to 1,500 Hz. The particular value of the frequency selected for a given patient can depend at least in part on patient feedback (e.g., which frequency provides the most pleasant sensation), and/or a target system power requirement, with higher frequencies generally corresponding to higher power requirements. In any of these embodiments, as a result of the selected frequency being greater than the threshold frequency, individual pulses of the electrical signal will be directed both to sensory neurons that are in refractory, and sensory neurons that are in refractory but excitable. In process portion 275, a stimulation device (e.g., a spinal cord stimulation device) is programmed to deliver the electrical signal at the target stimulation frequency.

[0026] Figure 3 is a flow diagram of a process 370 for treating a patient. Process portion 371 includes implanting an electrical stimulation device proximate to a target sensory neural population e.g., at the patient's spinal cord. Process portion

372 includes directing an electrical signal to multiple sensory neurons of the target sensory neural population at the target stimulation frequency. In process portion 373, individual neurons of the sensory neural population complete corresponding individual refractory periods at different times. This may result because individual neurons can have different individual refractory periods based on the size of the neuron and also because the physiological activation of sensory neurons is not synchronous across the entire population. Process portion 374 includes producing a sensation of paresthesia in the patient, resulting from an asynchronous sensory neuron response to the electrical signals. For example, by applying an electrical signal at a frequency greater than the threshold frequency, individual neurons are expected to be exposed to (and respond to) a stimulation pulse very quickly after completing corresponding individual refractory periods. Because individual neurons are completing individual refractory periods at different times, the individual neurons become reactivated at different times. This produces an asynchronous sensory neuron response that is expected to have an improved sensation for the patient. In particular, patients treated with such a stimulation signal are expected to report a smooth and/or otherwise pleasant sensation, as opposed to a rough, tingly, prickly, and/or other sensation that may not be as pleasant. In addition, it is expected that such signals will not block afferent signals from the target sensory neural population. Accordingly, in particular embodiments, the patient's ability to perceive other sensations is not expected to be affected significantly or at all. As a result, selecting the target stimulation frequency in accordance with the foregoing parameters can produce a beneficial result for the patient.

[0027] Figure 4 is a timing diagram illustrating a representative first signal 430 in accordance with a particular embodiment of the present disclosure. In this embodiment, the signal 430 includes a continuous string of biphasic, charge-balanced, paired pulses 431 having a pulse width PW. Each neighboring pair of anodic and cathodic pulses corresponds to a cycle 432 having a period P and an associated frequency F. Because each cycle 432 immediately follows the preceding cycle 432, the signal 430 has no interpulse interval.

[0028] As is also shown in Figure 4, the frequency F of the signal 430 produces a period P for each cycle 432 that is significantly less than a corresponding refractory

period RP. This arrangement is expected to produce the patient sensations described above with reference to Figure 3.

[0029] In some cases, it may be desirable to reduce the power required to deliver the electrical signal, without significantly reducing the associated asynchronous neural response. One approach to achieving this result is to deliver multiple electrical signals, for example, two electrical signals, that together produce an asynchronous neural response, but with less power than is required to produce the continuous stream of pulses shown in Figure 4. Figure 5 illustrates a representative method 570 for producing such a result. The method 570 includes selecting first electrical signal parameters (process portion 571) that can include a first frequency, first pulse width, first interpulse interval, first burst frequency, first burst width, first interburst interval, and first intensity. The frequency, pulse width, and interpulse interval of the first signal are described above with reference to Figure 4. The burst frequency refers to the frequency at which groups of pulses are delivered to the patient, and the burst width refers to the time period over which any particular group of pulses is delivered. The interburst interval refers to the time period between bursts, and the intensity refers to the amplitude (e.g., voltage and/or current) or intensity of the pulses. In a representative example, the pulses are provided at current-controlled intensity level of from about 0.1 mA to about 20 mA, and, more particularly, about 0.5 mA to about 5.0 mA, with a varying voltage of up to about 15 volts, and a frequency of about 10,000 Hz. Values toward the higher ends of the foregoing ranges may be used in particular embodiments, e.g., when sensory subcutaneous nerves and/or other sensory and/or motor peripheral nerves (as opposed to spinal nerves) form the target neural population. In a further representative example, sequential bursts can be separated from each other by less than one second, and the overall duty cycle of the first signal alone (or the first and second signals together) can be about 50%.

[0030] Process portion 572 includes selecting corresponding parameters for the second electrical signal. Process portion 573 includes selecting a phase shift or offset between pulses of the first signal and pulses of the second signal. In process portion 574, the first and second electrical signals are directed to a target neural population. Optionally, the process 570 can include varying the signal delivery parameters (process portion 575), for example, by varying the first interpulse interval

with a constant phase shift between pulses of the first signal and pulses of the second signal, or by varying the phase shift with a constant first interpulse interval. Examples of representative wave forms selected in accordance with the process 570 are described below with reference to Figures 6-8.

[0031] Figure 6 is a timing diagram illustrating wave forms for two electrical signals, shown as a first electrical signal 630a and a second electrical signal 630b. The first electrical signal 630a includes first cycles 632a, each of which includes a first pulse 631a having a pulse width PW1. Individual first cycles 632a have a first period P1. The second electrical signal 630b includes multiple second cycles 632b, each of which includes a second pulse 632b having a second pulse width PW2. Individual second cycles 632b have a second period P2.

[0032] In a particular embodiment, each second cycle 632b of the second signal 630b follows a corresponding first cycle 632a of the first signal 630a, and is spaced apart from the first cycle 632a by an offset or phase shift O. In particular embodiments, the offset O can have a constant value, so that the first and second frequencies F1, F2 are equal. In other embodiments, the offset O can vary, which can prolong the effectiveness of the therapy. It is believed that one possible mechanism by which the therapy effectiveness can be prolonged is by reducing the patient's maladaptive response, e.g., by reducing a tendency for the patient's central nervous system to lessen its response to the effects of a non-varying signal over time. In still further embodiments, it is expected that the practitioner can reduce the patient's maladaptive response without varying signal delivery parameters, and/or via a treatment regimen that includes more than two electrical signals or only a single electrical signal. For example, in at least some embodiments, applying a single, constant frequency signal (e.g., as shown in Figure 4) so as to produce an asynchronous neural response, can reduce the maladaptive response of the patient's central nervous system, e.g., when compared with a signal that produces a synchronous neural response.

[0033] The combination of the first signal 630a and the second signal 630b produces a combined period PC corresponding to the first period P1 plus the offset O. In a particular aspect of this embodiment, the combined period PC is selected to be smaller than the refractory period RP. However, the first frequency F1 may be selected to be slower than the corresponding total refractory period. If the first signal

630a alone were provided to the patient in accordance with these parameters, it would not likely produce an asynchronous neural response. However, the second signal 630b can supplement the effects of the first signal 630a. In particular, the second pulses 631b are delivered in a manner that activates neurons that may come out of their refractory periods after the preceding first pulse 631a. This is expected to be the case because the combined period PC is less than the refractory period RP. For example, the combined period PC can be a suitable fraction (e.g., one-half or one-third) of the total refractory period RP. These values can be less than the total refractory period, but greater than the absolute refractory period. In a particular embodiment, the total refractory period RP can have a value of about 2-4 msec., and the first and second frequencies F1, F2 can have a value of from about 250 Hz to about 500 Hz. The combined period PC can have a value of from about 50 μ sec. to about 300 μ sec. and in a particular embodiment, about 100 μ sec.

[0034] In operation, the first and second signals 630a, 630b may be applied to the patient after the constant pulses described above with reference to Figure 4 are applied. Accordingly, the constant pulse pattern shown in Figure 4 can be used to establish an initial asynchronous neural response, for example, over a time period of several microseconds to several seconds, e.g., several milliseconds. This asynchronous response period can be extended by the first and second signals 630a, 630b, without expending the amount of power required to produce a continuous stream of pulses over the same period of time. The power savings can result because the combination of the first and second signals 630a, 630b produces a quiescent period Q during which no pulses are applied to the patient. In general, it is expected that the quiescent period Q will be less than or equal to the refractory period RP. As a result, the patient benefit is expected to at least approach the benefit achieved with the constant stream of pulses shown in Figure 4. For example, in a particular embodiment, it is expected that the patient can achieve the same or nearly the same benefit whether the stimulation is in the form of a continuous stream of pulses at 3 kHz, or two overlaid sets of spaced-apart pulses, each provided at less than 1.5 kHz, with the latter stimulation requiring less power than the former.

