

**ADAPTIVE CUSHION METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR
MINIMIZING FORCE CONCENTRATIONS ON A HUMAN BODY
BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

A. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to methods, articles and apparatus for comfortably supporting a seated or recumbent human body. More particularly, the invention relates to a method and apparatus for minimizing concentration of forces on supported body parts using an adaptive cushion having a matrix of air bladder cells which are dynamically pressurized in response to measurements of body forces exerted on sensors overlying the cells.

B. Description of Background Art

Whenever a human body is supported by an object such as a chair or bed, normal and shear forces produced in reaction to the weight of the individual are transmitted from the supporting surface through the skin, adipose tissues, muscles, etc. to the skeleton. The forces exerted on body parts by support surfaces, which are equal and opposite to body weight forces, can in some cases cause damage to tissues. Forces on body parts can compress internal blood vessels and occlude nutrients from the tissue, the product of the magnitude and duration of these forces determining whether tissue damage or morbidity will occur. High pressure alone is generally not sufficient to deleteriously affect tissue. Deep-sea divers for example, are subjected to high, but evenly distributed normal forces and do not suffer from tissue damage. If, however, there is a sufficiently large external pressure gradient on a body part, resulting from, for example, a low-pressure area adjacent to a high-pressure area, internal body fluids can migrate to the area of lower pressure. Tangential or shear forces exerted externally on a body part can also collapse internal capillaries and blood vessels by distorting them along their longitudinal axes. It is therefore extremely important to know both the surface force gradient (pressure gradient) and the externally applied shear force exerted on tissue, because it is the combination of these factors that leads to tissue strain and subsequent tissue death. Thus, even relatively small external shear and normal forces, which may be independent of one another, can combine to produce damagingly large shear stresses on internal tissue. The areas of the human body which are most at risk of developing tissue damage such as a pressure sore are: heel, ischial tuberosities, greater trochanter, occiput and sacrum.

There are available a variety of pressure/force sensors, shear sensors and sensor arrays which are useable for measuring normal and shear forces exerted on human tissues. For example, the present inventor's U.S. Pat. No. 5,7(51),973, November 5, 1996, Multi-Directional Piezoresistive Shear And Normal Force Sensors For Hospital Mattresses And Seat Cushions discloses thin, planar sensors for measuring reaction forces exerted by mattresses or chair pads on the body of a recumbent or seated patient. One embodiment of the invention disclosed in the specification of the '973 patent includes a sensor comprised of a two-dimensional array

of isolated sensor element pads, each consisting of a thin, flat layer formed of a non-conductive elastomeric polymer matrix filled with electrically conductive particles. A matrix of upper and lower conductive elements in electrical contact with upper and lower sides of each sensor pad enables separate measurements to be made of the electrical resistance of each pad. Pressure exerted on each pad, e.g., in response to a normal force exerted on the sensor matrix by a person's body, reduces the thickness of the sensor pad, and therefore its electrical resistance by a bulk or volume piezoresistive effect.

The present inventor also disclosed a novel method and apparatus for measuring pressures exerted on human feet or horses' hooves in U.S. Pat. No. 6,216,545, April 17, 2001, Piezoresistive Foot Pressure Measurement. The novel apparatus disclosed in the "545 patent includes a rectangular array of piezoresistive force sensor elements encapsulated in a thin, flexible polymer package. Each sensor element includes a polymer fabric mesh impregnated with conductive particles suspended in an elastomeric matrix such as silicone rubber. The piezoresistive mesh layer is sandwiched between an array of row and column conductor strip laminations, preferably made of a nylon mesh impregnated with printed metallic paths. Each region of piezoresistive material sandwiched between a row conductor and column conductor comprises an individually addressable normal force or pressure sensor in a rectangular array of sensors, the resistance of which varies inversely in a pre-determined way as a function of pressure exerted on the sensors, and thus enabling the force or pressure distribution exerted by an object contacting the array to be mapped.

In U.S. Patent No. 6,543,299, April 8, 2003, Pressure Measurement Sensor With Piezoresistive Thread Lattice, the present inventor disclosed a transducer sensor array for measuring forces or pressures exerted on a surface, the array including a fabric-like, two-dimensional lattice of individual force or pressure sensor transducer elements comprising intersecting regions of pairs of elongated, flexible threads, each consisting of a central electrically conductive wire core covered by a layer of piezoresistive material which has an electrical resistivity that varies inversely with pressure exerted on the material.

In U.S. Patent No. 7,201,063, April 10, 2007, Normal Force Gradient/Shear Force Sensors And Method Of Measuring Internal Biological Tissue Stress, the present inventor disclosed a normal force gradient/shear force sensor device and measurement method for measuring internal stresses in tissues of a person supported by a chair or bed. The device includes a planar matrix array of peripheral normal force sensors radially spaced from central shear force sensors, each including an electrically conductive disk located within a circular opening bordered by circumferentially spaced apart electrodes. The disk and electrodes are located between upper and lower cover sheets made of a stretchable material such as polyurethane, one cover sheet being adhered to the disk and the other sheet being adhered to a support sheet for the electrodes. Motion between the cover sheets in response to shear forces exerted on the array causes the disk to press more or less

tightly against the electrodes, thus varying electrical conductance between the disk and electrodes proportionally to the magnitude and direction of the shear force. Each normal force sensor includes an electrically conductive film pressed between row and column conductors. Measurements of conductance values of pairs of sensor, which vary proportionally to normal forces exerted on the sensor, are used to calculate a gradient vector of normal forces exerted by a body part on the sensor array, which is combined with the shear force vectors in an algorithm to calculate internal reaction shear forces, e.g., on flesh near a bony prominence.

The first group of the present inventor's patents identified above disclosed shear and normal force sensors and arrays which are useful in producing maps of normal and shear forces exerted at discrete points on a surface, such as a human body part, by an object such as the supporting surface of a chair or bed. The last of the present inventor's patents identified above provided an effective means for measuring shear forces and stresses on human tissue which is located some distance below the surface of the skin.

In U.S. Patent No. 6,721,9(80), Force Optimization Surface Apparatus And Method, the present inventor and co-inventors disclosed an apparatus including a mattress which included a plurality of laterally disposed, tubular sausage-shaped air bladders, each having thereon an individual force sensor. The apparatus included a mechanism for individually inflating each of the air bladders, monitoring the pressure in each individual bladder while a person was lying on the mattress monitoring the force exerted on that particular bladder, adjusting the pressure of that individual bladder for the purpose of minimizing force exerted by that particular bladder on the person's body, and repeating the foregoing steps for each bladder cell in turn.

