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(54) **ABLATION APPARATUS AND SYSTEM TO LIMIT NERVE CONDUCTION**

Related U.S. Application Data

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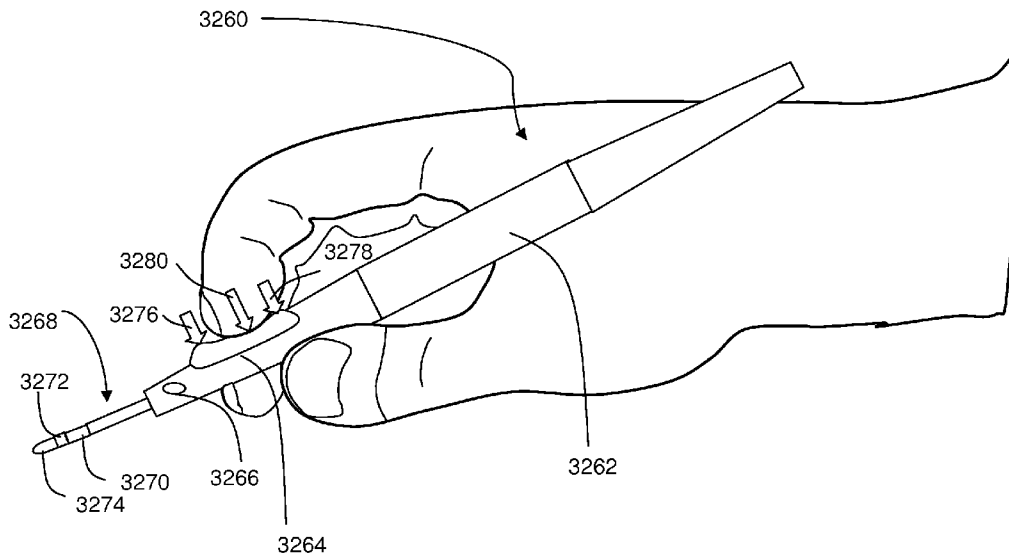
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method of managing a system of minimally invasive surgery. The management method includes providing a practitioner with a minimally invasive surgery system including a controller. One or more use parameters is stored to memory associated with the controller. In addition, an electro-surgical probe having its own memory is provided to mate with the remaining elements of the system. Complementary use parameters are stored in the memory of the probe. The management method also includes communicating and comparing the use parameters of the controller with the complementary use parameters of the probe and managing the use of the electro-surgical probe according to the use parameters.

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(21) Appl. No.: **11/559,232**

