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AUTOMATED APPARATUS AND METHOD
FOR CONSOLIDATING PRODUCTS FOR PACKAGING

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The present invention relates generally to the field of manufacturing ophthalmic lenses, especially molded, hydrophilic contact lenses, and more specifically to an automated apparatus for consolidating contact lenses for packaging after inspection thereof.

The molding of hydrophilic contact lenses is disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 4,495,313 to Larsen; U.S. Patent No. 4,640,489 to Larsen, et al.; U.S. Patent No. 4,680,336 to Larsen et al.; U.S. Patent No. 4,889,664 to Larsen et al.; and U.S. Patent No. 5,039,459 to Larsen et al.

These prior art references disclose a contact lens production process wherein each lens is formed by sandwiching monomer or monomer mixture between a front curve (lower) mold section and back curve (upper) mold section, carried in a two by four mold array. The monomer is polymerized, thus forming a lens which is then removed from the mold sections and further treated in a hydration bath and packaged for consumer use.

U.S. Patent Nos. 5,080,839 and 5,094,609, both to Kindt-Larsen disclose respectively a process for hydrating contact lenses and a chamber for hydrating contacts lenses formed with a monomer or monomer mixtures disclosed in the forgoing patents. The process disclosed in these patents significantly reduce the thruput time by hydrating the lens and releasing the lens from the mold cavity with deionized water and a small amount of surfactant without any salts, so that the time consuming ionic neutralization of the polymer from which the lens blank is made does not occur during the hydration process. When deionized water is used, the final step of the process is to introduce buffered saline solution into the final package with the

1 lens and then seal the lens within the package so that the
final lens equilibrium (ionic neutralization, final
hydration and final lens dimensioning) is accomplished in
the package at room temperature or during sterilization.

5 U.S. Patent No. 4,961,820 discloses a final
package for a contact lens, wherein the package is formed
from a transparent plastic material such as polypropylene
and a foil laminate that is heat sealed thereto.

10 While U.S. Patents 5,080,839 and 5,094,609
contemplate that the entire hydration process and transfer
to final packaging may take place in a fully automated
fashion, and while the chamber and process described in
the foregoing patents enabled automated handling of the
15 lens during hydration, suitable automated equipment to
inspect and handle the lenses at high production rates and
implement the methods thereof in a fully automated
apparatus was not readily available or taught by the prior
art.

20 Recent developments in the inspection of contact
lenses produced in accordance with the foregoing methods
has enabled automated lens inspection, as taught in U.S.
Patent 5,500,732 to Ebel et al. Further, recent
developments in the hydration and automated handling of
wet contact lenses, as taught in U.S. Patent 5,476,111 to
Anderson et al., has enabled automatic robotic handling of
25 lenses during hydration, and prior to the inspection
thereof by the automated lens inspection system.

30 The removal of lenses, that are out of product
specification, from a serial product stream of contact
lenses, generates random variations in the product flow
which must be consolidated prior to packaging.

The present invention therefor provides an automated
apparatus for consolidating serial product flow wherein
the product flow includes random variations in the flow.
The present invention provides a consolidation buffer for

1 receiving the serial products from the production line,
and then consolidating random variations in the product
flow. The automated robotic handling means then selects
a predetermined number and arrangement of product units
and transports that number and arrangement to a subsequent
5 packaging station for packaging, sterilization, and final
shipment.

More specifically, the present invention is directed
to an automated apparatus for controlling the automatic
packaging of contact lenses in a contact lens fabrication
10 facility, said apparatus comprising:

(a) a first robotic transfer device for
periodically transferring a first predetermined array of
individual packages from an inspection station to a
consolidation buffer;

15 (b) a controller for tracking and identifying
individual packages containing contact lens inspected at
said inspection station, said controller including memory
and logic for storing the identity of individual packages
containing contact lenses determined to be out of
20 specification by said inspection station and generating a
signal to cause said first robotic means to discard any
said individual package identified by said controller as
being out of specification; and

(c) said consolidation buffer having at least
one elongate buffer rail and at least one product follower
25 for each rail to consolidate packages deposited thereon,

(d) a second robotic assembly for periodically
transferring a second predetermined array of individual
packages from said consolidation buffer to a second
processing station.

30 The present invention further provides a robotic
transfer means for receiving serial product flow, and
selectively ejecting individual product units in response
to data signals from the automated lens inspection system.

More specifically the present invention is
1 further directed to an automated apparatus for
consolidating serial product flow wherein said product
flow includes a series of discrete product units, said
apparatus comprising:

5 (a) at least one serial product line having
random variations in serial product flow;

(b) a consolidation buffer for receiving said
serial products from said line, at least one product
follower for consolidating random variations in said
10 product flow and guide means to present product shingling;

(c) an automated output device for selecting a
predetermined number and arrangement of product units, and
transporting said number and arrangement to a subsequent
processing station.

15 The present invention further provides a
consolidation buffer between two serial production
operations, wherein the number and arrangement of product
varies between input and output. The present invention
enables use of a first x,y array of product units merging
20 from a serial production line, and consolidating those
product units into a second x,y array of units which
corresponds to an array used in second production
operation relating to the product.

