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Feygin

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(54) **LIQUID DISPENSER**

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(51) **Int. Cl.**[7] **B65B 1/04**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **141/234**; 222/214; 141/130

(58) **Field of Search** 141/130, 114, 141/234–245; 222/263, 214, 101, 491, 206; 73/863.33, 864.11, 863.32; 422/99, 100

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A dispenser that is capable of simultaneously filling a large array of receivers (e.g., wells, etc.) with nano-liter volumes of liquid at high accuracy. The dispenser has a very simple construction, is quite compact, and has few if any moving parts.

14 Claims, 2 Drawing Sheets

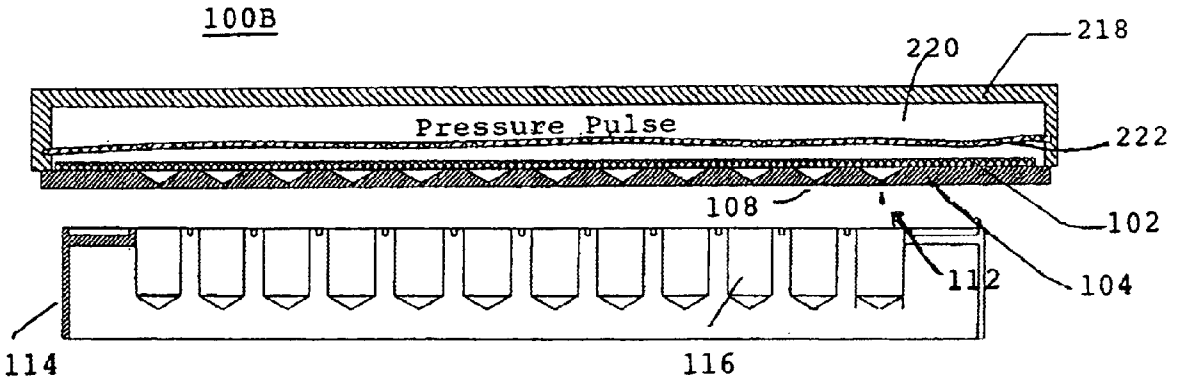
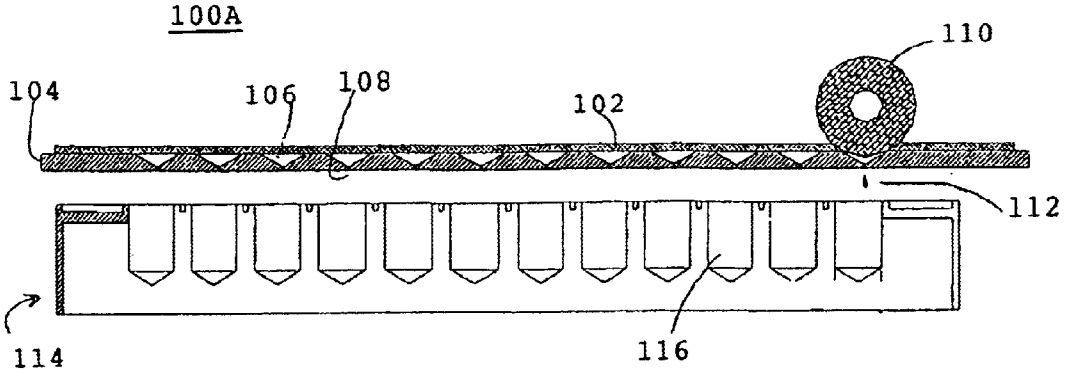


FIG. 1



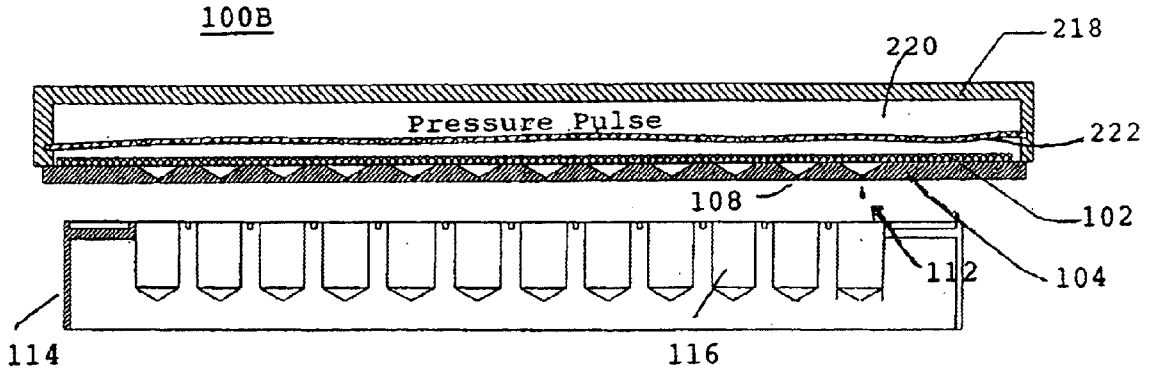
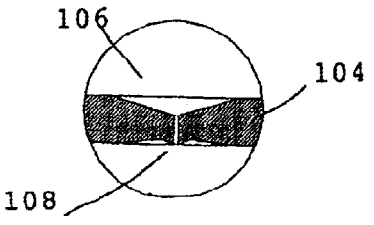