The method described in U.S. Patent No. 6,721,9(80) of measuring force exerted by a person's body on a single individual air bladder cell while adjusting the inflation pressure in that cell may be suitable for single air bladder systems, and for those conditions in which the body of a supported patient freely conforms to the support surface. However, for the more frequently encountered cases in which portions of a patient's body are straddled between and supported by adjacent air bladder cells, the force measured on a particular bladder whose air pressure is being adjusted may be minimal for a particular inflated pressure. But the pressure which may minimize force exerted on a particular air bladder cell will in general not be the optimum pressure for minimum total force concentrations on a person's body. This is because while the force exerted on a particular air bladder cell may be minimized, forces exerted on air bladder cells adjacent to the air bladder cell in which the pressure is being varied may be substantially increased because the load weight is shifted to the adjacent cells.

A similar limitation of the prior art methods and apparatus occurs when a portion of a patient's body is supported in a cantilevered manner from one or more adjacent air bladder cells while pressure is varied in a particular air bladder cell. Again in that case, load forces are transferred to adjacent air bladder cells. Accordingly, it would be desirable to provide a method and apparatus which accounted for all forces

exerted on all air bladder cells while varying pressure in any individual cell. The present invention was conceived of to provide a method and apparatus for minimizing body force concentrations on parts of a human body supported by a chair or bed cushion, which includes measuring forces exerted on body parts.

OBJECTS OF THE INVENTION

An object of the present invention is to provide an adaptive cushion method and apparatus for minimizing reaction forces exerted by a bed, chair or other such object on body parts of a person lying or seated on the object.

Another object of the invention is to provide an adaptive cushion method and apparatus which includes an overlay cushion for placement on a bed mattress or chair, the cushion including a matrix of individually pressurizable air bladder cells and an array of surface force sensor transducers which includes an individual sensor vertically aligned with each air bladder cell, and an electronic control system for receiving force sensor signals and dynamically varying inflation pressures applied to individual air bladder cells to inflate or deflate the individual cells to pressures calculated by a control system algorithm to minimize force concentrations on parts of a body supported by the cushion.

Another object of the invention is to provide stretchable surface force transducers which are conformable to protuberances of a human body.

Another object of the invention is to provide stretchable surface force sensors which have an asymmetric, diode-like current-versus-voltage transfer function.

Another object of the invention is to provide a matrix array of stretchable surface force sensor transducers which have a non-bilateral current-versus-voltage transfer functions, thus minimizing cross-talk ambiguities occurring during X-Y addressing of individual sensors to map forces exerted on the array.

Various other objects and advantages of the present invention, and its most novel features, will become apparent to those skilled in the art by perusing the accompanying specification, drawings and claims.

It is to be understood that although the invention disclosed herein is fully capable of achieving the objects and providing the advantages described, the characteristics of the invention described herein are merely illustrative of the preferred embodiments. Accordingly, I do not intend that the scope of my exclusive rights and privileges in the invention be limited to details of the embodiments described. I do intend that equivalents, adaptations and modifications of the invention reasonably inferable from the description contained herein be included within the scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Briefly stated, the present invention comprehends a method and apparatus for minimizing high concentrations of reaction forces exerted by a chair, bed or other such object on protruding parts of the body of a person seated or lying on the object. A body force minimization apparatus according to the present invention includes an adaptive cushion for placement on a mattress or chair, the cushion having a matrix of

- 5 -

air bladder cells which are individually pressurizable by means of an air compressor and valves to variable pressures.

In a typical embodiment of the adaptive cushion suitable for use on bed, the air bladder cells may be arranged in a 6X2, X-Y rectangular grid, thus dividing the cushion into left and right columns, each having 6 longitudinally spaced apart zones running in the long, head-to-feet direction of the bed.

The adaptive cushion apparatus according to the present invention also includes a flexible, stretchable planar array of force sensor transducers of novel construction, which is preferably positioned on the upper surface of the cushion, the array having at least one sensor in vertical alignment with each air bladder cell of the cushion.

The sensor array according to the present invention includes stretchable fabric row and column conductors which have sandwiched between inner facing conductive surfaces thereof a stretchable fabric sheet coated with a piezoresistive material. Thus constructed, the planar sensor array is elastically deformable in response to forces exerted on the array by the weight of a human body supported on the upper surface of the sensor array overlying the air bladder cells. Preferably, the sensor array is placed on the upper surfaces of the air bladder cells and maintained in that position by a form-fitting, waterproof, contour sheet. The fabric matrices for both row and column conductors, as well as the central piezoresistive layer, are all made of a material which is elastically deformable in any direction within the plane of the material. In a preferred embodiment, the fabric matrices or the row conductor sheet and column conductor sheet are plated with a copper base coat and a nickel cover coat. The central piezoresistive sheet consists of a synthetic fabric matrix coated with piezoresistive coating. The sensor array also has an upper cover sheet which is made of a fabric such as Lycra which has a two-way stretch characteristic, i.e., is elastically stretchable in orthogonal directions.

An adaptive cushion apparatus according to the present invention includes an electro-pneumatic controller which is effective in alternately pressurizing and venting individual air bladder cells to controlled pressures, in respect to forces exerted by a human body on individual sensors aligned with the air bladder cells. The electro-pneumatic controller includes an electronic control system for applying a voltage or current individually to each force sensor and measuring the resultant current or voltage to thereby determine electrical resistance of the sensor, which is inversely proportional to the force or pressure exerted on the sensor, by for example, a person seated or lying on the cushion covered by the sensor array.

The electronic control system also includes a computer which receives as inputs electrical signals from individual sensors representative of their resistance, and hence forces or pressures exerted on the upper surface of each sensor.

- 6 -

The body force minimization apparatus according to the present invention also includes a pneumatic system which has a source of pressurized air, such as a compressor, for inputting pressurized air through a manifold and individually controllable inlet selector valves to each individual air bladder cell. The apparatus also includes an air pressure transducer for monitoring the air pressure within a selected cell, and outputting to the computer an electrical signal representative of the measured pressure.

Each air bladder cell inlet valve is electrically operable and has a first, open position in which air from an outlet port of the manifold is conducted to a selected air bladder cell to inflate it to a desired set pressure, and a second, closed position effective in maintaining a desired set pressure within the cell.

The pneumatic system also includes a vent valve coupled to the inlet port of the manifold. With the vent valve and a selected air bladder cell valve in a second, open position, pressurized air from a selected air bladder cell is vented to the atmosphere through an exhaust port of the vent valve to reduce the pressure in the individual air bladder cell to a lower controllable value. Each valve is electrically connected to an output control port of the computer, and operably controllable by signals on the output control port.

The present invention also includes a method for electronically controlling operation of the body force minimization apparatus. The method includes an algorithm implemented in the control system computer. That algorithm receives as inputs force measurements from individual air bladder cells, and outputs command signals which individually adjust the air pressure in each air bladder cell to values which are effective in minimizing force concentrations on body parts supported by the cushion.

