

SPLIT VALVE

The present invention relates to valves, and in particular, but not exclusively, to valves for controlling, charging, discharging and/or regulating the flow of powders, liquids, slurries and/or fluids.

Valves, such as split butterfly valves, are available in many designs and used widely for processes where product containment is required to prevent product exposure to environment and personnel working in close proximity of the product. The split valves are designed pre-dominantly for handling and contained transfer of solid state powders and granular material alike.

Split valve design allows the valve to be split open into two halves, commonly called alpha and beta halves, or active and passive halves. The valve design is such that when split, the two halves keep the contents on either side sealed and contained.

Similar to the split butterfly valve, a split ball valve can also be used for contained transfer of solids and more commonly liquids. Historically, these valves have mainly been used in pharmaceutical and biotech industries for non-sterile operations.

In sterile equipment design, full systems need to be sterilised and once sterilised, it is important to ensure sterility is maintained throughout the processing cycle,

for example, adding of materials, discharging of materials, any process transfers between systems etc.

Split valves can be sterilised via a number of known methods, which include autoclaving, passing steam through the open valve, or passing other gases, such as vapourised hydrogen peroxide, through them prior to any product coming in contact with the internal surfaces or product contact parts.

In the manufacture of pharmaceuticals, chemicals, biological material and food, effective containment is essential for the safe and hygienic handling of such compounds and materials. At each stage of the manufacturing process, handling must be controlled and managed to provide optimum protection for the operator and for maintaining the integrity of the product.

The material being handled is often hazardous to health, owing to the increasing potency of many new pharmaceutical ingredients. Pharmaceutical and bio-manufacturing products are often manufactured under strict controls against product contamination. This is because the products are often for human consumption and the industries are heavily regulated by bodies like the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) in the United States and the MHRA (Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency) in the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, the pharmaceutical products, such as active pharmaceutical ingredients and/or subsequently diluted powders, may in sufficient quantities be hazardous to the health of an operator. It is therefore necessary to avoid direct contact between an operator and the potentially hazardous material.

Owing to such stringent requirements for there to be a good seal between active and passive elements of the split valve to prevent product exposure to environment and personnel working in close proximity of the product, manufacture of the elements of the valve are under stringent conditions to ensure that the dimensions of the elements are precisely manufactured to ensure stringent tolerances are met.

In addition, the valve elements are consequently relatively large often owing to the housing for the valve itself being capable of ensuring that there is a good seal between members. This can make the containers bulky and difficult to handle, particularly when being handled in a glove box containment apparatus where the dexterity of operators is compromised.

It is an object of the present invention to overcome or alleviate one or more of the problems associated with the prior art.

In accordance with the present invention, there is provided a split valve assembly comprising two valve portions complementarily shaped such that the first can sealingly engage with and co-operate with the second to allow the movement of material therethrough, each valve portion comprising a housing, a valve seat and a valve closure member moveable between a first position in which the valve closure member is displaced from the valve seat and the valve is open, and a second position in which the valve closure member co-operates with the valve seat and the valve is closed, wherein the assembly has a first configuration in

which the first and second valve portions engage with one another, the valve closure members being closed, and a second configuration in which the two valve portions are disengaged from one another, the first valve portion having locking means moveable relative to the second valve portion to selectively lock and unlock the two valve portions together.

The present invention provides a valve assembly capable of ensuring a secure and good seal therebetween and which has a simplified mechanism for engagement and securing valve portions together to provide an improved valve system.

The locking means may comprise a locking pair, one member of which is moveable relative to the other and capable of selectively engaging with the other member to lock and unlock portions together.

The locking pair may comprise a male and female member complementarily shaped to one another. The male member is preferably moveable relative to the female member.

The male member is preferably capable of translational movement.

In one embodiment, the male member comprises a pair and the female member comprises a complementarily shaped blind bore for receiving the male member.

The male member is preferably disposed in the active valve portion and the female in the passive valve portion.

The longitudinal axis of the male member may be off-set from that of the female member. Consequently, when the male member engages and is received by the female member, the valve portions are squeezed together to form a better seal therebetween.

In one embodiment the first and second valve portions may be both female members, there being a third valve portion having corresponding male members which the female members can receive.

Each valve portion of the assembly may be mountable on a vessel for containing material, conveyance means, such as a hose, for conveying material and/or other process equipment known to the art. The means for mounting the valve portions may comprise any means known to the art, such as for example a screw thread, interference fit, female:female attachment etc. In an alternative embodiment, the valve portions may be integrally formed with a vessel or conveyance means.