[0035] In at least some embodiments, the amplitude of the second signal 630b may be greater than that of the first signal 630a. It is expected that the increased amplitude of the second signal 630b may be more effective at activating neurons that

are in a relative refractory state rather than an absolute refractory state, thus reducing the number of neurons available to fire during the quiescent period Q. In general, it is expected that using two signals to achieve the foregoing pulse-to-pulse amplitude variation is more readily achievable with two overlaid signals than with a single signal, at least for particular stimulation parameters (e.g., at high frequencies). Paired signals with different amplitudes can also more readily activate smaller A β fibers. In general, the signals are preferentially directed to A β fibers over C fibers. In general, the signals are also preferentially directed so as to avoid triggering a muscle response. In addition to, or in lieu of, the increased amplitude, the second signal 630b can have pulses with a second pulse width PW2 greater than the first pulse width PW1. The particular values of the signal amplitude, pulse width and/or other parameters can be selected based at least in part on patient feedback. In any of these embodiments, this arrangement can further extend the asynchronous neural response established by the initial constant pulse pattern described above.

[0036] Figure 7 is a timing diagram illustrating wave forms for two electrical signals, shown as a first electrical signal 730a and a second electrical signal 730b, having parameters selected in accordance with another embodiment of the disclosure. The two electrical signals 730a, 730b are generally similar to the corresponding first and second electrical signals 630a, 630b described above with reference to Figure 6, except that the first frequency F1 and the second frequency F2 both vary, as indicated by frequencies F1A-F1C and F2A-F2C. For example, the first frequency F1 initially increases (as pulses become closer together) and then decreases. The second frequency F2 also decreases and then increases. In a particular aspect of this embodiment, the offset or phase shift O between pulses of the first electrical signal 730a and pulses of the second electrical signal 730b remains constant despite the changes in the first and second frequencies F1, F2. In some cases, this can produce a varying pulse width PW2 for the second signal 730b. For example, the second pulse of the second signal 730b shown in Figure 7 has a reduced pulse width PW2 compared with the pulse width of either the first or third pulse, in order to fit between the second and third pulses of the first signal 730a. This arrangement can prevent the pulses of the two signals 730a, 730b from overlapping each other. One potential advantage of the varying first and second electrical signals 730a, 730b shown in Figure 7 is that this arrangement can reduce

the likelihood for the patient to develop a maladaptive response to a constant set of signals, while still producing an asynchronous patient response, with a reduced power requirement, as discussed above with reference to Figure 6.

[0037] In other embodiments, the patient can receive stimulation from more than two signals. For example, as shown in Figure 8, the patient can receive three electrical signals, shown as a first electrical signal 830a, a second electrical signal 830b, and a third electrical signal 830c. Pulses of the second electrical signal 830b can be offset from corresponding pulses of the first electrical signal 830a by a first offset O1, and pulses of the third electrical signal 830c can be offset from pulses of the second electrical signal 830b by a second offset O2. By superposing the three electrical signals, the patient can feel sensations generally similar to those described above with reference to Figures 6 or 7, with a power savings similar in principle (though perhaps not value) to those described above. In particular, the superposition of three signals may provide a smoother effect for the patient with slightly less power savings than are expected from superposing two signals.

[0038] Figure 9 is a partial schematic illustration of a representative lead body 110 coupled to a controller 101 in accordance with a particular embodiment of the disclosure. In this embodiment, the lead body 110 includes eight electrodes 112a-112h, and the controller 101 includes two channels, CH1 and CH2. A cathodal signal is applied from the first channel CH1 to the third electrode 112c, and an anodal signal is applied from the first channel CH1 to the second and fourth electrodes 112b, 112d. The second channel CH2 applies a cathodal signal to the fourth electrode 112d, and an anodal signal to the second and fifth electrodes 112b, 112e. In one aspect of this embodiment, at least one of the electrodes to which the second channel CH2 is coupled is different than the electrodes to which the first channel CH1 is coupled. Accordingly, the portion of the overall target neural population receiving the pulses from the second channel CH2 can be different than (though perhaps overlapping with) the portion of the target neural population receiving pulses from the first channel CH1. It is expected that in at least some embodiments this will increase the number of neurons at the overall target neural population that respond asynchronously. In addition to or in lieu of this effect, it is expected that the electrical field produced by the second channel CH2 will differ more significantly from that produced by the first channel CH1 when it is produced by

a different set of electrodes, which can also increase the likelihood of an asynchronous neural response. In other embodiments, signals applied to the channels can be varied in other manners, in addition to or in lieu of the foregoing arrangement, including but not limited to switching individual electrodes from cathodic to anodic or vice versa.

[0039] Figure 10 is a cross-sectional illustration of the spinal cord 191 and an adjacent vertebra 195 (based generally on information from Crossman and Neary, "Neuroanatomy," 1995 (publ. by Churchill Livingstone)), along with selected representative locations for representative lead bodies 110 (shown as lead bodies 110a-110d) in accordance with several embodiments of the disclosure. The spinal cord 191 is situated between a ventrally located vertebral body 196 and the dorsally located transverse process 198 and spinous process 197. Arrows V and D identify the ventral and dorsal directions, respectively. In particular embodiments, the vertebra 195 can be at T10 or T11 (e.g., for axial low back pain or leg pain) and in other embodiments, the lead bodies can be placed at other locations. The spinal cord itself 191 is located within the dura mater 199, which also surrounds portions of the nerves exiting the spinal cord 191, including the dorsal roots 193 and dorsal root ganglia 194. The lead body is generally positioned to preferentially stimulate tactile fibers and to avoid stimulating fibers associated with nociceptive pain transmission. In a particular embodiment, a lead body 110a can be positioned centrally in a lateral direction (e.g., aligned with the spinal cord midline 189) to provide signals directly to the spinal cord 191. In other embodiments, the lead body can be located laterally from the midline 189. For example, the lead body can be positioned just off the spinal cord midline 189 (as indicated by lead body 110b), and/or proximate to the dorsal root 193 or dorsal root entry zone 188 (e.g., 1-4 mm from the spinal cord midline 189, as indicated generally by lead body 110c), and/or proximate to the dorsal root ganglion 194 (as indicated by lead body 110d). Other suitable locations for the lead body 110 include the "gutter," also located laterally from the midline 189, and the dorsal root entry zone. In still further embodiments, the lead bodies may have other locations proximate to the spinal cord 191 and/or proximate to other target neural populations e.g., laterally from the midline 189 and medially from the dorsal root ganglion 194.

[0040] Figure 11 is a partially schematic, side elevation view of a lead body 110 configured in accordance with another embodiment of the disclosure. The lead body 110 can include a first or distal portion 111a, a second or proximal portion 111b, and an intermediate third portion 111c located between the first and second portions 111a, 111b. The first portion 111a can carry signal delivery electrodes 112, or other features configured to deliver therapeutic signals to the patient. The second portion 111b can include connection terminals 113 or other features configured to facilitate communication with the implantable pulse generator 101 (Figure 1). The third portion 111c can include a link, e.g., an electrical link 108 having multiple wires 114 that provide signal communication between the connection terminals 113 of the second portion 111b and the signal delivery electrodes 112 of the first portion 111a.