More specifically, the present invention is directed
25 to a consolidation buffer for consolidating a plurality of
products having random variations in product arrangement,
said buffer comprising:

(a) at least one buffer rail, said buffer rail
having an input end and an output end, said buffer rail
receiving a plurality of products with random variations
30 in the arrangement thereof at said input end, said buffer
rail having at least one elongate vertical guide rail to
prevent shingling of products during consolidation and
transport;

1 (b) at least one product follower mounted for reciprocal movement along said rail from said input end to said output end, said product follower engaging products placed on said rail and sliding them along said rail from said input end to said output end;

5 (c) at least one longitudinal drive for reciprocating said product follower along said rail; and

10 (d) a sensor for determining the presence of product at the output end of said rail, and initiating a signal for said longitudinal drive to reciprocate said product follower to said input position.

15 The present invention further provides for a programmable logic controller which maintains a status count for each of the individual products in the consolidation buffers of the present invention, including a count for each random addition of product, and a
20 separate count for each selection and transport of product from the buffers to the final packaging station. The present invention provides a method and apparatus for the high speed robotic handling of discrete final packages of product having a soft contact lens carried therein. This
25 robotic handling enables selective ejection or rejection of specific lenses, even when carried in a predetermined X,Y array, when one or more of said lenses have been flagged as flawed or out of spec by the automated lens inspection system.

30 The present invention further provides for an automated control means for sequencing and coordinating each of the robotic assemblies used in the transfer of lenses from the automated lens inspection system to final packaging.

While the invention is described with particular reference to molded contact lenses wherein the lens has been molded between a first and second mold half, it is understood the present consolidation apparatus is equally

1 suitable for the consolidation of lenses formed by lathe
cutting wherein the hydrogel is maintained at a dry state
while the desired optical surfaces are cut and polished.
Further, the apparatus of the present invention may also
5 be used in consolidating spin cast lenses which subject a
liquid monomer to centrifugal force in a mold which has
the same shape as the desired optical surfaces of the
lens.

The present invention for an automated apparatus
and method for consolidating products for packaging may be
10 more readily understood by one skilled in the art with
reference being had to the following detailed description
of the preferred embodiments, taken in conjunction with
the accompanying drawings, wherein like elements are
designated by identical reference numerals throughout the
several views, and in which:

15 Figure 1 is a diagrammatic illustration of
plural robotic handling means, and a consolidation buffer
for removing random variations in product flow.

20 Figure 2 is an elevation view of the automated
lens inspection system and the stations utilized in the
initial handling of the lenses prior to the automated lens
inspection.

Figure 3 is a plan view of the apparatus
illustrated in Figure 2.

25 Figure 4 is an elevation view of the
consolidation buffer of the present invention, and the
packaging apparatus to which the consolidated product flow
is transferred.

30 Figure 5 is a plan view of the apparatus
illustrated in Figure 4 illustrating both a consolidation
buffer and a packaging buffer arranged immediately prior
to the packaging apparatus.

Figure 6 is an isometric view of a contact lens carrier which serves as both an inspection carrier, and a portion of the final contact lens package.

Figure 7 is an isometric view of an inspection carrier used to transport a plurality of the contact lens carriers illustrated in Figure 6 through the automated lens inspection system.

Figure 8 is an elevation view of the consolidation buffer of the present invention.

Figure 9 is a plan view of the consolidation buffer of the present invention, as illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 10 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the apparatus illustrated in Figure 8, taken along section line 10-10'.

Figure 11 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the apparatus illustrated in Figure 8, taken along section line 11-11'.

Figure 12 is a diagrammatic illustration of an individuated robotic handling device transporting contact lens carriers to the consolidation buffer of the present invention.

Figure 1 is a diagrammatic illustration of the automated apparatus of the present invention used to consolidate serial product flow when the serial product flow has random variations therein. While prefigured 2 X 8, 2 X 5 and 4 X 8 arrays are used in the description of the present invention, it is understood that a variety of arrays and configurations may be used in the practice of the invention described herein.

As illustrated in Figure 1, an inspection pallet 10 carrying sixteen product articles 20, arranged in a 2 X 8 array 20(a) is transported in the direction of arrow A from an automated inspection system that has separately

1 reviewed each of the products 20 according to a predefined
product criteria. Pallet 10 travels on a conveyor 12(b)
through each of the three positions 10(a), (b) and (c)
illustrated in Figure 1. After the products have been
removed from the inspection pallet 10, as indicated in
5 10(c), the empty inspection pallets are returned via
return conveyor 13 to be refilled with product.

A robotic handling device 200 is positioned adjacent
conveyors 12, 13 and has mounted thereon a
2 X 8 vacuum array 202 having sixteen independently
10 actuatable vacuum gripping means mounted thereon. Pallet
10(b) is conveyed along conveyor 12 to a predetermined
product pick point, as illustrated in Figure 1 and the 2
X 8 array 202 is positioned thereabove to remove each of
the sixteen products from the inspection carrier 10(b).
15 As illustrated in Figure 1, products 20(b), (c) and (d)
have been marked with an "X" to diagrammatically
illustrate the removal of flawed or out spec products. In
the practice of the present invention, a programmable
logic controller is used to control the various elements
20 of the present invention and receives a datablock from the
automated inspection system having a flag set for each of
the products 20(b), (c) and (d) that are flawed or out of
spec.