The inlet and outlet of the chamber may be closed once the movement from the first to the second configuration is complete. In so doing, the assembly ensures that the material being transferred therethrough does not come into contact with the surrounding environment.

The valve seat and valve closure member are preferably complementarily shaped to ensure that a seal is formed when the valve closure member is closed.

The valve assembly may be a split butterfly valve, split ball valve, any other split valve or quick release coupling known to the art. Preferably, the assembly is a split butterfly valve.

Preferably, the valve portions form a mating pair, one being a male or active valve portion, the other female or passive.

Preferably, the valve seat comprises a seal member. The seal member may preferably comprise an abutment portion and a resiliently deformable portion located between the abutment portion and the valve housing.

In an alternative embodiment, the valve closure member may be provided with a recess for receipt of a seal which, in use, is adapted to engage against a solid portion of the valve housing.

In the case where the seal is located in a recess in the valve closure member the valve closure member may further comprise an elastomeric material covering the valve closure member and the seal located thereon.

In one embodiment, the valve closure member being pivotable beyond the position in which further displacement is normally prevented by engagement with the valve seal, the valve may further comprise biasing means for biasing the

valve closure member into its closed position.

The valve seal may be located either on the valve housing or on the valve closure member.

During use, the assembly may be switched from the first to the second configuration to allow material to be transferred therethrough. Once the material has been transferred, the assembly is switched back to the first configuration and the two valve portions disengaged.

By way of example only, a specific embodiment of the present invention will now be described, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Fig. 1 is a perspective view of two valve portions of a valve assembly in accordance with the present invention;

Fig. 2a and b is a perspective view of a valve assembly in accordance with the present invention in its first configuration and second configuration respectively;

Fig. 3 is a perspective view of the active portion of a valve assembly in accordance with the present invention;

Fig. 4 is a perspective view of the locking means of the active portion of the valve shown in Fig. 3; and

Fig. 5a and b views of a cut away section through the active valve portion of Figs. 1 – 4;

Referring firstly to Figs. 1 to 4, the valve assembly 10 comprises two valve portions, an upper, passive and lower, active valve portion 12,14, each having a valve housing indicated generally at 16, 18 which are generally annular and a valve closure member 20, 20' which is pivotally mounted within the housing. Valve housing 18 has an annular recess 19. The valve closure member 20,20' is in the form of an annular disc and is provided with spindles 22,22' by means of which the valve closure member is pivotally mounted within the housing. The valve closure member 20,20' and the spindles 22,22' are machined from a single piece of metal.

One of the spindles 22 of the lower valve closure member 18 is operatively connected to actuator 26. Thus, the annular disc is journaled for rotation on the spindles 22,22' and is moved by rotation of the spindle 26. An automatic actuator 26 is received on an opposite end to the annular disc of the spindle 22. Two actuators may be employed, one either side of the spindle of the active valve portion or a manual actuator can be used in an alternative embodiment.

The valve closure member 20,20' is engageable with and disengageable from an annular valve seat in the form of an annular seal (not shown) which is seated in a complementarily-shaped recess in the valve housing. The seal comprises a EPDM annular abutment portion (alternatively, perfluoroelastomer or any other suitable material can be used) which, in use, engages the valve closure member 20,20'.

The outer end face 32,32' of each of the valve housing portions 16, 18 is planar and in use each face is connected to, for example, adjacent piping sections or a vessel in a manner well known to in the art and a through passage is formed by means of, for example, aligned bores.

The abutment of the two valve housing portions 16,18 form a mating pair such that the upper valve portion 16 is mounted within the lower valve housing portion 18, the upper valve portion 16 being male and the lower valve portion 18 being female. In a first configuration (see Fig. 2) the two valve portions are engaged, such that the valve closure members are sealed from the surrounding environment and that material to be transferred through the valve will not be contaminated by the surrounding environment,

The active or male portion 14 of the valve 10 has two moveably mounted locking pin 60 diametrically opposite one another and located within a housing 62. Each pin 60 is capable of translational movement to move from an unlocking position (see Fig. 3) where the pin is located within the housing 62 to a locking or engaged position whereby the pin 60 extends beyond its housing (see Fig. 4).

The housing 62 forms part of the spindle 22.

There are two complementarily shaped blind bores 64 that are located in the female valve portion 12 each of which is shaped to receive respective pin 60.

Fig. 5a and b show the locking member engaging with and disengaging with the female or passive portion of the valve. As can be seen, pin 60 is moveable from a retracted position (Fig. 5a) into an extended position (Fig. 5b) where the pin is received in blind bore 64.

The valve closure members are adapted to be pivotable through 90 degrees, and when in its fully open position the profile of the inner face 50,50' of the valve closure member 20,20' corresponds with the profile of the through bore of the valve housing, thereby creating no restrictions for the flow of fluid or other material.