(22) Filed: **Nov. 13, 2006**



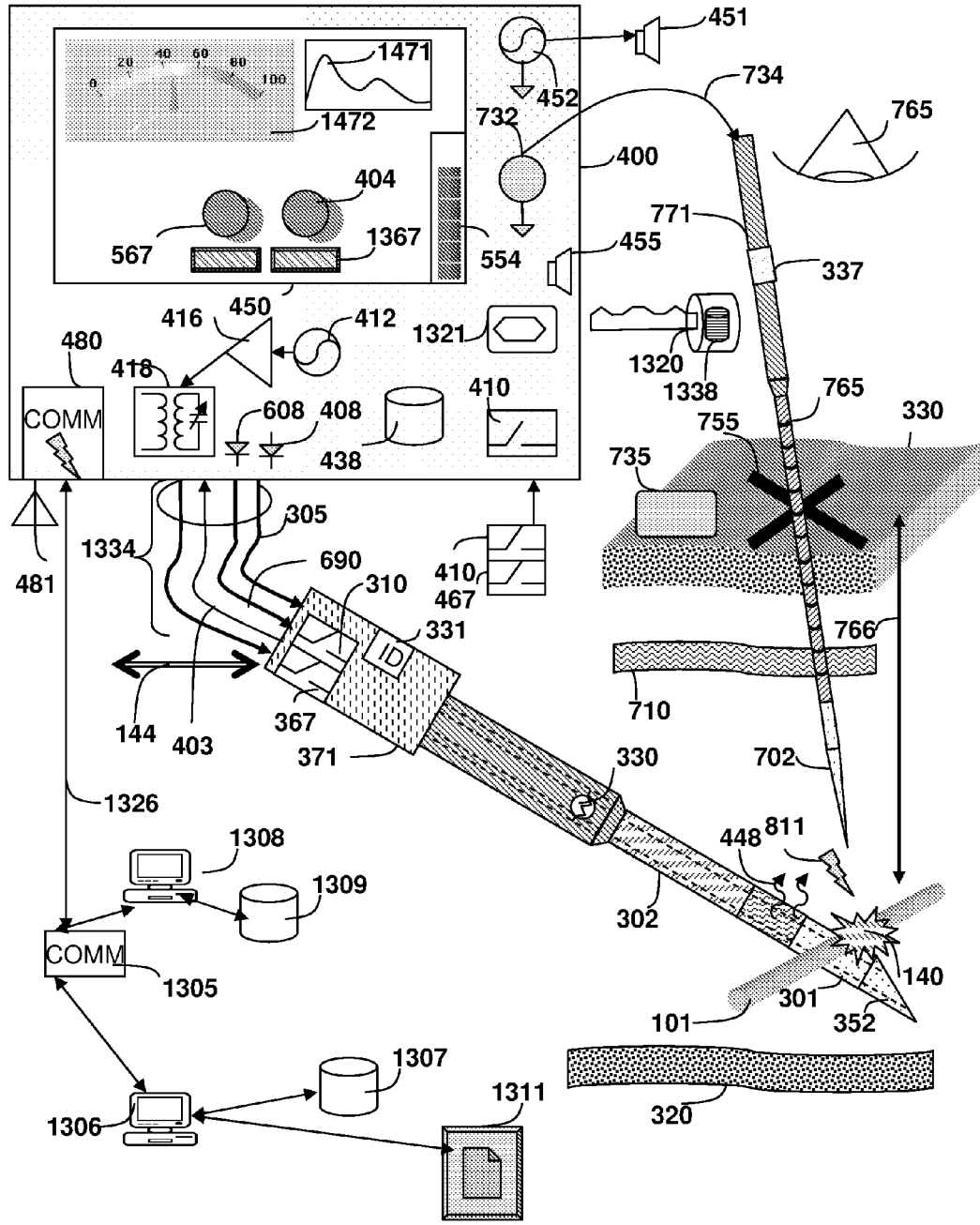


FIG. 1

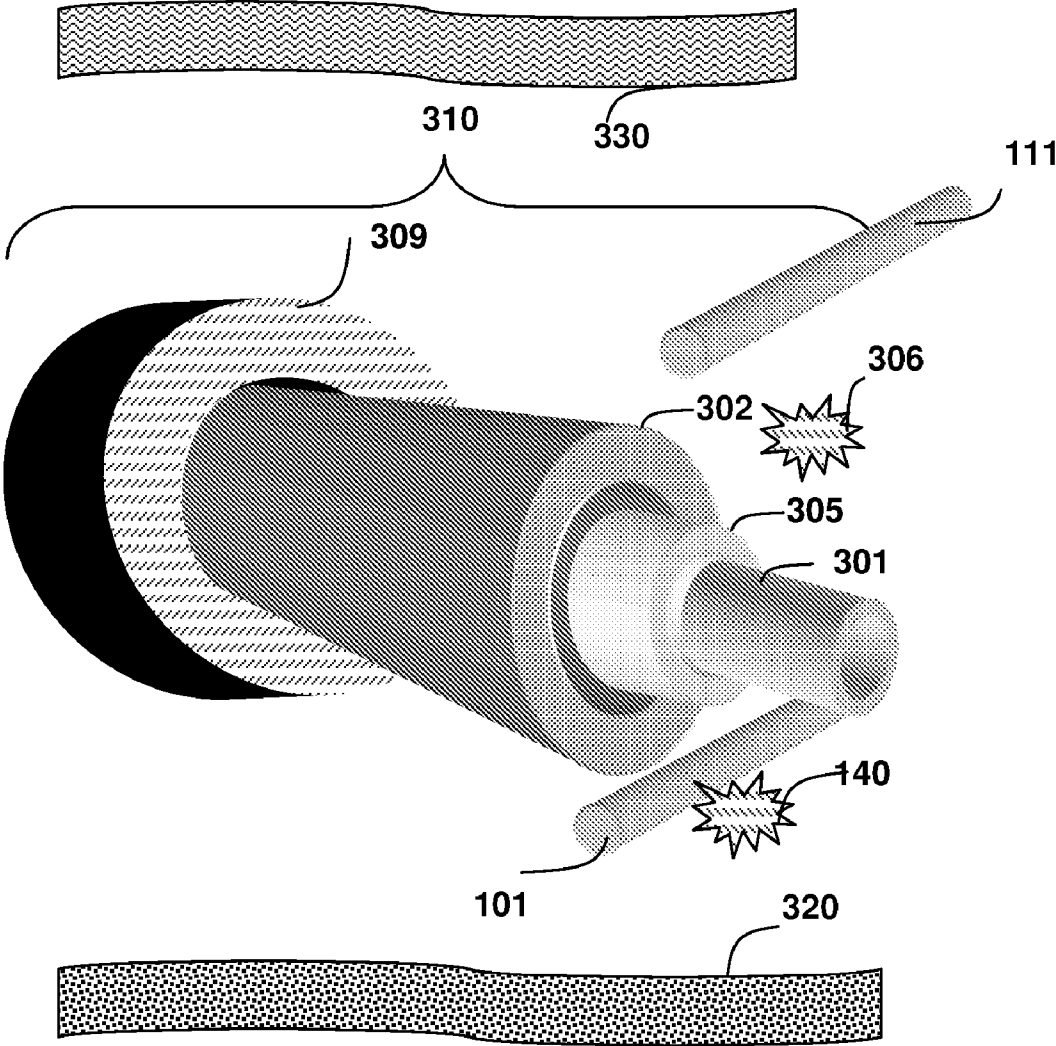


FIG. 2

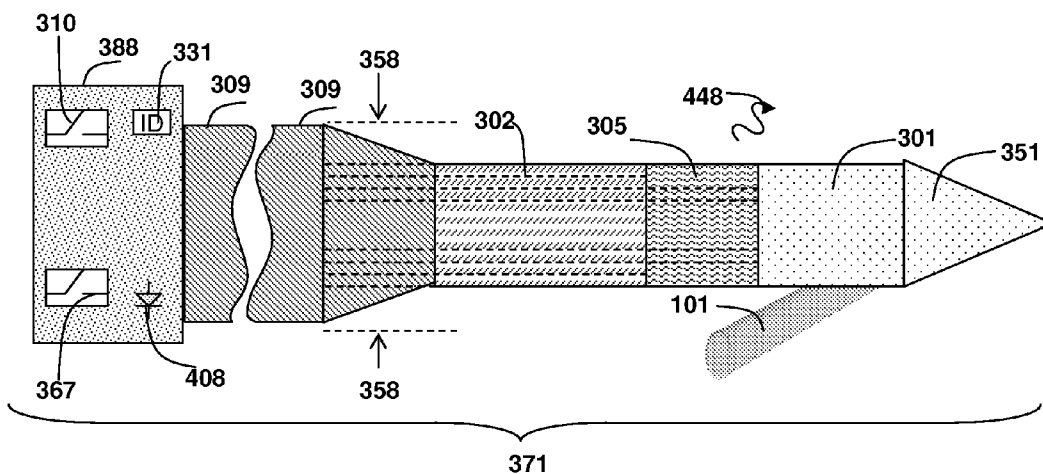


FIG. 3A

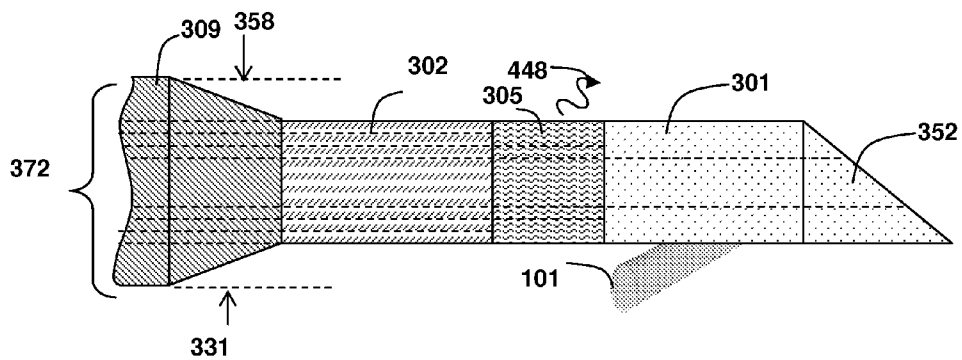


FIG. 3B

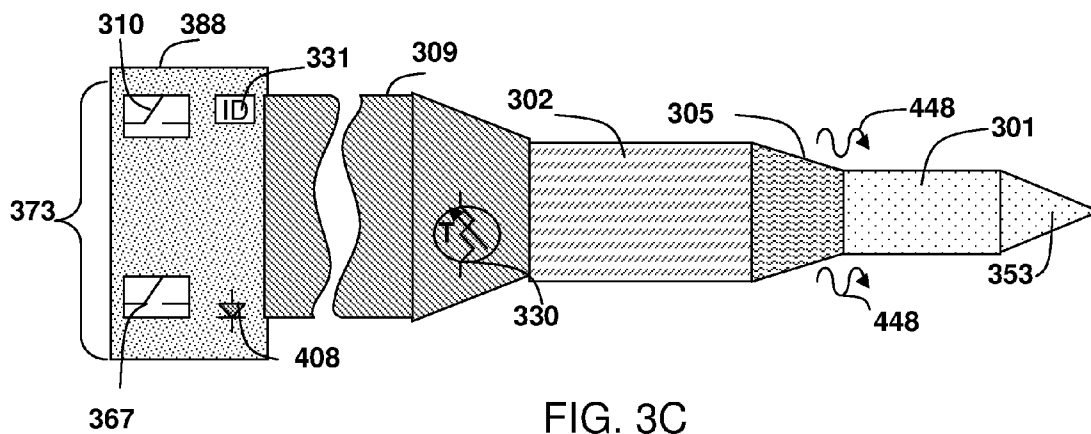


FIG. 3C

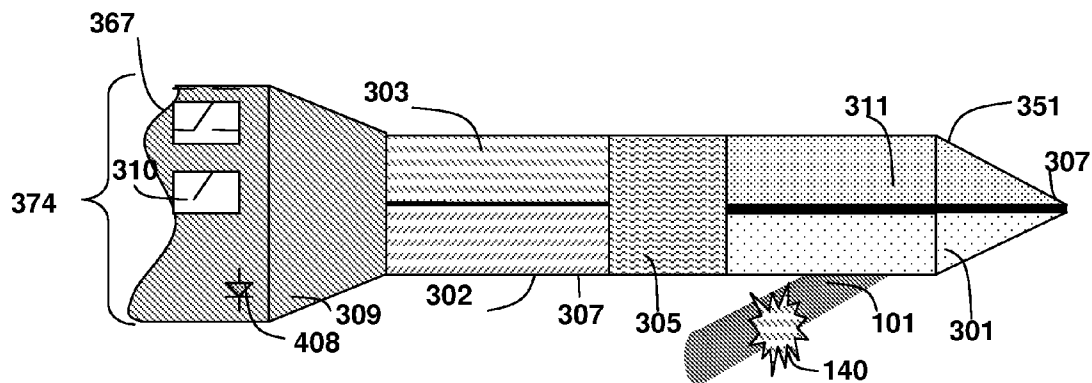


FIG. 3D

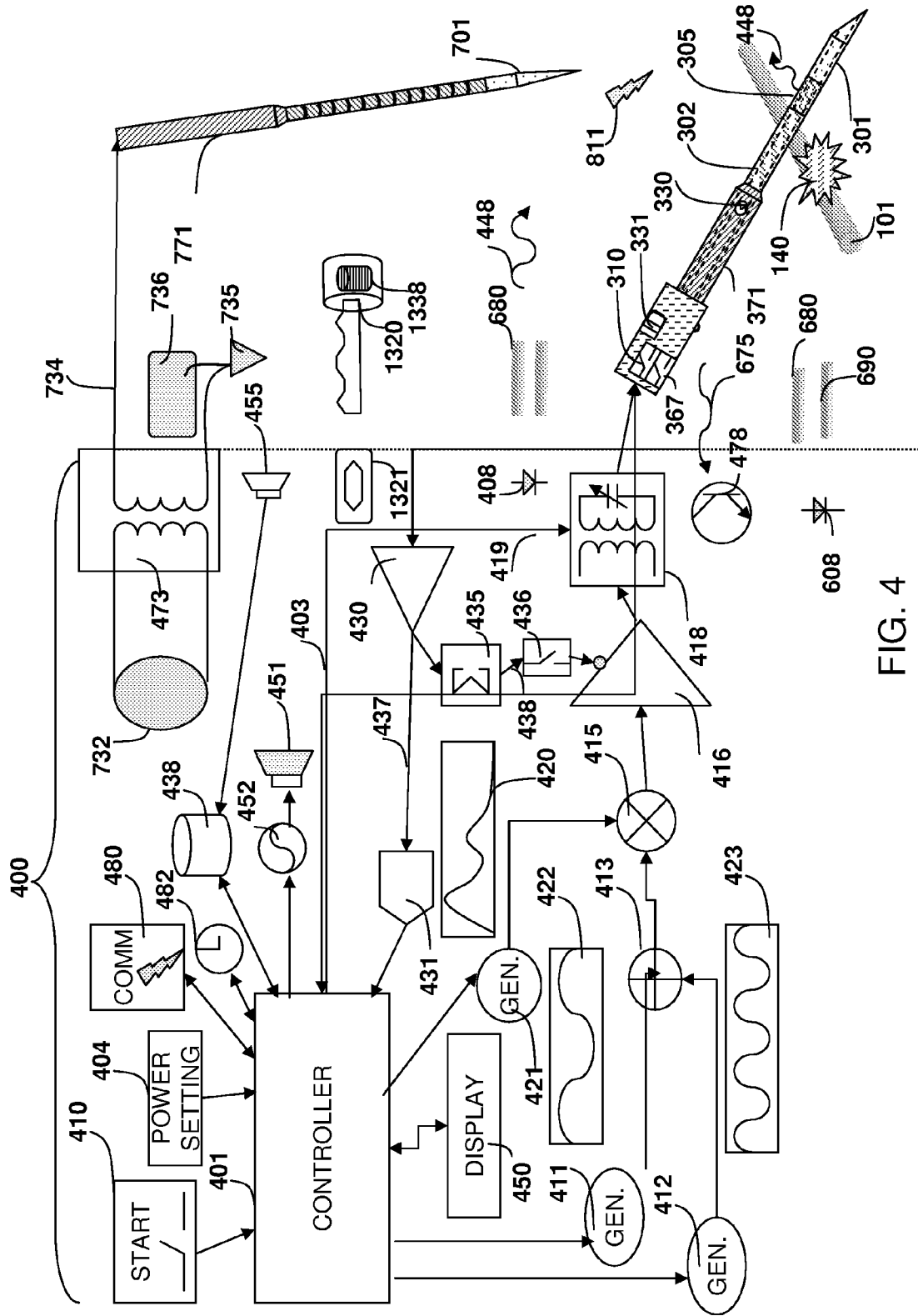


FIG. 4

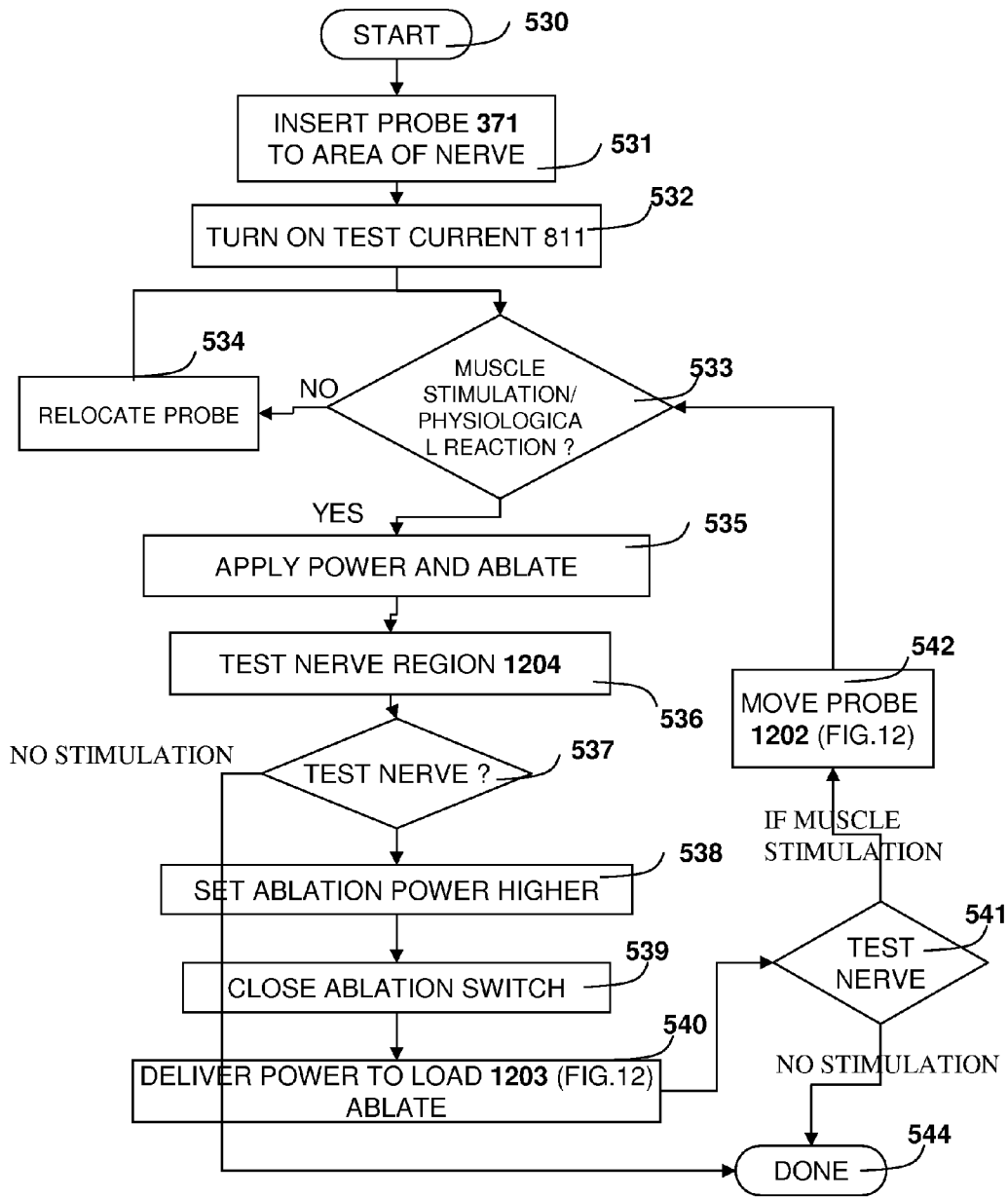


FIG. 5A

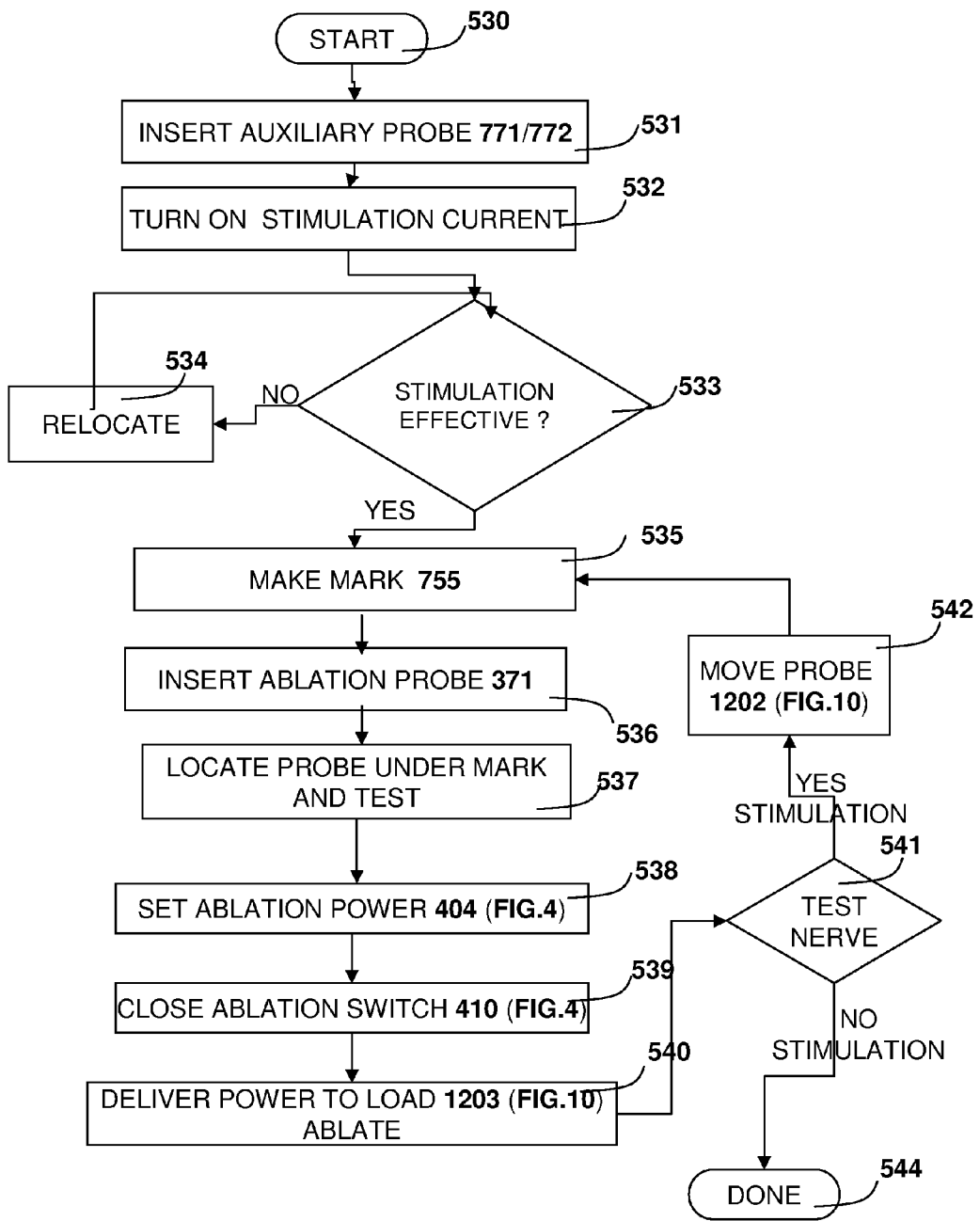


FIG. 5B

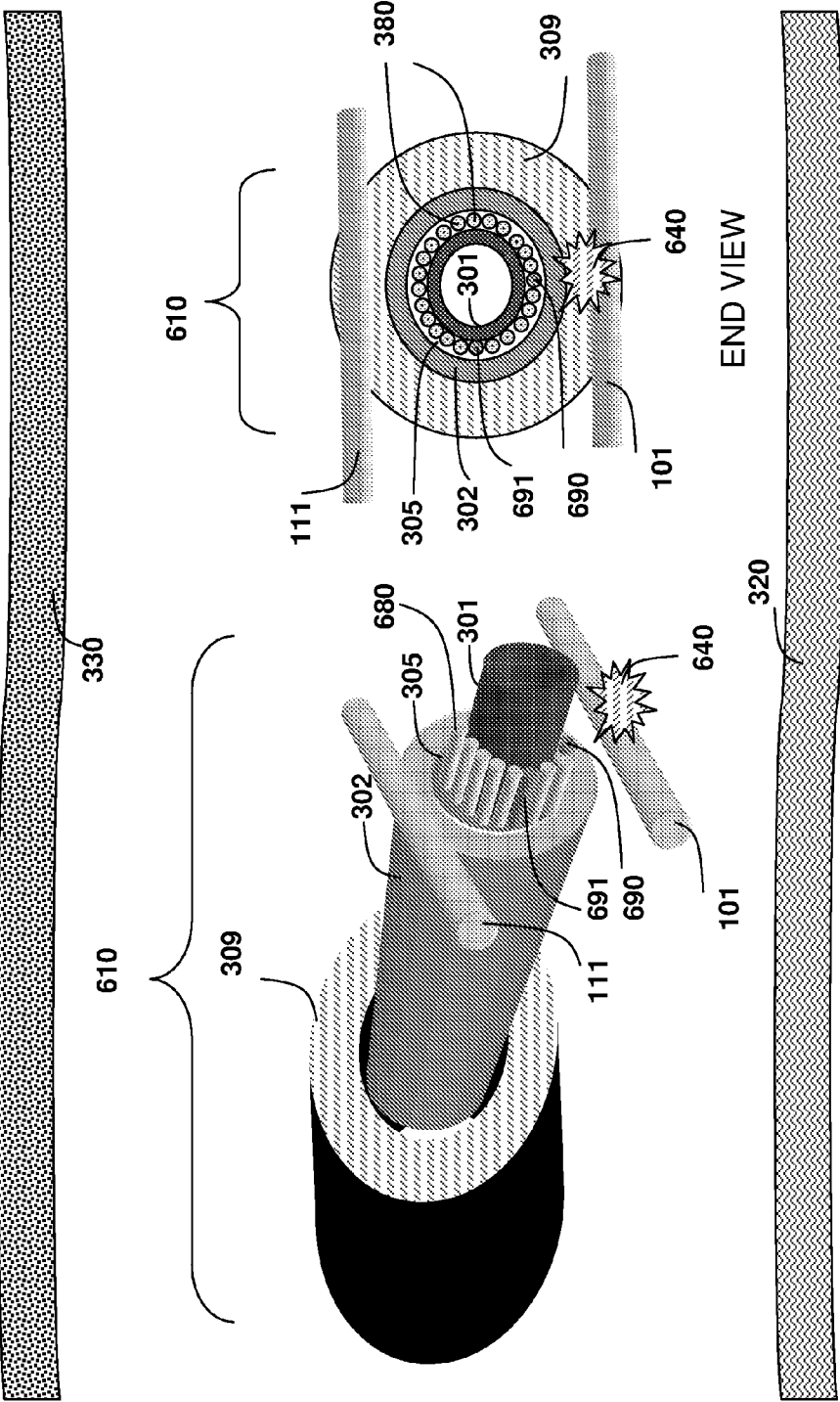


FIG. 6

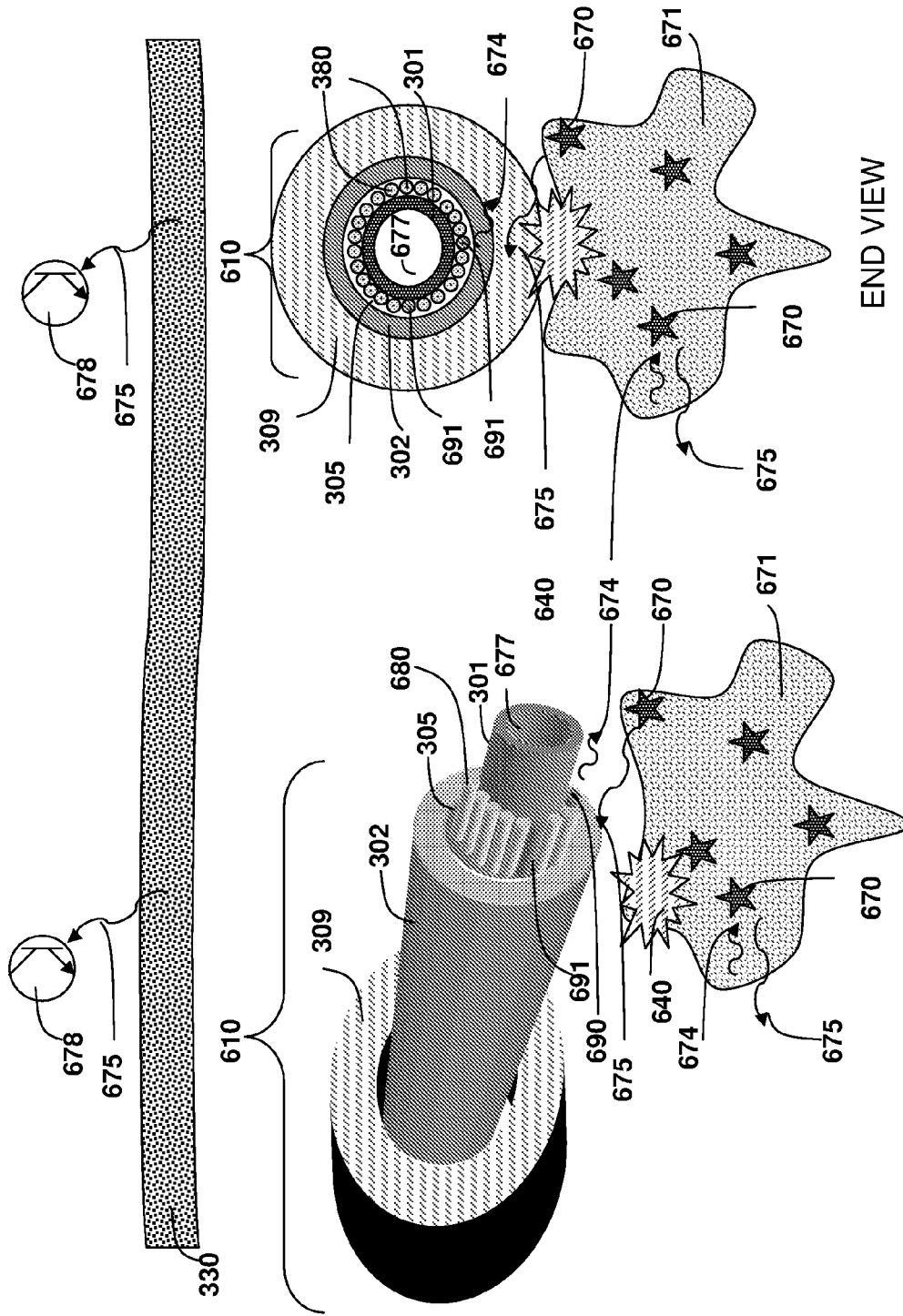


FIG. 6A

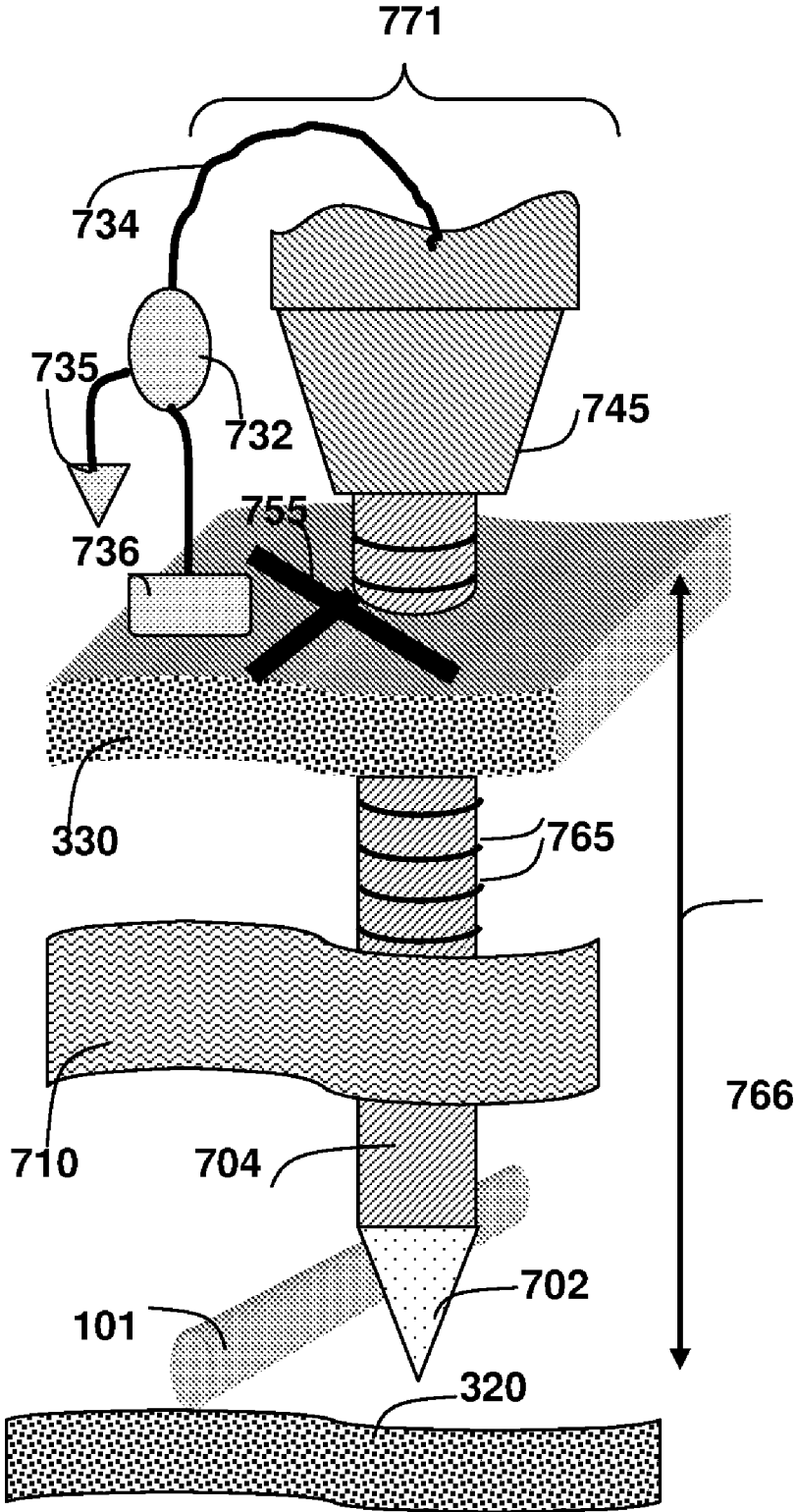


FIG. 7

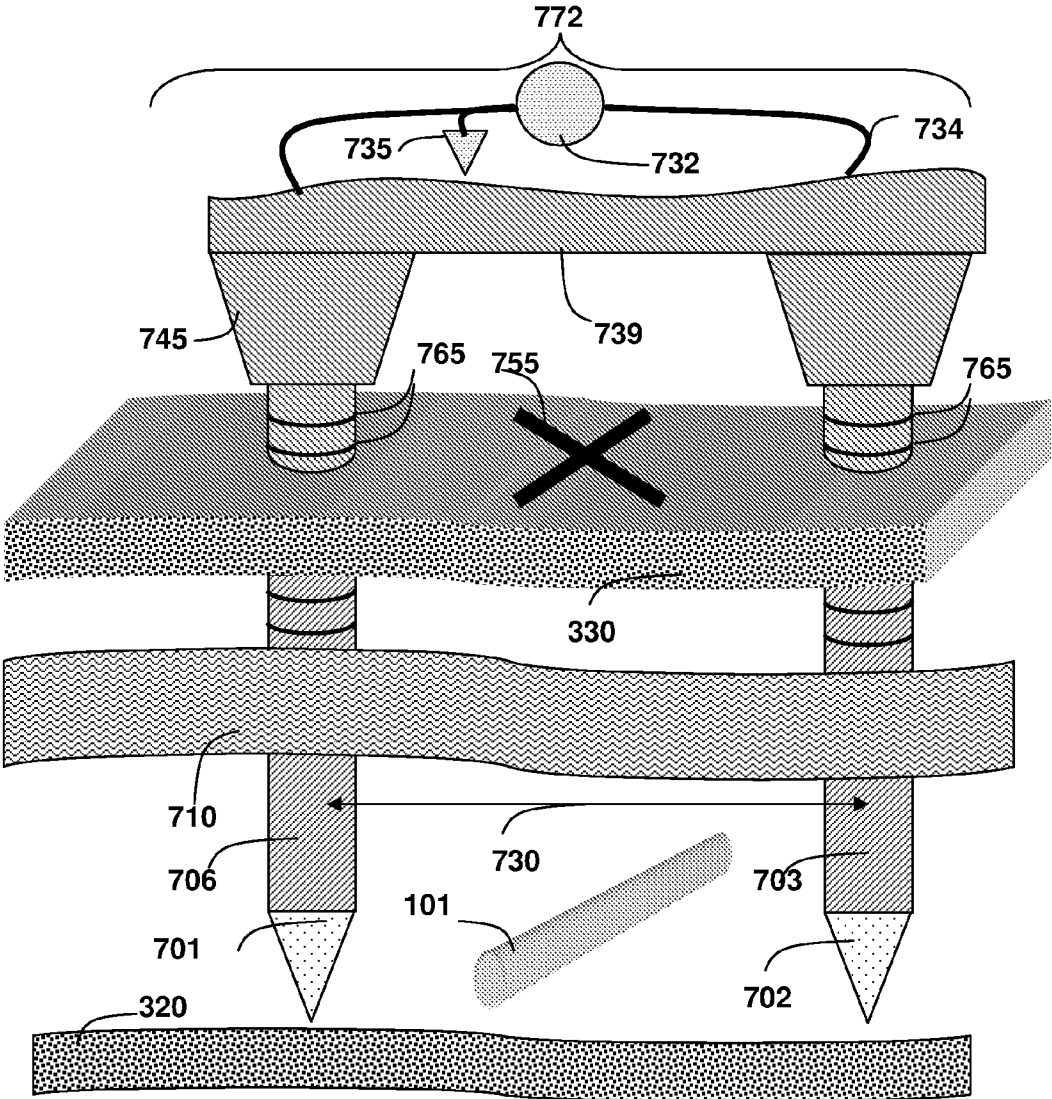


FIG. 7A

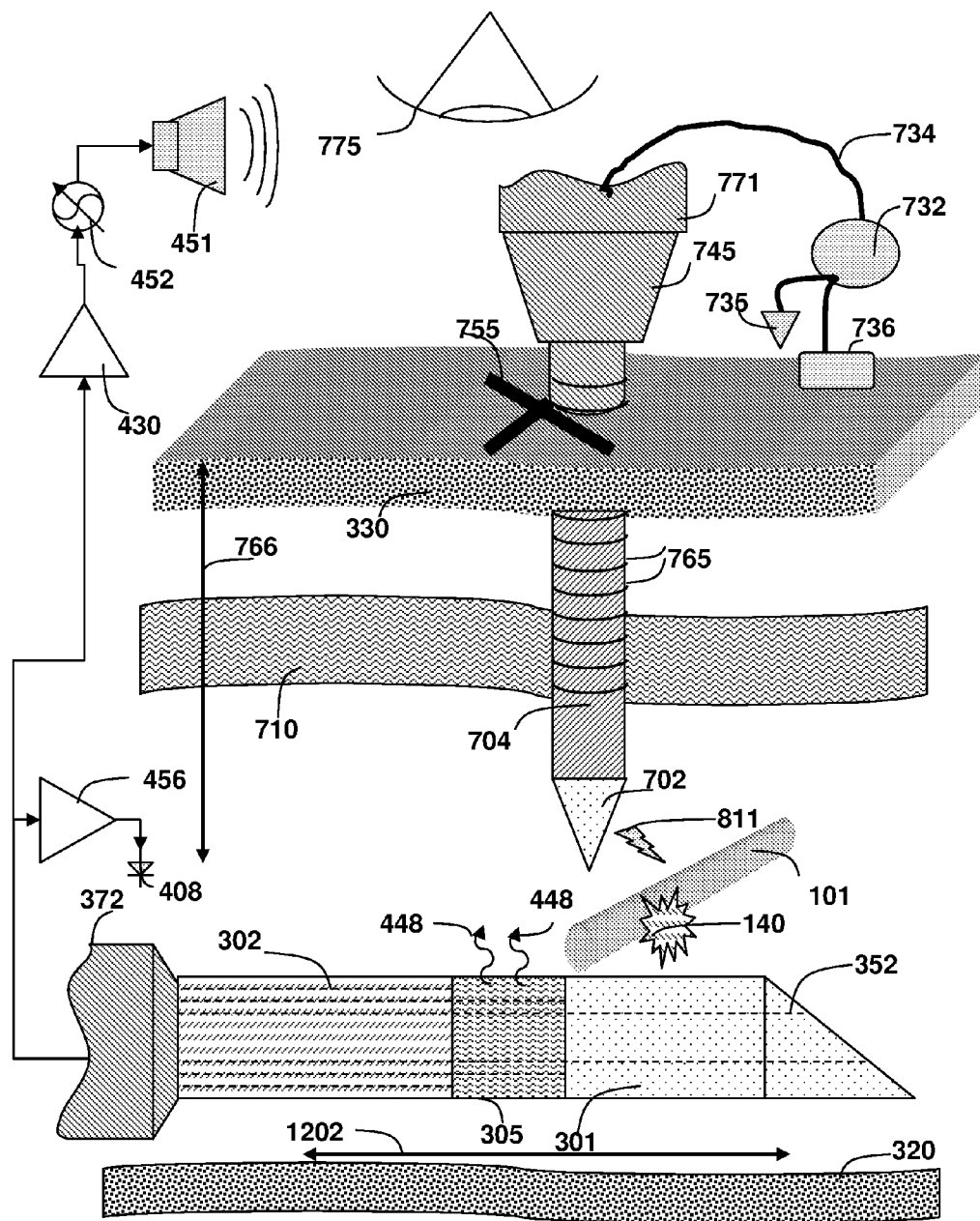


FIG. 8

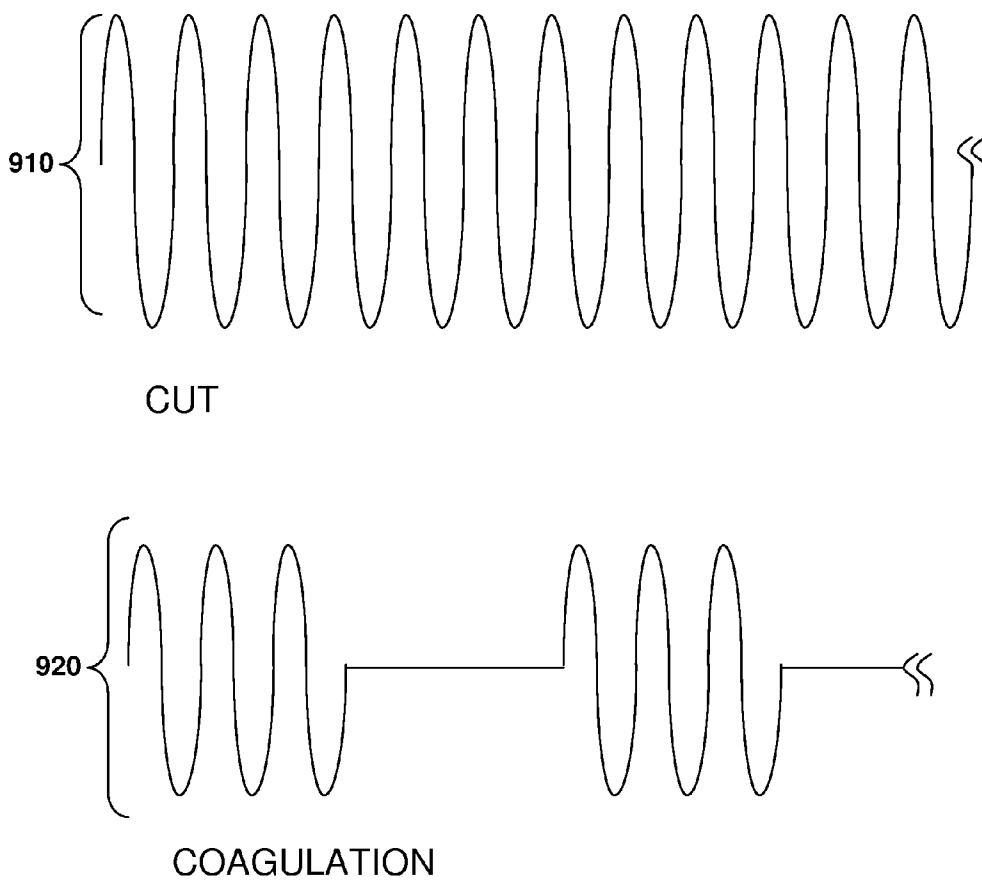


FIG. 9

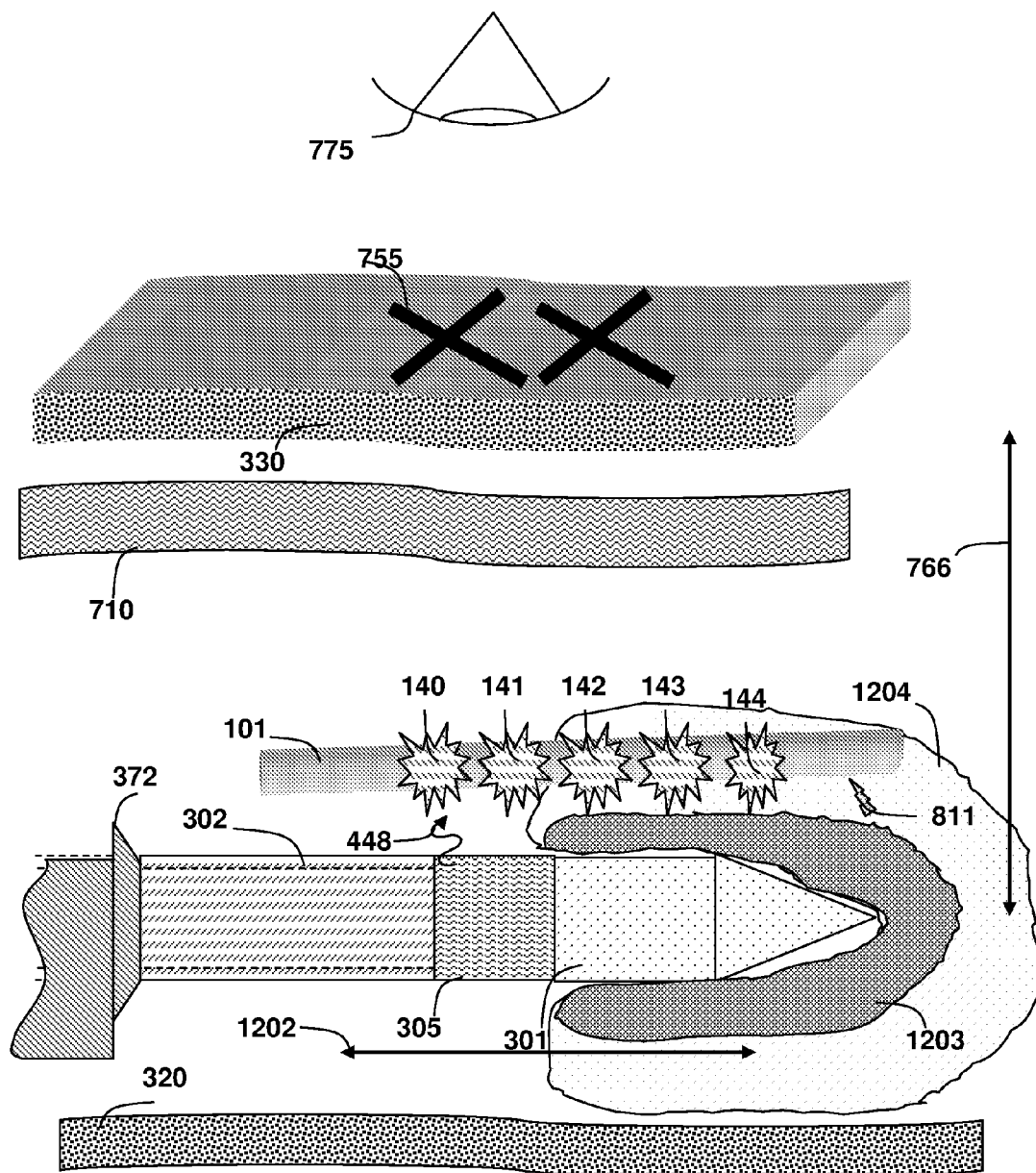


FIG. 10

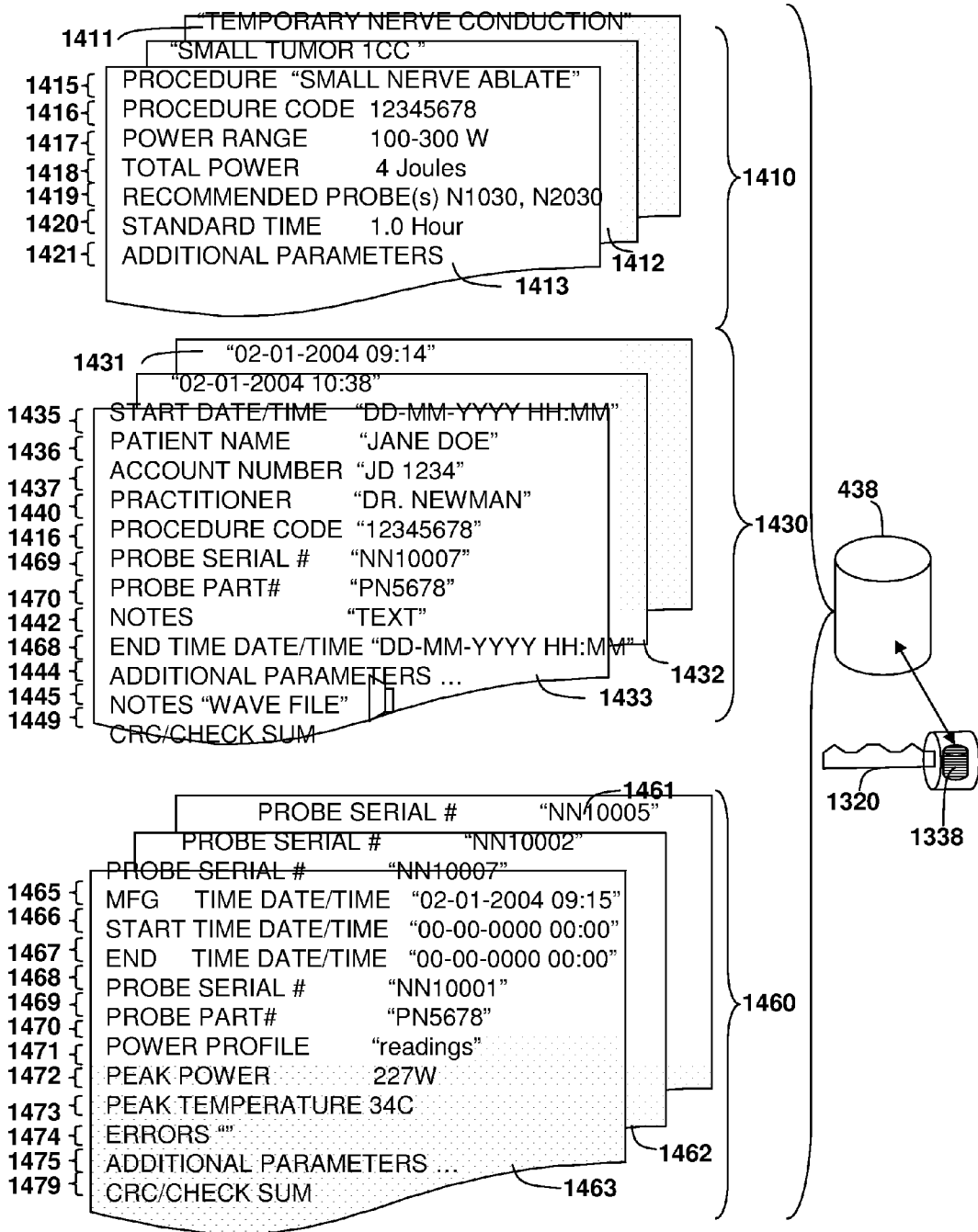


FIG. 11

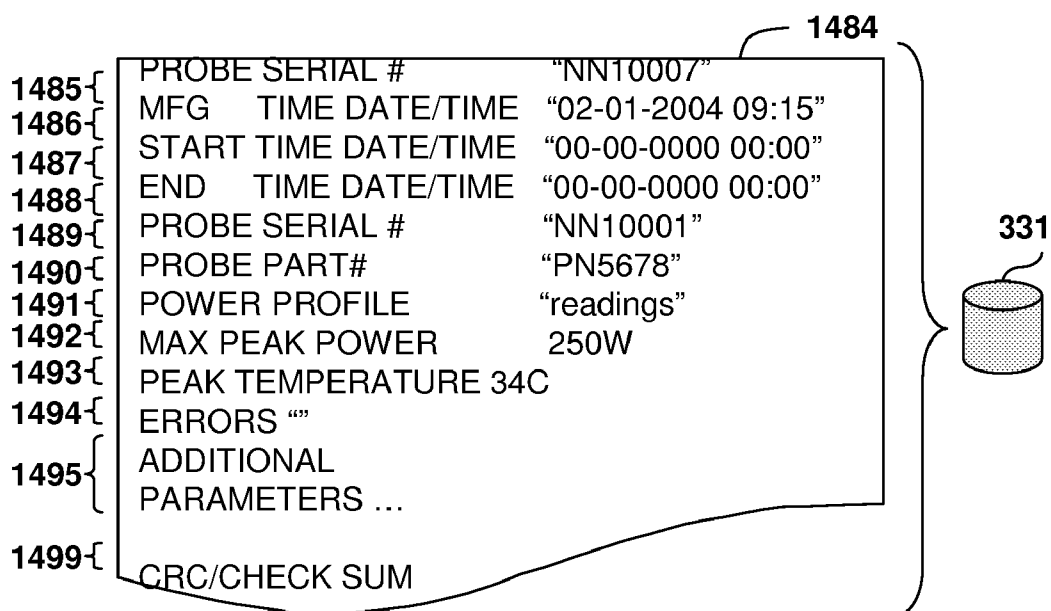


FIG. 11A

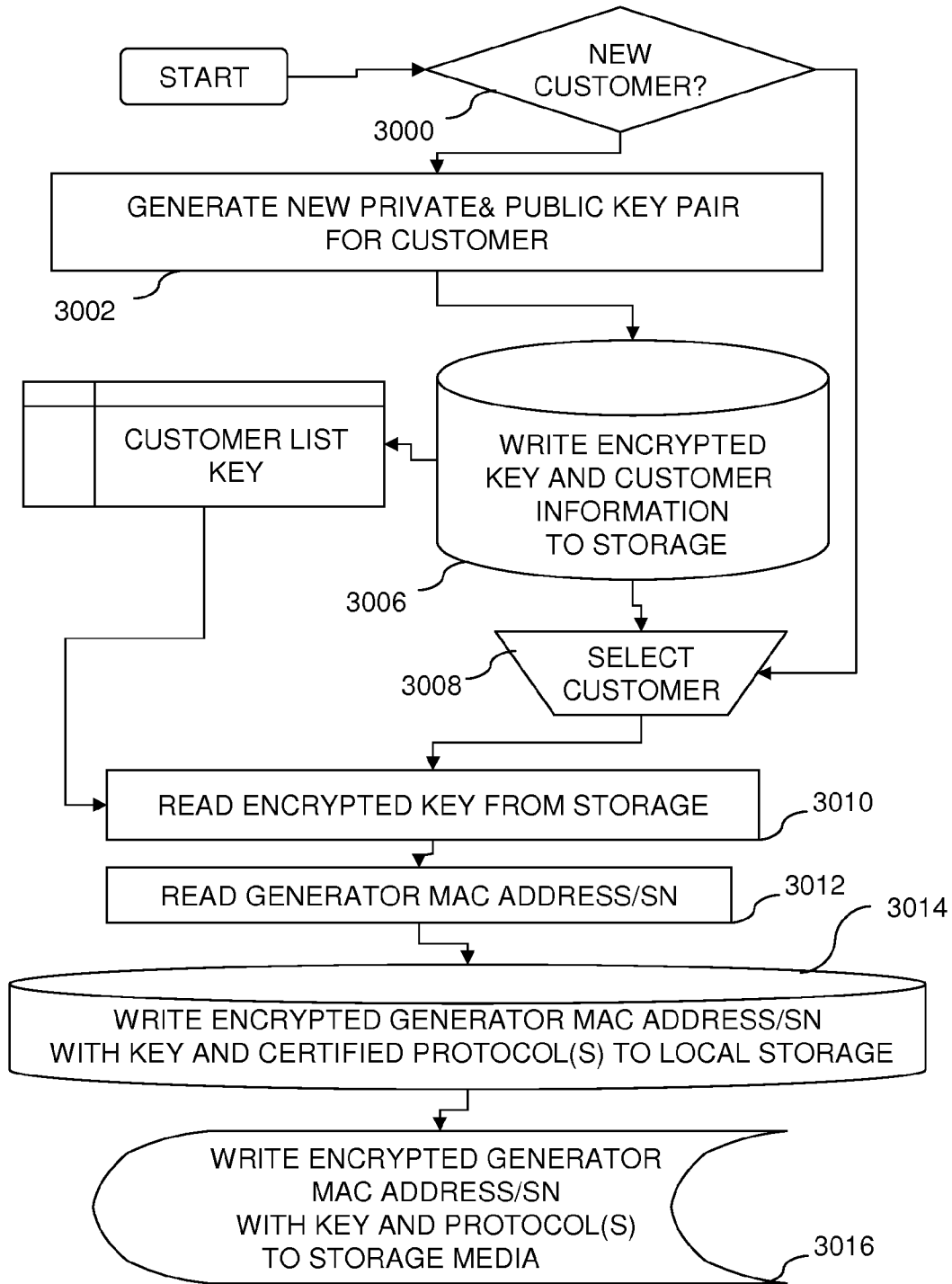


FIG 20

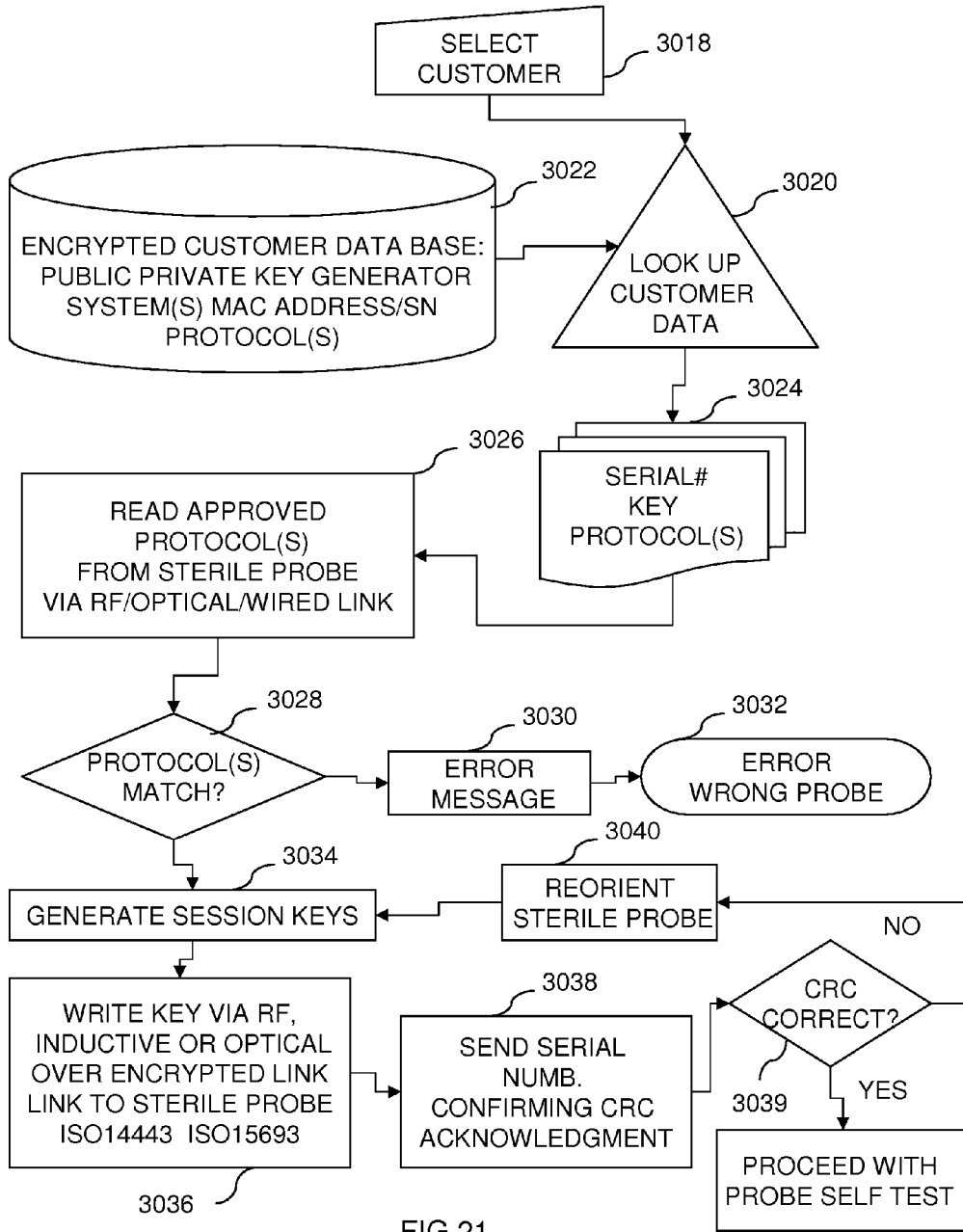


FIG 21

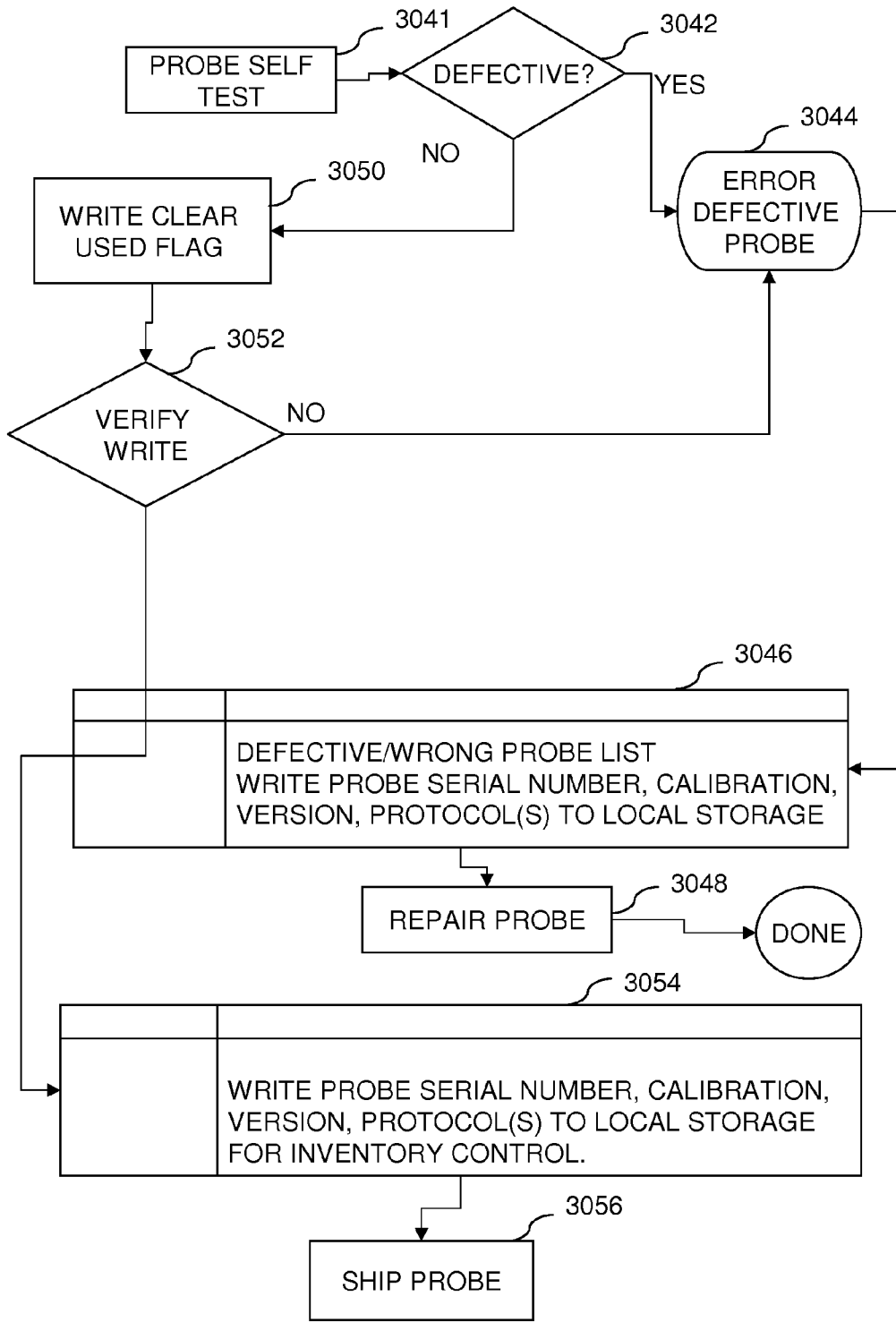


FIG 22

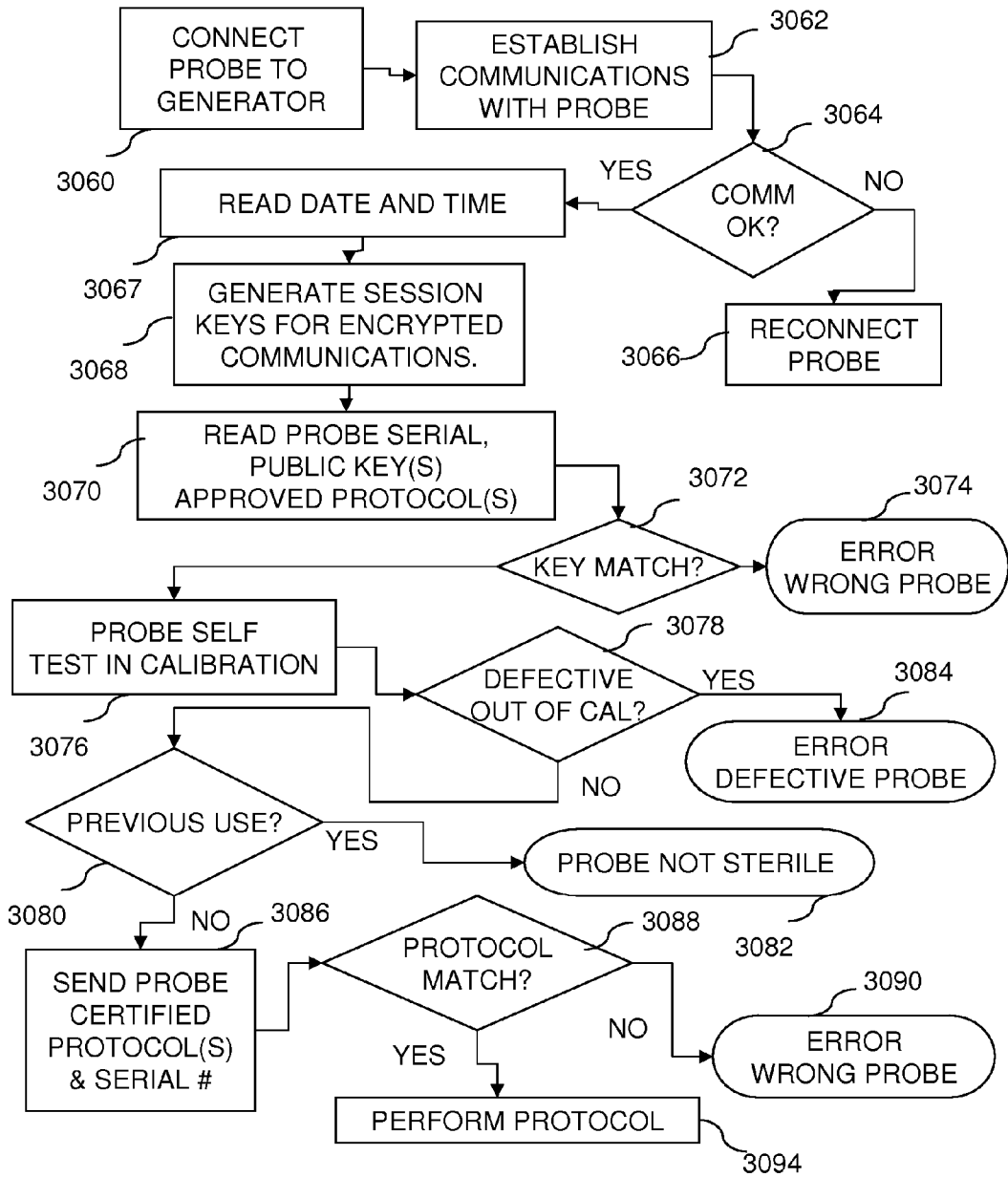


FIG 23A

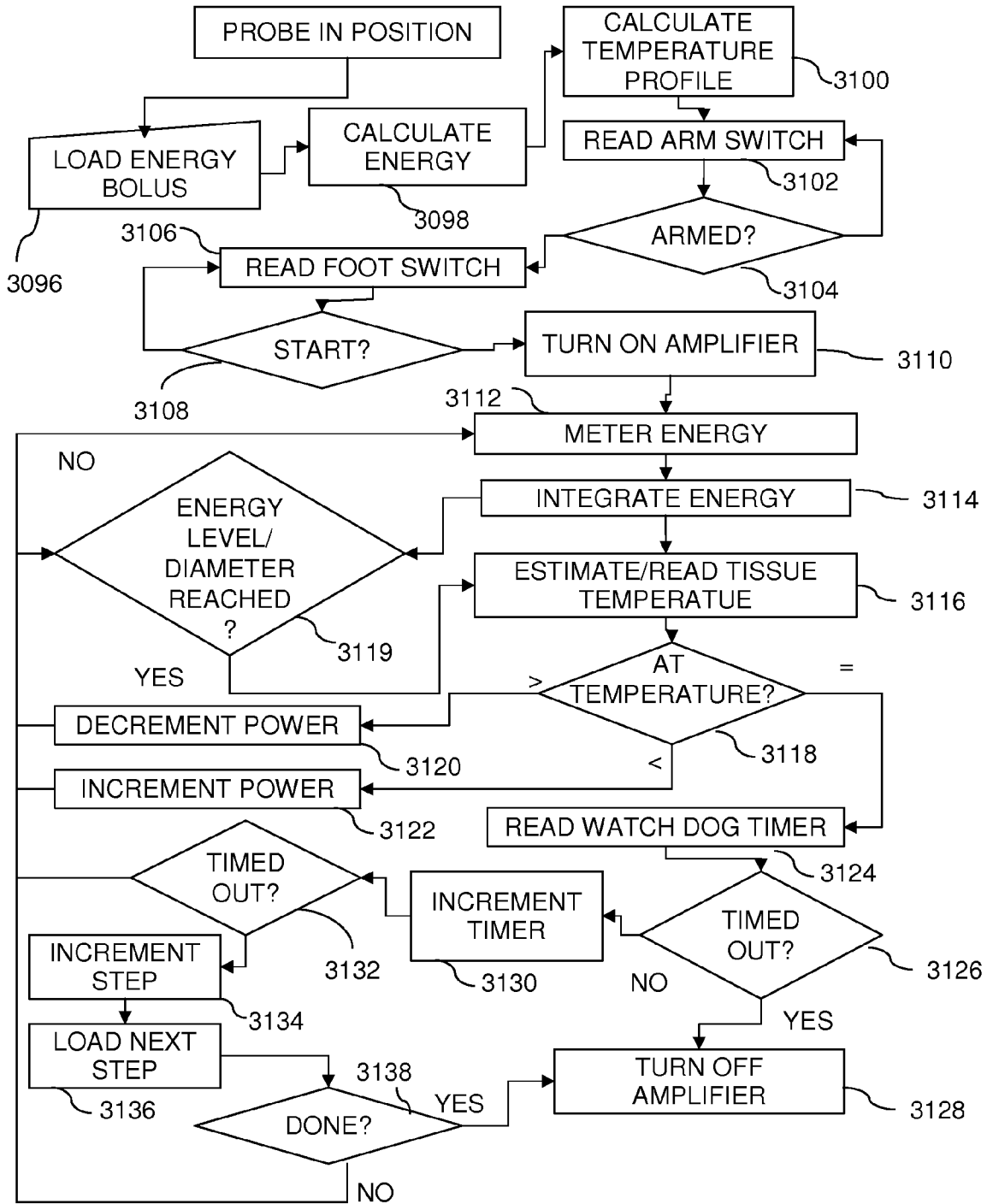


FIG. 23B

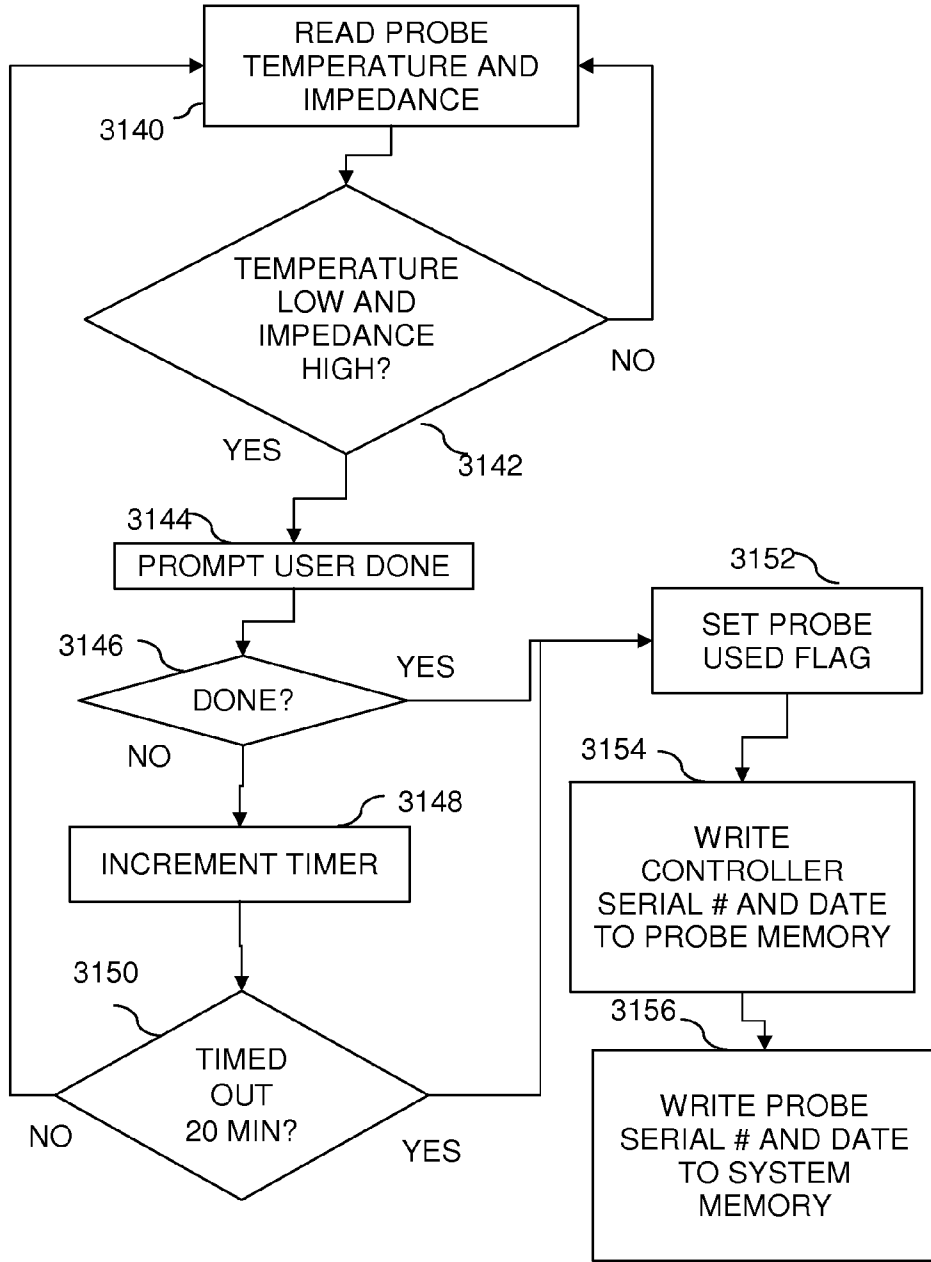


FIG. 23C

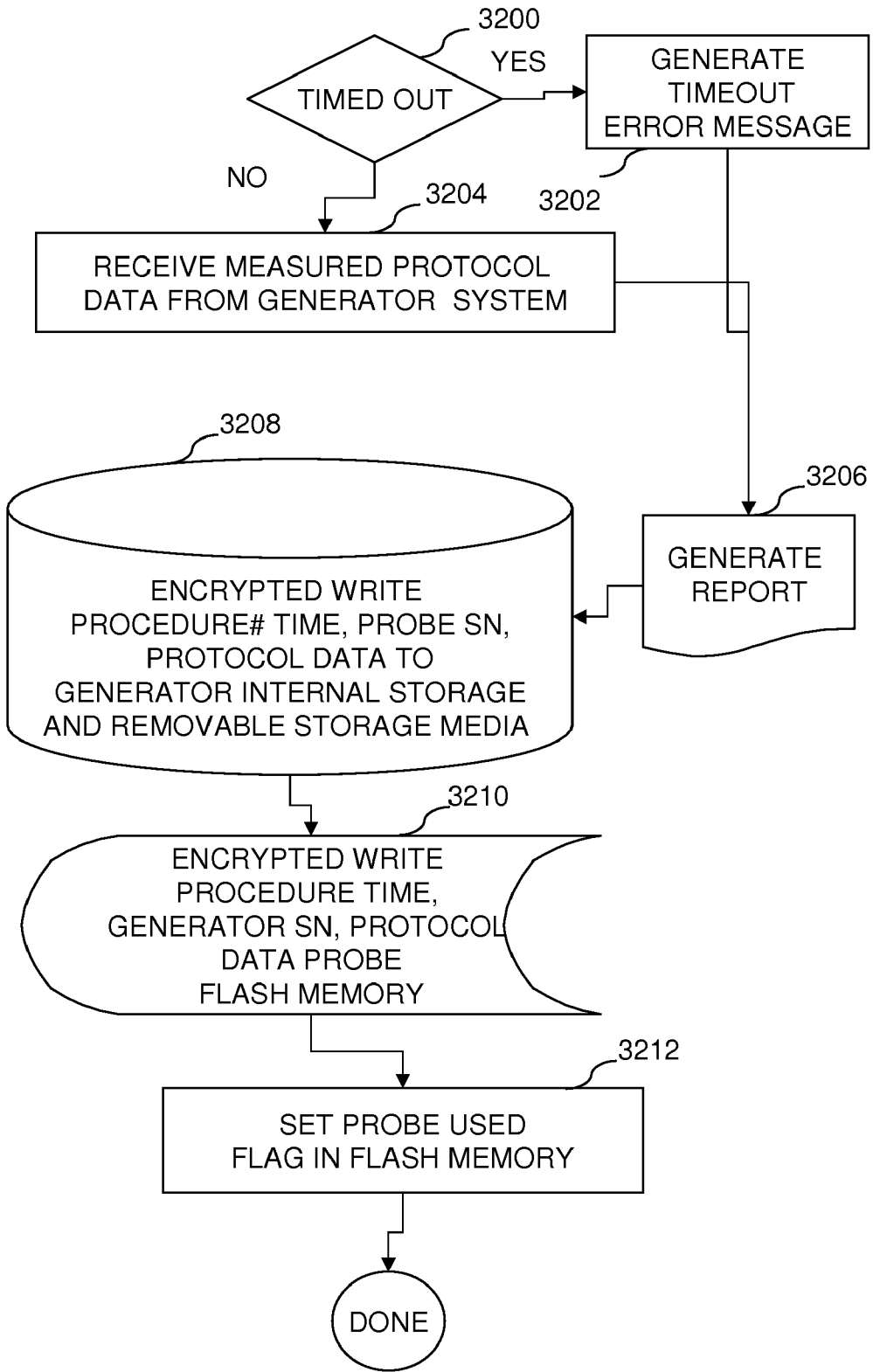


FIG 24

3250

Treatment Profile:

PulseType	ChfType	ModOnTime	ModOffTime	PwrRdStZ	PwrRdStPot	TermTime	PulseOffTime	TermT	TermZ	TermP	TermE	NumTimesRpt	PwrSP	VoltSP	TempSP	VoltLmt	PwrLmt	JouleLmt
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	1	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	2	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	3	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	4	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	5	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	6	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	7	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	8	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	0	150	0	250	300	0	9	230	90	130	5	0
TP	2	100	0	0	0	100	30	150	0	250	300	60	4	230	90	130	5	0
TP	1	100	0	0	0	100	30	150	0	250	300	140	3	230	90	130	5	0
JP	3	100	0	0	0	10	0	150	0	250	300	0	1	70	90	70	5	250

FIG 25

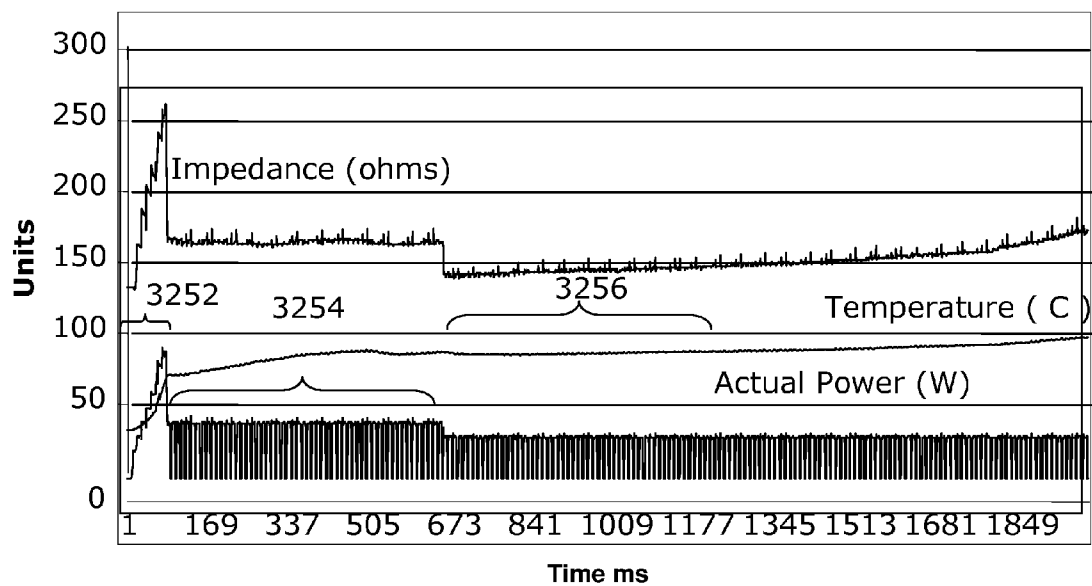


FIG 26

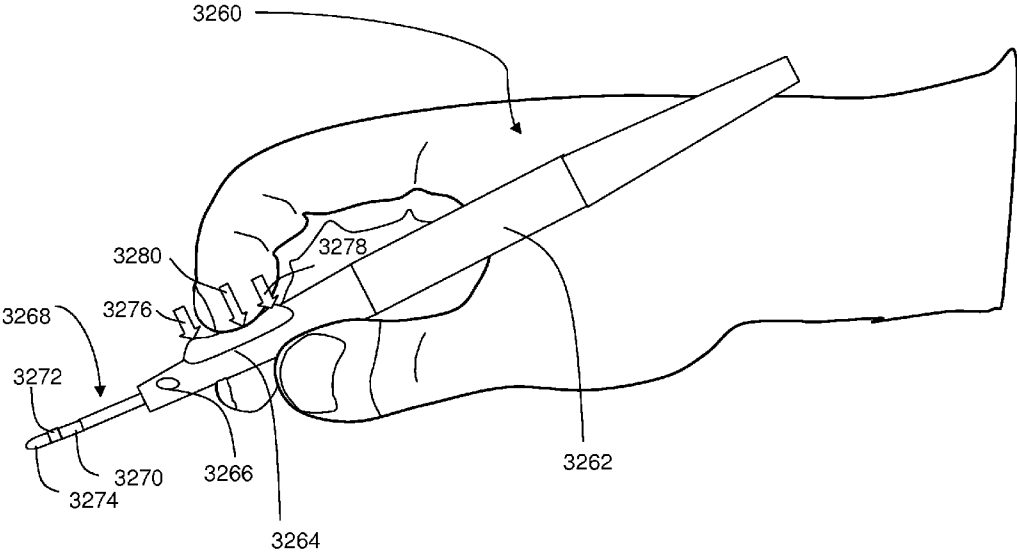


FIG 27

ABLATION APPARATUS AND SYSTEM TO LIMIT NERVE CONDUCTION

RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/870,202, filed Jun. 17, 2004, entitled "Ablation apparatus and system to limit nerve conduction," now published, which is hereby incorporated by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present invention relates to a method and device used in the field of Minimally Invasive Surgery (or MIS) for interrupting the flow of signals through nerves. These nerves may be rendered incapable of transmitting signals either on a temporarily (hours, days or weeks) or a permanent (months or years) basis. One embodiment of the apparatus includes a single puncture system which features electrodes capable of creating areas of nerve destruction, inhibition and ablation.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] The human nervous system is used to send and receive signals. The pathway taken by the nerve signals conveys sensory information such as pain, heat, cold and touch and command signals which cause movement (e.g. muscle contractions).

[0004] Often extraneous, undesired, or abnormal signals are generated (or are transmitted) along nervous system pathways. Examples include, but are not limited to, the pinching of a minor nerve in the back, which causes extreme back pain. Similarly, the compression or other activation of certain nerves may cause referred pain. Certain diseases also may compromise the lining of nerves such that signals are spontaneously generated, which can cause a variety of maladies, from seizures to pain or (in extreme conditions) even death. Abnormal signal activations can cause many other problems including (but not limited to) twitching, tics, seizures, distortions, cramps, disabilities (in addition to pain), other undesirable conditions, or other painful, abnormal, undesirable, socially or physically detrimental afflictions.