[0041] The first portion 111a can include signal delivery electrodes 112 that have an annular or ring shape and are exposed at the outer circumferential surface of the first portion 111a, as shown in Figure 11. In other embodiments, the signal delivery electrodes 112 can have other configurations, e.g., the electrodes 112 can have a flat or curved disc shape. The first portion 111a can have an overall diameter D1 which is sized to allow the first portion 111a to pass through the lumen of a delivery catheter or other delivery device. The first portion 111a can also include a first fixation device 115a to secure or at least partially secure the first portion 111a in position at a target site. In a particular embodiment, the first fixation device 115a can include one or more tines, or an annular cup that faces proximally (rightward as shown in Figure 11) to resist axial motion. In other embodiments, the first fixation device 115a can include other features.

[0042] The second portion 111b can include the connection terminals 113 described above, and can have an overall diameter D2. In a particular embodiment, the diameter D2 of the second portion of 111b can be approximately the same as the diameter D1 of the first portion of 111a. The second portion 111b can include a second fixation device 115b, for example, one or more sutures 106 that secure or at least partially secure the second portion 111b in position. Each of the first and second portions 111a, 111b can include rounded, convex external surfaces 105 (e.g., at the proximal end of the first portion 111a and/or at the distal end of the second portion 111b) that are exposed to patient tissue and, due to the rounded shapes of these surfaces, facilitate moving the lead body 110 in the patient's body.

The third portion 111c can have a diameter D3 that is less than the diameters D1, D2 of the first and second portions 111a, 111b, and a stiffness less than a stiffness of the first and second portions 111a, 111b. Accordingly, the third portion 111c can be flexible enough to allow the second portion 111b to move without disturbing the position of the first portion 111a. Further details of the lead body 110 shown in Figure 11 are included in pending U.S. Patent Application No. 12/129,078, filed May 29, 2008 and incorporated herein by reference.

[0043] Figure 12 is a cross-sectional illustration of the spinal cord 191 and an adjacent vertebra 195 along with selected representative locations for representative lead bodies 110 generally similar to those described above with reference to Figure 11 and shown in Figure 12 as lead bodies 110a-110d. In each of the foregoing representative locations, the first portion 111a of the lead body 110 can be positioned epidurally (or subdurally) proximate to a target neural population at the spinal cord 191 while the second portion 111b is positioned radially outwardly from the spinal cord 191, and while the third portion 111c provides a flexible coupling between the first and second portions. The first portion 111a can be positioned relative to the spinal cord 191 at locations generally similar to those described above with reference to Figure 10.

[0044] In a particular embodiment, the practitioner can use an automated (e.g., computer-implemented) or semi-automated feedback technique to select the particular frequency or frequencies of signals applied to a patient. In one aspect of this embodiment, treatment leads can be placed at any of the locations shown in Figures 10 or 12 in the patient's lower back region, for example, at T10. The practitioner can also outfit the patient with one or more diagnostic leads (e.g., epidural recording leads) located at the gutter, but at a superior position along the spine. For example, the practitioner can position two epidural recording leads in the gutter, one on each side of the midline, at a cervical location. The diagnostic leads are not expected to discriminate between action potentials from individual neurons, but rather can record an overall action potential sum. At low stimulation frequencies, in response to which the neuron population generates synchronous action potentials, the recorded signal strength of the compound action potential is expected to be higher than when the patient produces asynchronous responses at higher frequencies, in which the recorded signal will have a lower signal strength indicating

fewer additive action potentials. Accordingly, in one embodiment, the practitioner can increase the frequency of the signals applied to the treatment leads, while observing the amplitude of the summed compound action potential response recorded by the recording leads. When the detected response decreases, this can indicate to the practitioner that the patient is generating asynchronous action potentials. This information can be used alone or in combination with a patient response to select a longer term stimulation frequency. In a particular embodiment, the practitioner can start at a low frequency (e.g., about 40 Hz) and, using an automated program, increase the frequency of the stimulation applied to the patient up to a level of about 10,000 Hz. The program can then automatically decrease the frequency in accordance with one or more set increments until the detected response increases to or changes by a threshold level (which the program can detect automatically), and/or the patient indicates a change. The patient's reported change may include an indication that the patient's perceived sensation is no longer smooth and is instead rough, or otherwise less desirable

[0045] In other embodiments, other aspects of the foregoing operation can be automated. For example, the system can automatically identify a baseline signal strength corresponding to a synchronous response. In a particular embodiment, the baseline signal strength can be the signal strength recorded when the patient is stimulated at 40 Hz or another low frequency. As the system automatically increases the stimulation frequency to identify an appropriate frequency for eliciting an asynchronous response, it compares the recorded signal strengths with the baseline level. If the recorded signal strength is equal to or higher than the baseline level, the patient response is identified as a synchronous response. If the recorded signal strength is lower than the baseline level, then the patient response is identified as asynchronous or transitioning to asynchronous. At this point, the system can automatically vary the frequency (increasing and/or decreasing) in a closed loop manner to identify a target frequency (e.g., an optimum frequency) that the patient will receive during therapy. In a particular embodiment, the target frequency is the frequency that produces the most asynchronous patient response.

[0046] One feature of many of the foregoing embodiments described above is the application of one or more electrical signals to the patient's neural tissue that produce an asynchronous response. As described above, it is expected that an

asynchronous response will produce a smoother or otherwise more pleasant patient sensation than standard spinal cord stimulation, while still masking or otherwise beneficially altering pain signals. In addition, particular embodiments are expected to reduce power consumption by providing intermittent or otherwise spaced-apart signals that are nevertheless timed to trigger an asynchronous patient response. By reducing the power consumption of the device, these embodiments can decrease the frequency with which the patient recharges the implanted stimulator, and/or decrease the frequency with which a non-rechargeable battery within the implanted stimulation must be replaced. The intermittent signal may also produce other patient benefits, possibly including an increase in the term over which the therapy is effective.

[0047] From the foregoing, it will be appreciated that specific embodiments of the disclosure have been described herein for purposes of illustration, but that various modifications may be made without deviating from the invention. For example, the wave forms of the electrical signals applied to the patient may have characteristics other than those specifically shown and described above. In a particular example, the wave forms may include pulses other than square wave pulses. In other embodiments, the leads or other signal delivery devices may have configurations other than those specifically shown and described above. Furthermore, while certain embodiments were described in the context of spinal cord stimulation, generally similar techniques may be applied to other neural populations in other embodiments using similar and/or modified devices. For example, stimulation signals selected to produce an asynchronous patient response can be applied subcutaneously to peripheral nerves. Such nerves can include occipital nerves, which can be stimulated to address headaches and/or facial and/or neck pain, and/or peripheral nerves at the lower back to address lower back pain. In still further embodiments, the stimulation signals can be applied to neural populations to produce an asynchronous response that addresses patient conditions other than pain. In another embodiment, such signals can be applied to the autonomic nervous system, e.g., to the splenic nerve to address obesity. In any of the foregoing cases, the refractory periods and threshold frequencies may differ from those associated with spinal cord stimulation, but the methodologies used to select the target stimulation frequency can be generally the same or similar.

[0048] Certain aspects of the invention described in the context of particular embodiments may be combined or eliminated in other embodiments. For example, a given signal delivery protocol may include different signals at different times during a treatment regimen, with the signals having characteristics generally similar to any of those described above with reference to Figures 4 and 6-8. Characteristics of particular signals (e.g., the first signal) may be applied to other signals (e.g., the second signal, and/or a continuous pulse stream, such as that shown in Figure 4). Further, while advantages associated with certain embodiments have been described in the context of those embodiments, other embodiments may also exhibit such advantages. Not all embodiments need necessarily exhibit such advantages to fall within the scope of the present disclosure. Accordingly, the invention can include other embodiments not specifically shown or described above.

[0049] Throughout this specification and the claims which follow, unless the context requires otherwise, the word "comprise", and variations such as "comprises" and "comprising", will be understood to imply the inclusion of a stated integer or step or group of integers or steps but not the exclusion of any other integer or step or group of integers or steps.

[0050] The reference to any prior art in this specification is not, and should not be taken as, an acknowledgement or any form of suggestion that the prior art forms part of the common general knowledge in Australia.