The valve assembly can then be fully engaged in its second configuration, whereby seats 28,28' mate to form a seal and valve closure members 20,20' contact one another and can rotate to open each valve portion respectively, which are sealingly engaged thereby allowing the passage of material therethrough without the material becoming contaminated. Rotation of the spindles 22, 22' of the lower valve closure member 20' will result in rotation of the upper valve closure member 20'.

The valves of the present invention are able to operate in a complete sterile manner, with, in one embodiment, an in situ sterilisation step before and after each docking, regardless of how many times the valve is split open and re-docked, ensuring sterile conditions on product contact parts.

These barriers can be created by any combination of seals, gaskets, o rings, or seats or inflatable seals.

When the valve is split open into two halves, any material disposed within a vessel etc. will maintain its sterility as each valve portion is sealed from the surrounding atmosphere by the valve closure members.

The invention is not restricted to the details of the foregoing embodiments. For example, the valve actuator may be replaced with a different actuator, such as a manually-operated handle.

An alternative embodiment of the present invention replaces the butterfly valve closure members of the valve with ball closure members.

CLAIMS

1. A split valve apparatus comprising two valve portions complementarily shaped such that the first can sealingly engage with and co-operate with the second to allow the movement of material therethrough, each valve portion comprising a housing, a valve seat and a valve closure member moveable between a first position in which the valve closure member is displaced from the valve seat and the valve is open, and a second position in which the valve closure member co-operates with the valve seat and the valve is closed, wherein the apparatus has a first configuration in which the first and second valve portions engage with one another, the valve closure members being closed, and a second configuration in which the two valve portions are disengaged from one another, the first valve portion having locking means moveable relative to the second valve portion to selectively lock and unlock the two valve portions together.

2. A split valve apparatus as claimed in claim 1, wherein the locking means comprises a locking pair one member of which is movable relative to the other and capable of selectively engaging with the other member to lock and unlock portions together.

3. A split valve apparatus as claimed in claim 2, wherein the locking pair comprises a male and female member complementarily shaped to one another.

4. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of claims 1 to 3, wherein the locking pair comprises a male member which is movable relative to the female member.

5. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of claims 2 to 4, wherein the locking pair comprises a male member capable of translational movement.

6. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of claims 2 to 5, wherein the locking pair comprises a male member comprising a pin a female member which comprises a complementarily shaped blind bore, for receiving the male member.

7. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of claims 2 to 6, wherein the locking pair comprises a male member disposed in the active valve portion and a female in a passive valve portion.

8. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of claims 2 to 7, wherein the longitudinal axis of the male member is off-set from that of the female member in the locking pair.

9. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of claims 2 to 8, wherein the first and second valve portions are female members and a third valve portion has corresponding male members, which the female members of the first and second valve portions can receive.

10. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the preceding claims, wherein each valve portion is mountable on a vessel or conveyance means.

11. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the preceding claims, wherein the valve portions are integrally formed with a vessel or conveyance means.

12. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the preceding claims, wherein the inlet and the outlet of the chamber are closed, on movement from the first configuration to the second configuration.

13. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the preceding claims, wherein the valve seat and valve closure member are complementarily shaped, to ensure that a seal is formed when the valve closure member is closed.

14. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the preceding claims, wherein the apparatus is a split butterfly valve or a split ball valve.

15. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the preceding claims, wherein the valve seat comprises a seal member.

16. A split valve apparatus as claimed in claim 15, wherein the seal member comprises an abutement portion and a resiliently deformable portion.

17. A split valve apparatus as claimed in claim 15, wherein the resiliently deformable portion of the seal member is located between the abutement portion and the valve housing.

18. A split valve apparatus as claimed in claim 15, wherein the valve closure member is provided with a recess for receipt of a seal, which is adopted to engage against a solid portion of the valve housing.

19. A split valve apparatus as claimed in claim 18, wherein the valve closure member comprises an elastomeric material covering the valve closure member.

20. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the previous claims, wherein the valve comprises biasing means for biasing the valve closure member into its closed position.

21. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the preceding claims, wherein the valve seal is located on the valve housing, or on the valve closure member.

22. A split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the preceding claims, wherein the apparatus may be switched from the first configuration to the second during use to allow material be transferred therethrough.

23. A split valve apparatus as claimed in claim 36, wherein on the completion of passing of material, the apparatus may be switched from the second configuration to the first configuration and the two valve portions disengaged.

24. A method of transferring material comprising the use of a split valve apparatus as claimed in any one or more of the previous claims.