[0005] In other situations, the normal conduction of nerve signals can cause undesirable effects. For example in cosmetic applications the activation of the corrugator supercilli muscle causes frown lines which may result in permanent distortion of the brow (or forehead); giving the appearance of premature aging. By interruption of the corrugator supercilli activation nerves, this phenomenon may be terminated. Direct surgical interruption of nerves is however a difficult procedure.

[0006] Traditional electrosurgical procedures use either a unipolar or bipolar device connected to that energy source. A unipolar electrode system includes a small surface area electrode, and a return electrode. The return electrode is generally larger in size, and is either resistively or capacitively coupled to the body. Since the same amount of current must flow through each electrode to complete the circuit; the heat generated in the return electrode is dissipated over a larger surface area, and whenever possible, the return electrode is located in areas of high blood flow (such as the biceps, buttocks or other muscular or highly vascularized

area) so that heat generated is rapidly carried away, thus preventing a heat rise and consequent burns of the tissue. One advantage of a unipolar system is the ability to place the unipolar probe exactly where it is needed and optimally focus electrosurgical energy where desired. One disadvantage of a unipolar system is that the return electrode must be properly placed and in contact throughout the procedure. A resistive return electrode would typically be coated with a conductive paste or jelly. If the contact with the patient is reduced or if the jelly dries out, a high-current density area may result, increasing the probability for burns at the contact point.

[0007] Typical bipolar electrode systems are generally based upon a dual surface device (such as forceps, tweezers, pliers and other grasping type instruments) where the two separate surfaces can be brought together mechanically under force. Each opposing surface is connected to one of the two source connections of the electrosurgical generator. Subsequently, the desired object is held and compressed between the two surfaces. When the electrosurgical energy is applied, it is concentrated (and focused) so that tissue can be cut, desiccated, burned, killed, stunned, closed, destroyed or sealed between the grasping surfaces. Assuming the instrument has been designed and used properly, the resulting current flow will be constrained within the target tissue between the two surfaces. One disadvantage of a conventional bipolar system is that the target tissue must be properly located and isolated between these surfaces. Also, to reduce extraneous current flow the electrodes can not make contact with other tissue, which often requires visual guidance (such as direct visualization, use of a scope, ultrasound or other direct visualization methods) so that the target tissue is properly contained within the bipolar electrodes themselves, prior to application of electrical energy.

[0008] In recent years, considerable efforts have been made to refine sources of RF or electrical energy, as well as devices for applying electrical energy to specific targeted tissue. Various applications such as tachyarrhythmia ablation have been developed, whereby accessory pathways within the heart conduct electrical energy in an abnormal pattern. This abnormal signal flow results in excessive and potentially lethal cardiac arrhythmias. RF ablation delivers electrical energy in either a bipolar or unipolar configuration utilizing a long catheter, similar to an electrophysiology (EP) catheter. An EP catheter consisting of a long system of wires and supporting structures normally introduced via an artery or vein which leads into the heart is manipulated using various guidance techniques, such as measurement of electrical activity, ultrasonic guidance, and/or X-ray visualization, into the target area. Electrical energy is then applied and the target tissue is destroyed.