After the products 20 have been removed from the
25 inspection carrier 10(b), the robotic transfer device 200
positions the 2 X 8 array over conveyor belt 14 and
selectively discharges the products 20(b), (c) and (d).
Those products are then removed by conveyor 14 for
subsequent destruction or recycling.

30 The robotic device 200 then places the remaining
products on a vacuum consolidation buffer 230 as indicated
at 20(d). The product array as deposited at 20(d)
includes gaps or random variations in the product flow
resulting from the removal of the out of spec products

20(b), (c) and (d) from the serial product flow. The
consolidation buffer 230 includes a pair of pneumatic
product followers 232,234 which are used to consolidate
the product group 20(d) with product group 20(e). Each of
the pneumatic followers 232,234 is independently advanced
in the direction of arrow C until the product stream is
consolidated. One or more pneumatic followers may be used
to consolidate and advance the array along the
consolidated buffer. As product 20(f) encounters product
20(g), the entire stream of product driven by the
pneumatic product followers will advance and trigger an
optical sensor 236, which generates a control signal for
the programmable logic controller to de-energize the
pneumatic product follower and return the follower to the
initial start position. Likewise, optical sensor 238
generates a similar return signal for the other pneumatic
product follower when the second product stream has been
consolidated. After consolidation of the product, a
separate indexing mechanism 240 returns the entire product
stream in the direction of arrow D to a predetermined
registration point for subsequent robotic handling. In
the present invention, the consolidation buffer 230
includes both moveable and fixed guide rails which permit
sliding movement of the product along the rails in
response to product followers 232,234, but which will
prevent "shingling" of the product during consolidation.

A package feed robotic handling device 300 is
positioned between the consolidation buffer 230 and a
packaging station 400, and is equipped with an array 302
which contains ten vacuum gripping means arranged in a
2 X 5 matrix. The 2 X 5 array 302 is first positioned
over product group 20(f) and the vacuum gripping means is
actuated to withdraw the first ten products from the
vacuum consolidation rail 230. The packaging robotic
handling device 300 then positions the 2 X 5 array and

product group 20(f) over position 1 on the packaging indexing table 400, and drops the array of products onto support pallet 410 mounted on the packaging indexing table 400. For the purposes of illustrating the operation of the invention, only a single support pallet 410 is illustrated on the packaging indexing table 400, although it is understood that in actual practice eight such support pallets are provided, one for each index position. The ten product units 20(g), carried by support pallet 410 are then indexed to position 2 for product verification, and to position 3 for subsequent product packaging operations.

During packaging, the packaging index table 400 rotates support pallets 410 from position to position to enable the products to undergo subsequent packaging steps. In the event there is a malfunction or delay in the operation of the packaging indexing table 400, the incoming product arriving on consolidation buffer 230 is temporarily stored in a buffer area 308 which has a plurality of buffer pallets 310 positioned therein. When the packaging index table 400 resumes operation, the package robotic handling device 300 will then transfer products in the 2 X 5 arrays from the buffer pallets 310 to the support pallets 410 on a first-in, first-out basis.

If the product being handled is time sensitive, the programmable logic controller can generate a time stamp to be placed with each product array as it is transferred from any given processing station to any subsequent processing station. Thus, a time stamp may be placed on the product when inspected, or when transferred to the buffer area 308. If the product is transferred to buffer 308, the X,Y coordinates of the array are also stored with the time stamp. If the time sensitive allotment expires before packaging index table 400 has resumed operation, the packaging robotic handling device 300 will then

discard expired time sensitive product, and will transfer only product meeting the time sensitive criteria to the support pallet 410. Likewise, if a problem in the production line results in an inordinate number of products being rejected, so that less than five products are available on either consolidation string 230(a),(b) at position 20(e) then the robotic handling device 200 will transfer product as necessary to balance product streams on both sides of the packaging consolidation buffer 230, and thereby enable removal of product as a 2 X 5 product array.

POST HYDRATION PROCESSING

The present invention was designed for and is particularly adapted for use in the post hydration processing section of an automated contact lens production facility. Contact lenses molded in an automated production line; hydrated in a hydration system as described in U.S. Patent 5,476,111; and automatically inspected as described in U.S. Patent 5,500,732 are particularly well suited for consolidation and packaging by the present invention.