FIG. 2

FIG. 3



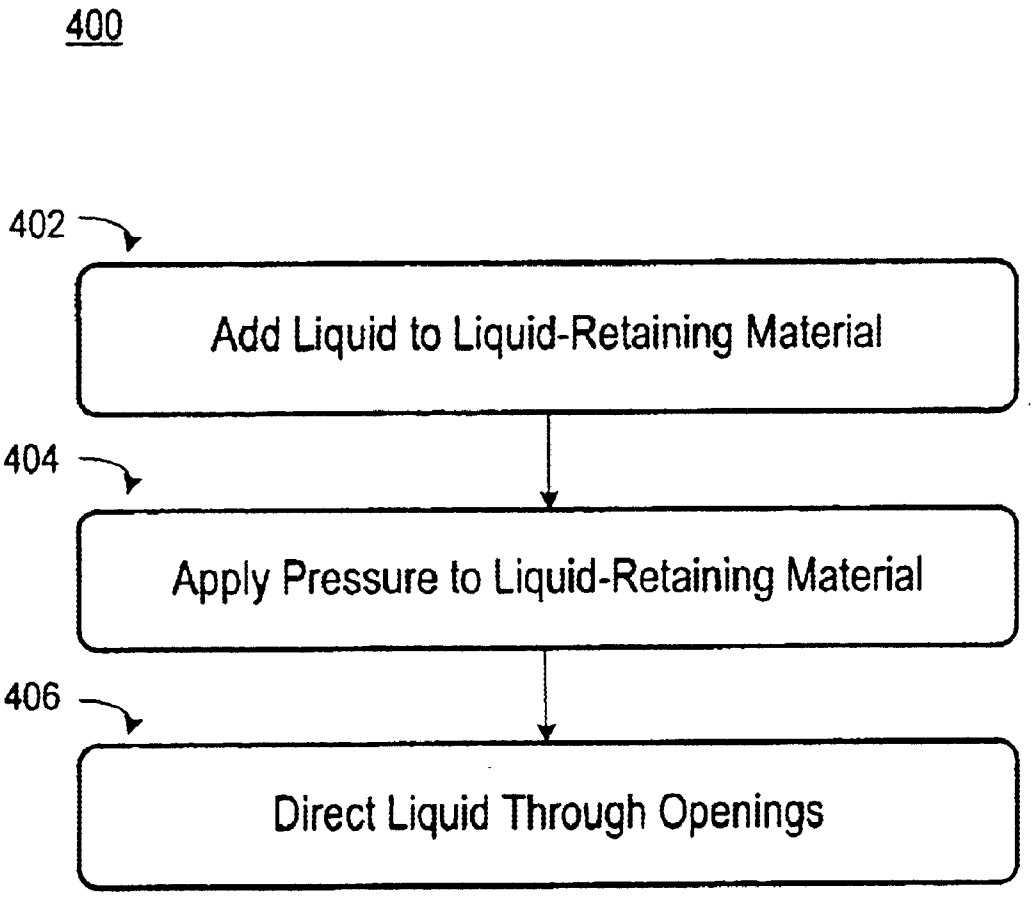

400
402
Add Liquid to Liquid-Retaining Material
404
Apply Pressure to Liquid-Retaining Material
406
Direct Liquid Through Openings

FIG. 4

LIQUID DISPENSER

STATEMENTS OF RELATED CASES

This case claims priority of U.S. Provisional Patent Application 60/386,147 filed Jun. 5, 2002.

FILED OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to liquid dispensers. More particularly, the present invention relates to liquid dispensers that are capable of simultaneously dispensing very small quantities of liquid to an array of receivers.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Many research applications require that very small (i.e., nano-liter), precisely-metered quantities of liquid are dispensed, simultaneously, into an array of receivers (e.g., wells in a multi-well plate, etc.). This is very difficult to do for a number of reasons.