CLAIMS

1. A therapy system for treating a patient's pain, comprising:
a signal delivery element positionable to deliver an electrical stimulation signal to a target neural population of the patient;
a pulse generator coupleable to the signal delivery element to transmit the electrical stimulation signal to the signal delivery element; and
a machine-readable medium containing instructions that, when executed, cause the pulse generator to transmit the electrical stimulation signal to neurons of the target neural population via the signal delivery element, wherein the electrical stimulation signal is selected to have a target stimulation frequency that is above a threshold frequency that corresponds to a refractory period for individual neurons of the target neural population, and wherein the target stimulation frequency is in a range of from about 3 kHz to about 10 kHz.
2. The therapy system of claim 1 wherein the electrical stimulation signal comprises a first set of pulses interleaved with a second set of pulses, and wherein the frequency of the first set of pulses is less than the threshold frequency, the frequency of the second set of pulses is less than the threshold frequency, and the frequency of the first set of pulses and the second set of pulses combined is greater than the threshold frequency.
3. The therapy system of claim 2 wherein individual pulses of the first set of pulses are spaced apart from individual pulses of the second set of pulses.
4. The therapy system of claim 1 wherein the electrical stimulation signal includes a continuous string of biphasic, paired pulses, wherein individual

paired pulses correspond to an individual cycle, and wherein individual cycles immediately follow corresponding preceding individual cycles.

5. The therapy system of claim 1 wherein the electrical stimulation signal includes:

a first pulse pattern having a continuous string of biphasic, paired pulses;
and

a second pulse pattern having a plurality of sets of interleaved pulses, wherein individual sets of pulses have a frequency that is less than the threshold frequency, and wherein the instructions, when executed, apply the first pulse pattern for a predetermined time period and subsequently apply the second pulse pattern.

6. A therapy system for treating a patient's pain, comprising:

an implantable lead having at least one electrode, wherein the lead is positionable to deliver an electrical stimulation signal to a target neural population of the patient, wherein the target neural population includes multiple neurons, and wherein individual neurons have a refractory period;

an implantable pulse generator coupleable to the implantable lead to transmit the electrical stimulation signal to the implantable lead;
and

a machine-readable medium containing instructions that, when executed, cause the pulse generator to transmit the electrical stimulation signal to the target neural population via the implantable lead, wherein the electrical stimulation signal is selected to have a target frequency that is greater than a threshold frequency corresponding to the refractory period, and wherein the target frequency is in a range of from about 3 kHz to about 10 kHz.

7. The therapy system of claim 6 wherein the electrical stimulation signal comprises a plurality of sets of interleaved pulses, wherein each individual set of pulses has a frequency that is less than the threshold frequency.

8. The therapy system of claim 7 wherein the electrical stimulation signal includes a quiescent period having no pulses, and wherein the quiescent period is less than the refractory period.

9. The therapy system of claim 5 wherein the electrical stimulation signal comprises a plurality of biphasic, charge-balanced, paired pulses, wherein individual neighboring pulses correspond to a cycle, and wherein individual cycles immediately follow corresponding preceding individual cycles.

10. A method for treating a patient's pain, comprising:
selecting a frequency for a stimulation signal based at least in part on a threshold frequency corresponding to a refractory period for neurons of a target neural population, wherein the frequency is in a range of from about 3 kHz to about 10 kHz; and
programming a therapy system to direct the stimulation signal to the target neural population to produce an asynchronous sensory neuron response.

11. The method of claim 10, further comprising:
identifying lower back pain in the patient; and
positioning a lead having a plurality of electrodes proximate to the T10 or T11 vertebra to deliver the stimulation signal.

12. The method of claim 10 wherein programming the therapy system to direct the stimulation signal to the target neural population includes programming the therapy system to direct a constant frequency stimulation signal.

13. The method of claim 10 wherein programming the therapy system to direct the stimulation signal to the target neural population includes programming the therapy system to direct a plurality of sets of pulses to the target neural population, and wherein each individual set of pulses has a frequency that is less than the threshold frequency, and wherein a frequency of the plurality of sets of pulses combined is greater than the threshold frequency.

14. The method of claim 10 wherein programming the therapy system to direct the stimulation signal to the target neural population includes programming the therapy system to direct a first pulse pattern to the target neural population for a predetermined time period and subsequently direct a second pulse pattern to the target neural population, wherein the first pulse pattern includes a continuous string of biphasic, paired pulses, wherein the second pulse pattern includes a plurality of sets of interleaved pulses, and wherein individual sets of pulses have a frequency that is less than the threshold frequency.

15. The method of claim 10 wherein selecting a frequency for a stimulation signal includes selecting a frequency that is at least twice the threshold frequency.

16. The method of claim 10 wherein programming the therapy system to direct the stimulation signal to the target neural population includes programming the therapy system to direct a pulse pattern to the target neural population, the pulse pattern having a quiescent period with no pulses, and wherein the quiescent period is less than the refractory period.

17. The method of claim 10 wherein programming the therapy system to direct the stimulation signal to the target neural population includes:

programming the therapy system to direct a first pulse pattern to the target neural population to initiate the asynchronous sensory neuron response; and

programming the therapy system to direct a second pulse pattern, different from the first pulse pattern, to the target neural population to extend the duration of the asynchronous sensory neuron response.

18. The method of claim 10 wherein programming the therapy system to direct the stimulation signal to the target neural population includes programming the therapy system to direct a pulse pattern to the target neural population, the pulse

pattern having a plurality of sets of interleaved pulses, and wherein the period between any neighboring pulses is less than the refractory period.

19. The method of claim 10, further comprising programming the therapy system to vary the frequency of the stimulation signal to decrease power usage while extending the asynchronous sensory response.

20. The method of claim 10, further comprising selecting a pulse pattern for the stimulation signal to reduce power consumption, wherein the pulse pattern includes a quiescent period.