The present invention envisions a multi-purpose disposable lens package carrier which transports a contact lens during inspection thereof, and serves as a portion of the final packaging after inspection. Package carrier 20 is illustrated in Figure 6 and is formed from injection molded or thermal formed plastic sheet material, such as polypropylene and includes a planar essentially rectangularly shaped base member 34 having an angularly depending wall portion 38 at one end thereof forming a first flange member and a pair of registration flanges 33(a),33(b), one of which is visible in Figure 6, at the other end thereof which are used to align the package

carrier for robotic handling. This package carrier is more fully described in copending application U.S.S.N. 995,607, the disclosure of which is incorporated here by reference thereto. Registration notches 31(a), (b) are provided on either side of the base 34 to cooperate with registration pins on various support pallets used in the processing and packaging operations to register the package carrier and lens for further handling or treatment. Offset from the center of the package is a cavity 36 integrally formed therein which is of an essentially semi-spherical configuration, generally in conformance with a curvilinear shape of a contact lens (not shown) which is adapted to be stored therein in a sealed condition while immersed in a suitable sterile aqueous solution in a manner similar to that described in U.S. Patent No. 4,691,820 to Martinez. The height "h" of flange member 38 depending from the planar base member 34 is complimentary to the height or depth of cavity 36, and provides for self alignment of the package carrier in cooperation with depending flanges 33(a), (b) on specially configured pallet carriers, as will hereinafter be described. Depending flange 38 is also used in the final packaging of the product in cooperation with a plurality of generally "chevron-shaped" ridges 32, which will assist the end user in gripping the package while peeling open a foil laminate cover.

The cavity 36 also includes a plurality of tick marks 37 which are used to assist in holding a contact lens in the centered position in the cavity during the removal of deionized water at one of the post hydration processing stations. The package carrier is also equipped with an annular flange 39 which is used for heat sealing a foil laminate cover in order to provide a hermetic seal for the contact lens during final distribution. A cut-out 35 may optionally be provided to facilitate gripping the flange

38 and the package when the cover stock or foil laminate is removed for consumer usage.

1 Base member 34 also includes a smooth planar surface 34(a) to provide a suitable engagement zone for vacuum grippers on the upper side, and a vacuum rail on the lower side, which are used to transport the package carrier during various stages of the operation.

5 An inspection carrier for transporting the package carriers through the automated lens inspection system is illustrated in Figure 7. The inspection carrier 10 includes a first and second row 10(a), 10(b) of cavities 40 which receive the bowl 36 of the package carrier and provide an optical sight path for the automated lens inspection system. Each of the intermediate registration pins 41 engage a package carrier on either side, with the end registration pins 41(a) engaging a single package. 15 These registration pins provide for precise registration of the package carrier in the longitudinal dimension of the inspection carrier while a pair of hard edges 42(a), 42(b) provide a reference surface for the downwardly descending flanges 33(a), 33(b), which together with pins 20 41 register the carrier package against rotational skewing. The inspection pallet 10 is further provided with three registration openings 43 on either side of the pallet which are used to transport the pallet through the automatic lens inspection station and to lock the pallet 25 in place during loading and unloading of the package carriers. The inspection pallet is further provided with a pair of grooves 44(a), 44(b) which provide a positive grip for an overhead transport mechanism that places and then removes the inspection pallet from the automatic lens 30 inspection system. A pair of slanted faces 45 provide clearance for the downwardly descending flange member 38 of the package carrier 20.

As illustrated in Figure 3, an injection mold machine 30 is used to mold the polypropylene package carriers 20 which serve a dual purpose in the invention concept. First, to provide a carrier for the inspection of the lens by the automated lens inspection system, and secondly, to provide a receptacle for the final packaging of the lens for distribution to end use consumers. These package carriers are molded in predetermined array, typically in clusters of sixteen per mold cycle, and removed from the injection mold by a robotic transfer means 60 having a rapidly reciprocating low mass transport carrier 62. The carrier 62 includes a hand member 64 having a plurality of vacuum gripper means thereon which are arranged to correspond to the array of mold cavities within the injection molding machine 20. Carrier 62 reciprocates along support member 26 and is rotatable from a vertical orientation as illustrated in Figure 3, to a horizontal orientation necessary to place the packaged carriers into a secondary transfer shuttle 68. Secondary transfer shuttle 68 is used to transport a plurality, i.e. sixteen of the package carriers from a first receiving position 68(a) illustrated in Figure 3 to a second position 68(b) where the package carriers are picked up by a robotic handling device 50. Robotic handling device 50 is articulated, having first and second arms 51,52 and a vertically reciprocating arm and hand (not shown) having a plurality of vacuum gripping means thereon which engage each of the package carriers transported by the transfer shuttle 68.

The package carriers 20 are then removed from the transfer shuttle 68 and placed on an inspection pallet 10 at a pallet loading station 11. In the preferred embodiment the package carriers are molded in a 4 X 4 array to maximize the efficiencies inherent in such an array for molding, which are transported in the inspection

1 pallet 10 in a 2 X 8 array. When these two arrays are
used, robotic handling device 50 makes two separate
transfers, and transfers a 2 X 4 array in each transfer.
The loaded pallet 10 is then moved by conveyor 12(a) to a
5 deionized water injection station 16 wherein each of the
package carriers transported on the inspection pallet are
partially filled with degassed and deionized water. The
inspection pallet is then transferred by a push conveyor
17 to a lens loading area 18 where it is batched with a
10 second pallet to provide a contiguous loading area with
thirty-two package carriers in a 4 x 8 array, each of
which has been dosed with degassed and deionized water.