[0009] A wide variety of technology in the development of related systems, devices and EP products has already been disclosed. For example, U.S. Pat. No. 5,397,339, issued Mar. 14, 1995, describes a multipolar electrode catheter, which can be used to stimulate, ablate, obtain intercardiac signals, and can expand and enlarge itself inside the heart. Other applications include the ability to destroy plaque formations in the interior of lumens within the body; using RF energy applied near, or at the tip of, catheters such as described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,454,809 and U.S. Pat. No. 5,749,914. In these applications a more advanced catheter which is similar to the EP catheters described above contains an array of

electrodes that are able to selectively apply energy in a specific direction. Such devices allow ablation and removal of asymmetric deposits or obstructions within lumens in the body. U.S. Pat. No. 5,098,431 discloses another catheter based system for removing obstructions from within blood vessels. Parins, in U.S. Pat. No. 5,078,717 discloses yet another catheter to selectively remove stenotic lesions from the interior walls of blood vessels. Auth in U.S. Pat. No. 5,364,393 describes a modification of the above technologies whereby a small guide wire which goes through an angioplasty device and is typically 110 cm or longer has an electrically energized tip, which creates a path to follow and thus guides itself through the obstructions.

[0010] In applications of a similar nature, catheters which carry larger energy bursts, for example from a defibrillator into chambers of the heart have been disclosed. These catheters are used to destroy both tissues and structures as described in Cunningham (U.S. Pat. No. 4,896,671).

[0011] Traditional treatments for the elimination of glabellar furrowing have included surgical forehead lifts, resection of corrugator supercilli muscle, as described by Guyuron, Michelow and Thomas in *pi Corrugator Supercilli Muscle Resection Through Blepharoplasty Incision*, *Plastic Reconstructive Surgery* 95 691-696 (1995). Also, surgical division of the corrugator supercilli motor nerves is used and was described by Ellis and Bakala in *Anatomy of the Motor Innervation of the Corrugator Supercilli Muscle: Clinical Significance and Development of a New Surgical Technique for Frowning*, *J Otolaryngology* 27; 222-227 (1998). These techniques described are highly invasive and sometimes temporary as nerves regenerate over time and repeat or alternative procedures are required.

[0012] More recently, a less invasive procedure to treat glabellar furrowing involves injection of botulinum toxin (Botox) directly into the muscle. This produces a flaccid paralysis and is best described in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 324:1186-1194 (1991). While minimally invasive, this technique is predictably transient; so, it must be re-done every few months.

[0013] Specific efforts to use RF energy via a two needle bipolar system has been described by Hernandez-Zendejas and Guerrero-Santos in: *Percutaneous Selective Radio-Frequency Neuroablation in Plastic Surgery*, *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*, 18:41 pp 41-48 (1994) The authors described a bipolar system using two parallel needle type electrodes. Utley and Goode described a similar system in *Radio-frequency Ablation of the Nerve to the Corrugator Muscle for Elimination of Glabellar Furrowing*, *Archives of Facial Plastic Surgery*, January-March, 99, VI P 46-48, and U.S. Pat. No. 6,139,545. These systems were apparently unable to produce permanent results possibly because of limitations inherent in a two needle bipolar configuration. Thus, as is the case with Botox, the parallel needle electrode systems would typically require periodic repeat procedures.

[0014] There are many ways of properly locating an active electrode near the target tissue and determining if it is in close proximity to the nerve. Traditional methods in the cardiac ablation field have included stimulation by using either unipolar and bipolar energy by means of a test pacemaker pulse prior to the implantation of a pacemaker or other stimulation device. A method of threshold analysis called the 'strength duration curve has been used for many

years. This curve consists of a vertical axis (or Y-axis) typically voltage, current, charge or other measure of amplitude, and has a horizontal axis (or X-axis) of pulse duration (typically in milliseconds). Such a curve is a rapidly declining line, which decreases exponentially as the pulse width is increased.