In particular, if a common liquid-holding manifold having an array of valves/nozzles is used for dispensing, it is difficult to ensure that liquid flows equally through all of the valves/nozzles. Any non-uniform accumulation of matter in the manifold, or partial occlusions of some valves/nozzles, will result in flow imbalances. Furthermore, it is difficult to precisely control all micro-valves in the array.

Consequently, a need exists for a dispenser that is capable of accurately and simultaneously dispensing very small quantities of liquid into a plurality of receivers.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A dispenser in accordance with the illustrative embodiment of the present invention is capable of simultaneously filling a large array of receivers (e.g., wells, etc.) with nano-liter volumes of liquid at high accuracy. The dispenser has a very simple construction, is quite compact, and has few if any moving parts.

In accordance with the illustrative embodiment, a liquid-retaining material (e.g., sponge, etc.) holds a predetermined amount of liquid. The liquid is released from the liquid-retaining material by the application of pressure. The liquid is forced, by the applied pressure, through an array of precisely-sized openings that are disposed in a plate that underlies the liquid-retaining material. Receivers that underlie the plate receive the droplets of liquid that pass through the openings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** depicts a liquid dispenser in accordance with a first illustrative embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **2** depicts a liquid dispenser in accordance with a second illustrative embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **3** depicts a close-up of a dispensing nozzle for use in conjunction with the liquid dispensers of FIGS. **1** and **2**.

FIG. **4** depicts a method in accordance with the illustrative embodiments of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In accordance with the illustrative embodiment, a liquid-retaining material (e.g., a hydrophilic material, an open cell sponge, etc.) holds a predetermined amount of liquid. The liquid is released from the liquid-retaining material by the application of pressure from a pressure-applying device. The liquid is forced, by the applied pressure, through an array of precisely-sized openings that are disposed in a plate that underlies the liquid-retaining material. Receivers (e.g., wells of a multi-well plate, etc.) that underlie the plate receive the droplets of liquid that pass through the openings.

FIG. **1** depicts dispenser **100**A in accordance with a first illustrative embodiment of the present invention. Dispenser **100**A includes liquid-retaining material **102**, dispensing plate **104**, and roller **110**, interrelated as shown.

Liquid-retaining material **102** is filled with a predetermined amount of liquid. This can be done in a variety of ways, as is known to those skilled in the art. One way is to pour a predetermined amount of liquid onto liquid-retaining material **102**. Another way to do this is by saturating liquid-retaining material **102** with liquid and then removing a specific amount of liquid, such as by passing material **102** through appropriately-spaced rollers.

Liquid-retaining material **102** is positioned over dispensing plate **104**. The dispensing plate includes an array of spherical or conical indentations **106**. At the bottom of each such indentation is a precisely-sized opening **108** (e.g., 0.1 mm diameter, etc.). (See also, FIG. **3**.) The openings are sized to generate a drop that contains less than one microliter of liquid.

Roller **110**, which serves as a pressure-applying device, contacts liquid-retaining material **102** and applies a consistent amount of downward-directed pressure to it. Liquid is forced out of liquid-retaining material **102** at the point of contact with roller **110**. The ejected liquid flows into indentations **106**. Droplet **112** containing a precise amount is formed by each opening **108**. Droplet **112** is received by wells **116** of multi-well plate **114**. In FIG. **1**, plate **114** is an 8×12 multi-well plate, so that dispensing plate **104** is advantageously arranged with an 8×12 array of indentations **106**. Thus, as roller **110** engages material **102**, liquid is forced into 8 indentations **106** simultaneously. To dispense liquid into the next row of indentations **106**, liquid-retaining material **102** is moved past roller **110**, or the roller is moved over material **102**. In some other variations, dispensing plate **104** is arranged with a 16×24 array of indentations to accommodate a 384-well multi-well plate, and in yet other variations, dispensing plate **104** is arranged with a 32×48 array of indentations to accommodate a 1536-well plate.

FIG. **2** depicts dispenser **100**B in accordance with a second illustrative embodiment of the present invention. Dispenser **100**B includes liquid-retaining material **102**, dispensing plate **104**, housing **218**, and diaphragm **222**, interrelated as shown.

Housing **218** and dispensing plate **104** define pressure chamber **220**. Liquid-retaining material **102** overlies dispensing plate **104**, and diaphragm **222** overlies material **102**. A pulse of pressure (e.g., via a hose connection that is not depicted, etc.) is supplied or otherwise generated within pressure chamber **220** above diaphragm **222**. As a result, diaphragm **222** is forced downward thereby squeezing liquid-retaining material **102**. This squeezing forces at least some liquid out of liquid-retaining material **102** and through openings **108** in dispensing plate **104**. In this embodiment, the pressure chamber, diaphragm and the device that delivers or generates the pulse of pressure compose the pressure-applying device.