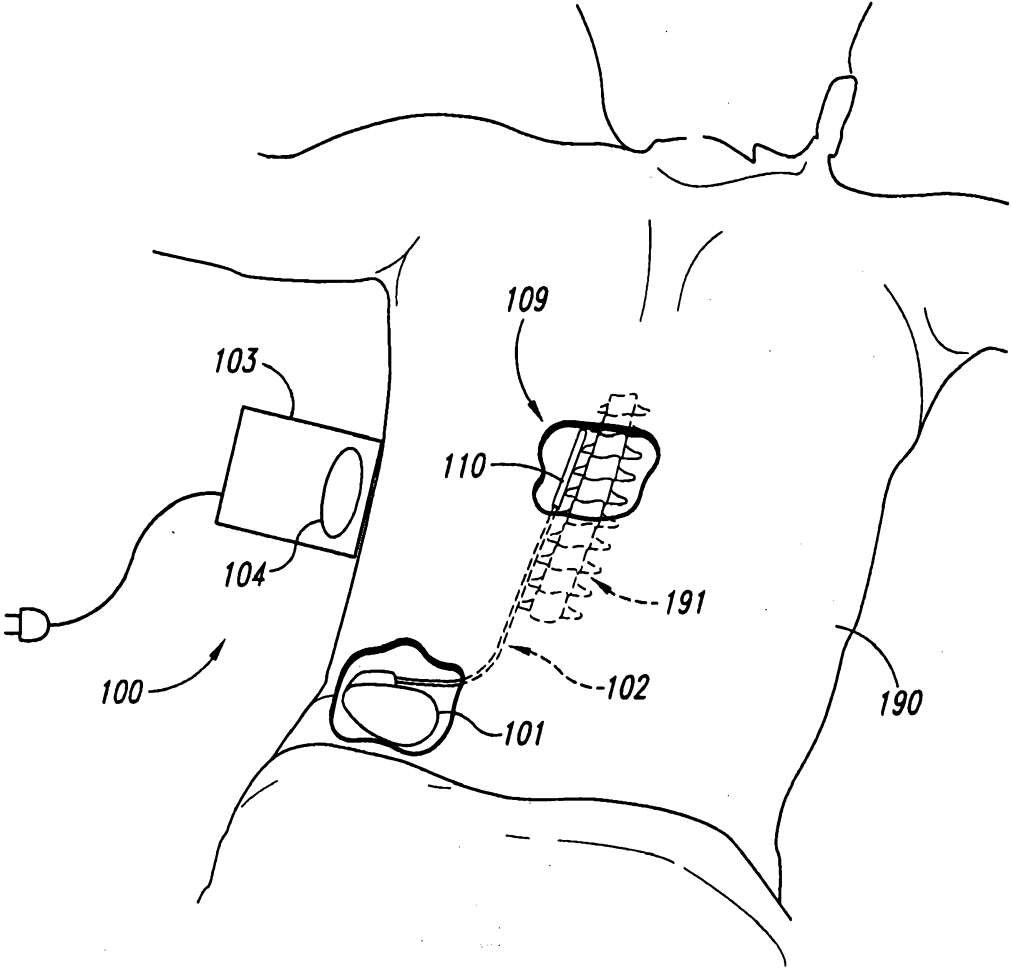


Fig. 1

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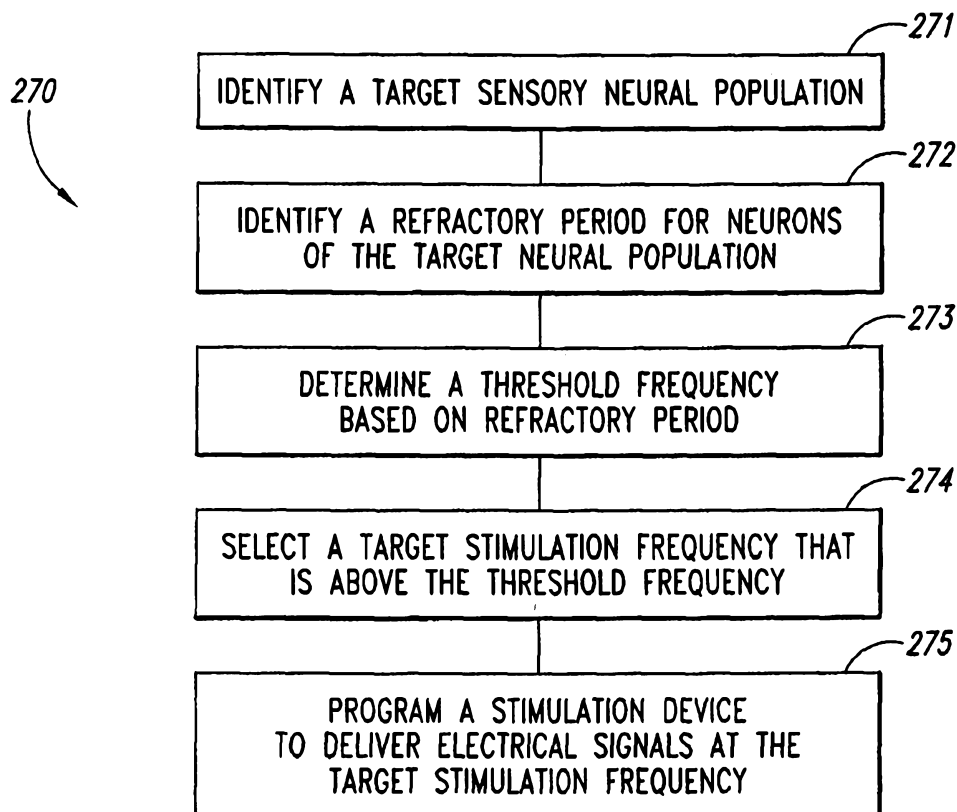