[0015] Various stimulation devices have been made and patented. One process of stimulation and ablation using a two-needle system is disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 6,139,545. The stimulation may also be implemented negatively, where tissue not responsive to stimulation is ablated as is described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,782,826 (issued Jul. 21, 1998).

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0016] One aspect of the present invention is an electro-surgical probe including a probe body which defines a longitudinal probe axis. Thus the probe resembles a single needle and can be placed into tissue through a single opening. The electro-surgical probe also includes a first and second conductive electrode, each disposed along the probe axis. The surface area of the first conductive electrode is, in this aspect of the invention, greater than the surface area of the second conductive electrode. The ratio of the surface area of the first conductive electrode to the surface area of the second conductive electrode may be equal to or greater than 3:1 or equal to or greater than 8:1. The ratio of the surface area of the first conductive electrode to the surface area of the second conductive electrode may be adjustable.

[0017] The electro-surgical probe of the subject invention may further include a stimulation energy source in electrical communication with either the first or the second conductive electrode. Similarly, the electro-surgical probe may also include an ablation energy source communicating with either the first or second conductive electrode. A switch may be provided for the selective connection of the stimulation energy source or the ablation energy source to at least one of the conductive electrodes. Either the first or the second conductive electrode may be nearer the point of the electro-surgical probe at one end of the probe axis.

[0018] Another aspect of the present invention is an electro-surgical probe including a probe body defining a longitudinal probe axis, an active electrode operatively associated with the probe body at a first location along the probe axis, a stimulation electrode associated with the probe body at a second location along the probe axis and a return electrode operatively associated with the probe body at a third location along the probe axis. The stimulation electrode may be positioned between the active and return electrodes. The electro-surgical probe of this embodiment may further include a stimulation energy source in electrical communication with the stimulation electrode. The stimulation energy source may provide variable stimulation current. Either the active electrode, the return electrode or both may be connected to a ground for the stimulation energy source. Alternatively, a separate ground may be employed. This aspect of the present invention may also include an ablation energy source connected to the active electrode. The ablation energy source may be configured to provide variable ablation energy.

[0019] Another aspect of the present invention is an electro-surgical probe also having a probe body defining a longitudinal probe axis. At least three electrodes will be

associated with the probe body at distinct and separate locations along the probe axis. A stimulation energy source connected to at least one of the electrodes is also included.

[0020] The stimulation energy source of this embodiment of the present invention may be configured to provide variable stimulation energy. In addition, the stimulation energy source may be selectively connected by means of a switch to at least one or more of the various electrodes. Similarly, a ground for the stimulation energy source may be selectively connected to one or more of the electrodes.

[0021] Another aspect of the present invention is a method for positioning an electrosurgical probe. The method includes providing an electrosurgical probe such as those described immediately above, inserting the electrical surgical probe to a first position within tissue containing a target nerve and applying stimulation energy to an electrode. Upon the application of stimulation energy, a first response of a muscle associated with the target nerve may be observed. Thereupon, the electrosurgical probe may be moved to a second position and a second application of stimulation energy may be undertaken. The method further includes observing a second response of a muscle associated with the target nerve and comparing the second response with the first response. The method may also include varying the level of stimulation energy between the first and second applications of stimulation current. If the electrosurgical probe provided to implement the method has a third electrode, stimulation energy may be applied to a select third electrode as well. Certain advantages will be observed with respect to positioning the electrosurgical probe if stimulation energy is sequentially applied to first, second, third and subsequent electrodes.

[0022] Another aspect of the present invention is a method of managing a system of minimally invasive surgery. The management method includes providing a practitioner with a minimally invasive surgery system including a controller. One or more use parameters is stored to memory associated with the controller. In addition, an electrosurgical probe having its own memory is provided to mate with the remaining elements of the system. Complementary use parameters are stored in the memory of the probe. The management method also includes communicating and comparing the use parameters of the controller with the complementary use parameters of the probe and managing the use of the electrosurgical probe according to the use parameters. The use parameters may include items such as a practitioner identification designation, a controller identification designation and a permitted therapeutic protocol. Other use parameters may be devised. This aspect of the present invention may also include maintaining a probe use flag in the electrosurgical probe memory.

[0023] Another aspect of the present invention is a system for minimally invasive surgery including a controller associated with memory, an electrosurgical probe associated with memory, a communication link between the controller and the probe and means for comparing use parameters stored in the memory of the controller with complementary use parameters stored in the electrosurgical probe. In addition, the system includes means for managing use of the electrosurgical probe according to the use parameters.

[0024] Another aspect of the present invention is an electrosurgical probe having a probe body defining a longitudinal

probe axis with multiple conductive electrodes operatively disposed along the probe axis. The probe also includes a stimulation current source in electrical communication with at least one conductive electrode and a blunt tip operatively disposed at a first end of the probe.

[0025] Another aspect of the present invention is an electrosurgical probe including a probe body defining a longitudinal probe axis, multiple conductive electrodes operatively disposed along the probe axis, and a stimulation current source in electrical communication with at least one of the conductive electrodes. This aspect of the present invention further includes a handle operatively associated with the probe body and a switch operatively associated with the handle. The switch is selected so that selective actuation of the switch may increase or decrease the application of stimulation current to at least one conductive electrode. The switch may also be configured such that an alternative actuation of the switch allows the application of ablation current to at least one conductive electrode.

[0026] Another aspect of the present invention is a system for minimally invasive surgery including an electrosurgical probe, a source of ablation current in electrical communication with the electrosurgical probe and apparatus for automatically delivering a therapeutic quantity of energy from the source of ablation current to the electrosurgical probe. The therapeutic quantity of energy may include a select waveform, a select energy application duration, or a predetermined power profile that varies over time. Other attributes of the therapeutic quantity of energy are possible.

[0027] Another aspect of the present invention is a method of minimally invasive surgery which includes automatically supplying a therapeutic quantity of energy from a source of ablation current such as is described above.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- [0028] FIG. 1 Bi-Polar Driver System.
- [0029] FIG. 2 Schematic diagram of the bi-polar needle.
- [0030] FIG. 2A Schematic diagram of the split bi-polar needle.
- [0031] FIG. 3A Magnified side view of conical bi-polar probe.
- [0032] FIG. 3B Magnified side view of hollow chisel bi-polar probe.
- [0033] FIG. 3C Magnified side view of tapered conical bi-polar probe.
- [0034] FIG. 3D Magnified side view of split conical bi-polar probe.
- [0035] FIG. 4 Schematic diagram of the bi-polar driver system.
- [0036] FIG. 5A Ablation Procedure without Auxiliary probe.
- [0037] FIG. 5B Ablation Procedure with Auxiliary probe.
- [0038] FIG. 6. Side view Hybrid bi-polar needle for nerve ablation.
- [0039] FIG. 6A Side view Hybrid bi-polar needle for tumor ablation.

- [0040] FIG. 7 Side view of auxiliary nerve probe.
- [0041] FIG. 7A Side view of auxiliary dual-tipped nerve probe.
- [0042] FIG. 8 Side view of guided ablation procedure with auxiliary nerve probe(s).
- [0043] FIG. 9 Sample electro-surgery waveforms.
- [0044] FIG. 10 Side view of visually guided ablation procedure.
- [0045] FIGS. 11-11A Controller and probe data base structure.
- [0046] FIG. 12 is a side view of a single axis electrosurgical probe having equal surface area electrodes.
- [0047] FIG. 13 is a side view of a single axis electrosurgical probe having two electrodes of differing surface areas.
- [0048] FIG. 14 is a side view of a single axis electrosurgical probe having two electrodes of differing surface areas.
- [0049] FIG. 15 is a side view of a single axis electrosurgical probe having three electrodes.
- [0050] FIG. 16 is a side view of a single axis electrosurgical probe having three electrodes and a curved handle portion.
- [0051] FIG. 17 is a side view of a single axis electrosurgical probe having multiple electrodes transverse a nerve.
- [0052] FIG. 18 is a side view of a single axis electrosurgical probe having multiple electrodes parallel to a nerve.
- [0053] FIG. 19 is a side view of a single axis electrosurgical probe having multiple electrodes crossing a nerve at an angle.
- [0054] FIG. 20 is a flowchart illustrating certain aspects of a system management method consistent with the present invention.
- [0055] FIG. 21 is a flowchart illustrating certain aspects of a system management method consistent with the present invention.
- [0056] FIG. 22 is a flowchart illustrating certain aspects of a system management method consistent with the present invention.
- [0057] FIG. 23A is a flowchart illustrating certain aspects of a system management method consistent with the present invention.
- [0058] FIG. 23B is a flowchart illustrating certain aspects of a system management method consistent with the present invention.
- [0059] FIG. 23C is a flowchart illustrating certain aspects of a system management method consistent with the present invention.
- [0060] FIG. 24 is a flowchart illustrating certain aspects of a system management method consistent with the present invention.
- [0061] FIG. 25 is a tabular representation of a therapeutic energy protocol consistent with the present invention.
- [0062] FIG. 26 is a graphic representation of a therapeutic energy protocol consistent with the present invention.
- [0063] FIG. 27 is a perspective view of an electrosurgical probe featuring a multi-position switch to control stimulation current.
- [0064] Certain terms used herein are defined as follows:
- [0065] Medical Terms
- [0066] Corrugator supercili muscles—skeletal muscles of the forehead that produce brow depression and frowning.
- [0067] Cerepressor anguli oris—skeletal muscle of the corner of the mouth that produces depression of the corner of the mouth.
- [0068] Depressor labii inferioris—skeletal muscle of the lower lip that causes the lip to evert and depress downward.
- [0069] Dystonias—medical condition describing an aberrant contraction of a skeletal muscle which is involuntary.
- [0070] Frontalis—skeletal muscle of the forehead that produces brow elevation or raising of the eyebrows.
- [0071] Hyperhidrosis—condition of excessive sweat production.
- [0072] Masseter—skeletal muscle of the jaw that produces jaw closure and clenching.
- [0073] Mentalis—skeletal muscle of the lower lip and chin which stabilizes lower lip position.
- [0074] Orbicularis oculio—skeletal muscle of the eyelid area responsible for eyelid closure.
- [0075] Orbicularis ori—skeletal muscle of the mouth area responsible for closure and competency of the lips and mouth.
- [0076] Parasympathetic—refers to one division of the autonomic nervous system.
- [0077] Platysma myoides—skeletal muscle of the neck that protects deeper structures of the neck.
- [0078] Platysma—same as above.
- [0079] Procerus muscles—skeletal muscle of the central forehead responsible for frowning and producing horizontal creasing along the nasofrontal area.
- [0080] Procerus—same as above.
- [0081] Rhinorrhea—excessive nasal mucous secretions.
- [0082] Supercilli—a portion of the corrugator muscle that sits above the eyelids.
- [0083] Temporalis—skeletal muscle of the jaw that stabilized the temporomandibular joint.
- [0084] Zygomaticus major—skeletal muscle of the face that produces smiling or creasing of the midface.
- [0085] Electrical Terms.
- [0086] ADC: Analog to digital converter.
- [0087] ASCII: American standard of computer information interchange.
- [0088] BAUD: Serial communication data rate in bits per second.
- [0089] BYTE: Digital data 8-bits in length.
- [0090] CHARACTER: Symbol from the ASCII set.

- [0091] CHECKSUM: Numerical sum of the data in a list.
- [0092] CPU: Central processing unit.
- [0093] EEPROM: Electronically erasable programmable read only memory.
- [0094] FLASH MEMORY: Electrically alterable read only memory. (See EEPROM)
- [0095] UI: Graphical user interface.
- [0096] HEXADECIMAL: Base 16 representation of integer numbers.
- [0097] I2C BUS: Inter Integrated Circuit bus. Simple two-wire bidirectional serial bus developed by Philips for an independent communications path between embedded ICs on printed circuit boards and subsystems.
- [0098] The I2C bus is used on and between system boards for internal system management and diagnostic functions.
- [0099] INTERRUPT: Signal the computer to perform another task.
- [0100] PC: Personal computer.
- [0101] PWM: Pulse-width modulation.
- [0102] ROM: Read only memory.
- [0103] WORD: Digital data 16-bits in length

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0104] FIG. 1 illustrates two main components and one optional component, which are the energy generator 400, the probe 371 (alternate probes are described in FIGS. 3A-D) and optionally probes 771 or 772 that may be used.

[0105] In normal operation, the novel probe 371 would combine a unique bipolar configuration in a single MIS needle, is inserted into the patient using MIS techniques. The probe, which may contain and/or convey various functions described later, is initially guided anatomically to the region of the anticipated or desired location. Various means of locating the tip 301 are utilized of placing the zone of ablation in the proper area to interrupt signal flows through the nerve 101.

Device Operation

[0106] Many combinations of electrode diameters and tip shapes are possible. The 'novel' probe performs a variety of functions, such as stimulation, optical and electronic guidance, medication delivery, sample extraction, and controlled ablation. This bi-polar electrode is designed as a small diameter needle inserted from a single point of entry thus minimizing scarring and simplifying precise electrode placement. This low cost, compact design provides a new tool to the art.

[0107] Probes may emit fiber optic illumination for deep applications using electronic guidance as taught in FIGS. 1 and 8. The invention offers a simple low cost ablation probe that is capable of performing precise ablation while minimizing damage to nearby tissue structures. The metered ablation energy and precise probe targeting give the practitioner a tool is also not available in prior art. The practitioner has unprecedented control of treatment permanence in a minimally invasive procedure. Such a procedure is typically

performed in less than one hour with only local anesthetic and would require no stitches or chemicals common to prior medical art.

[0108] Stimulation/Ablation

[0109] First the probe electrode 301 must be in the desired location relative to the target nerve 101 (FIG. 4), then the user initiates the treatment via switch(s) 410 and 310 using the selected power setting 404 (FIG. 4). The controller configures the generators 411 (FIG. 4) and 412 to the amplitude frequency and modulation envelope, delivering 50 KHz-2.5 MHz of 5 to 500 watts of available energy. The summing junction 413 combines the RF outputs as the application requires and passes them to the pulse-width modulator 415 for output power control. The output of modulation generator 420 is applied to the multiplier 415 with radio frequency RF signals 422 and 423. This permits complex energy profiles to be delivered to a time variant non-linear biologic load. All of these settings are based on the information provide to the generator by the installed probe 371 the selected power 404 settings, and the modulation envelope 420 (FIG. 4) settings, which are then loaded by the generator 421.

[0110] For example, both a high amplitude sine wave 910 (FIG. 9), used for cutting, and a pulse-width modulated (or PWM) sine wave 920, used for coagulation, are well known to electro-surgery art. Precise power rates and limits of average total power are controlled via integrator 435 minimizing damage to nearby structures or burning close to the skin for shallow procedures. Where nearby structures 111 (FIG. 2A) are too close to be avoided by electrodes such as 371 (FIG. 3), 372 (FIG. 3A), and 372 (FIG. 3B), additional probe geometries as taught in FIGS. 3D, 6 and 6A offer novel methods to direct energy and limit ablation to a smaller region, thereby avoiding other structures. For safety a hardwired switch 436 disables the power amplifier in the event of a system fault, the probe is unplugged or over power condition, thus protecting both the patient and practitioner.

[0111] The output of the modulator 415 is applied to the input of the power amplifier 416 section. The power amplifier's 416 outputs are then feed into the impedance matching network 418, which provides dynamic controlled output to the biologic loads that are highly variable and non-linear, and require dynamic control of both power levels and impedance matching. The tuning of the matching network 418 is performed for optimal power transfer for the probe, power level, and treatment frequencies settled. The system's peak power is 500 watts for this disclosed embodiment. Precise control is established by the proximity of the tip and the control loops included in the generator itself The final energy envelope 420 is delivered to probe tip 301 and return electrodes 302.

[0112] This precise control of energy permits extension of the ablation region(s), 140 and 1203 (FIG. 10), and the duration of treatment efficiency. Low or medium energy settings 404 permit temporary nerve-conduction interruption for 3-6 months. Higher energy settings at 404 may result in a longer nerve conduction interruption of 1 year to permanent. In the prior art, procedures had little control over duration of termination of such signal flow through the nerve. This invention gives the practitioner enhanced control of such duration. Patients can evaluate controlled temporary treatment before choosing longer or permanent treatment options.

[0113] A low energy nerve stimulator 771 has been integrated into the system to assist in more precise identification of nearby structures and for highly accurate target location. Lastly, additional sensors, such as temperature 311, voltage, frequency, current and the like are read directly from the device and/or across the communications media 403 to the probe.

[0114] Directed Ablation

[0115] In addition to the substantial radially-symmetric ablation patterns with probes as taught in 371 (FIG. 3) and 372, switching or dividing ablation power to multiple electrodes (FIG. 3D) can generate an asymmetric ablation zone. This high intensity source 608 with probe 610 (FIGS. 6 and 6A) minimizes damage to nearby structures 111 or the burning of skin 330 in shallow procedures. Also, FIGS. 2A and 3D identify probe configurations for selective or asymmetric ablation.

[0116] Power Feedback

[0117] The power amplifier output 430 and buffered the feedback signals 437 are connected to an Analog to Digital converter (or ADC) 431 for processor analysis and control. Said signals 437 control power modulation 420 settings and impact the impedance matching control signals 419. This integrated power signal 437 is recorded to the operating-condition database (FIG. 11) for later procedure review. This power level is also compared to reading taken from the probe 1492 (FIG. 11A) as compared against procedure maximums, which if exceeded will in turn disable the amplifier output, thereby protecting the patient from error or equipment fault. Similarly, limits from the probe and generator sensors such as temperature 330 are also used to terminate or substantially reduce the modulated power levels and ultimately the procedure.

[0118] Probe Identification

[0119] At power startup, the controller 401 (FIG. 4) reads the probe status and internal identification kept within the probe itself 331 (and 371) via serial communications 403 (or bus). Serial communications is used because it is commonly available to most single-chip microprocessors. This or similar methods (e.g. I2C, or SPI) may be used, but this disclosed embodiment will use serial for its simplicity. Serial communications 403 permits the generator to address and control EEROM memory 331, temperature sensors 330, processors, ADC and DACs within the single-chip microprocessor embedded in the probe itself. The user selects the desired power setting 404 and based on probe identification read from the EEROM or microprocessor 331 makes the appropriate configurations. The probe 371 is connected via cable 1334 (FIG. 1) to control unit 101 or generator. This probe is not intended for multiple procedural uses. So to prevent such use of the probe, the controller 401 (FIG. 4) reads the stored time register from ID memory module 331. If the probe's initialized time 1467 (FIG. 14) is zero, the current real-time clock 482 value is written to probe's 331's initial time register via serial bus 403. If time read on module 331 is non-zero, the probe's initial time register is added to two(2) times the procedural time (based on the probe type) FIG. 141420. If that value when compared to current real-time clock 482, is less than current time, the controller will alert the practitioner via display 450, speaker 451 and, flashing probe illumination 608, that the procedure will be terminated and the probe rendered invalid.

[0120] The controller 401 also verifies selected procedure 1415 (FIG. 11) for compatibility with installed probe. If incompatible, the user is also prompted to select a different power setting 404, procedure, or probe 371. If probe 371 matches power setting 404, the system enables power amplifier 416, guide light source 408, and low-voltage nerve stimulation 732. Both of these procedures are enforced by a mandatory "hand shake" protocol and the serialized information, which must be present and properly verified by the electronic circuitry for a procedure to be instituted. During a clinical procedure, information is required to be conveyed by the embedded electronics contained within the probe, which provides another way of enforcing this protection and thus again preventing unauthorized re-use. The ultimate goal is prevent cross-contamination between patients. The probe will accomplish this by being unique, serialized, and given the above procedures. Once plugged in, the probe will enter the serial number into the data logging system via the serial bus 403 and circuit logic will thereafter prevent re-use of the probe and cross-contamination that would occur. Further, this scheme will prevent the use of unauthorized third party probes, for they will not be activated, preventing potential inferior or uncertified probes from being used and presenting potential danger to the patient.

[0121] Nerve Target Location Tools

[0122] Prior to treatment, the practitioner may use auxiliary probe 771 (FIG. 4), to locate target 101 and nearby structures 111 as taught in FIGS. 4, 7, 7A, 8, and 10. When needle 771 is in place, the practitioner may locate and place a mark or marks on the surface of the skin 755 (see FIGS. 7 and 8) or leaves auxiliary probe 771 in place. For shallow sub-cutaneous procedures, probe tip illumination 448 from source 408 is visible to practitioner aiding in probe placement to pre-marked location.

[0123] Location Via Florescence Marker Dye.

[0124] In other procedures, whereby somewhat larger targets are sought, such as more diffuse nerve structures or small areas of abnormal growth (e.g. such as cancer) the injection of specially designed dyes that attach to target structures are used, as taught in FIG. 6A. The probe 610 (FIG. 6) is moved into the proximity of the target 671. The light source 608 illuminates quantum-dot/dye tagged antibody 670. The dye fluoresces 675 at a frequency/wavelength of a particular material and will typically emit light in the visible to infrared (or IR) or potentially other wavelength regions. The return fiber(s) 680 deliver emissions 675 to the detector 478 for measurement and are the result is then displayed on bar graph 554 (FIG. 1) and/or an audio tone sounded via speaker 451 based on proximity. Visible and IR light emissions propagate over limited distances permitting additional external detectors 678 to be used for shallow targets just under the skin 330. Location via this method is similar to the electronically guided probe method taught in FIG. 8 where probe 610 movement maximizes the signal output when in close proximity. IR emissions propagate and can permit deeper (typically several centimeters) detection with optional additional external sensors 678. Unfortunately, many dyes fluoresce in the visible region making external detection impossible for deep targets or when obscured by bone. However, probe 610 (FIG. 6A) solves this problem by integrating target illumination 674, emission 675 detector, ablation, biopsy, and medication delivery in single compact

probe. Electronic probe guidance (FIG. 8) if required is used in combination with florescence detection to rapidly locate target. The instant invention offers a minimally invasive system for locating and treating small/deep tumors and other tissue that are to be ablated, destroyed or removed.

[0125] Electronic Probe Guidance

[0126] Low energy nerve stimulation current 810 (FIG. 8) assist in locating desired treatment region and avoiding nearby structures. Probe 771 is selectable between nerve stimulator and current measurement to/from auxiliary probe tip 702 (FIG. 8). Return electrode 736 provides a return path for local ground 735. Ablation probe switch 367 selects low-energy stimulator/receiver and high-energy ablation to/from probe 372. Amplitude of measured guidance current 811 and light 478 are transmitted to display 554, and audio feedback 452 through the speaker 451.

[0127] Optical Probe Guidance

[0128] Disclosed invention provides optical sources 408 that aid in probe placement (FIG. 10) by supplementing stimulation source 732 and acting as preliminary guide. Probe 771 is selectable between nerve stimulator or current 811 measurement and to or from the auxiliary probe tip 702. The ablation probe switch 367 selects low-energy stimulator/receiver or high-energy ablation to or from probe 371, 372, 373, and 374. In this mode, the physician operator will have previously placed marks 755 on the surface of the skin by various means described. The physician operator 775 will then see the tip when the 448 if the optical illumination is turned on. It 448 will provide a bright spot under the skin indicating the location of the tip in relation to the marks 755. The physician 775 will then guide the probe tip 301 into precise alignment under these marks 755 so as to enable ablation of that target tissue 101.

[0129] Data and Voice

[0130] Real-time engineering parameters are measured such as average power 437, luminous intensity 478, probe current 811, energy 438 and, temperature 330 to be recoded into USB memory 438. Simultaneously, the internal parameters disclosed such as frequency 423, modulation 420 and such are recoded into USB memory 438 as well. Additionally probe, patient, and procedure parameters (FIG. 11) are written to local storage 438. The practitioner dictates text and voice notes via microphone 455, which are saved to memory 438 (FIG. 1). All data and records are time stamped using the real-time clock 482. This permits detailed post procedure graphing and analysis.

[0131] Data Transfer

[0132] At procedure conclusion, the system transfers the data 438 recorded to the USB removable memory 1338 and to a file server(s) 1309 and 1307. In the disclosed embodiment, data transfer is performed over Ethernet connection 480. Probe usage records 1460 (FIG. 11) that are stored in local memory 438 are then written to removable memory module 1338. Parallel records are mirrored to local storage 1309 and remote server 1306 storage 1307 via Ethernet connection 480 or similar means. Sensitive records are encrypted and transferred via secure network connection and also written to removable module 1320. The database contained on the remote server tracks the following information: equipment by manufacture, probe accessory inventory,

usage, billing, repair/warranty exchange information, and program recorders. As a system 400 is certified for new procedures 1410 (FIG. 11), the relational databases are automatically updated to reflect new billing/procedure codes 1416, potential power settings 1417 and the like. This insures that the equipment is current and alerts the practitioner to new probes/procedures as they are developed and certified.