Droplets **112** are dispensed, simultaneously, into wells **116** of underlying multi-well plate **114**. A very low CV (coefficient of variation) is expected because the internal fluidic pressure will be evenly and instantaneously distributed across the entire internal volume and surface of material **102**.

For dispenser **100**B, liquid-retaining material **102** can be loaded with a predetermined amount of liquid by, for example, advancing material **102** through a cassette or cartridge that contains liquid, in the manner in which film is advanced through a camera. The cartridge would be located before pressure chamber **220**. Alternatively, a roll of material **102** can be disposed in liquid. A portion of material **102** is advanced into chamber **220**, liquid is dispensed, and the emptied material is drawn out of chamber **220**. Additional material **102** laden with liquid is sequentially advanced into chamber **220** for dispensing. Liquid-retaining material **102** can be cycled back to receive more liquid and then again advanced in chamber **220**.

Until pressure is applied, such as by roller **110** in the first embodiment, or by a pulse of pressure in the second embodiment, liquid-retaining material **102** retains liquid. Consequently, dispensers **100**A and **100**B do not require valves.

FIG. **4** depicts method **400** for dispensing liquid in accordance with the illustrative embodiments of the present invention. In accordance with operation **402**, liquid is added to liquid-retaining material **102**. Those skilled in the art will be able to provide material **102** with a predetermined amount of liquid, such as by using the techniques described above or other techniques that might occur to them in view of the present teachings.

In operation **404**, pressure is applied to liquid-retaining material **102**. The applied pressure forces at least some liquid out of the liquid-retaining material. Pressure can be applied in any of a variety of ways such as, without limitation, the roller technique or the pressure-pulse technique that have already been described.

The liquid that is forced out of liquid-retaining material **102** is directed, as per operation **406**, through sized openings to create droplets containing a desired volume of liquid. This is done, in the illustrative embodiments, by positioning liquid-retaining material **102** on top of dispensing plate **104**. The indentations **106** in dispensing plate **104** collect the liquid, which then passes through a hole at the bottom of each indentation.

It is to be understood that the above-described embodiments are merely illustrative of the present invention and that many variations of the above-described embodiments can be devised by those skilled in the art without departing from the scope of the invention. It is therefore intended that such variations be included within the scope of the following claims and their equivalents.

I claim:

1. A liquid dispenser comprising:

liquid-retaining material, wherein said liquid-retaining material is capable of internally retaining a quantity of liquid;

a dispensing plate disposed beneath said liquid-retaining material, wherein said dispensing plate comprises an array of sized openings; and

a pressure-applying device, wherein said pressure-applying device applies pressure to said liquid-retaining material to force at least some of said quantity of liquid therefrom.

2. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** further comprising an array of receivers, wherein said receivers are disposed beneath said dispensing plate, and further wherein said receivers are arranged in an array that is complementary to said array of sized openings so that each said receiver receives a droplet of said liquid that is dispensed through each said sized opening.

3. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** wherein said pressure-applying device comprises a roller, wherein said roller contacts said liquid-retaining material.

4. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** wherein said pressure-applying device comprises:

a pressure chamber, wherein said liquid-retaining material is disposed in said pressure chamber; and

a diaphragm, wherein said diaphragm is disposed within said pressure chamber, and wherein said membrane overlies said liquid-retaining material.

5. The liquid dispenser of claim **4**, wherein said pressure-applying device further comprises a device for generating a pulse of pressure.

6. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** wherein said dispensing plate comprises an array of indentations, wherein one of said sized openings is disposed at a bottom of each of said indentations.

7. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** wherein said openings are disposed in an 8×12 array.

8. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** wherein said openings are disposed in an 16×24 array.

9. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** wherein said openings are disposed in an 32×48 array.

10. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** further comprising an arrangement for providing said liquid-retaining material with a predetermined amount of said liquid.

11. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** wherein said openings are less than 0.1 mm in diameter.

12. The liquid dispenser of claim **1** wherein said openings are sized to generate a droplet that contains less than a micro-liter of said liquid.

13. A method for dispensing, comprising:

adding liquid to a liquid-retaining material, wherein said liquid is retained within said liquid-retaining material;

applying pressure to said liquid-retaining material to force a portion of said liquid out of said liquid-retaining material; and

directing said portion of liquid through an array of openings, wherein each opening has a precisely determined sized.

14. The method of claim **13** wherein said precisely determined size is determined such that a droplet that is formed by said opening contains less than a micro-liter of liquid.

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