According to the algorithm, each of the air bladder cells is inflated to predetermined upper set pressures, which may be the same or different for different cells, prior to a person's lying or sitting on the cushion. Next, a person is positioned on the cushion, while forces exerted by the person's body on each sensor are initially monitored by computer controlled measurement of the electrical resistance of each force sensor. A first, "zone-one" air bladder cell is then deflated under computer control to a predetermined lower set pressure. Although zone-one may correspond to any individual air bladder cell, such as the upper left-hand corner cell value in a 6-row by 2-column of air cells for use on a bed, a preferred mode of operation is to choose as zone-one the cell on which the highest body force was measured during the initial monitoring process.

During the step of deflating the first, zone-one air bladder cell, which is done in a slowly varying, ramped fashion, the forces exerted on each of the cells including the zone-one cell are measured, and the sum and optionally the average of those forces calculated by the computer. At the end of the downwardly ramped deflation step, the air pressure corresponding to the lowest sum and average of all force sensor readings is noted. The zone-one cell is then re-inflated to that pressure corresponding

to the lowest sum and average force sensor readings, to complete the cycle for zone-one.

The pressure-ramping cycle described above for the first zone, i.e., zone-one, is repeated in turn for each remaining zone of the air bladder cell cushion. Preferably, the sequence of zone deflation, re-inflation pressure-ramping cycles corresponds to successively smaller force concentrations. In other words, zone-one is chosen as the zone at which the highest surface body force was measured, zone-two would correspond to that zone having the second highest body force measurement, etc.

After the pressure-ramping cycle has been completed for each of the zones of the adaptive cushion, those steps are repeated for all of the zones, but using a reduced range of pressures, i.e., lower upper set pressures and higher lower set pressures. The sequence is then repeated again until the successively smaller adjustments in force measurements fall below a predetermined threshold level, at which time the cyclical operation of the system reverts to a passive state.

In the passive state, the computer monitors each of the force sensor outputs. Restoration of the control system to active cyclical operation is initiated by a significant change of any force measurement above a predetermined threshold in response, for example, to patient movements.

According to the first aspect of the invention, there is provided an adaptive cushion apparatus for reducing the magnitude of reaction force concentrations exerted on parts of a human body in response to contact with a supporting object, said apparatus comprising; a. a cushion for placement between a supporting object and a human body, said cushion having at least first and second hermetically sealable air bladder cells each made of a thin, flexible, air impervious material, b. at least first and second force sensitive sensors associated with said first and second air bladder cells, respectively, each of said sensors having an electrical characteristic which varies in a predetermined way with a force exerted on a said air bladder cell by a said body, c. a pressurization device for pressurizing a hollow interior space of each of said air bladder cells to an individually controllable pressure, d. at least one pressure transducer operatively coupleable to each of said air bladder cells to thereby measure gas pressure within said hollow interior

spaces of each of said air bladder cells, and e. a control apparatus having a force sensor interface port for receiving signals from said force sensors, a pressure transducer port for receiving signals from said pressure transducer, and an output port for providing control signals to said pressurization device to thereby pressurize air within said air bladder cells to individually controllable values which minimize a sum of forces sensed by said force sensors.

According to the second aspect of the invention, there is provided a method for reducing the magnitude of reaction force concentration exerted on parts of a human body in response to contact with a supporting object, said method using the apparatus according to the first aspect of the invention, and comprising the steps of; a. providing a cushion for placement between a supporting object and a human body, said cushion having at least first and second hermetically sealable air bladder cells each made of a thin, flexible, air impervious material, b. providing at least first and second force sensitive sensors associated with said first and second air bladder cells, respectively, each of said sensors having an electrical characteristic which varies in a predetermined way with a force exerted on a said air bladder cell by a said body, c. providing a source of pressurized gas for pressurizing a hollow interior space of each said air bladder cells to an individually controllable pressure, d. providing at least one pressure sensitive transducer operatively coupleable to each of said air bladder cells to thereby measure gas pressures within said hollow interior spaces of each said air bladder cells, e. providing a control apparatus for receiving signals from said force sensors and said pressure transducer and providing control signals to said pressurization device to thereby pressurize air within said air bladder cell to a value which minimize a sum of forces sensed by said force sensors, f. inputting to said control apparatus a signal from said pressure transducer representative of said gas pressure within said hollow

interior space of a said air bladder cell, g. inputting to said control apparatus signals from said force sensors representative of a forces exerted on all of said air bladder cells, h. providing from said control apparatus a control signal to said source of pressurized gas to thereby pressurize said hollow interior space of a said air bladder cell to a value which minimizes a sum of forces sensed by a said force sensors associated with all of said air bladder cells, i. calculating by said control apparatus from said transducer signals and said force sensor signals appropriate pressurization values for said hollow interior spaces of said air bladder cells which tend to minimize a sum of force concentration on said air bladder cells, and j. providing for issuance from said control apparatus to said source of pressurized air control signals effective in pressurizing said air bladder cells to said calculated force-minimizing pressure values.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a partly diagrammatic perspective view of a body support cushion apparatus with adaptive body force concentration minimization according to the present invention.

Figure 2A is a fragmentary upper perspective view of the apparatus of Figure 1, showing a sensor array jacket of the apparatus removed from a mattress overlay cushion of the apparatus to thereby reveal individual air bladder cells of the mattress.

Figure 2B is a fragmentary view of the mattress overlay of Figure 2A, showing an individual air cell thereof.

Figure 3 is a diagrammatic side elevation view of the apparatus of Figures 1 and 2, showing certain bladder cells thereof deflated to reduce support forces exerted on parts of a human body supported by the mattress overlay.

Figure 4 is a vertical sectional view of the mattress of Figure 2, taken in the direction of line 4-4.

Figure 5 is a fragmentary exploded perspective view of the mattress of Figure 1, showing elements of a force sensor arrangement thereof.

Figure 6 is a diagrammatic view showing a preferred relationship between the dimensions of adjacent air bladder cells and the width of an insulating strip between conductors of sensors on the cells.

Figure 7 is an electrical resistance-vs.-normal force diagram for the sensors of Figure 5.

- 8 -

Figure 8 is a partly schematic view of a preferred modification of sensor elements of the array of Figure 1, which includes a diode junction.

Figure 9 is a current-vs-voltage (I-V) diagram for the sensor elements of Figure 8.

Figure 10A is a schematic diagram showing a six row by two column matrix of the sensors of Figure 5.

Figure 10B is a view similar to that of Figure 10A, but showing sensors modified to include a diode junction.

Figure 11 is a block diagram of electro-pneumatic controller elements of the apparatus of Figure 1.

Figure 12 is a simplified perspective view of the electro-pneumatic controller of Figure 11.

Figure 13 is a flow chart showing operation of the apparatus of Figure 1.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Figures 1-13 illustrate various aspects of a method and apparatus for minimizing body force concentrations on a human body using an adaptive cushion according to the present invention. The example embodiment of the invention depicted in Figures 1 and 3, includes an adaptive cushion which is of an appropriate size and shape for use on a standard single or hospital bed. However, as will be clear from the ensuing description of that example embodiment, the size and shape of the adaptive cushion can be varied to suit different applications, such as for use on a fixed chair or wheel chair.