Fig. 2

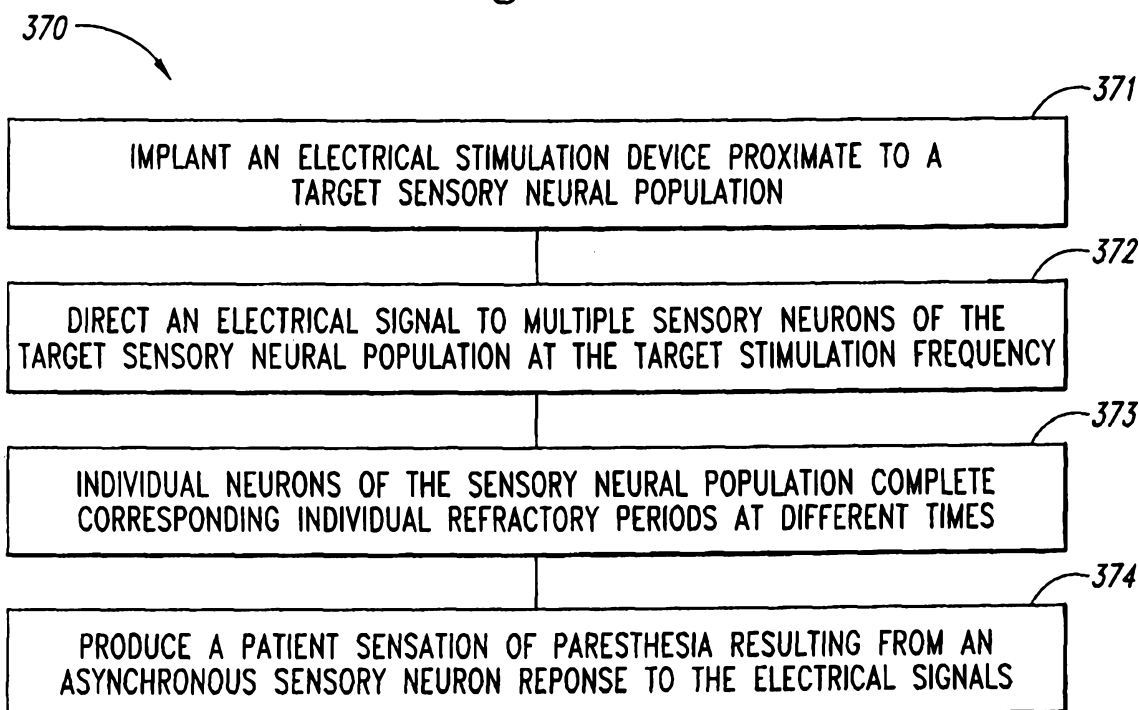


Fig. 3

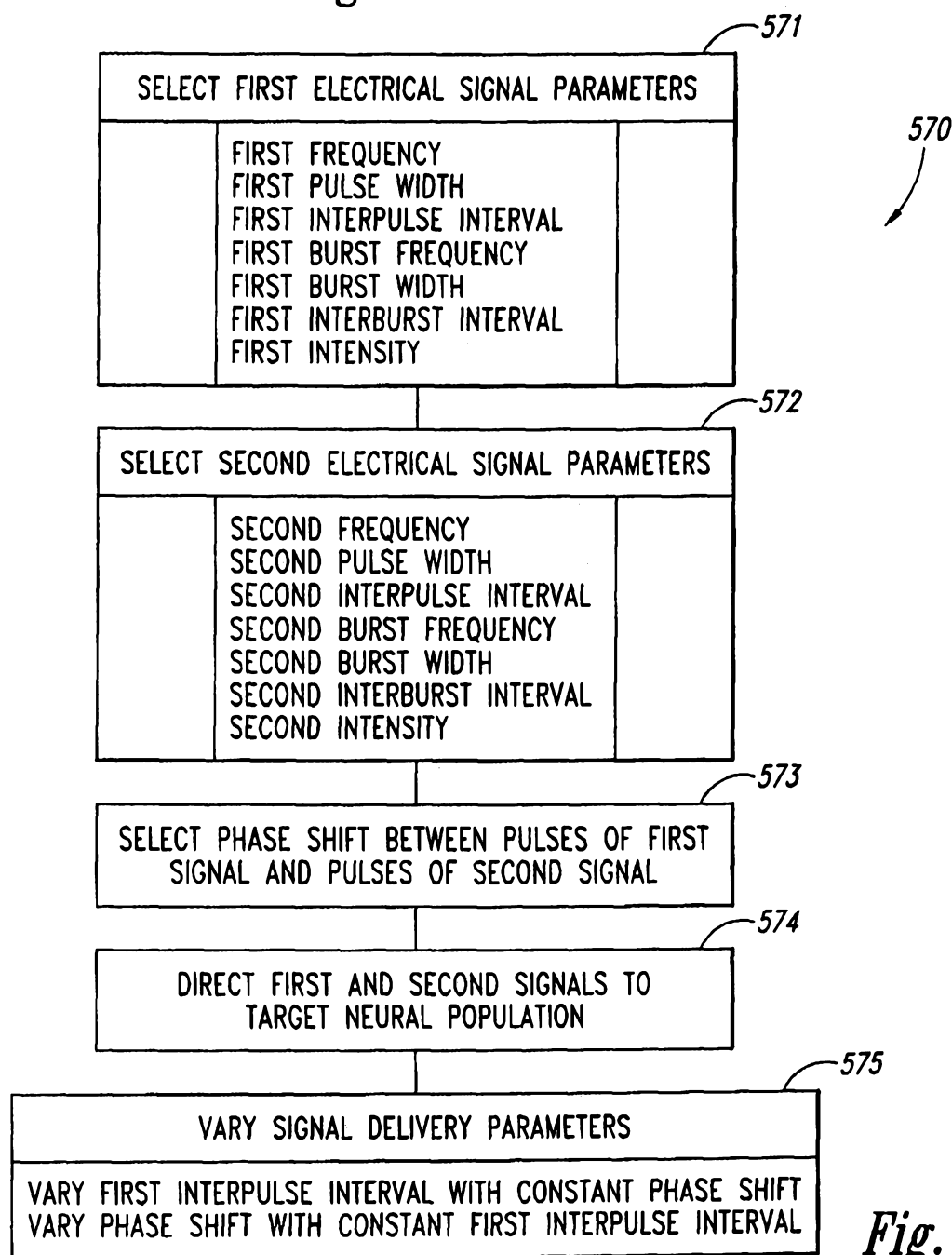
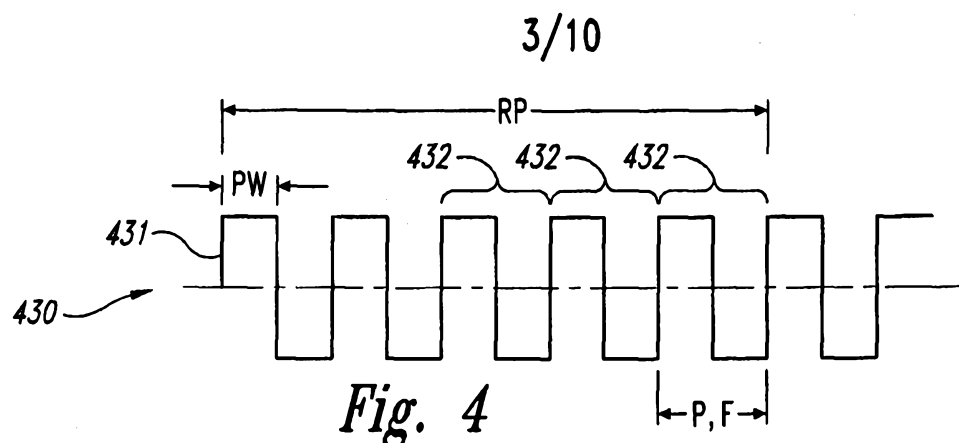
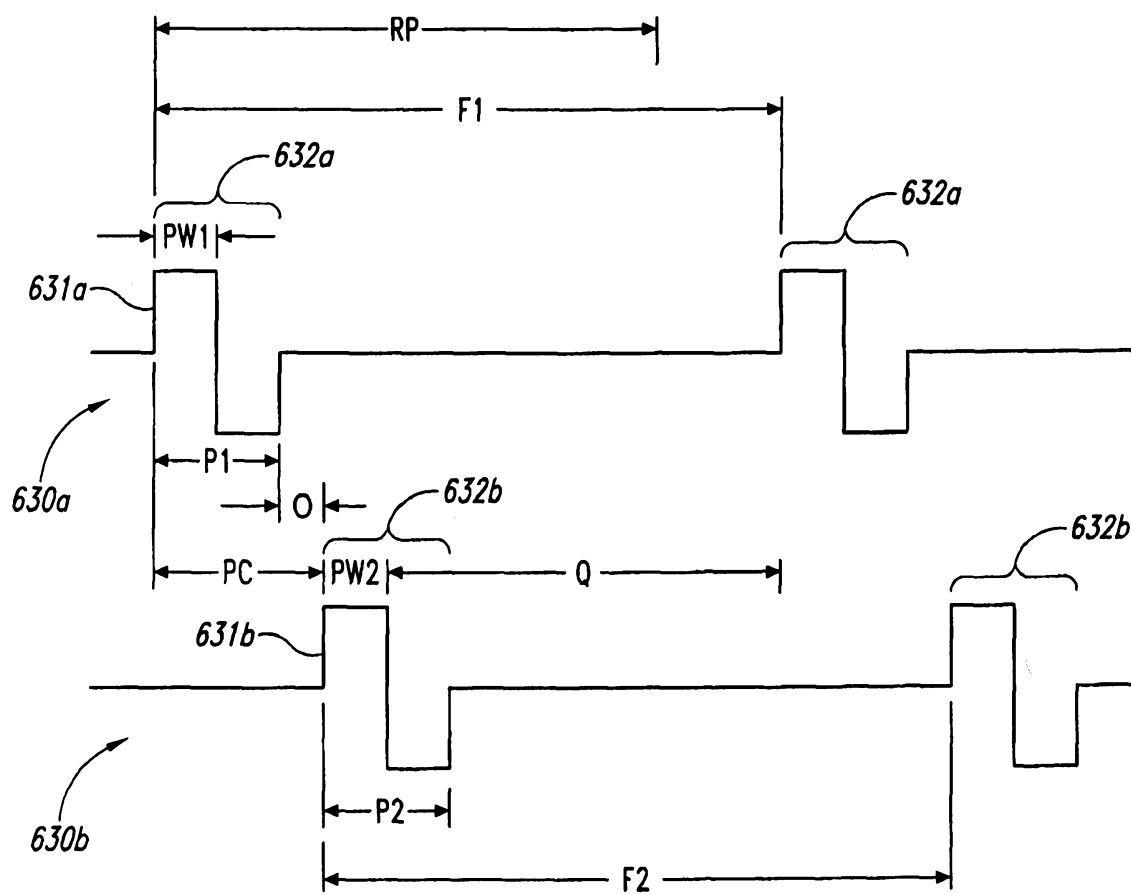