A first robotic transfer device 100 having a
plurality of convex lens carrier elements 110 mounted
thereon then removes thirty-two contact lenses from the
15 preceding hydration station as described in U.S. Patent
5,546,111. The robotic transfer device 100 includes an
adjustable 4 X 8 array 102 of convex lens carriers 104
which pick up thirty-two lenses with a first 4 X 8 array,
configuration, and deposits them in the batched array of
20 thirty-two package carriers at staging area 18, with a
single lens in each package carrier. The contact lenses
are transferred from the hydration station to the
individual convex lens carrier 100 with a gentle puff of
air, and retained thereon by surface tension. The robotic
25 transfer array 102 is paused at station 70 to remove any
air bubbles entrapped in the residual deionized water that
wets the lens. Station 70 includes a plurality of
specially configured air nozzles which blow off the
residual bubbles.

30 After the package carriers 20 have been loaded with
a contact lens, the inspection pallets 10 are singulated
by transport push plate 19 and loaded onto a first
overhead conveyor 21. The overhead conveyor 21 then lifts
the inspection pallet 10 from the lens loading area and

transfers it to the automatic lens inspection system 15,
and particularly to the conveyor 15(b) for transport
1 through the automatic lens inspection system. After the
lenses have been inspected, the inspection pallet is
lifted by the second overhead conveyor 22 and placed on
conveyor 12(b) for transport to the deionized water
5 removal station 24. The deionized water is then removed
by a specially configured nozzle prior to packaging. The
deionized water is used to hydrate and center the lens
within the package carrier during the inspection process,
but is removed prior to packaging, to enable a precise
10 dosing of a buffered saline solution in the final package.

After removal of the deionized water, the lenses,
package carriers and inspection pallet are transported to
the package removal pick point 25 which clamps the
inspection pallet 10 to enable the second robotic transfer
15 device 200 to remove the package carriers and lenses
therefrom.

A programmable logic controller maintains a status
register for each of the lenses as they are placed at the
robotic transfer staging area 18 and receives a flag from
20 the automatic lens inspection station 15 for each lens
that has failed inspection. The second robotic transfer
device 200 includes a 2 X 8 array of independently
actuable vacuum grippers which engage the package carriers
at the package removal pick point 25. Any packages
25 containing out of spec lenses are then dropped onto
conveyor 14 by the robotic transfer device 200 as
hereinbefore described, and the remaining lenses are
transferred to the consolidation buffer 230 illustrated in
Figures 4, 5, 8 - 12.

30 The consolidation buffer 230 includes a pair of
consolidation rails 230(a), (b), cross sections of which
are illustrated in Figure 12, which receive the 2 X 8
array of package carriers from the second robotic transfer

means 200. This 2 X 8 array is deposited on the consolidation buffer 230 at position 230(c), as illustrated in Figure 5 and 8. A pair of product followers 232,234 engage the string of package carriers and slide them in the direction of arrow C to a first staging area. A first consolidation of the initial load occurs during this transport. The strings of consolidated packages are then further transported in the direction of arrow C, in which the packages may engage other package carriers on the consolidation buffer. Eventually, the packages enter the final staging area where they trigger light sensors 236,238 as previously described. If they encounter existing package carriers, the intermediate followers 266, 267 will push the entire string in the direction of arrow A until each of the strings of package carriers has triggered its respective light sensor 236 or 238 as illustrated in Figure 1. As the sensor is triggered, the PLC logic controller signals one or both pneumatic controllers to reverse the actuating air pressure for the air cylinders 268, 269 which actuate product followers 266, 267 thereby causing them to retract. A product indexing pusher 340 then returns the product string in the direction of arrow D to a fixed reference position where the package carriers can be readily engaged by the third robotic handling device 300. The Overhead guide rails are positioned just above the smooth planar area 34(a) of each package carrier 20 to hold the package carriers to the buffer and to prevent shingling thereof when being driven forward by product followers 232,234, 266 and 267 or indexing pusher 240.

The packaging robotic transfer device 300 includes a 2 X 5 array 302 of vacuum gripping means 304 which may engage ten of the package carriers at the position illustrated at 230(d) in Figure 5 for transfer to the indexing turntable 400. The indexing turntable 400

1 includes a rotatable turntable having eight support
pallets 410 mounted thereon for receiving the 2 X 5 array
of package carriers and contact lenses from the packaging
robotic transfer device 300.

5 In normal operation, the robotic transfer device 300
deposits the 2 X 5 array on support pallet 410 in the
number 1 position. If the indexing turntable is not in
operation, a large buffer area 308 is provided with a
plurality of buffer pallets, one of which is indicated
symbolically at 310 in Figure 5. Buffer area 308 will
10 accommodate approximately fifty pallets for intermediate
storage, or approximately 10 minutes of product stream in
the event the packaging operation is temporarily
interrupted for resupply, maintenance or adjustments.