Referring first to Figures 1 and 2A, an adaptive cushion apparatus (20) for minimum body force concentrations on a body of a person lying on a bed may be seen to include a longitudinally elongated, rectangular cushion overlay (21). Cushion (21) has an appropriate size and shape to fit conformally on top of a standard size hospital bed. Thus, an example embodiment of cushion (21) had a laterally elongated, rectangular shape with a length of about 6 feet, a width of about 3 feet, and a thickness of about 4 inches.

As shown in Figure 1 and 2A, mattress overlay cushion (21) is constructed as a rectangular, two-column by six-row array of 12 individual inflatable air bladder cells (22). Each air bladder cell (22) has a laterally elongated, rectangular shape, having a length of about 18 inches, a depth of about 17 inches, and a thickness of about 4 inches. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, bladders (22) are arranged in left and right columns, each having 6 longitudinally spaced apart, laterally disposed, laterally elongated bladders. As shown in Figures 2B and 4, each air bladder cell has a flat base panel (23), left and right end panels (24), (25), head and toe or front and rear panels (26), (27), and an upper panel (28). The bladders (22) are preferably made of a thin sheet of a flexible, preferably elastomeric material such as neoprene rubber or

polyurethane, having a thickness of about .014 inch. The six panels of each air bladder cell (22) are sealingly joined at edges thereof to form a hermetically sealed body which has a hollow interior space (22A). Optionally, each air bladder cell (22) may be fabricated from a tubular preform in which each end panel is sealingly joined to opposite transverse ends of the tubular preform. In either embodiment, adjacent panels of an individual air bladder cell are sealingly joined by a suitable method such as ultrasonic bonding, RF-welding or adhesive bonding.

The number, size, shape, relative positioning and spacing of air bladder cells (22) of mattress cushion overlay (21) are not believed to be critical. However, it is believed preferable to arrange mattress overlay (21) into symmetrically-shaped left and right columns each having at least five and preferably six longitudinal zones corresponding to major curvature of a longitudinally disposed medial section of a typical human body. Thus, as shown in Figures 1, 2A and 3, mattress overlay cushion (21) has a left-hand column of six air bladder cells (22L1)-(22L6), and a right-hand column of six cells (21R1)-(21R6).

As shown in Figures 1 and 4, the bladders (22) are stacked closely together in both front and rear and side by side directions, with minimum longitudinal and lateral spacings (29), (30), respectively, that are preferably vanishingly small so that adjacent bladder cells physically contact each other.

As indicated in Figures 1, 2A and 2B, each bladder cell (22) is provided with a tubular air inlet port 31 which protrudes through a side wall, e.g., a left or right side wall (24) or (25), and communicates with a hollow interior space (22A) within the bladder. Air admitted into or exhausted from hollow interior space (22A) through port (31) of an air bladder cell (22) enables the cell to be inflated or deflated to a selected pressure.

Although the shape of each air bladder cell (22) of cushion (21) shown in Figures 1 and 2 is that of a rectangular block, or parallelepiped, the air bladder cells may optionally have different shapes, such as convex hemispheres protruding upwards from the base of the cushion. Also, the array of air bladder cells (22) of cushion (21) may be parts of a unitary structure with a common base panel (23) which has individual rectangular-block shaped, hemispherical or hollow inflatable bodies of other shapes protruding upwardly from the common unitary base panel.

Whether individual air bladder cells (22) are separate bodies or upper inflatable shell-like portions protruding upwardly from a common base, air inlet/exhaust port tubes (31) of each air bladder cell (22), or selected air bladder cells (22), may be located in the base panel (23) of the cell and protrude downwardly from the cell, rather than being located in a side wall and protruding laterally outwards, as shown in Figures 1 and 2A.

As shown in Figures 1, 4 and 5, body force minimization apparatus (20) includes a force sensor array (32) which has a matrix of individual force sensors (33), with at least one sensor positioned on the upper surface (28) of each air bladder cell

- 10 -

(22). As will be explained in detail below, each force sensor (33) comprises a force sensitive transducer which has an electrical resistance that varies inversely with the magnitude of a normal, i.e., perpendicular force exerted on the sensor by an object such as the body of a person supported by overlay cushion (21). In a preferred embodiment, force sensor array (32) is maintained in position on the upper surfaces of air bladder cells (22) by a water-proof, form-fitting contour fabric sheet (21A) which fits tightly and removably over cushion (21), as shown in Figure 3.

Referring to Figure 1, it may be seen that body force minimization apparatus (20) includes an electronic control module (35). As will be explained in detail below, electronic control module (35) includes sensor interface circuitry (36) for electrical interconnection to sensors (33). Electronic control module (35) also includes a computer (37) which is interconnected with sensor interface circuitry (36). Computer (37) is programmed to receive input signals from sensor interface circuitry (36), measure the resistance of individual sensors (33) and calculate therefrom the magnitude of forces exerted on each sensor, make calculations based on the force measurements, and issue command signals to control the pressure in individual air bladder cells (22) which are calculated using an algorithm to minimize force concentrations on the cells.

In a preferred embodiment of apparatus (20), measurement of the resistance of each sensor (33) is facilitated by arranging the sensors into a matrix array of rows and columns. With this arrangement, individual resistances of a 6 X 2 array 32 of sensors (33) may be measured using 6 row interface conductors and 2 column interface conductors (50),(51), as shown in Figure 1.

To avoid cross talk between measurements of individual sensors (33), the aforementioned row-column addressing arrangement requires that each sensor have a non-bilateral, asymmetric current versus voltage characteristics, e.g., a diode-like impedance characteristic. As will be described in detail below, the present invention includes a novel sensor having the required diode-like characteristic. Alternatively, using force sensors (33) which do not have a diode-like characteristic, the force sensor array (32) can be partitioned into 12 separate rectangular sensors (33) each electrically isolated from one another, with a separate pair of interface conductors connected to upper and lower electrodes of each sensor.

As shown in Figure 1, body force minimization apparatus (20) includes an air pump or compressor (40) for providing pressurized air to the input port (42) of a selector valve manifold (41). Selector valve manifold (41) has 12 outlet ports (43A), each connected through a valve (43) to a separate air bladder cell inlet port (31). As will be explained in detail below, the compressor (40), selector valve manifold (41) and valves (43) are operably interconnected to computer (37) and an air pressure measurement transducer (44). Pressure transducer (44) outputs an electrical signal proportional to pressure, which is input to computer (37). This arrangement enables the inflation

- 11 -

pressure of each air bladder cell (22) to be individually measured and varied under control of the computer (37).