Fig. 5

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*Fig. 6*

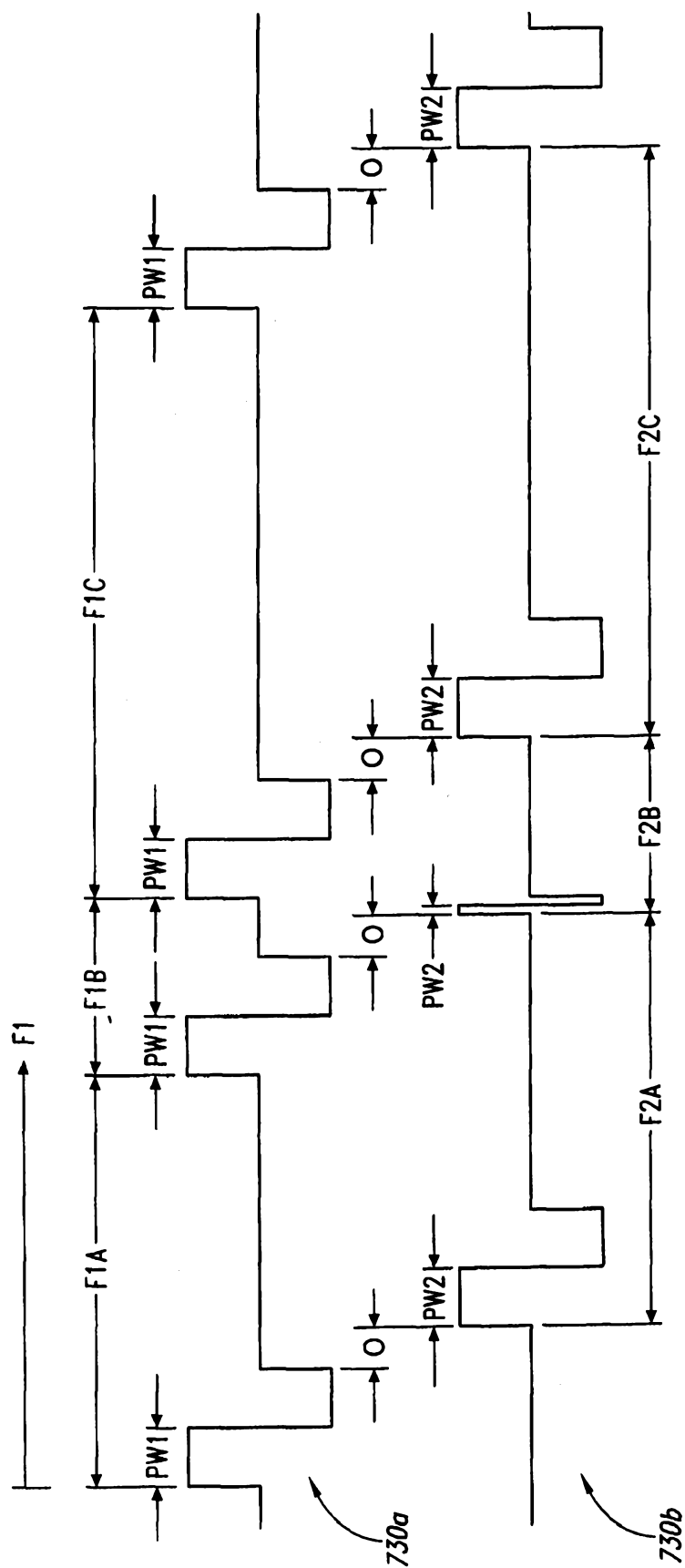


Fig. 7

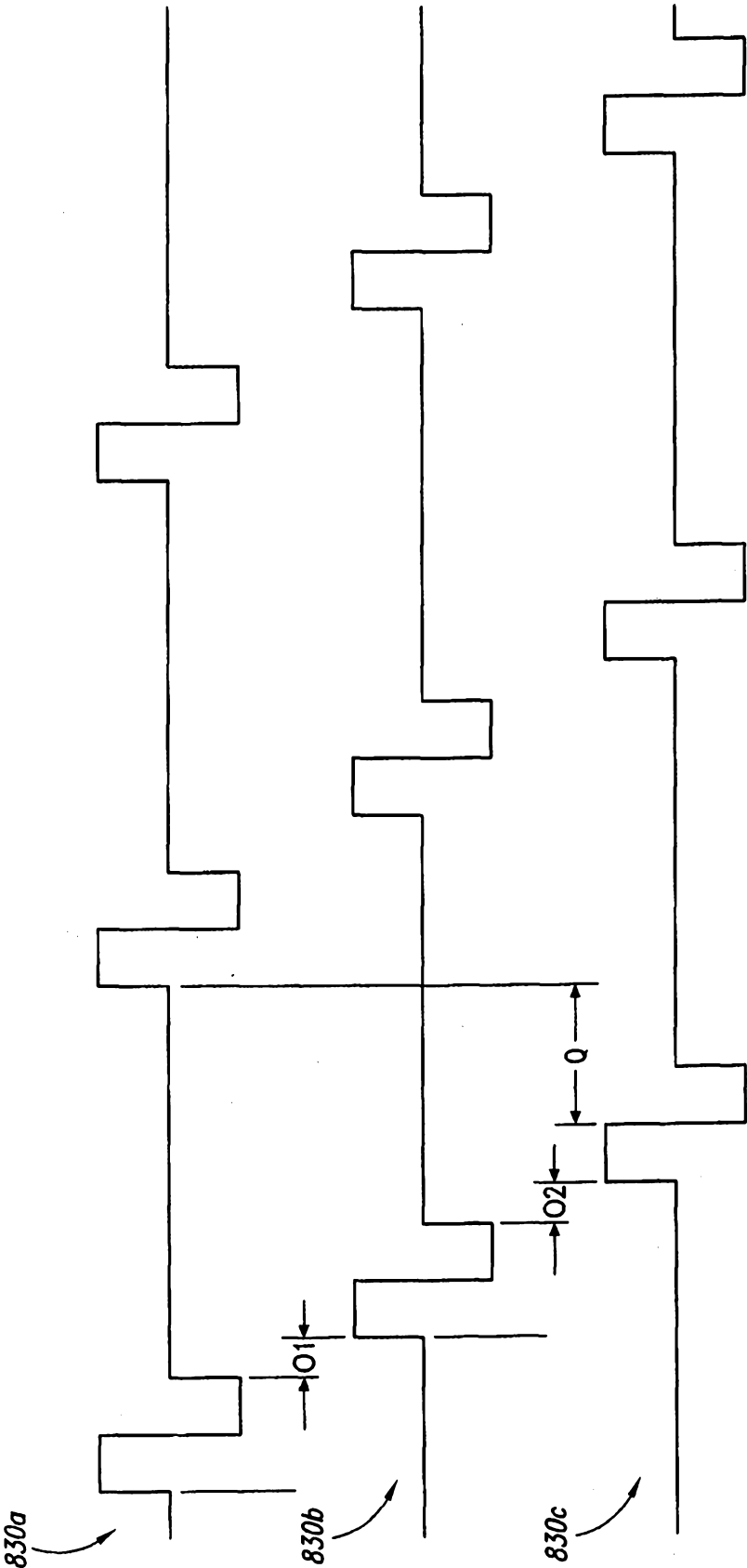
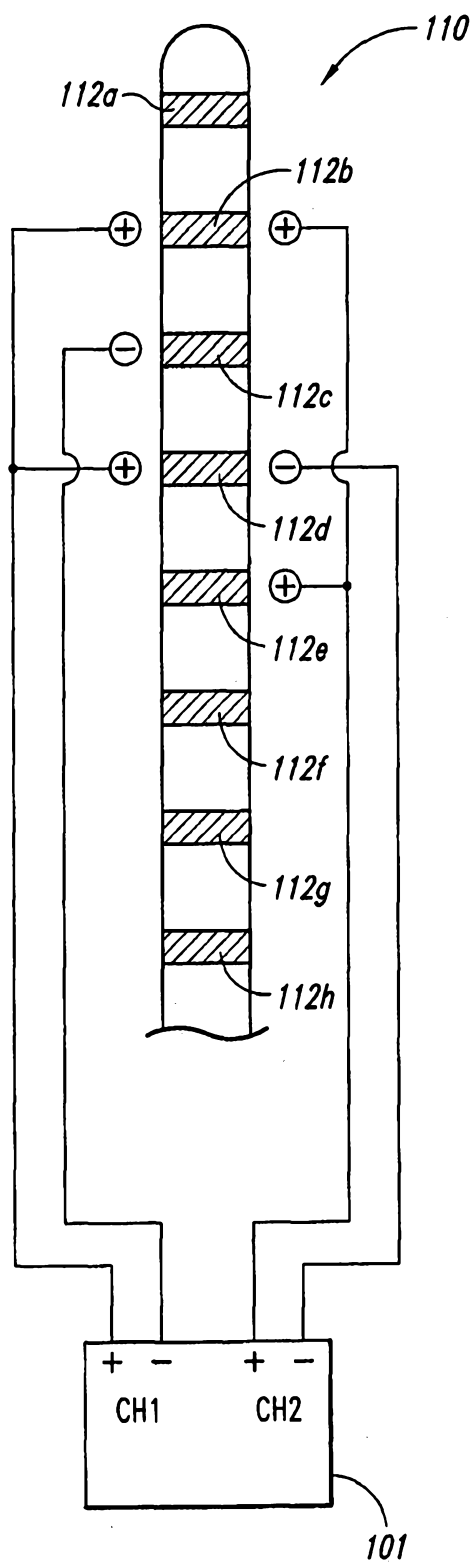