15 After the 2 X 5 array of package carriers has been
deposited on support pallet 410, the pallet is rotated to
position 412 where optical sensors verify that a package
has been loaded at each position and that the packages are
correctly aligned on the pallet. Indexing turntable 400
is then rotated again to station 414 wherein each of the
20 individual package carriers are dosed with approximately
950 microliters of a buffered saline solution. The use of
deionized water in the hydration and inspection steps
significantly speeds the production line as a whole since
the time consuming ionic neutralization of the polymer
25 from which the lenses are made does not occur until after
the inspection process. When deionized water is used for
hydration and inspection, the final step of the process is
to introduce buffered saline solution into the final
package with the lens and then seal the lens within the
30 package so that final lens equilibration (ionic
neutralization, final hydration and final lens
dimensioning) is accomplished in the package at room
temperature or during sterilization after the lens has
been packaged and sealed.

1 It has been determined empirically that it is
desirable that soft contact lenses produced in accordance
with the present invention be exposed to atmosphere for no
more than fifteen minutes between the removal of the
deionized water at station 24 (illustrated in Figure 3)
5 and the dosing of the saline solution at station 414 in
Figure 5. The programmable logic controller which
previously received the inspection results from the
automated lens inspection system and correlated those
results to the individual lenses, also time stamps the
10 individual lenses at the pick up point 25, immediately
following the removal of the deionized water at station
24. This time stamp is transferred through consolidation
and into the 2 X 5 array when removed by the packaging
robotic transfer device 300. In the event the indexing
15 turntable 400 is not operational, and the 2 X 5 array is
stored in the buffer 308, then the X,Y coordinates of the
2 X 5 array are stored with the time stamp to enable the
packaging robotic transfer device 300 to select "fresh"
product, i.e. less than fifteen minutes old, at the time
20 the indexing turntable 400 resumes operation. After
operation is resumed, the robotic transfer device 300 will
then dispose of the "expired" product, rather than
transferring it to the indexing turntable.

25 After saline dosing at station 414, the saline level
is checked at station 415 and the support pallet is then
rotated under a final product check station 416 to a foil
receiving station 418.

30 As described earlier, each group of package carriers
receives a single laminated foil cover sheet which is
heat sealed to the package carriers. The laminated foil
stock 432 is fed from a large indefinite spool through a
tensioning device 434 to an ink jet printer 436 which
prints the lot, batch and power number of the lenses to be
packaged. The foil laminate is cut from an indefinite

length product into two strips that are heat sealed to the
2 X 5 product array to provide two separate 1 X 5 product
strips. The foil in between each of the package carriers
is also partially severed, scored or perforated to enable
the consumer to separate individual packages from the 1 X
5 array at the time the product is used. The partial
scoring is done with a series of rolling blades 440(a)-(d)
which are pneumatically biased into a drum 439. The foil
is then split into two strips by a foil splitter blade 441
and the foil passes through a stationary gripper and
sensing mechanism 442. A video camera 438 and a series of
sensors at station 442 are used to provide precise
alignment of the information printed by the ink jet
printer 436, with the printing fields into which said
printing is placed, and the alignment of the perforations
or scores provided by rolling blades 439. An advancing
grripper 434 is provided to draw a length of foil laminate
corresponding to the 1 X 5 array and sever the strips with
a rotating knife 444. At the completion of this cut, the
advancing gripper 434 has advanced in the direction of
arrow E in Figure 4 to place the 1 X 5 foil strips under
vacuum gripping heads 418(a),(b). These vacuum gripping
heads then reciprocate downwardly to grip the foil, lift
it from the advancing and cutting station 434, and
transfer the foil to the indexing turntable 400 at the
foil placement station 418.

The indexing turntable 400 is then rotated again, and
a heat seal mechanism 420 seals a single strip of foil to
five separate package carriers in a single high
temperature short cycle sealing operation. Indexing
turntable 400 is then rotated to position 422 where a
reciprocating transfer head 446 removes the sealed product
from the indexing turntable 400 and transports it in the
direction of arrow F for sterilization and cartoning.

The Consolidation Buffer

1 The consolidation buffer of the present invention
will be described with respect to Figures 8 - 12 in which
230(a), (b) represent a pair of elongated buffer rails and
an elongate side rail 230(e).

5 As illustrated in Figure 12, the second robotic
transfer device 200 includes a 2 X 8 array 202 of
independently actuatable vacuum gripping means 204 which
pick a 2 X 8 array of package carriers from pick point 25,
10 immediately following the removal of the deionized water
as previously described with respect to Figure 3. The 2
X 8 array is then moved to position 230(c) as illustrated
in Figure 5 and 8, and as illustrated in cross-section in
Figure 12 wherein the individual package carriers 20 are
15 positioned immediately above the buffer rails, and then
lowered into engagement therewith, to enable the buffer
rails to engage the smooth planar surfaces 34(a) of the
package carrier 20. The vacuum gripping means 204 are
then released, depositing the array of packages on buffer
rails 230(a), 230(b).

20 The buffer rails 230(a), (b) include three sections,
a loading section denoted as 230(c) in Figures 8 and 9, an
intermediate section and an end section or package lift
off area indicated at 230(d) in Figures 8 and 9. The
25 packages are deposited on the buffer rails 230(a), (b) as
illustrated in Figure 12, and then transported the length
of the buffer rail by one or more pneumatic product
followers. Inasmuch as the packages transported by the
present invention, generally indicated in Figure 6, are
30 thin and light weight, there is a tendency for the
packages to "shingle" during transport. This problem was
addressed in the parent application by the use of vacuum
rails which exerted a light pressure from below to
maintain the packages in contact with the buffer rails.