Figures 2A, 4 and 5 illustrate details of the construction of force sensor array (32). As shown in those figures, sensor array (32) includes an upper cover sheet (45) made of a thin flexible, elastically stretchable material. In an example embodiment of sensor array (32) fabricated by the present inventor, cover sheet (45) was made of "two-way stretch" Lycra-like material which had a thickness of about 0.010 inch and a thread count of about 88 threads per inch. That material had the trade name Millglass Platinum, Style No. (24)7579, obtained from the Milliken & Company, P.O. Box 1926, Spartanburg, SC 29304.

Referring to Figures 4 and 5, sensor array (32) includes an upper, column conductor sheet (46) which is fixed to the lower surface of upper flexible cover sheet (45), by flexible adhesive strips made of 3M transfer tape 950, or a flexible adhesive such as Lepage's latex contact adhesive. Column conductor sheet (46) is made of a woven fabric matrix sheet composed of 92% nylon and 8% Dorlastan fibers, which give the sheet a flexible, two-way stretch elasticity. The fabric matrix sheet of conductor sheet (46) is electroless plated with a base coating of copper, followed by an outer coating of nickle. The metallic coatings completely impregnate the surfaces of fibers adjacent to interstices of the mesh fabric, as well as the upper and lower surfaces (47), (48) of the conductor sheet (46), thus forming electrically conductive paths between the upper and lower surfaces (47) and (48). The present inventor has found that a suitable conductive fabric for conductor sheet is a Woven Silver brand, Catalog #A251 available from Lessemb Company, 809 Madison Avenue, Albany, NY 12208, USA.

In an example embodiment of sensor array (32), upper conductive sheet (46) was fabricated from the Woven Silver, Catalog #A151 material described above. The surface resistivity of upper and lower surfaces (47), (48) of that material was about 1 ohm per square or less, and the inter-layer resistance between upper and lower surfaces (47), (48) was about 50 ohms per square.

In a preferred embodiment of sensor array (32) according to the present invention, individual conductive pads, or rows or columns of conductors, are formed by etching metal-free channels vertically through conductor sheet (46), from the top of upper conductive surface (47), all the way to the bottom of lower conductive surface (48). Thus, as shown in Figure 5, narrow longitudinally disposed straight channels (49) are etched through upper column conductor sheet (46). This construction results in the formation of two adjacent, relatively wide, longitudinally elongated left and right planar column electrodes (50), (51). The adjacent left and right column electrodes are separated by a relatively thin channel (49), thus electrically isolating the adjacent column electrodes from each other.

- 12 -

According to the present invention, insulating channels (49) are etched through upper conductor sheet (46) to form column electrodes (50) and (51) by the following novel process.

First, to prevent capillary wicking and resultant wetting of a subsequently applied etchant solution to fabric conductor sheet (46), the sheet is pre-processed by treating it with a hydrophobic substance such as PTFE. The treatment is preferably made by spraying the conductor fabric sheet (46) with an aerosol containing a hydrophobic material such as PTFE. A suitable aerosol spray is marketed under the trade name Scotch Guard by the 3M Company, St. Paul, Minnesota. Preferably, areas of fabric conductor sheet (46) which are to have insulating channels (49) formed therein are masked from the hydrophobic treatment by adhering strips of masking tape which have the shape of the channels to the sheet before applying the hydrophobic material to the sheet.

Following the pre-processing of conductor sheet (46) to make it hydrophobic, sheets of masking tape are adhered tightly to both upper and lower surfaces (47), (48) of the conductor sheet, using a roller or press to insure that there are no voids between the masking tape and surfaces, which could allow etchant solution to contact the conductive surfaces. Next, strips of masking tape having the shape of insulating channels (49) are removed from the conductor sheet. Optionally, the strips of masking tape to be removed are preformed by die-cutting partially through larger sheets of masking tape.

After strips of masking tape corresponding to channels (49) have been stripped from conductor sheet (46), the conductive metal coatings of the fabric sheet aligned with the channels is chemically etched away. A preferred method of performing the chemical etching uses a concentrated solution of 10 mg ammonium phosphate in 30 ml of water. The ammonium phosphate solution is mixed with methyl cellulose solid powder, at a concentration of 10 percent methyl cellulose powder until a gel consistency is obtained. The etchant gel thus formed is then rolled onto the areas of upper and lower surfaces (47), (48) of conductor sheet (46), over channels (49). The etchant gel is allowed to reside on channels (49) for approximately 1 hour, at room temperature, during which time the nickel and copper plating of the fabric matrix of conductor sheet (46), in vertical alignment with channels (49), is completely removed, thus making the channels electrically insulating. This process separates the conductor sheet into left and right column electrodes (50), (51), respectively.

The etching process which forms insulating channel (49) is completed by rinsing the etchant gel from upper and lower surfaces (47), (48) of conductor sheet (46), followed by removal of the masking tape from the upper and lower surfaces.

Referring still to Figure 5, it may be seen that sensor array (32) includes a thin piezoresistive sheet (52) which has on an upper surface (53), that is in intimate contact with lower surfaces of left and right column electrodes (50), (51). Piezoresistive

- 13 -

sheet (52) also has a lower surface (54) which is in intimate electrical contact with the upper surfaces of row electrodes on a lower row conductor sheet (56). Lower, row conductor sheet (56) has a construction exactly similar to that of upper, column conductor sheet (46). Thus, lower row conductor sheet (56) has upper and lower conductive surfaces (57), (58), and narrow, laterally disposed insulating channels (59) which are positioned between and define row electrodes (61), (62), (63), (64), (65), (66).

The function of piezoresistive sheet (52) of sensor array (32) is to form a conductive path between column and row electrodes, e.g., left-hand column electrode (50) and rear row electrode (61), the resistance of which path varies in a predetermined fashion as a function of normal force exerted on the sensor array.

In example embodiments of sensor array (32), piezoresistive sheet (52) was fabricated by coating a stretchy, thin Lycra-like fabric sheet with a piezoresistive material. A suitable fabric sheet, which forms a matrix for supporting the piezoresistive material, was a fabric known by the trade name Platinum, Milliken, Style #247579, obtained from the manufacturer, Milliken & Company, Spartanburg, South Carolina, USA. That fabric had a fiber content of 69 percent nylon and 31 percent Spandex, a thread count of about 88 threads per inch, and a thickness of 0.010 inch. The piezoresistive material used to coat the fabric matrix is made as follows:

A solution of graphite, carbon powder, nickel powder and acrylic binder are mixed in proportions as required to obtain the desired resistance and piezoresistive properties. Silver coated nickel flake is used to achieve force response in the low force range of 0 to 1 psi, graphite is used for the mid range of 1 to 5 psi and Charcoal Lamp Black is used for high force range of 5 to 1000 psi. Following is a description of the substances which are constituents of the piezoresistive material:

Silver Coated Nickel Flake:

Platelets approximately one micron thick and 5 microns in diameter.

Screen Analysis (-325 Mesh) 95%.

Apparent Density 2.8.

Microtrac d50/microns 12-17.