Fig. 8

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*Fig. 9*

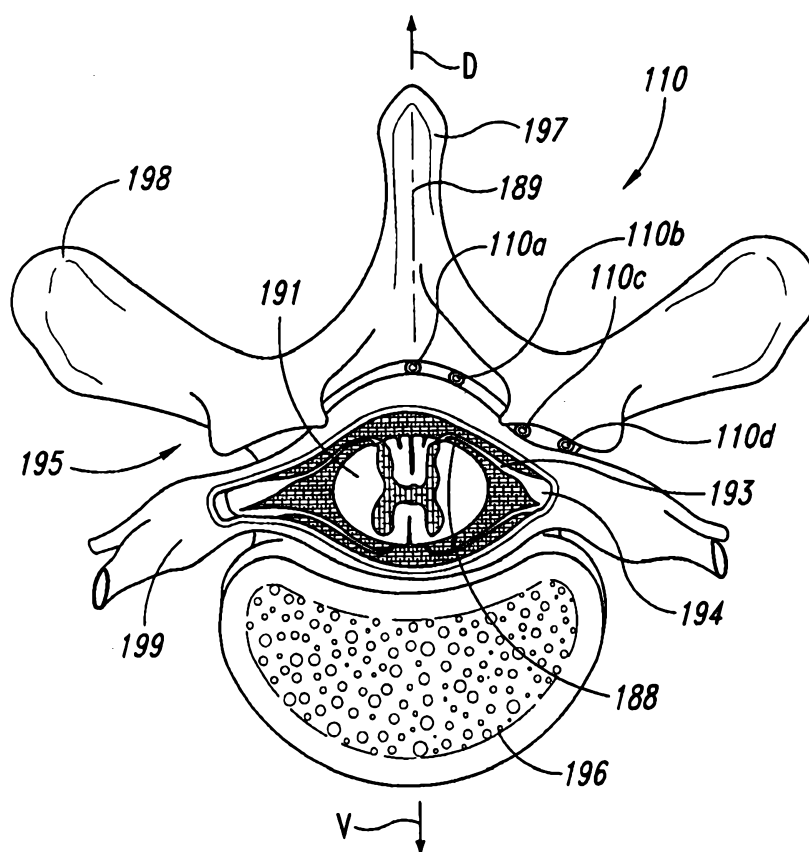


Fig. 10

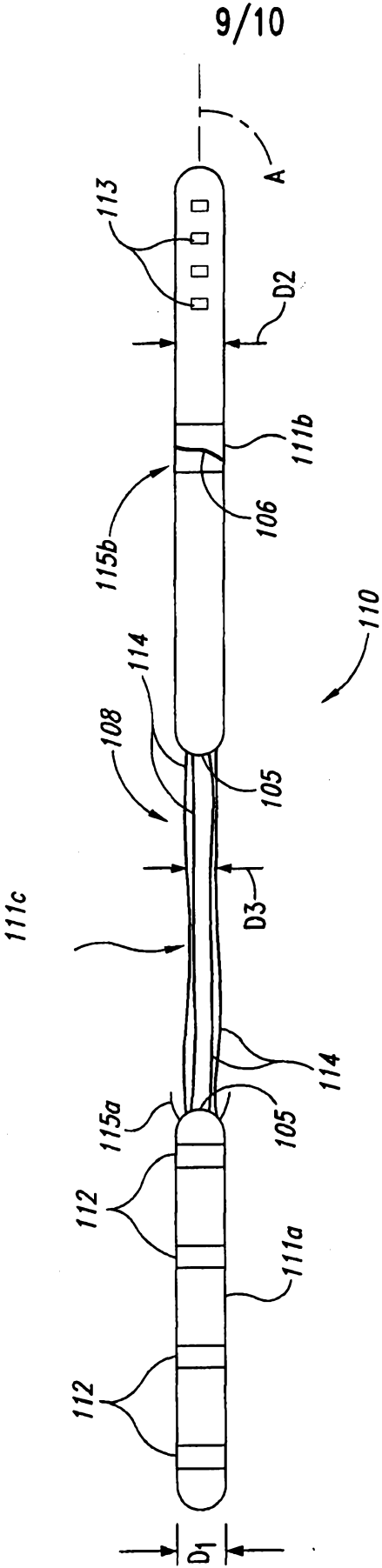


Fig. 11

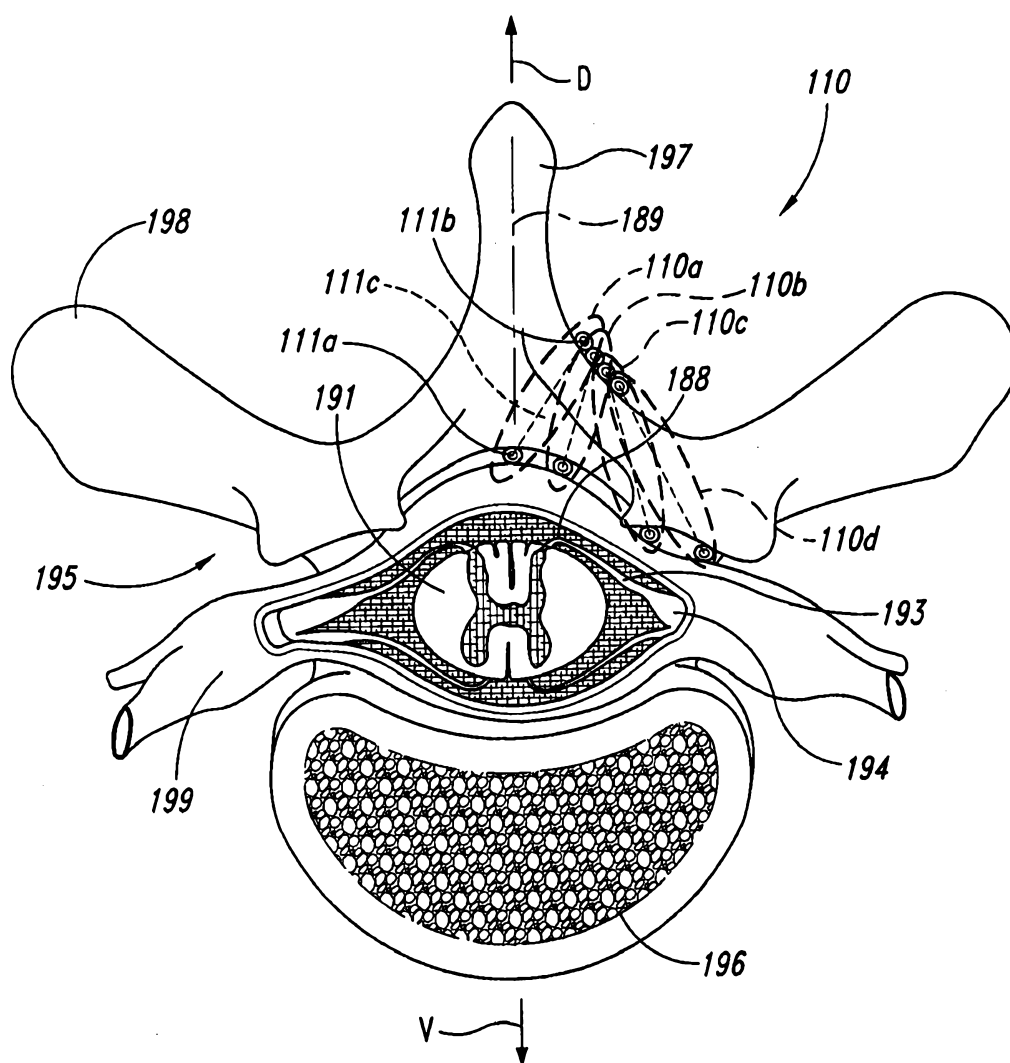


Fig. 12