[0133] Before further explaining the disclosed embodiment of the present invention in detail, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited in its application or to the details of the particular arrangement shown. The invention is capable of other embodiments. Further, the terminology used herein is for the purpose of describing the probe and its operation. Each apparatus embodiment described herein has numerous equivalents.

[0134] FIG. 1 Bi-Polar Driver System

[0135] FIG. 1 identifies the two required components of the system, various modules and optional items. The two components always utilized during a procedure will be the energy generator/controller/data storage device 400 and probe 371. 400 contains advanced electronic systems capable of recognizing a properly authorized probe, preventing re use of a previously used probe, generating appropriate energy as described, performing safety checks, storing data, and other functions as described. Main functions of 400 may include, but not be limited to, generation of light, generation of location-stimulation currents, generation of ablation energies, data logging, storage, communication and retrieval, and other functions critical to a MIS procedure. Probe 371 and its various forms are single puncture bipolar surgical tools that may be used in identifying proper location of its tip 301, in relation to target tissue 101 which is desired to be ablated, modified or destroyed. Probe 771 and its various derivatives may optionally be used to assist in locating and properly positioning tip 301 of probe 371.

[0136] FIG. 2 Isometric View of the Bi-Polar Probe

[0137] Bi-polar probe 310 represents probes 371, 372, 373 shown in FIGS. 3A-C with exception to type of needlepoint on the probe. FIG. 3D varies from the other because it has a split return probe. Bi-polar probe 310 (not drawn to scale) consists of insulating dielectric body 309 made from a suitable biology inert material, such as Teflon, PTFE or other insulative material, covering electrode 302 except for where 302 is exposed as a return electrode. Conductive return electrode 302 tube is fabricated from medical grade stainless steel, titanium or other conductive material. Hollow or solid conductive tip electrode 301 protrudes from surrounding dielectric insulator 305. Sizes of 309, 302, 305, and 301 and its inner lumen (diameter, length, thickness, etc.) may be adjusted so as to allow for different surface areas resulting in specific current densities as required for specific therapeutic applications.

[0138] Hollow Electrode 301 often used as a syringe to deliver medication such as local anesthetic. Tip electrode 301 is connected to power amplifier 416 via impedance matching network 418 (FIG. 4). Return electrode(s) 302 delivers return current to power amplifier 416 via impedance matching network 418. Dielectric insulator in the disclosed embodiment is a transparent medical grade polycarbonate acting as a light pipe or fiber optic cable. Light source LED

or laser **408** (FIG. 4) provides illumination at the far end of the probe via fiber optic cable/transparent dielectric **305** for guiding the probe under the skin i.e. shallow procedures. In an alternate embodiment dielectric insulator is replaced with a plurality of optical fibers for viewing and illumination as taught in FIG. 6.

[0139] Ablation regions **306** and **140** extend radially about electrode **301** generally following electric field lines. For procedures very close to skin **330** a chance of burning exists in region **306**. To minimize the chance of burning, a split return electrode probe **374** in FIG. 3D is offered. Thereby concentrating the current away from region **306** to **140** or vice versa. In FIG. 2A, insulator **307** splits the return electrode into two sections **302** and **303**, dividing return current ratio from 0-50%, which may also be selectively activated. Active electrodes are also split into two sections **301** and **311** so energy may be directed in a desired direction. This electrode configuration is identified on the proximal portion of the probe so the operator may position the needle and electrodes accordingly. FIG. 6 teaches a laser directed ablation for more precise energy delivery.

[0140] FIG. 2A Isometric View of Split Bi-Polar Probe.

[0141] The bi-polar probe **380** (not drawn to scale) consists of an insulating dielectric body **309** made from a suitable biologically inert material, such as Teflon PTFE or other electrical insulation, that covers split return electrodes **302** and **303**. The disclosed conductive return electrodes **302** and **303** are fabricated from medical grade stainless steel, titanium or other electrically conductive material. Hollow or solid split conductive tip electrodes **301** and **311** protrude from the surrounding dielectric insulator **305**. The operation of the hollow/split conductive tip is very similar to probe tip **310** as taught in FIG. 3D. Ablation regions **1203** (FIG. 10) and **140-144** extend radially about electrode **301** generally following electric field lines. For procedures very close to skin **330** a chance of burning exists in region **306**. To minimize chance of burning a split return electrode probe **311** is used, thereby concentrating the current away from region **306** to **140**. For procedures where there is a risk to nearby structures **111**, the ablation region **1203** must be a non-radial ablation zone. The disclosed split electrode **380** permits dividing or splitting energy delivered to electrode pairs **301/302** and **311/303**. The disclosed division or ratio between pairs is 0-100%. Dual amplifiers or time multiplexing/switching main amplifier, **416** located between electrode pairs, directs energy to target **101** avoiding **111**. This simple switch network reliably ratios electrical energy while minimizing damage to nearby structures.

[0142] FIG. 3A Conical Bi-Polar Needle

[0143] Bi-polar probe **371** discloses conical shaped electrode **301** and tip **351** for minimally invasive single point entry. Probe diameter **358** is similar to a 20-gage or other small gauge syringe needle, but may be larger or smaller depending on the application, surface area required and depth of penetration necessary. In disclosed embodiment, electrode shaft **302** is 30 mm long with approximately 5 mm not insulated. Lengths and surface areas of both may be modified to meet various applications such as in cosmetic surgery or in elimination of back pain. The conductive return electrode **302** is fabricated from medical grade stainless steel, titanium or other conductive material. The dielectric insulator **305** in the disclosed embodiment is a transparent

medical grade material such as polycarbonate, which may double as a light pipe or fiber optic cable. The high intensity light source **408** LED/laser (FIG. 4) provides guidance illumination **448** at working end of probe. The illumination source modulation/flash rate is proportional to the received stimulation current **810** as taught in FIG. 8. A small diameter electrode permits a minimally invasive procedure that is typically performed with local anesthetic. This configuration may contain lumens for delivery of agents as described elsewhere.

[0144] FIG. 3B Hollow Chisel.

[0145] The hollow chisel electrode **352** is often used as a syringe to deliver medication such as local anesthetic, medications/tracer dye. The hollow electrode may also extract a sample. Dielectric insulator **305** in the disclosed embodiment is a transparent medical grade polycarbonate and performs as a light pipe or fiber optic cable. The novel dual-purpose dielectric reduces probe diameter and manufacturing costs. Light source **408**, typically a LED or laser (FIG. 4 not shown), provides illumination **448** at the working end of probe. It provides an illumination source for guiding the probe under the skin. A second embodiment, as taught in FIG. 6, dielectric insulator is replaced/combined with plurality of optical fibers for viewing/illumination.

[0146] FIG. 3C Tapered Conical

[0147] The bi-polar probe **373** discloses a tapered conical shaped probe for minimally invasive single point entry. It is constructed similarly to probe **371** as taught in FIG. 3A. Probe tip is not drawn to scale to teach the tip geometry. In disclosed embodiment, electrode **301** is approximately 5 mm long and fabricated from medical grade stainless steel but may be of various lengths to accommodate specific application and surface area requirements. The solid tapered conductive tip electrode **353** protrudes from tapered dielectric insulator **305**. Transparent dielectric insulator **305** also performs as light pipe or fiber optic cable terminated to high intensity light source **408** (FIG. 4) providing illumination **448**. The electrode assembly is mounted in an ergonomic handle **388** (which has not been drawn to scale). Handle **388** holds ablation on/off switch **310**, ablation/stimulation mode switch **367**, identification module **331** and terminations for cable **1334** (FIG. 13). Temperature sensor **330** (located close to tip) monitors tissue temperature.

[0148] FIG. 3D Split Conical Bi-Polar Probe

[0149] Description of this probe is described in both drawings 2A and 3D. Bi-polar probe **374** (not drawn to scale) consists of insulating dielectric body **309** made from a suitable biologically inert material, such as Teflon, that covers split return electrodes **302** and **303**. Conductive return electrodes **302** are fabricated from medical grade stainless steel, titanium or other suitable conductive material. Hollow or solid split conductive tip electrodes **301** and **311** protrude from surrounding dielectric insulator **305**. Their operation is very similar to probe tip **380** as taught in FIG. 2A. Solid tapered conductive tip electrodes **311** and **301** protrude from transparent dielectric insulator **305**. Dielectric insulator **305** also performs as a light pipe or fiber optic cable terminated to high intensity light source **408** providing illumination **448**.

[0150] Probe handle (not drawn to scale) encloses memory module **331**, on/off switch **310** and mode switch **367**.

Temperature sensor **330** (located close to tip) monitors tissue temperature. Split electrode **380** (FIG. 2A) permits dividing or splitting energy delivered to electrode pairs **301/302** and **311/303**. Dual amplifiers or time multiplexing/switching main amplifier **416** are located between electrode pairs directing energy to target **101** avoiding **111** creating asymmetric ablation volume. A small diameter electrode needle is injected from a single point of entry minimizing scarring and simplifying precise electrode placement.

[0151] Connections consist of a tapered dielectric sleeve **309** covering the ridged stainless electrode tube **302**. Insulating sleeve **309** is made from a suitable biologically inert material, which covers electrode **302**. Dielectric **305** insulates conical tipped electrodes **351** and **301**.

[0152] FIG. 5A Ablation Procedure (Without Auxiliary Probes)

[0153] Ablation probe **371** is inserted and directed anatomically into the area where the target nerve to be ablated (Box **531**) is located. Test current **811** is applied (Box **532**). If probe is located in the immediate proximity of the target nerve a physiological reaction will be detected/observed (Example: During elimination of glabellar frowning, muscle stimulation of the forehead will be observed). If reaction is observed, then a mark may optionally be applied on the surface of the skin to locate the area of the nerve. Power is applied (Box **535**) in an attempt to ablate the nerve. If physiological reaction is not observed, (Box **534**) the probe will be relocated closer to the target nerve and the stimulation test will be repeated (Box **536** & **537**). If no physiological reaction is observed, the procedure may be terminated (Box **544**). Also, the probe may be moved in any direction, up, down, near, far, circular, in a pattern, etc. to create a larger area of ablation for a more permanent result.

[0154] In Box **537**, if stimulation is observed again, then the ablation power may be set higher (Box **538**), alternatively, as mentioned, the needle may be moved in various directions, or a larger dosage of energy may be reapplied, to form a larger area of ablation for more effective or permanent termination of signal conduction through the nerve. After delivery of power (Box **540**), stimulation energy may be applied again (Box **541**). If there is no stimulation, the procedure is completed (Box **544**). If there is still signal flow through the nerve (stimulation or physiological reaction) then the probe may be relocated (Box **542**) and the procedure is started over again (Box **533**).

[0155] FIG. 5B Flow Chart of Visually Guided Ablation Procedure Using Auxiliary Probes Such As **771** and **772**.

[0156] Auxiliary probes **771** and **772** (FIGS. 7 and 7A) provide a method to quickly and accurately locate target structure **101** and subsequently mark target location **755**. Auxiliary probes may be much smaller (like acupuncture needles) than ablation probes. Structures are marked typically with an ink or similar pen allowing the illuminated ablation probe **371** or other ablation probe to be quickly guided to mark **755**. Optionally, non-illuminated probes may be used allowing the practitioner to simply feel for the probe tip. For deep structures, probe **771**(FIG. 8) is employed as an electronic beacon. Small current **811**, which is similar to the stimulation current but smaller, from probe tip **702** is used to guide ablation probe **372** (FIG. 8).

[0157] Operation **530** (FIG. 5B) inserts auxiliary probe **771** or **772** (FIGS. 7 and 7A) thru skin **330** and muscle

layer(s) **710** near nerve **101**. Target **101** depth **766** is measured (FIGS. 7 and 7A) using auxiliary probe markings **765**. Decision **533** checks if the probe is in position if not adjustments are performed in **534**. Operation **532** enables nerve stimulation current **811**. When muscle stimulation is obtained or physiological reaction is obtained, Auxiliary probe tip is in place. Depth may be noted by reading marks **765** and location marks **755** may be made in operation **535**. With the probe in position under mark in operations **536** and **537**, operation **538** sets power level **404** and closes ablation switch **410**. Alternatively, stimulation may be applied directly from the ablation probe as taught elsewhere. Operation **540** and controller **401** set generator **411** (FIG. 4) frequencies, modulation **420** envelope and enables power amplifier **416** to deliver preset ablation energy. Region **1203** (FIG. 10) shows the general shape of the ablation region for conical tip **301** for example.

[0158] Between each ablation, procedure **540** (FIG. 5C) (nerve conduction) is tested in **541**. Probe amplifier **416** delivers small nerve stimulation current **811** from electrode **301** or Auxiliary probe **771** or both. Based on the nerve conduction test **541** if the desired level of conduction is achieved the procedure is complete. Operation **542** moves the probe to the next position and repeats conduction test **541**. If complete, the probe(s) is removed in operation **544**. Number and ablation intensity/energy are set by the particular procedure and the desired permanence. The practitioner selects the procedure/power level **404** (FIG. 4) and controller **401** compares the installed probe via identification **331** (FIG. 4) for compatibility with selected procedure. The practitioner is alerted if the installed probe is incompatible with selected power range **404**.

[0159] As an example and not a limitation, five ablation regions (**140**, **141**, **142**, **143**, and **144**) are shown in FIG. 10. Ablation starts with area **144**, then the probe is moved to **143** and so on to **140**. Alternatively, movement may be during insertion, moved laterally, in a circular manner or other manner to enlarge the area of targeted nerve destruction. Nerve responses may be tested after each ablation allowing the practitioner to immediately check the level of nerve conduction. Probe position and power adjustments are made before applying additional ablations if required. Accurate probe location tools and methods taught herein permit use of minimal ablation energy thereby minimizing damage to non-target structures. This translates to reduced healing time and minimal patient discomfort. The instant invention gives the practitioner a new tool to perform a minimally invasive nerve conduction limiting procedure with the ability to select, temporary or permanent nerve conduction interruption with a new level of confidence. This new tool offers a low cost procedure performed typically in office or outpatient setting often taking less than one hour with local anesthetic. In contrast to prior art where surgical procedures require stitches and longer healing intervals with limited control of permanence (nerve re-growth).

[0160] FIG. 6 Side View of the Bi-Polar Probe **610** With Enhanced Laser Targeting.

[0161] Probe insertion and placement is same as taught in FIG. 3. Probe construction is the same as FIG. 3 with the dielectric **305** having embedded optical fibers **690** and **680** providing imaging/illumination. Additional fiber(s) **690-691** are illuminated by a high intensity laser source.

[0162] In special cases were target nerve 101 or ablation region 640 is in close proximity to second nerve 111 or skin 330 bi-polar probes 371 or 372 (FIG. 3) create an annular ablation region between electrodes 301 and/or 302, potentially damaging nearby structures such as other nerves 111. With probe 610 in the desired position, laser 608 (FIG. 4) is turned on target 670 (FIG. 6A) with illuminating fiber(s) 690. Fiber(s) transmitting high intensity laser light to ionized region 640 is illuminated by fiber(s) 690. Simultaneous with laser illumination, RF energy 470 is delivered to electrodes 301 and 302. A relatively low impedance path is created by the high intensity laser illumination wherein RF energy will follow this newly created path. Thus very specific regions may be selected for ablation. By permitting operation at a lower power, energy is concentrated where it is needed and eliminates or reduces damage to nearby structures such as skin 330 or nerves 111. Probe 610 improves on the already very precise ablation taught in FIG. 3 with the addition of a low power laser (or other type light source) and fiber delivery system. In the disclosed embodiment a diode pumped Nd:YAG (Neodymium Doped Yttrium Aluminum Garnet) laser is offered as an example and not a limitation.

[0163] FIG. 6A Side View is the Florescence Emission Guided Hybrid Bi-Polar Tumor Probe.

[0164] Probe construction is similar to FIGS. 3A and 6 with dielectric 305 embedded with a plurality of optical fibers 380, 690, and 680 for illumination detection/imaging. These enhanced systems and processed augments the selective nature of previously disclosed probes. Fiber(s) 690-691 are illuminated by a high intensity light source(s) 608 which is typically a tunable laser or UV LED. Source(s) 608 (FIG. 4) provides illumination for tagged marker(s) 670 in the disclose embodiment where a tunable laser is employed. Excitation/illumination wavelength(s) are specific to the dye/nano-particle used with marker 670 that is very specific for the desired target 671. The marker/tag is typically a protein specific antigen combined with a florescent marker. The novel probe illumination permits delivery of intense illumination to the target for maximum system sensitivity. Many dyes excited by short (Blue/UV) wavelength light are transmitted poorly in tissue but are easily delivered by fiber 690. A second application offered for hybrid bi-polar ablation probe 610 is for locating/destroying small cancer lesions. The probe addresses cases where surgery is not practical or it dangerous due to location or sub-operable size. Quantum-dot or dye tagged antibody materials 670 are injected into the patients where it attaches to target structure 671. Once tagged, cancer node(s) may be located, tested, and treated.

[0165] FIG. 7 Side View of Auxiliary Single Tipped Nerve Probe

[0166] This probe may be used in conjunction with any of the therapeutic probes 371 and their derivatives. The needle itself will be very fine in nature, such as an acupuncture type needle. By its small size, numerous needle insertions may be accomplished with no scarring and minimal pain. The probe 771 will be inserted in the vicinity of the target tissue through skin 330. The exposed tip of 771, 702 will be exposed and electrically connected to generator 732 via wire 734. The surface of probe 771 is covered with dielectric 704 so the only exposed electrical contact is surface 702 and

return electrode 736. Exposed tip 702 will be advanced to the vicinity of target 101 and test stimulation current will be applied. Appropriate physiological reaction will be observed and when the tip 702 is properly located, depth will be noted via observing marks 765. External mark 755 may be applied for reference. Ablation probe 371 may then be advanced to the proximity of the target tissue under the X mark 755 and ablation/nerve destruction as described elsewhere may be performed.

[0167] FIG. 7A Side View of Auxiliary Dual-Tipped Nerve Probe.

[0168] Dual tipped probe 772 offers an additional embodiment that eliminates return electrode pad 736. Probe frame/handle 739 holds two fine needles, 702 and 701, in the disclosed embodiment that are spaced a short distance (a few mm)-mm apart (730). The shaft of conductive needle 701 is covered with dielectric insulator 706, similar to the construction of probe 771 (FIG. 7). The shaft of the second conductive needle 702 is covered with dielectric insulator sleeve 703. Electric generator 732 provides current to the probes via conductors 734 and 735. Current originates from 701 and returns via electrode 702. Large probe handle 739 is drawn out to teach the dual probes. To aide in probe depth measurement, markers 765 are printed on needle shafts. Dielectric insulating sleeves 703 and 706 isolate the needle shaft current from muscle layer 710. Current applied via generator 732 stimulates the nerve directly while avoiding muscle 710. Smaller probe tips with smaller current permits accurately locating small structures.

[0169] Probes 702 and 701 are very small gage needles similar in size to common acupuncture needles, thus permitting repeated probing with minimal discomfort, bleeding, and insertion force. Sharp probes are inserted thru skin 330 and muscle layer(s) 710 near nerve 101. The practitioner locates target nerve 101, then the skin surface may be marked 755 as location aide for ablation step as shown in flow chart (FIG. 5B). Once the desired site of ablation is located, ablation probe(s) 610(FIG. 6), 371 and related probes (FIG. 3), may be inserted under skin 330, illuminated 448 by tip 305. They are visible through skin (via illumination 448 from tip 305) and are guided to mark 755 (FIG. 8). The observed intensity 765 from illumination source 305 is used as an estimator of measured depth 765. This simple probe system permits rapid, accurate locating of target structures with minimal pain and injury. Accurate target location permits use of lower ablation energy thereby minimizing damage to nearby structures.

[0170] FIG. 8 Side View of Guided Ablation Procedure With Auxiliary Nerve Probe(s).

[0171] Auxiliary probes 771 and 772 (FIGS. 7 and 7A) are used to accurately locate target structure 101. Probe 771 holds a fine conductive needle 702 that has a shaft covered with dielectric insulator 704. Electric generator 732 provides a small current to the auxiliary probe via conductor 734 and return conductor 735 via return electrode 736. The sharp auxiliary probe is inserted thru skin 330 and muscle layer(s) 710 near target nerve 101. Dielectric insulating sleeve 704 isolates needle shaft from muscle layer 710. Current is applied via generator 732 thereby stimulating the nerve directly while avoiding muscles 710. Prior art probes without insulating sleeve 704 stimulate both the nerve and muscle simultaneously, masking nerve 101 and subsequently making nerve location difficult.

[0172] Auxiliary probe 771 and 772 provide a method to quickly locate shallow or deep target structures. Shallow structures are typically marked with ink pen allowing illuminated ablation probe 371 or its equivalents to be quickly guided to mark 755. Optionally, non-illuminated probes may be used by the practitioner who simply feels for the probe tip. For deep structures, probe 771 may also be employed as an electronic beacon; small current 811 (which will be lower intensity and different from the stimulating current) from probe tip 702 is used to guide ablation probe 372. Amplifier 430 (FIG. 4) detects current from tip electrode 301 for reading and displays it by controller 401. Alternately probe 701 is used as a receiver detecting current 811 from electrode 301. Moving probe tip 301 horizontally 1202 and in depth 766 relative to auxiliary probe 702 changes current 810 inversely proportional to distance. Detected signal current 811 isolated and buffered by amplifier 430, is measured and the current is displayed to simple bar graph 554 for rapid reading. In addition, audio feedback, in which the tone is modulated by proximity of probe tip 351, 352 or equivalent in relation to auxiliary probe tip 702 is provided to minimize or eliminate the practitioner having to look away from the needle, thus assisting in accurate probe placement. Variable frequency/pitch and volume audio signal are proportional to sensed current 811 that is generated by 452. The tone signal emitted by speaker 451 (FIGS. 4 and 1) provides a pleasant and accurate method to aide in probe placement. Simultaneously, illumination source 408 is modulated by amplifier 456 to blink at a rate proportional to the sensed current. This permits the practitioner to quickly and accurately guide ablation probe 372 into position using a combination of audio and visual guides. The audio and visual aides also reduce the practitioner's training/learning time. The novel real-time probe placement feedback gives the practitioner confidence that the system is working correctly so he/she can concentrate on the delicate procedure. Accurate probe location permits use of minimal energy during ablation, minimizing damage to non-target structures and reducing healing time and patient discomfort.

[0173] FIG. 9 A High-Energy Electro-Surgery Sinusoid Cutting Waveform 910.

[0174] Lower energy pulse width modulated (or PWM) sinusoid 920 for coagulation is also well known to electro-surgery art. Variations of cut followed by coagulation are also well known.

[0175] FIG. 10 Side View of Visually Guided Ablation Procedure.

[0176] Auxiliary probes 771 and 772 (FIGS. 7 and 7A) have accurately located target structure 101 and subsequently marked target locations 140 to 144. Shallow structures are marked typically with ink pen (755) allowing illuminated ablation probe 371, 372 or equivalent to be quickly guided to that point. For deep structures, probe 771 is employed as electronic beacon, small current 811 from probe tip 702 is used to guide ablation probe 372 as taught in FIG. 8.

[0177] Ablation probe 372 is inserted thru skin 330 and muscle layer(s) 710 near nerve 101. Illumination source 408 permits practitioner to quickly and accurately guide illuminated 448 ablation probe 372 into position. Illumination 448 from ablation probe as seen by practitioner 775 is used as an additional aide in depth estimation. Selectable nerve simu-

lation current 811 aids nerve 101 location within region 1204. This novel probe placement system gives practitioner confidence system is working correctly so s/he can concentrate on the delicate procedure. Accurate probe location permits use of minimal energy during ablation, minimizing damage to non-target structures and reducing healing time and patient discomfort.

[0178] Region 1203 shows the general shape of the ablation region for conical tip 301. Tip 301 is positioned in close proximity to target nerve 101. Ablation generally requires one or a series of localized ablations. Number and ablation intensity/energy are set by the particular procedure and the desired permanence.