Available from : Novamet Specialty Products Corporation,
681 Lawlins Road, Wyckoff, NJ 07481

Graphite Powder:

Synthetic graphite, AC-4722T

Available from: Anachemia Science
4-214 DeBaets Street
Winnipeg, MB R2J 3W6

Charcoal Lamp Black Powder:

Anachemia Part number AC-2155

Available from: Anachemia Science
4-214 DeBaets Street

- 14 -

Winnipeg, MB R2J 3W6

Acrylic Binder:

Staticide Acrylic High Performance Floor Finish

P/N 4000-1 Ph 8.4 to 9.0

Available from: Static Specialties Co. Ltd.

1371-4 Church Street

Bohemia, New York 11716

Following are examples of mixtures used to make piezoresistive materials having different sensitivities:

Example I for forces in the range of 0 to 30 psi:

- 200ml of acrylic binder
- 10ml of nickel flake powder
- 10ml of graphite powder
- 20ml of carbon black

Example II for forces in the range of 0-100 psi

- 200ml of acrylic binder
- 5ml of nickel flake powder
- 5ml of graphite powder
- 30ml of carbon black

Example III for forces in the range of 0-1000psi

- 200ml of acrylic binder
- 1ml of nickel flake powder
- 1ml of graphite powder
- 40ml of carbon black

The fabric matrix for piezoresistive sheet (52) is submerged in the piezoresistive coating mixture. Excess material is rolled off and the sheet is hung and allowed to air dry.

Figure 6 illustrates calculation of a minimum spacing S between adjacent air bladder cells (22), and a minimum width of non-conductive strip (49) between adjacent conductors of sensor array (32).

Referring to Figure 6, it may be understood that as a patient sinks into a deflating bladder (22), the upper force sensor layer (33) is drawn down and away from the bladder over which it was initially positioned. If the non-conductive strip (49) is too narrow, there is a possibility that a conductor such as column conductor (50) overlying the deflating bladder will contact adjacent conductor (51) and, thus register forces that are not representative of the force over the bladder in which it was originally positioned. It is therefore necessary to make the non-conductive strip (49) wide enough to prevent this from happening. If we assume a simple situation wherein an air bladder cell is deflated until the center of the cell, then the force sensing layer is drawn down a distance equal to the diagonals ($C1$ and $C2$) as shown in Figure 6, the width S of non-conductive

- 15 -

strip (49) should be made equal to or greater than $(C1 + C2)$ - the width of the bladder) to prevent forces being misread as coming from a neighboring cell.

Figure 7 illustrates the electrical resistance of a one-inch square piezoresistive force sensor element (48) using a piezoresistive sheet (37) having the formulation listed for an example sensor array (32) shown in Figures 1 and 2, and fabricated as described above, as a function of normal force or pressure exerted on the upper surface (47) of upper substrate sheet (33) of sensor array (32). As shown in Figure 7, the resistance varies inversely as a function of normal force.

As shown in Figure 1, row electrodes (31-l) through (31-m), in vertical alignment with column electrodes (32-l) through (32-n) form with piezoresistive layer sheet (37) between the column and row electrodes a $m \times n$ rectangular matrix array of $m \times n$ force elements (48). If upper and lower electrodes for each sensor element (48) were electrically isolated a separate pair of lead-out conductors for each of the 12 sensors, i.e., a total of 24 leads.

Preferably, as shown in Figures 1 and 5, sensor array is arranged into rows and columns, thus requiring only 8 lead-out conductors. However, as shown in Figure 10A, if matrix addressing of sensor array (32) is used to measure the resistance of individual sensors (33) to thereby determine normal forces exerted on the sensors, there is a substantial cross-talk between the resistance on an addressed sensor (33) and non-selected sensors because of parallel current paths to non-addressed sensors. To overcome this cross-talk problem, the present inventor has developed a method for modifying sensors (33) to give them a diode-like characteristic. As may be confirmed by referring to Figure 10B, the cross-talk between sensors (33) which have a non-bilateral, polarity-sensitive transfer function, mitigates the cross-talk problem present in the matrix of symmetrically conductive sensors (33) shown in Figure 10A.

Sensors (33) are modified to have a diode-like characteristic by modifying the preparation of piezoresistive layer sheet (52), as follows: First, a piezoresistive layer sheet (52) is prepared by the process described above. Then, either the upper surface (69) or the lower surface (70) of the piezoresistive coating (67) of Piezoresistive sheet (52) is modified to form thereon a P-N, semiconductor-type junction.

Modification of piezoresistive coating (67) to form a P-N junction is performed by first preparing a slurry which has the composition of one of the three example mixtures described above, but modified by the addition of 5ml each of copper oxide (CuO) in the form of a fine powder of 50-micron size particles, and 5 ml of cuprous oxide (Cu₂O) in the form of a fine powder of 50-micron size particles and thoroughly stirring the foregoing ingredients. The resultant solution is then reduced using about 30 mg of solution of sodium borohydride, also known as sodium tetrahydroborate (NaBH₄) or ammonium phosphate, to form a solution having a pH of about 5.5. The solution is then coated onto the upper surface (69) or lower surface (70) of piezoresistive coating (68) on piezoresistive sheet (52). This coating process is performed using a roller

- 16 -

coating process which results in about 0.5 ml of solution per square centimeters being applied. The surface coating is then allowed to air-dry at room temperature and a relative humidity of less than 20%, for 4 hours. After the coated surface has dried, it functions as a P-type semiconductor, while the uncoated side of coating (68) functions as an N-type semiconductor of P-N junction diode.

Figure 8 illustrates a sensor (33) which has been prepared as described above to give the sensor a diode-like characteristic, and a circuit for obtaining the I-V (current versus voltage) transfer function of the sensor. Figure 9 shows a typical I-V curve for sensor (33) of Figure 8.

As stated above, the advantage of modifying sensors (33) by adding a semi-conductive layer that acts like a diode is that it reduces cross talk between sensors. As is shown in Figure 10A, this cross-talk occurs because of the so-called "completing the square" phenomenon, in which three connections are made in a square matrix array of three non-addressed resistors that form the three corners of a square. Thus, any two connections in a vertical column and a third one in the same row function as either connection in an X-Y array of conductors. The resistor at the fourth corner of the square shows up as a phantom in parallel with an addressed resistor because the current can travel backwards through that resistor, and forward through the other resistors. Care and additional expense must be taken in the electronics to eliminate the contribution of this phantom. For example, if, as is shown in Figure 10A, a potential V is applied between row and column conductors X_1Y_1 , to thereby determine the resistance of piezoresistive sensor resistance R_{11} , reverse current flow through "phantom" resistor $R_{(22)}$ would cause the sum of resistances $R_{12} + R_{(22)} + R_{22}$ to shunt R_{11} , resulting in the parallel current flow paths indicated by arrows in Figure 10A, which in turn would result in the following incorrect value of resistance:

$R_{x1y1} = R_{11} // (R_{12} + [R_{22}] + R_{21})$, $R_{x1y1} = R_{11}(R_{12} + [R_{22}] + R_{21}) / (R_{11} + R_{12} + [R_{22}] + R_{21})$, where brackets around a resistance value indicate current flow in a counterclockwise direction through that resistor, rather than clockwise, i.e., diagonally downwards towards the left. Thus, for example, if each of the four resistances listed above had a value of 10 ohms, the measured value of R_{11} would be:

$R_{11} = 10(10+10+10)/(10+10+10+10) = 300/40 = 7.5$ ohms, i.e., 25% below the actual value, 10 ohms, of R_{11} . If the resistance values of R_{12} , R_{22} and R_{21} of the three non-addressed piezoresistive sensors (33) were each lower, e.g., 1 ohm, because of greater forces concentrated on those sensors (33), the measured value of R_{11} would be:

$R_{11} = 10(1+1+1)/(10+1+1+1) = 30/13 = 2.31$ ohms, i.e., a value of about 77 percent below the actual value of R_{11} .