In the present invention, this function is preformed by a series of hold down rails divided into three sections. In the first section denoted as 230(c) a pair of moveable guide rails 240, 241 are used to hold down the packages during initial transport and consolidation. These guide rails pivot up and out of the way during loading of the packages as illustrated in Figures 10 and 12. In the intermediate section of the consolidation buffer 230, the guide rail members 242(a), 242(b) are fixed, with a 0.5mm clearance above the nominal height of the package. This clearance provides for adequate transport of the packages without allowing shingling thereof. A third pair of hold down bars 243, 244 are nominally maintained in the lower position illustrated in Figures 8 and 9 when the package arrays are received, but open for package lift off as illustrated in Figure 11.

The packages are transported the length of the buffer rail by at least one pneumatic product follower, which was illustrated in the parent application as a pair of rodless cylinders. While a single drive, traversing the entire length of the consolidation buffer 230 has proved to be adequate and satisfactory, the consolidation buffer 230 illustrated in Figures 8 and 9 uses a two stage drive that provides a faster cycle rate, thereby allowing a higher throughput for the consolidation function.

As illustrated in Figure 8 and 12, the first stage drive is indicated by a rodless cylinders 250(a), 250(b) which travel on pneumatic guide rods 252(a), 252(b) throughout the length of the input zone 230(c). A second rodless cylinder drive mechanism 260 is used to transport the consolidated packages the remaining length of the buffer 230 into the package lift off zone 230(d). Suitable rodless pneumatic drives are available from S.M.C. Pneumatics, Inc. a Japanese Corporation having sales offices in Chicago, Illinois.

After triggering infra red sensors, 236, 238 the consolidated package array is moved back into position by a return stroke from indexing pusher 240 and package return plates 262(a), (b) as will be hereinafter explained in greater detail. The rodless cylinder 260 travels a fixed guide rail 264 and includes a pair of pneumatically engageable package engaging followers 266, 267 which are reciprocated upwardly to engage the package string for transport in the direction of arrow C, and then retracted during the return stroke to enable an advancing package array to be transported over the engagement point E. Each of the package followers 266, 267 is mounted on a separate pneumatic cylinder 268, 269 which are fixed to the carriage 260 of a rodless cylinder which reciprocates along rail 264. Each of the package followers 266, 267 travel in a space defined between the two buffer rails 230(a), 230(b) as illustrated in Figure 10. The limits of travel of the reciprocating carriage 260 is illustrated in Figure 8 with the initial or home position of the carriage 260 illustrated in solid lines, and the nominal end stroke position illustrated in dotted lines at 260(a). As illustrated in Figure 8, the pneumatic cylinder 268(a) has elevated the package follower 266(a) to its upward package driving position. The sensor array 236, 238 mounted in bridge 270 signals when the leading edge of the consolidated package array reaches the end of travel of the consolidating rails 230(a), 230(b). Infra red sensors are used, and generate a signal for the PLC the controller halts the advance of the carriage 260 and the PLC begins the return stroke to the home position illustrated in Figure 8 when both sensors have triggered, or when carriage 260 reaches its end of stroke position.

After the rodless carriage 260 begins at return stroke, a pneumatic cylinder 340 (the index pusher) advances package plate 262 in a direction opposite to the

1 arrow C to return a consolidated package array to a
predefined registration point for pick up by the 2 x 5
package array 302 as previously described with respect to
Figure 1. The pneumatic drive 340 advances the package
5 return plate 262 to the position illustrated at 262(a) in
Figure 8 to align the first 2 x 5 array in a predetermined
position for robotic pick up, and then returns to the
position illustrated at 262.

10 Shingling of the package carriers is prevented by
means of a longitude vertical restraining guides 240 and
241, 242(a), (b) and 243, 244 as will be hereinafter
explained with respect to Figures 8-12. In the load
section 230(c) a pair of guides 240, 241 are mounted for
15 pivotal movement on shafts 277, 278 and are rotated by
rotary actuators 279, 280 from the position illustrated in
Figure 12 to the dotted line position 240(a), 241(a)
illustrated in Figure 10. The rotary reactors 279, 280
may be pneumatically, hydraulically or electrically
powered, but in the preferred embodiment are pneumatically
driven.