[0179] Five ablation regions are illustrated 140, 141, 142, 143, and 144; however, there could be more or less regions. Ablation starts with area 144, then the probe is moved to 143 and so on to 140, conversely, ablations could start at 140 and progress to 144. Also, the practitioner could perform rotating motions, thus further increasing the areas of ablation and permanence of the procedure. Between each ablation procedure 540 (FIG. 5C), a small nerve stimulation test current 811 is emitted from electrode 301. The approximate effective range of the nerve stimulation current 811 is shown by 1204. Testing nerve response after each ablation allows the practitioner to immediately check level of nerve conduction. Without probe 372 removal, the practitioner receives immediate feedback as to the quality of the ablation. Then minor probe position adjustments are made before conducting additional ablations (if required).

[0180] FIG. 1-11A Controller and Probe Data Base Structure

[0181] Controller 101 maintains local probe 1460, patient 1430, and procedure 1410 databases. All work together to insure correct probes and settings are used for the desired procedure. Automatically verifying that the attached probe matches selected procedure and verifying probe authentication and usage to avoid patient cross contamination or use of unauthorized probes. Automatic probe inventory control quickly and accurately transfers procedure results to the billing system.

[0182] FIG. 11—Procedure Parameters Code(s) Database 1410

[0183] From a touch screen, the practitioner selects the desired procedure from list 1410. For example "TEMPORARY NERVE CONDUCTION" 1411, "SMALL TUMOR ICC" 1412, and "SMALL NERVE ABLATE" 1413 are a few of the choices. Each procedure has a unique procedure code 1416 to be used in the billing system. Power range parameter 1417 is a recommended power setting via power level control 404. The recommended probe(s) Associated with procedure 1415 and power range parameter 1417 are listed in parameters 1419. With the probe connected, the part number is read from memory 331 (FIGS. 1, 3 and 4) and compared to list 1419. The total power parameter 1418 is the maximum energy that the system may deliver for this procedure and is determined by the procedure code, probe being used and software parameters. These parameters may be modified, updated and changed as required by addition of new probes and procedures allowed/approved. Power is delivered, measured and totaled with integrator 435 (FIG. 4). The power integration circuit is designed as a hardwired

redundant safety circuit that turns off the power amplifier if maximum energy is exceeded. This novel feature protects patients from system fault or practitioner error. Standard procedure time **1420** is doubled and added to current RTC **482** then written to probe memory **331** (in FIG. 1).

[0184] FIG. 11 & 11A—Probe Usage Authorization Database **1460**

[0185] From touch screen **450** (FIGS. 1 and 4) practitioner selects desired procedure from list **1410**. Probe **371** and equivalents (FIGS. 3A-D) type is selected from recommended list **1419** and is connected via cable **1334** (FIG. 1) to control unit **101**. Once connected, controller **401** (FIG. 4) reads the stored time register from ID memory module **331** (FIG. 1). If start time **1487** read is zero (factory default), current real time clock **482** (FIG. 4) is written to database **1460** in the start time field **1467**, **1430** and **1435**. Simultaneously, twice the standard procedure time **1420** parameter is added to RTC **482** and written to time register **1487** via serial bus **403**. If probe start time **1487** reads (**331**) non-zero, the value compared to real time clock **482**. If greater than current time plus twice the standard selected procedure duration **1420**, the controller alerts the practitioner via display **450**, speaker **451** and flashing probe illumination **608** of previously probe used condition. To correct the situation, the practitioner simply connects a new sterile probe and repeats the above process. FIG. 13 teaches additional detail regarding probe verification usage and related database operations. Periodically controller **401** performs the above verification to alert practitioner that he/she has forgotten to change probe(s).

[0186] During the procedure (FIG. 10), various parameters such as peak temperature **1473**, power **1472**, impedance, etc. . . . are read, scaled, stored and displayed. Parameters such as procedure start **1467**; end time **1468**, serial number **1469**, and part number **1468** are recorded as well. Critical parameters are written to local high-speed memory **438** for display and analysis. On a time permitting or end of procedure, data is mirrored to removable USB **1320** memory stick **1338**. Probe specific parameters **1463** are copied and written to probe memory **1338** for use at probe refurbishment facility. Database checksum/CRC(s) **1449**, **1479**, and **1499** are check and updated as required. Faults such as shorts (dielectric **305** (FIG. 3) breakdown) that are detected are saved to error field **1494** and **1474**. If network connection **1305** is available, email request for replacement probe are automatically sent to repair/customer service center **1308**. Defective probe **374** with saved failure information **1494** is returned for credit and repair.

[0187] Use of a USB memory stick permits continued operation in the event of a network **1326** failure Data is loaded to memory **1338** for simple transfer to office computer **1306** (FIG. 1) for backup. Commonly available USB memory sticks **1320** have large data capacities in the tens to hundreds of megabytes at a low cost with long retention times. USB memory sticks also can support data encryption for secure transfer of patient data. Sealed versions are available as well compatible with chemical sterilization procedures.

[0188] If computer network **1326** such as Ethernet 802.11 or wireless 802.11x is available, files are mirrored to local storage **1309**, remote server **1307**. The remote server (typically maintained by equipment manufacture) can be

remotely update procedure(s). To insure data integrity and system reliability a high availability database engine made by Birdstep of Americas Birdstep technology, Inc 2101 Fourth Ave. Suite 2000, Seattle Wash. is offered as an example. The Birdstep database supports distributed backups, extensive fault and error recovery while requiring minimal system resources.

[0189] FIG. 11—Patient/Procedure Database **1430**

[0190] From a touch screen, the practitioner selects or enters patient name from previous procedure **1430** and creates a new record **1433**. Similarly, a procedure is selected from **1410** (for example “TEMPORARY NERVE CONDUCTION”**1411**, “SMALL TUMOR ICC”**1412**, and “SMALL NERVE ABLATE”**1413**). Each procedure has a unique procedure code **1416** that is used for the billing system. Other information such as practitioners name **1440**, date **1435** is entered to record **1433**. As taught above probe appropriate for the procedure is connected and verified, part **1470** and serial number **1469** recorded.

[0191] FIG. 11—Voice and Notes

[0192] The practitioner enters additional text notes to file **1442** or records them with microphone **455** (FIG. 5) to wave file **1445** for later playback or transcription. The instant invention permits temporary/permanent nerve conduction interruption. Thus, procedures are performed at intervals from months to years apart. A hands free integrated voice recorder is extremely useful. Detailed text and voice notes made while probing/ablating are also recording specific settings, and patient response. A feature that is very helpful when reviewing treatment progress and saves valuable time instead of writing notes. Practitioners play back voice/wave files **1445** with standard audio tools a his/or hers desk. Audio files **1445** can be sent via email or file transfer for transcription, updating note field **1442**.

[0193] At the end of procedure, records are updated and stored to memory **438**. Backup copies are written to USB **1320** memory stick **1338** (FIG. 1). If computer network **1326** such as Ethernet 802.11 or wireless 802.11x is available, files are mirrored to local storage **1309**, remote server **1307**. Patient name **1436**, procedure date **1435**, and procedure codes **1416** are automatically transferred via network or USB device **1320** to billing system **1306**. USB memory stick permits continued operation in the event of a network **1326** failure. Data is loaded to USB memory **1338** for simple transfer to office computer **1306** (FIG. 1) for backup. USB memory sticks **1320** have large data capacities in the tens to hundreds of megabytes at a low cost with long retention times. USB memory stick also support data encryption for secure transfer of patient data. Insuring patient is accurately billed with minimal office paper work. Probe inventory is automatic maintained with replacement probes automatic shipped as needed.

Alternative Probe Configurations

[0194] FIG. 12 is a schematic view of an alternative embodiment of a single axis electrosurgical probe **2000** having a longitudinal probe axis **2001**, which is similar to the probe of FIG. 3. However, probe **2000** of FIG. 12 features substantially equal surface area conductive electrodes **2002** and **2004** located along a longitudinal axis. A probe **371** also having substantially equal surface area electrodes **301** and **302** is shown in FIG. 3A.

[0195] In an equal electrode surface area implementation, one of the conductive electrodes **2002**, **2004** may be selectively connected to a stimulation current source or an ablation current source as described above. The other electrode **2002**, **2004** may be unconnected or connected as a ground or return path for the connected current source. In the embodiment shown in FIG. **12** conductive electrode **2002** is configured to be connected to the ablation source making electrode **2002** the active electrode. Thus electrode **2004** is in this embodiment a return electrode. Either electrode **2002**, **2004** may be connected to a current source or return with appropriate switches.

[0196] Since electrodes **2002** and **2004** have substantially equal surface area, the local heating formed upon the application of RF ablation energy to the active electrode **2002** results in a heating zone having a substantially symmetrical ellipsoid form.

[0197] The single axis electrosurgical probe **2000** of FIG. **12** also features a dielectric insulator **2006** positioned along the probe axis between the conductive electrodes **2002** and **2004**. The dielectric insulator **2006** may have any suitable length, and probes with alternative length insulators may be manufactured for specific ablation procedures. Varying the length of the dielectric insulator **2006** varies the gap dimension **2008** between the electrodes **2002** and **2004**. Varying the gap dimension **2008** provides for optimization of the current density within the ablation zone, varies the length of the ablation zone and permits the use of higher voltages, if desired. Thus, the gap dimension may be selected in conjunction with other parameters such as electrode surface area and ablation current to achieve select ablation volumes and tissue temperatures for specific applications.

[0198] The probe **2000** of FIG. **12** also features a blunt tip **2010** rather than the conical tip **351**, chiseled tip **352** or other tips of FIG. **3**. The blunt tip **2010** of FIG. **12** has a smooth rounded profile and is advantageous in certain instances to allow the probe to be easily advanced and maneuvered under the skin minimizing the risk of puncture or the cutting of adjacent tissue or anatomical structures. Thus, a blunt tip **2010** may significantly reduce the bruising or other trauma associated with a procedure.

[0199] The probe **2000** of FIG. **12** may include a sensor **2012**. The sensor may be a temperature sensor **2012**. A temperature sensor provides for active temperature monitoring within the ablation zone. Alternatively, a single axis electrosurgical probe of any configuration may be implemented with a Kalman filter as taught by Conolly U.S. Pat. No. 6,384,384 which patent is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. Kalman filters are also used to estimate tissue temperature within an ablation volume. Kalman filters are suitable for use where well-defined tissue state changes occur at specific temperatures due to protein denaturation such as the denaturation of collagen at **65C**. Kalman filter temperature monitoring is advantageous because the bulk and cost of a separate temperature sensor can be avoided.

[0200] FIG. **13** is a schematic view of an asymmetrical single axis probe **2014** also defining a longitudinal probe axis **2015**. The probe **2014** features a first conductive electrode **2016** and a second conductive electrode **2018** having different surface areas. In the embodiment shown in FIG. **13**, the first electrode **2016** is an active electrode and the second electrode **2018** having a larger surface area is a

return electrode. A probe having any surface area ratio between an active and return electrode may be fabricated and used to achieve specific ablation results. In addition, the relative positions of the active electrode **2016** and the return electrode **2018** with respect to the tip of a given probe may be switched. In one embodiment the ratio of the active electrode **2016** to the surface area of the return electrode **2018** is 1:3. Other ratios including 1:8 may be implemented to achieve specific results. The surface area ratio may further be adjustable using a sleeve or other mechanism which will shield or cover a portion of on or both electrodes thus increasing or decreasing the length of the gap defining dielectric insulator **2019**. Generally, asymmetrical electrode surface areas will result in asymmetrical heating and ablation because of the higher current density of the RF ablation energy at the electrode with smaller surface area. For example, upon the application of RF energy to the active electrode of the FIG. **13** embodiment, a tissue volume proximal the active electrode **2016** may be asymmetrically heated due to the greater current density resulting from the relatively small surface area of the active electrode **2016**. Asymmetrical tissue heating coupled with precise RF power integration taught herein and various probe geometries permits the formation of selected repeatable and controlled ablation volumes.

[0201] FIG. **14** schematically illustrates an alternative asymmetrical probe **2020**, which is similar in many respects to the asymmetrical probe **2014** of FIG. **13**. The asymmetrical probe **2020** of FIG. **14**, however, features an active electrode **2022** having a surface area greater than that of the return electrode **2024**. In the FIG. **14** embodiment current density is higher at the relatively smaller surface area electrode **2024**, thus ablation energy is concentrated in the dielectric insulator gap **2025** between the electrodes **2022** and **2024** nearer return electrode **2024** and away from the tip of the probe.

[0202] FIG. **15** is a schematic view of one embodiment of a multiple electrode probe **2026**. The multiple electrode probe **2026** includes a substantially needle-shaped probe body **2028** which defines a longitudinal probe axis **2029**. More than two electrodes are associated with the probe body and positioned at various locations along the probe axis. In the FIG. **15** embodiment the electrodes include an active electrode **2030**, a return electrode **2032**, and a stimulation electrode **2034**. In this embodiment the active electrode is positioned near the tip of the multiple electrode probe **2026**, the return electrode **2032** is positioned away from the tip and the stimulation electrode **2034** is positioned between the active electrode **2030** and the return electrode **2032**. It should be noted that the position of the various electrodes with respect to each other and the tip may be varied to achieve specific ablation and probe positioning advantages. In addition, the connection of any given physical electrode as an active electrode, return or stimulation electrode may be varied at the discretion of the user with a simple switching mechanism between the electrode and the ablation or stimulation energy sources. Alternatively, a separate ground or return path **2035** may be utilized with any configuration of electrodes. The various electrodes of the multiple electrode probe **2026** are separated by a first dielectric insulator **2036** and a second dielectric insulator **2038**. FIG. **16** schematically illustrates the multi-polar probe **2026** of FIG. **15** with the addition of a curved section **2040** opposite the portion of the probe body **2028** associated with the electrodes. The

curved section **2040** may in certain instances allow the practitioner to achieve optimal probe positioning with a minimum of unnecessary tissue disruption. A multiple electrode probe **2026** may be implemented with dielectric insulators **2036**, **2038** of varying dimensions, sensors or electrodes of different surface areas, all as described above, to achieve desired ablation results.

[**0203**] FIG. **17-19** schematically illustrates an alternative embodiment of a multiple electrode probe **2042**. The multiple electrode probe **2042** of FIG. **17-19** includes a probe body **2044** which defines a longitudinal probe axis **2045**. Multiple electrodes **2046-2062** are associated with the probe body **2044** at separate locations along the probe axis. In the embodiment shown in FIG. **17-19** the electrodes are uniformly sized and spaced. It is important to note, however, that different sizes of electrodes and non-uniform spacing of the electrodes may be implemented to achieve specific ablation results. Preferably, each of the electrodes **2046-2062** may be selectively connected with one or more switches to a stimulation current source, an ablation current source, a ground for the stimulation current source a ground for an ablation energy source or left unconnected. As described in detail below, the flexibility provided by switched connection of each electrode to a current source or ground provides certain advantages in probe location and ablation. In addition, the multiple electrode probe **2042** could be deployed in conjunction with a separate return electrode **2064**, typically placed in contact with tissue away from the ablation site.

Placement Methods

[**0204**] Several methods of properly positioning a probe adjacent to a selected nerve for ablation energy application are discussed above. For example, probe placement methods featuring fluorescence marker dyes, optical probe guidance and electronic probe guidance with the use of low energy nerve stimulation current are discussed in detail. Certain of the alternative probe configurations as illustrated in FIGS. **13-19** provide for refined probe placement methods using variations of the basic electrical stimulation techniques described above.

[**0205**] The single axis electrosurgical probe **2000** of FIG. **12** or the asymmetric probes **2014**, **2020** of FIG. **13** and **14** may each be properly positioned using an iterative technique, as described above with reference to FIGS. **5A-C**. The iterative placement method may be refined for uses with multiple electrode probes such as are depicted in FIGS. **15-19**.

[**0206**] For example, the FIG. **15** embodiment of a multiple electrode probe **2026** includes a separate stimulation electrode **2034**. The stimulation electrode **2034** is located along the longitudinal axis **2029** of the probe body, typically though not necessarily between an active electrode **2030** and a return electrode **2032**. During the stimulation and positioning phases of a probe placement procedure the active electrode **2030**, return electrode **2032** or a separate electrode **2035** not associated with the probe body **2028** may serve as the ground for the stimulation current source. As is described above with respect to FIG. **5** a practitioner will typically monitor target nerve response by observing muscle reaction elicited by the stimulation current as the multiple electrode probe **2026** is iteratively guided closer to the target nerve **101**. The level of stimulation currently applied may be

adjusted to increase or decrease the effective stimulation range depending upon the muscle response observed by the practitioner. Typically, stimulation current will be continuously or stepwise reduced with a switch or other control to decrease the stimulation range as the stimulation electrode **2034** is guided in close proximity to the subject nerve **101**, assuring that the nerve is ultimately placed adjacent to the stimulation electrode.

[**0207**] In probe embodiments where the stimulation electrode is positioned in between the ablation electrodes **2030**, **2032**, the above described iterative method guarantees that the target nerve is positioned within an elliptical ablation zone **2064** (see FIG. **16**) which will be formed between the active electrode **2030** and return electrode **2032** upon the application of RF ablation energy.

[**0208**] FIG. **17-19** shows an alternative embodiment of a multiple electrode probe **2042** placed in various orientations with respect to a target nerve **2066**. For example in FIG. **17**, the multiple electrode probe **2042** is placed transverse the nerve **2066**, in FIG. **18** the multiple electrode probe **2042** is placed parallel to a portion of the nerve **2066** and FIG. **19** shows the multiple electrode probe **2042** placed across the target nerve **2066** at an angle. As is described in detail above, each of the electrodes **2046-2065** may preferably be selectively connected to a stimulation current source, an ablation energy source, a ground or left unconnected. The electrodes **2046-2062** may be connected manually or switched and activated electronically.

[**0209**] The multiple electrodes of the FIG. **17-19** embodiment of the multiple electrode probe **2042** provides for certain advanced placement and ablation procedures. For example, FIG. **17** illustrates a method for locating and selectively ablating a target nerve **2066**, which runs substantially transverse the probe at a point along the axial length of the probe **2042**. This placement method features the practitioner initially positioning the probe across the target nerve **2066**. The electrodes **2046** through **2062** are then activated sequentially with stimulating current, in adjacent active/ground pairs (bipolar mode) or individually with reliance upon an external ground **2064** (mono-polar mode). The practitioner may then observe the response of one or more muscles associated with the target nerve as stimulation current is applied to successive electrodes **2046-2062**.

[**0210**] For example, with reference to FIG. **17**, stimulation current may be applied between electrodes **2046** and **2048**. The practitioner notes that there is no corresponding muscle response. Stimulation current may next be applied between electrodes **2048** and **2050**. Again, no muscle response is observed by the practitioner. Sequentially, stimulation current is then applied to successive electrode pairs. When the stimulation current is applied between electrodes **2054** and **2056** there may be a mild muscle response. When the stimulation current is applied between electrodes **2056** and **2058** however, a strong muscle response will be observed. Continuing on, the stimulation is then applied between electrodes **2058** and **2060**. Here a greatly reduced muscle response is observed indicating that the nerve is crossing the probe substantially between electrodes **2056** and **2058**. Subsequently, ablation energy may be applied between designated electrodes **2056** and **2058** to ablate nerve **2066**.

[**0211**] FIG. **18** illustrates a similar nerve location and ablation procedure wherein the nerve **2066** is substantially

parallel to and adjacent to the axial length of the probe **2042** adjacent electrodes **2048** through **2056**. In this second example the practitioner first applies stimulation current is applied between electrodes **2046** and **2048**. A mild muscle response or no muscle response may be observed. When stimulation current is applied between electrodes **2048** and **2050**, a strong muscle response is noted by the practitioner.

[0212] Sequentially, the stimulation current is then applied between electrodes **2050** and **2052** with similar strong muscle response observed. This sequential stimulation and response process is observed through the activation of electrodes **2056** and **2058** where the muscle response is substantially diminished or not observable. This is an indication that electrodes **2048** through **2056** are all in contact with the nerve **2042**. The electrodes **2048** through **2056** may then be switched to the ablation current source activated and sequentially or simultaneously in bi-polar pairs or individually in bi-polar or mono-polar mode to ablate the nerve **2042**. The nerve could be ablated along a select length defined by the number of electrodes activated by the practitioner. This method could also be implemented in mono-polar mode whereby stimulation or ablation energy is applied between one or more electrodes **2046** through **2062** and a separate return electrode applied externally on the body.

[0213] FIG. **19** illustrates a substantially similar nerve location and ablation procedure wherein the multiple electrode probe **2042** crosses the nerve **2066** diagonally or at an oblique angle to the probe axis. Thus, FIG. **19** illustrates a method for angular positioning of the probe **2042** relative to the nerve **2066**. In this example stimulation current applied as described above at electrodes **2052**, **2054**, and perhaps **2056** would result in a response in the associated muscle. If a larger number of electrodes elicit a muscle response, this is an indication of a broader nerve/probe contact area resulting from a more parallel contact placement of the probe **2042** relative to the nerve **2066**. Such a determination of angular placement can be enhanced by fabricating a probe with relatively short distance between adjacent electrodes, relative to the diameter of a nerve of interest. The practitioner may also maneuver the probe to attain a muscle response from more or less electrodes as desired providing the opportunity to ablate a greater or lesser length of the nerve without axially repositioning the probe.

[0214] The above methods of angular probe positioning and sequential stimulation may be combined with the iterative techniques also described above. For example, the stimulation current generator may be set at a relatively high level initially and reduced when the general location of the nerve with respect to certain electrodes is determined.

[0215] For example, the stimulation current threshold (to elicit an observable response) between electrodes **2048** and **2050** of FIG. **19** would be higher than the threshold between electrodes **2050** and **2053**. This information could be indicated graphically, numerically or audibly to allow the practitioner to reposition the probe for more parallel or more transverse positioning of probe **2042** relative to nerve **2066**.

[0216] The apparatus and methods described above may be implemented with various features which enhance the safety, ease of use and effectiveness of the system. For example, the probe may be implemented with an ergonomic and functional handle which enhances both operational

effectiveness and provides for the implementation of safety features. Individual probes may be carefully managed, preferably with system software to assure that a selected probe functions properly, is sterile and not reused, and that the proper probe is used for each specific treatment procedure. Similarly, safeguards may be included with the system to assure that the operator is certified and trained for the specific treatment protocol selected. Various treatment management methods and specific treatment therapies may be selected for both the best results and for enhanced patient safety. In one embodiment, the treatment, therapeutic, and safety methods may be implemented with and rigorously controlled by software running on a processor associated with the ablation apparatus and system as is described in detail below.

[0217] System Management Method

[0218] The concurrent goals of patient safety, procedure efficiency and therapeutic success can be advanced through an effective system management method. A system management method such as is described herein may be implemented through computer software and hardware including computer processors and memory operating within or in association with the control console and the probe system described herein. Various interfaces between a practitioner, the control console, and the probe system may be present. In addition the hardware associated with an ablation system, including the probe stimulation current source, ablation current source, and the probe system may be in communication with and provide feedback to the system processor. Alternatively, the steps of the system management method could be implemented manually.

[0219] In a software and processor based system embodiment, the techniques described below for managing an electrosurgical probe and system may be implemented as a method, apparatus or article of manufacture using standard programming and/or engineering techniques to produce software, firmware, hardware, or any combination thereof. The term "article of manufacture" as used herein refers to code or logic implemented with or stored upon a medium or device (e.g., magnetic storage medium such as hard disk drives, floppy disks, tape), optical storage (e.g., CD-ROMs, optical disks, etc.), volatile and non-volatile memory devices (e.g., EEPROMs, ROMs, PROMs, RAMs, DRAMs, SRAMs, firmware, programmable logic, etc.). Code in the computer readable medium is accessed and executed by a processor. The code in which implementations are made may further be accessible through a transmission media or from a file server over a network. In such cases, the article of manufacture in which the code is implemented may comprise a transmission media such as network transmission line, wireless transmission media, signals propagating through space, radio waves, infrared, optical signals, etc. Of course, those skilled in the art will recognize that many modifications may be made to this configuration without departing from the scope of the implementations and that the article of manufacture may comprise any information bearing medium known in the art.