On the other hand, by placing a diode in series with each piezoresistive sensor element (33), as shown in Figure 10B, the electrical resistance of an element measured in a reverse, counterclockwise direction a test current flow through the sensor element, e.g., R_{22} , would be for practical purposes arbitrarily large, or infinity compared

- 17 -

to the clockwise forward paths of current through the other resistances shown in Figures 10A and 10B. In this case, the measured resistance value for a 2X2 matrix of four resistances each having a value of 10 ohms would be:

$$R_{x1y1} = 10(1+\infty+1)/(10+1+\infty+1) = 10 \text{ ohms, the correct value.}$$

Thus, modifying each sensor 33 element to include a p-n junction thereby give the sensor element a diode-like characteristic electrically isolates, i.e., prevents backward current flow, through each sensor element (33). This enables the correct value of electrical resistance R_{xy} of each sensor element (33) and hence forces exerted thereon to be measured accurately using row and column matrix addressing rather than requiring a separate pair of conductors for each sensor element.

The above-described components of force minimization apparatus (20) according to the present invention are interconnected to form a closed-loop servo control system. That system is effective in reducing body force concentrations using an algorithm according to the method of the present invention. An understanding of this method and apparatus may be facilitated by referring to Figure 11, which is a block diagram of an electro-pneumatic controller system component (20A) of apparatus (20), in conjunction with the diagrammatic view of the apparatus shown in Figure 1, and the perspective view shown in Figure 5.

Referring to Figure 11, it may be seen that electro-pneumatic controller apparatus (20A) includes a computer (37) which is bidirectionally coupled to force sensor array (32) through force sensor interface module (36). The sensor interface module (36) includes a Digital-to-Analog Converter (DAC) (71) for generating in response to control signals from computer (37) test voltages or currents which are directed to matrix-addressed individual force sensors (33).

Individual force sensors (33) are addressed by connecting one terminal of a current or voltage source controlled by DAC (71) to a selected one of X-row conductors 1-6 by an X multiplexer (72), and connecting the other terminal of the source to a selected one of Y-column conductors 1 or 2 by a Y multiplexer 73. Sensor interface module (37) also included an Analog-to-Digital Converter (ADC) (74) which measures the voltage drop or current through a sensor (33) resulting from application of a test current or voltage, and inputs the measured value to computer (37). Using predetermined scale factors, computer (37) calculates the instantaneous value of electrical resistance of a selected addressed sensor (33), and from that resistance value, a corresponding normal force instantaneously exerted on the addressed sensor.

In response to control signals cyclically issued by computer (37), X multiplexer (72) and Y multiplexer (73) are used to cyclically measure the resistance of each force sensor element (33), at a relatively rapid rate of, for example, 3,000 samples per second, enabling computer (37) to calculate the force exerted on each force sensor (33) at that sampling rate.

- 18 -

Referring still to Figure 11, apparatus (20) includes a pressure control module (75) for dynamically controlling the air pressure in each individual air bladder cell (22), in response to command signals issued by computer (37), based upon values of force measured by sensor array (32) and an algorithm programmed in the computer. As shown in Figure 11, pressure control module (75) is operably interconnected to air compressor (40) and air pressure transducer (44) at output port (76) of the compressor to pressurize air in the outlet port to a value controllable by computer (37).

Outlet port (76) of compressor (40) is coupled to inlet port (42) of a 12-outlet port manifold (41). In response to electrical control signals issued by computer (37) and routed through pressure control module (75), each of 12 individual air bladder cell inlet selector valves (43) connected to separate outlet ports (43A) of manifold (41) is individually controllable.

In a first, open position of a selector valve (43), the air inlet port (31) of a selected air bladder cell (22) is pressurized to a pressure measured by transducer (44) to a predetermined value, by turning on compressor (40), to thereby inflate the cell to a desired pressure. Alternatively, with compressor (40) in an off-mode, a vent valve (77) coupled to the input port (42) of manifold (41) may be opened to deflate an air bladder cell (22) to a lower pressure value by exhausting air to the atmosphere.

After a selected one of the 12 selector valves (43) has been opened in response to a command signal from computer (37) for a time period sufficient to inflate a selected air bladder cell (22) to a predetermined pressure, an electrical signal output by pressure transducer (44), which is proportional to the pressure in that cell and input to computer (37), results in the computer outputting a closure command signal to the valve and a shut-off command signal to compressor (40).

When vent valve (77) and a selected selector valve (43) have been opened in response to command signals from computer (37) to deflate a selected air bladder cell (22) to a lower predetermined pressure, an electrical signal from pressure transducer (44) input to computer (37) results in an electrical closure command signal being output from the computer. That command signal closes vent valve (77) and the open selector valve (43), thereby maintaining the selected lower pressure in the selected air bladder cell. In an exactly analogous fashion, the air pressure in each other air bladder cell (22) is sequentially adjustable by sending a command signal to a selector valve (43) to open that valve, and operating compressor (40) and/or vent valve (77) to inflate or deflate the air bladder cell to a predetermined pressure.

Figure 12 is a simplified perspective view of a preferred embodiment of a housing for electro-pneumatic apparatus (20A) shown in Figure 11 and described above. As shown in Figures 11 and 12, electro-pneumatic controller (20A) includes an operator interface module (78). Operator interface module (78) includes manual controls, including a multi-function, on/off, mode control switch and button (79), up and down data entry slewing buttons (80), (81), and a digital display (82). Display (82) is controllable

- 19 -

by switch (79) to selectively display air pressure within and force on selectable air bladder cells (22), and the sum and average of all forces exerted on sensors (33).

As shown in Figure 12, electro-pneumatic controller (20A) is preferably contained in a box-like housing (83) which has protruding from a rear panel (84) thereof an L-bracket (85) for suspending the housing from a side board or end board of a bed. Housing (83) of electro-pneumatic controller (20A) also includes a tubular member (86) for interfacing air hoses (87) with air bladder cells (22), row and column conductors (88), (89), to sensors (33) of sensor array (32), and an electrical power cord (90) to a source of electrical power for powering the components of apparatus (20A).