20 As illustrated in Figure 12, when the robotic head
202 drops the inspected package array on to the
consolidating buffer 230, the respective array of packages
are arranged to be supported on a rail which extend the
length of the consolidating buffer. Each of these rails
25 define longitudinal cut out 230(f) and 230(g) which
receive the downwardly sloping angled flange member 38
illustrated in Figure 6. The bowl member 36 of one string
of package is 20 is received in a space 230(h) define
between the first buffer rail 230(a) and the second buffer
rail 230(b). The bowl member 36 of the second string of
30 packages is received in a second space 230(i) define
between the second buffer rail 230(b) and an elongate
support rail 230(e). After the package carriers 20 have
been deposited in the position illustrated in Figures 10-

12, the robotic device 200 is retracted and the rotary
1 actuators 279, 280 actuated to rotate guide members 240
and 241 into a position over the flat planar portion 34(a)
of package carriers 20. Once the doors have been rotated
into position, the rodless carriers 250(a), 250(b) begin
5 their advancing stroke in the direction of arrow C
illustrated in Figure 8 to consolidate the array, and move
it to the hand off point E illustrated in Figure 8. After
the rodless cylinders 250(a), 250(b) have completed their
stroke as indicated by the dotted line illustration 250(c)
10 in Figure 8, they return to their home position to await
a new array of product. During this advancing stroke, the
package array has been consolidated and advanced from the
moveable vertical guides 240, 241 to a position beneath
the fixed vertical guides 242(a), (b). During this
15 stroke, the package follower 232 has traveled in the space
230(h) defined between the buffer rails 230(a) and 230(b)
while the package follower 234 has traveled in the
longitudinal space between buffer rail 230(b) and the
vertical support 230(e).

20 At the hand off point E, the package followers 232,
234 have advanced the entire consolidated array past the
hand off point E so that when the pneumatical cylinders
268, 269 are actuated, the second set of package followers
266, 267 are advanced upwardly behind the consolidated
25 array. The entire array is then advanced under the fixed
vertical guides 242(a), (b) in the direction of arrow (c)
to the end position or hand off position indicated at
230(d) of Figure 8.

30 At the hand off position, the two vertical package
guides 243, 244 are mounted on a single rotary arm 245
which is pivotally mounted on shaft 282 which is rotated
by rotary actuator 284 from the position illustrated in
Figure 11, to the dotted line position 243(a), 244(a)
illustrated in Figure 11. It should be noted that Figure

11 views the consolidating buffer 230 from the opposite
direction as Figure 10. As described previously, the
1 advancing array of consolidated packages passes under an
infra red sensor array 236, 238 which generates a signal
for the PLC controller to individually retract the package
followers 266, 267 to thereby halt the advancing array of
5 packages and to return the rodless cylinder 260 is then
returned to its home position after both package arrays
have reached sensors 236, 238. Simultaneously, pneumatic
cylinder 340 begins its index stroke to return the
consolidated array to the pick up position for pick up by
10 the robotic head 302 as previously described with respect
to Figure 1. While the return cylinder 340 is positioning
the package array, the rotary actuators 284 rotates shaft
282 and the support arm 285 thereby lifting the vertical
guides 243, 244 free of the packages 20 enabling pick up
15 by the 2 x 5 robotic head 302. After the robotic head has
cleared the 2 x 5 array from the package lift off 230(d)
the rotary actuator 284 rotates shaft 282 to bring the
cross member 245 and the vertical restraining guides 243,
244 back into position over the buffer rails 230(a),
20 230(b).

Vertical guide 240 in the input section of the
consolidation buffer is mounted on a pair of rotating arms
220, 221 on shaft 278 which is journalled for rotation in
the support frame member 222 and bridge member 224.
25 Likewise, the moveable vertical guide 241 is mounted
between a pair of rotating arms 223, 224 which are
supported by shaft member 277 which is journalled for
rotation in frame member 222 and bridge member 224. The
fixed vertical restraint guides 242(a), (b) are fixably
30 supported by bridges 286 and 288. The package lift off
vertical restraint guides 243, 244 are supported by arm
members 245(a), 245(b) and shaft member 282 which is

journalled for rotation in the frame support member 226
and bridge member 228.

While the invention has been particularly shown and
described with respect to the preferred embodiments
thereof, it will be understood by those skilled in the art
that the foregoing, and other changes in form and details,
may be made therein without departing from the spirit and
scope of the invention, which is limited only by the scope
of the following claims.

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Claims:

1. An automated apparatus for consolidating serial product flow wherein said product flow includes a series of discrete product units, said apparatus comprising:

(a) at least one serial product line having random variations in serial product flow;

(b) a consolidation buffer for receiving said serial products from said line, at least one product follower for consolidating random variations in said product flow and guide means to prevent product shingling;

(c) an automated output device for selecting a predetermined number and arrangement of product units, and transporting said number and arrangement to a subsequent processing station.

2. An automated apparatus as claimed in Claim 1 wherein said apparatus further comprises a robotic transfer device for receiving said serial product flow, and ejecting individual product units in response to a quality control evaluation, said individual ejections creating said random variations in said product flow.

3. An automated apparatus as claimed in Claim 1 wherein said predetermined arrangement of output units includes an X,Y array of units, and said consolidation buffer includes at least X number of individual product buffers.

4. An automated apparatus as claimed in Claim 3 wherein said apparatus further comprises a control means which stores a status for each of said individual product buffers, including a count for each random addition of product, and a count for each selection and transport by said automated output means.

5. An automated apparatus as claimed in Claim 4 wherein said robotic transfer device will transfer products between individual buffers to ensure said X,Y array of units for said automated output device.

6. An automated apparatus as claimed in Claim 2 wherein said robotic transfer device includes an array of independently actuatable vacuum gripping means.