[0220] FIGS. **20-24** include a series of flow charts detailing various aspects of a method of probe management, system certification, system licensing and operator training consistent with the present invention. Although the method steps included herein are shown in a particular order on

FIGS. 20-24, other orders of operations are within the scope of the disclosed method. Certain aspects of the method, for example the practitioner authorization method illustrated in FIG. 20, are executed before delivery of the system to a practitioner to assure that the system is set up appropriately according to the practitioner's license and skills certification. Other aspects of the method such as probe ordering and probe self test (FIG. 21 and FIG. 22) are performed at the probe distribution point to assure that electrosurgical probes to be shipped are registered, tested, and identified in accordance with the practitioner's system, license, and treatment certification. In FIGS. 23A-C, the patient side elements of the overall probe management method are described as these steps will be followed interactively by the practitioner at or before the time of treatment. Any suitable computer interface may be provided to accept input into the system from the practitioner. As described above in paragraphs 0194-0204 a touch screen monitor, voice input, proximity sensor, or other interface for rapidly providing input is advantageous for avoiding input delays and to enhance input accuracy.

[0221] One aspect of a system management method consistent with the present invention is illustrated in FIG. 20. FIG. 20 shows certain steps associated with a method of managing the "customers" of a treatment system provider and the setup of the customer's system prior to delivery, recognizing that the customers of the system providers are physicians, surgeons and other practitioners who provide therapeutic treatment. The method begins with a determination of the status of a select practitioner as a new customer or a returning customer of the system provider (step 3000). If the practitioner is new, a new private and public key pair is generated (step 3002) using any one of many well-known public-key cryptosystems or similar technologies. For example, Lu, et al. U.S. Pat. No. 4,306,111 discloses a representative cryptosystem, which patent is incorporated herein by reference. Public and private keys and other customer information such as identification or billing information associated with the practitioner are stored to a database (step 3006). Prior to performing any system setup procedure, a setup operator must select the new or previously stored practitioner data from the database (step 3008). The private key for the selected practitioner is read from the stored list (step 3010). Steps 3012, 3014 and 3016 include reading a serial number or media access control address (MAC address) from the memory associated with an electrosurgical system using the MAC address or serial number as a seed for a hashing function to encrypt a private key for storage in the system memory. As discussed above in paragraphs 0194-0195, the system memory is in communication with the control for the system stimulation and ablation current sources. Thus implementation of the steps illustrated on FIG. 20 assures that the system (when provided to a practitioner) may be used to deliver only certain treatment protocols associated with the selected practitioner in accordance with the practitioner's established license, training and certification, as is described in greater detail below.

[0222] FIG. 21 includes a flow chart of the probe selection and ordering aspects of the system management method. As is described in detail herein, specific probes having specific physical parameters and energy delivery capacities may be prescribed or selected for the various ablation or nerve block procedures a practitioner may desire to perform. The fol-

lowing steps assure that the practitioner orders a correct probe from a probe manufacturer or distribution center and that the correct probes may be used only according to the intended treatment procedure and the practitioner's current license or certification. As described below, additional steps also assure that the correct treatment protocol is delivered through the correct probe thereby enhancing patient safety and treatment effectiveness.

[0223] The probe ordering process begins with order information provided by the system or the practitioner. Selection of the customer/practitioner (step 3018) and retrieval of the practitioner's data (step 3020) from the encrypted customer database (step 3022) follows. Previously stored practitioner data may be retrieved and if necessary decrypted (step 3020, step 3022). Most importantly the prescribed probe protocols associated with the practitioner's system and certifications are determined (step 3024). At this point, the probe which is being ordered must be matched with the protocols of intended use and the practitioner's registered system, license and certification data. This match could be accomplished manually; however, manual probe ordering introduces the possibility of human error. Preferably, a sterile packaged probe is interrogated via RF, optical or wired link for approved treatment protocols. For example, the probe may be interrogated for approved protocols over a communications link (step 3026). This step may occur at the probe distribution location. In one embodiment the communications link is an RF link using ISO18000 part 3 protocol operating at 13.56 Mhz. Other suitable wired or wireless communication strategies could be used as well. A determination must be made whether the probe matches the allowed treatment protocols associated with the practitioner's system (step 3028). If no match occurs, an error message will be delivered in an automated implementation (step 3030 and step 3032). If a match is registered, session keys for use by hashing functions will be generated (step 3034). The session keys and other information are then written to memory associated with the selected sterile probe (step 3036). In step 3038 the probe serial number is returned to the system and a cyclic redundancy check (CRC) or other hash function is performed to verify both the correct serial number and proper information storage (step 3039). In a wireless implementation an incorrect CRC may result from communications failure. In this case, the probe may be reoriented for a better signal (step 3040). Upon the completion of probe ordering, a probe self test will typically be completed, before the probe is sent to a customer/practitioner.

[0224] FIG. 22 illustrates in flow chart form a wireless communication probe self-test. Accuracy and patient safety may be enhanced if the probe self-test occurs while the probe is still in a sterile container. Self-test is preferably accomplished prior to the delivery of a probe to a practitioner. After the correct probe is ordered as described above, a command to a start self-test is issued in step 3041. A rectified RF field can be used to power a processor and/or memory 331 associated with a preferred "smart" probe (See FIG. 1). One embodiment of the probe uses, for example, an Atmel AT90SC6408RFT power processor. This processor is particularly suitable for a smart probe since it includes security features such as: OTP (One Time Programmable) EEPROM area, RNG (Random Number Generator), side channel attack countermeasures, hardware DES/TDES, CRC, ISO 14443 Type A & B contactless and serial interfaces. A smart

probe could also be implemented with other processors. An alternative embodiment of the probe, requiring identification only with less security functionality may be implemented with, for example an Atmel AT88SC0204CRF 2-Kbit user memory with authentication and encryption, an ISO/IEC 14443 Type B chip or other less full featured processor.

[0225] In step 3041 the processor tests internal memory, the proper operation of the temperature sensor 311 and possibly other matters. A defective probe will generate an error message (step 3042 and step 3044). In such case the defective probe serial number will be written to local storage before the probe is sent for repair (step 3046 and step 3048). A probe passing self-test operation 3041 will be subject to a write clear of the used probe flag as discussed in more detail below (step 3050). Verification of the write clear of the used probe flag is performed (step 3052), with a failed verification resulting in the error notification and repair steps 3044-3048. If the write clear of the used probe flag is verified, the serial number of the probe is written to a record for inventory control (step 3054). This method permits the select probe to be tracked to a specific end user. The public key system detailed above keeps any given probe from accidentally or intentionally being used in non-certified equipment. Once the probe is self-tested it may be shipped to the practitioner (step 3056).

[0226] The methods detailed above and illustrated on FIGS. 20-22 include steps which will enhance patient safety and ultimate procedure effectiveness prior to the time a probe or system is delivered to a practitioner for the performance of an ablation, nerve block or other electrosurgical procedure. Additional steps may be included in the system management method which provides protection immediately prior to or during a procedure. The FIG. 23 flowcharts illustrate certain probe usage and safety features which may be implemented immediately prior to or during a therapeutic procedure. In step 3060 of FIG. 23A a probe is removed from sterile packaging and connected to an ablation or stimulation current source control system such as the generator 400 of FIG. 1. The processor associated with the control console establishes communication with the probe over a serial bus 403, an RF Link, or through another communication pathway (step 3062). A failure of the communication link will result in a prompt to reconnect the probe (step 3064 and step 3066). Successful establishment of communication causes a date and time to be read for the generation of session codes for hashing functions (step 3067 and step 3068). In step 3070 the system reads the probe serial number, public key(s) and certified protocols generated and stored as described above. The system may then verify that the private key associated with the generator and the public key match (step 3072). This step assures that a properly ordered probe can only be used in an authorized system. If no match is observed, an error message is displayed (step 3074).

[0227] Assuming that the probe and control system or generator keys match, the system performs a pre-use probe self-test and calibration (step 3076). At this point in the process, the probe might be identified as defective, out of calibration or the prior use flag associated with the probe might be active, indicating a non-sterile probe which will result in an appropriate error message (step 3078 to step 3084). When a probe passes self-calibration, the serial number is read and the selected treatment protocol or

selected energy bolus is matched with the authorized protocols for the probe (steps 3086 and 3088). In the event of a mismatch, an error message may be generated (step 3090). If a successful match is found the practitioner may insert the probe to perform a therapeutic protocol (step 3094). Representative therapeutic protocols are described above in Paragraphs 0163-0170 and illustrated in FIGS. 5A-5B.

[0228] As shown on FIG. 23B, with the probe in position, a treatment protocol, alternatively known as an energy bolus may be loaded into the generator system (step 3096). The total energy required by the selected bolus is calculated (step 3098) and an estimated temperature profile is calculated (step 3100) from a known energy delivery profile. The operator may press a front panel arm switch or otherwise arm the system once the practitioner has received consent of the patient to proceed. The system reads the arm switch (step 3102) and verifies the system to be armed (step 3104). A supplemental practitioner arming step, for example, a foot switch, further assures patient safety. Thus, the practitioner may press a foot switch to enable the delivery of RF energy when ready. The system reads the activation of the foot switch (step 3106) and waits until the practitioner requests energy delivery (step 3108) at which point the amplifier is turned on (step 3110).

[0229] Real power is then measured (step 3112) as energy is delivered with power being integrated (step 3114) for total energy delivered. The optional probe temperature sensor is read and or a temperature profile is calculated (step 3116). For example, a 2D thermal model may be solved for real time temperature estimates assuming circular ablation lesion symmetry (step 3119). If the temperature is determined to be greater than desired as in step 3118, power is reduced (step 3120). If the temperature is less than desired, power is increased (step 3122). The watchdog timer is read at each step (step 3124). If the watchdog timer is timed out, there has possibly been a software or hardware failure and the RF amplifier is turned off (steps 3126, 3128). If the watchdog timer is not timed out the step timer is incremented (step 3130). If the currently selected protocol or energy bolus step timer has elapsed (step 3132) a step counter is incremented, the timer is reset (step 3134) and the next step (3136) is loaded for execution. If the last step associated with a select bolus is finished (step 3138), the energy delivery is terminated (step 3128). The foregoing steps assure that an integrated system as described herein will only deliver a prescribed therapeutic dosage, also known as an energy bolus. Thus over-treatment or burns may be avoided, enhancing patient safety.

[0230] As illustrated in FIG. 23C, upon completion of a procedure, the probe temperature and impedance is read (step 3140). High impedance and a temperature below body temperature (step 3142) indicate that the probe is removed from body and the operator is prompted by the system if done (step 3144). If no reply is received from the operator (step 3146), the timer is incremented (step 3148). If the timer has timed out (step 3150) or if an affirmative reply is received (step 3146), the probe used flag is set (step 3152) in probe memory 331 and the controller 400 serial number and date are written to probe memory (step 3154). Also the probe serial number, date, time, and any sampled treatment data are written to system memory (step 3156).

[0231] In summary, the steps illustrated on FIGS. 23A-C serve to verify that the probe is sterile (not used), properly

calibrated and not defective. These steps also assure that the probe matches the current source or generator console, that the probe matches the certified treatment protocols for the practitioner and that the maximum treatment time dosage for a given treatment protocol is not exceeded. Thus the above steps assure that the probe and system are properly used to supply the selected treatment protocol, enhancing patient safety and treatment effectiveness.

[0232] FIG. 24 is a flowchart illustrating a data writing procedure suitable for documenting information at the conclusion of the treatment procedure. If the selected probe has timed out during the procedure, an error message is generated (step 3200, step 3202). Otherwise, procedure data is retrieved from the system and a report is generated (step 3204, step 3206) the report may be saved, or displayed on the user display 450 (See FIG. 1). The report may be encrypted (step 3210) and include, but not be limited to, the probe serial number, the procedure time/date, the therapeutic protocol(s) used, current source current and runtime data, temperatures, impedances and error messages. Similarly encrypted data may be written to the probe memory 331 (see FIG. 4), including but not limited to the system generator serial number, protocol, and date (step 3210). In addition, the probe-used flag must be set to a used status in the probe flash memory 331 (step 3212).

[0233] The system of the present invention is preferably implemented with an integrated and attractively packaged control console which includes within one or related multiple housings a stimulation current source, an ablation energy source, and a practitioner interface unit. See FIG. 1 for example. The practitioner interface, particularly if implemented as a computer style monitor, with or without touch screen capacity also provides for novel training and system use control methods. For example, the system may be used to store and display practitioner training, promotional and client multimedia files for each procedure/protocol. Interactive multimedia files may be included to instruct a practitioner in the numerous safety features, therapeutic protocol or energy bolus prescriptions and nerve location methods taught herein. Similar multimedia files may be used to teach the protocol system settings and location of anatomical landmarks. The training and other multimedia materials may be customized for each practitioner. Thus the fully integrated system described herein may be used to provide ongoing practitioner training thereby assuring patient safety and procedure effectiveness.

[0234] Therapeutic Treatment Protocols

[0235] As disclosed herein tissue ablation or a nerve block or other minimally invasive electrosurgical procedure may be performed with precisely applied RF energy. A fundamental requirement of the therapeutic RF waveform is to heat and denature human tissue in a small area over a selected time frame, for example, less than 25 seconds. Laboratory experiments indicate this to be a suitable time required to adequately ablate a small motor nerve. Longer or shorter treatment times may be required for other applications. The temperature required to denature the fine structure of the selected tissue, primarily proteins and lipids is approximately 65° C. and above.

[0236] To safely achieve appropriate ablation, nerve block or other treatment goals, the RF waveform may be generated and applied to meet the following criteria:

[0237] 1. The probe temperature will be limited to less than 160° C. in order to prevent excess damage to collateral tissue areas.

[0238] 2. The probe temperatures will preferably be held to between 90° and 105° C.

[0239] This range will prevent excessive tissue sticking as well as aid in the growth of an appropriate ablation lesion.

[0240] Initial RF power application should bring the temperature of the probe tip to a working therapeutic temperature in controlled manner, causing minimal overshoot. The time frame for the initial warming phase may be between 0.2 to 2.5 seconds.

[0241] To achieve the foregoing generalized goals, specific treatment protocols may be developed. In one embodiment of the present invention, the delivery of a specific therapeutic protocol (also described as an "energy bolus") herein is automated. Automation can increase safety and treatment effectiveness since the practitioner may concentrate on probe placement while the system assures the delivery of the selected energy bolus. For example, the system controller 401 may be configured to control the waveform of energy supplied to an electrosurgical probe connected to the system. In particular, the wave shape, waveform modulation or pulse time may be controlled. Also, the total time during which power may be applied and maximum power or voltage limits may be set. In addition, a specific treatment protocol may be actively controlled according to feedback such as the probe temperature, adjacent tissue temperature, tissue impedance or other physical parameters which may be measured during the delivery of treatment energy. Specific energy delivery prescriptions or energy boluses may be developed for specific treatment goals. These energy prescriptions may be stored in memory associated with the controller as a permitted therapeutic protocol. A representative therapeutic energy protocol 3250 is shown in tabular form on FIG. 25.

[0242] The therapeutic protocol 3250 of FIG. 25 is optimized for the therapeutic ablation of a human nerve having a diameter of approximately 1 millimeter. As shown on FIG. 26, the treatment protocol 3250 is generally designed to rapidly heat tissue during an initial phase 3252. Rapid heating during the initial phase has been shown to minimize perceived pain and reduce muscle stimulation from the subsequent application of pulsed RF energy. A second phase 3254 includes constant power application resulting in a slower ramp to a desired therapeutic tissue/probe temperature. As also shown on FIG. 26, a third phase 3256 includes the maintenance of a constant temperature at reduced power to grow the ablation lesion to a desired size.

[0243] The therapeutic treatment protocol 3250 illustrated on FIGS. 25 and 26 is only one treatment protocol which has been found suitable for the ablation of a small motor nerve. Other treatment protocols may be developed for other or the same therapeutic goals. In all cases, the level of tissue ablation is substantially exponentially related to the product of time and temperature above 40° C. as is well known in the art as the Arrhenius rate. Thermal heat transport through target tissue may be calculated with a finite difference algorithm. Tissue properties may be specified on a 2D mesh and such properties can be arbitrary functions of space and time. Arrhenius rate equations may be solved for the extent

of ablation caused by elevated temperatures. In addition, optical and electrical properties which are characteristic of ablated tissue may be measured and determined through histological studies. Thus, various therapeutic protocols such as that illustrated in FIGS. 25 and 26 may be developed and optimized for the controlled achievement of desired therapeutic results. Preferably the therapeutic protocols are automatically delivered to assure that the selected energy bolus is precisely delivered.

[0244] As described above, the system may be configured to deliver a prescribed energy bolus automatically. Automated energy delivery can increase safety and treatment effectiveness, since the practitioner is free to concentrate on probe placement. The goals of enhanced patient safety and treatment effectiveness can be further advanced by providing an ergonomically appropriate probe with associated switches and control functions providing the practitioner with a tool that allows him to easily and safely initiate the automated delivery of an energy bolus while concentrating on probe placement. For example, FIG. 27 is a perspective view of an electrosurgical probe 3260 consistent with the present invention held by practitioner's hand. The probe 3260 includes an ergonomic probe handle 3262 which is symmetrical allowing for left or right handed operation. A sealed rocker switch 3264 is located at the forward 1/3 of handle 3262 for operation with the practitioner's index finger or thumb. Although a rocker switch is shown in FIG. 27, other multi-function switch styles are suitable for the implementation of this aspect of the invention. A light indicator 3266 is installed on the handle 3262 near the probe needle 3268 to signal the system generator status. The needle has an exposed return electrode 3270, insulator 3272 and blunt active electrode 3274. In use, the blunt active electrode 3274 is inserted in proximity to a target nerve.

[0245] During the process of probe placement, the stimulation current level may be increased or decreased as described herein by sequentially depressing one of the forward or rearward sides of the rocker switch (see arrows 3276 and 3278) thus closing internal switches 314 and 315 respectively. A speaker associated with the system may emit a tone having a volume or frequency or other sound attribute substantially proportional to the amplitude setting of the stimulation current with each switch closure. This feature permits the practitioner to adjust the stimulation level without the necessity of adjusting any level dials or switches associated with the generator, allowing the practitioner to focus on critical probe placement.

[0246] When the stimulation process is complete, and the probe is positioned for treatment, the practitioner may depress switch 3264 at the center (see arrow 3280), thus closing both switches and commanding the generator to arm the ablation current source. It should be noted that the blunt tip embodiment permits iterative probe placement while minimizing the risk of cutting arteries or other structures as with a chisel or pointed tip. When the rocker switch is centrally depressed, the light 3266 may illuminate a select color, green for example, signaling to the practitioner that the system is ready to apply RF ablation energy. Without moving the probe, a pre-selected RF energy bolus may be delivered by closure of a foot switch (not shown). Light source 3266 may illuminate a different color, blue for example, during the application of RF ablation energy. In addition, the system generator may be configured to emit a tone signaling energy delivery. Thus, the disclosed probe and system may be used by a practitioner to skillfully implement one of the probe location and placement methods

described herein, followed by the initiation of the automatic delivery of a selected energy bolus.

[0247] While the invention has been particularly shown and described with reference to a number of embodiments, it would be understood by those skilled in the art that changes in the form and details may be made to the various embodiments disclosed herein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention and that the various embodiments disclosed herein are not intended to act as limitations on the scope of the claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery comprising:

providing a controller with memory to a practitioner;

writing one or more use parameters to the memory of the controller;

providing an electrosurgical probe with memory;

writing one or more complementary use parameters to the memory of the probe;

comparing the use parameters of the controller with the complementary use parameters of the electrosurgical probe; and

managing use of the electrosurgical probe according to the use parameters.

2. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 1 wherein the use parameters in the memory of the controller comprise at least one of a practitioner identification designation, a controller identification designation a practitioner certification and a permitted therapeutic protocol.

3. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 1 wherein the complementary use parameters in the memory of the electrosurgical probe comprise at least one of an electrosurgical probe identification designation, a practitioner identification designation a practitioner certification and a permitted therapeutic protocol.

4. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 3 wherein the complementary use parameters are written to the electrosurgical probe memory prior to delivering the probe to the practitioner.

5. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 1 further comprising maintaining a probe use flag in the electrosurgical probe memory.

6. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 5 wherein the probe use flag is set to indicate a used probe by the controller after use of the electrosurgical probe for a therapeutic protocol.

7. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 5 wherein the controller is operatively associated with an electrosurgical current source.

8. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 7 wherein the controller prohibits the provision of current from the electrosurgical current source to the electrosurgical probe unless the use parameters in the memory of the controller match the use parameters of the electrosurgical probe.

9. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 5 wherein the controller prohibits

the provision of current from the electrosurgical current source to the electrosurgical probe unless the use flag is set to indicate an unused probe.

10. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 5 wherein the controller limits the provision of current from the electrosurgical current source to the electrosurgical probe according to a permitted therapeutic protocol stored in the memory of the electrosurgical probe.

11. The method of managing a system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 1 further comprising managing authority to use the system according to the use parameters.

12. A system for minimally invasive surgery comprising:

- a controller associated with memory;
- an electrosurgical probe associated with memory;
- a communication link between the controller and the electrosurgical probe;
- means for comparing a use parameter stored in the memory of the controller with a complementary use parameter stored in the electrosurgical probe; and
- managing use of the electrosurgical probe according to the use parameters.

13. The system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 12 further comprising means for maintaining a probe use flag in the electrosurgical probe memory.

14. The system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 12 further comprising an electrosurgical current source operatively associated with the controller.

15. The system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 12 further comprising means for automatically delivering a select quantity of energy from the electrosurgical current source to the electrosurgical probe according to a therapeutic energy protocol stored in the controller memory.

16. The system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 15 further comprising means for automatically delivering a select quantity of energy from the electrosurgical current source to the electrosurgical probe according to a therapeutic energy protocol stored in the electrosurgical probe memory.

17. An electrosurgical probe comprising:

- a probe body defining a longitudinal probe axis;
- multiple conductive electrodes operatively disposed along the probe axis;
- a stimulation current source in electrical communication with at least one of the conductive electrodes; and
- a blunt tip operatively disposed at a first end of the probe.

18. The electrosurgical probe of claim 17 further comprising a source of ablation current in electrical communication with at least one of the conductive electrodes.

19. The electrosurgical probe of claim 18 further comprising a switch providing for the selective connection of the stimulation current source or the ablation current source to at least one of the conductive electrodes.

20. The electrosurgical probe of claim 17 wherein the tip is defined by one of the conductive electrodes.

21. An electrosurgical probe comprising:

- a probe body defining a longitudinal probe axis;
- multiple conductive electrodes operatively disposed along the probe axis;

a stimulation current source in electrical communication with at least one of the conductive electrodes;

a handle operatively associated with the probe body; and

a switch operatively associated with the handle wherein selective actuation of the switch may increase or decrease the application of stimulation current to at least one conductive electrode.

22. The electrosurgical probe of claim 21 further comprising a source of ablation current in electrical communication with at least one of the conductive electrodes wherein selective actuation of the switch enables the application of ablation current to at least one conductive electrode.

23. The electrosurgical probe of claim 22 further comprising a second switch the actuation of which applies ablation current to at least one conductive electrode.

24. The electrosurgical probe of claim 23 where in the second switch is a foot switch.

25. The electrosurgical probe of claim 21 further comprising an indicator configured to show the application of stimulation current to at least one conductive electrode.

26. The electrosurgical probe of claim 22 further comprising an indicator configured to show the application of ablation current to at least one conductive electrode.

27. A system for minimally invasive surgery comprising:

- an electrosurgical probe;
- a source of ablation current in electrical communication with the electrosurgical probe;
- means for automatically delivering a therapeutic quantity of energy from the source of ablation current to the electrosurgical probe.

28. The system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 27 wherein the therapeutic quantity of energy comprises a select waveform.

29. The system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 27 wherein the therapeutic quantity of energy comprises a select energy application duration.

30. The system for minimally invasive surgery of claim 27 wherein the therapeutic quantity of energy comprises a power profile that varies over time.

31. A method of minimally invasive surgery comprising:

- providing a controller in communication with a source of ablation current;
- providing an electrosurgical probe in electrical communication with the source of ablation current; and

automatically supplying a therapeutic quantity of energy from the source of ablation current to the electrosurgical probe according to a select therapeutic energy protocol stored in memory associated with the controller.

32. The method of minimally invasive surgery of claim 31 wherein the therapeutic quantity of energy comprises a select waveform.

33. The method of minimally invasive surgery of claim 31 wherein the therapeutic quantity of energy comprises a select energy application duration.

34. The method of minimally invasive surgery of claim 31 wherein the therapeutic quantity of energy comprises a power profile that varies over time.