Force Minimization Algorithm

The adaptive cushion force minimization apparatus (20) as described above, includes a cushion (21) having a multiplicity of air bladder cells (22). Each individual cell (22) has on its upper surface an individual force sensor (33) of an array (32) of force sensors. An air pressure measurement transducer (44) is provided to measure the air pressure in each cell (22). Each force sensor 33 is located in a potential contact region between a person lying on cushion (21) and an air bladder cell (22). Each piezoresistive force sensor (33) functions as a force sensitive transducer which has an electrical resistance that is inversely proportional to the maximum force exerted by a person's body on the air bladder cell (22), the maximum force corresponding to the lowest resistance path across any part of each sensor.

In an embodiment of adaptive cushion apparatus (20) according to the present invention and shown in Figures 1 and 3, the cushion is partitioned into a pair of left and right longitudinally disposed columns. The columns are in turn partitioned into six longitudinal zones, each having a pair of left and right air bladder cells which supports a different longitudinal zone of a person, such as the head, hips, and heels. Thus, as shown in Figure 3, there are 6 air bladder cells (22) in each column, such as left-hand column cells (22L1)-(22L6). The air pressure in each of 12 cells (22L1)-(22L6), (22R1)-(22R6) is individually controlled by compressor (40) and selector valves (43) in response to force measurements made using force sensors (33). Individual control of air pressure in each individual air cell (22) is effected by electro-pneumatic controller system (20A), using a novel algorithm implemented in computer (37), as will now be described.

There can be a minimum of one zone using one air bladder cell (22), and up to N zones using n air bladder cells, wherein each zone has a force sensor (33) to measure the maximum force on that air bladder cell, the pressure transducer (44) being used to measure the air pressure in that air bladder cell. The control algorithm is one of continuous iteration wherein the force sensors (33) determine the peak force on the patient's body, and the pressure transducer (44) measures the air pressure at which the peak body force occurs. At the end of a cycle sampling forces on all sensors, the air pressure within each individual bladder cell (22) is restored to the pressure where the force was minimized for all zones. This process continues and the apparatus constantly

- 20 -

hunts to find the optimal bladder pressures for each individual cell resulting in minimizing peak forces on a person supported by overlay cushion (21).

Algorithm Description

Given:

N Zones each containing one air bladder cell (22) and numbered one to N

The air bladder cell of each zone is selectably connectable to an air pressure transducer (44) to measure $P\#$

Each air bladder cell (22) is fitted with an individual force sensor (33) capable of measuring the maximum force $F\#$ exerted on the surface of each cell.

A compressor (40) supplies air at pressures of up to 5psi to selected individual air bladder cells (22) of the zones. There is a normally closed vent valve (77) for deflating a selected air bladder cell (22) by exhausting air to the atmosphere through the vent valve.

There is a plurality of selector valves (43) that selects which air bladder (22) is being inflated with air or deflated by exhausting air to the atmosphere through the vent valve (79).

Algorithm Steps

1. $P_{set} :: P_{set}$, start, close vent valve (77)
2. Select zone $i=1$ by opening selector valve (43-1)
3. Turn the compressor (40) on.
4. Measure the air pressure in the air bladder cell (22) in zone I
5. Pressurize the zone-one air bladder cell (22) to a pre determined upper set pressure and close the selector valve (43-1) value P_{set} .
6. Repeat for $i+1$ until $i+1 = N$
7. Select Zone $i=1$
8. Obtain the force sensor (33) readings for all zones.
9. Open Vent valve (77)
10. Deflate the zone-one air bladder cell (22) to a predetermined minimum pressure and monitor all the force sensor (33) readings on all air bladder cells (22). Maintain bladder pressures in all other air bladder cells (22) at their upper set pressures.
11. Measure forces on all air bladder cells (22) as the single, zone-one air bladder is being deflated and compute the sum and optionally the average of all force sensor (33) readings.
12. Store in memory of computer (37) the pressure reading of the zone-one air bladder cell (22) at which the minimum sum and optionally the average of all force sensor (33) readings occurs.
13. Restore the pressure in the zone one air bladder cell (22-1) to the value at which the minimum sum and average force sensor readings for all the force sensors was obtained.

- 21 -

14. Close the zone-one selector valve (43-1). Maintain the pressure in zone one
15. Set: Count = $i + 1$.
16. Repeat steps 2 thru 15 until Count = $i+1 = N$.
17. Set: Pset = Pset, start - (Count * 20%_ (i.e., reduce the initial pressure in the zone one bladder (22-1).
18. Repeat Steps 2 thru 16 (i.e., with a reduced initial pressure).

Caveat

19. Constantly monitor all force sensors (33) and if significant change ($\Delta F > 0.2 * F\#$) is detected (patient moved) start over at Step 1.

Figure 13 is a flow chart showing the operation of apparatus (20) utilizing the algorithm described above. Table 1 lists appropriate lower and upper initial set pressures for bladders (22), as a function of the weight of a patient or other person supported by overlay cushion (21) of the apparatus.

TABLE 1

Patient Weight	Minimum Pressures	Start Pressure
75-119 Pounds	5.5"± 0.7: H ₂ O 10.31 ± 2mm Hg	6.5"± 0.7: H ₂ O 12.18 ± 2mm Hg
120-164 Pounds	6"± 0.7: H ₂ O 11.25 ± 2mm Hg	8"± 0.7: H ₂ O 15 ± 2mm Hg
165-199 Pounds	8"± 0.7: H ₂ O 15 ± 2mm Hg	10"± 0.7: H ₂ O 18.75 ± 2mm Hg
200-250 Pounds	10"± 0.7: H ₂ O 18.75 ± 2mm Hg	12"± 0.7: H ₂ O 22.49 ± 2mm Hg
Maximum Pressure		26"± 0.7: H ₂ O 48.74 ± 4mm Hg

In a variation of the method and apparatus according to the present invention and described above, after the pressures in each air bladder cell (22) have been optimized for minimum force concentration, inlet tubes (31) may be permanently sealed, and the adaptive cushion (21) permanently disconnected from pressure control module (75). This variation would also enable the custom fabrication of cushions (21) using air bladder cells (22), for customizing chair cushions to minimize force concentrations on a particular individual. Similarly, the variation of the method and apparatus according to the present invention could be used to customize saddle cushions or car seats.

What is claimed is:

1. An adaptive cushion apparatus for reducing the magnitude of reaction force concentrations exerted on parts of a human body in response to contact with a supporting object, said apparatus comprising;

a. a cushion for placement between a supporting object and a human body, said cushion having at least first and second hermetically sealable air bladder cells each made of a thin, flexible, air impervious material,

b. at least first and second force sensitive sensors associated with said first and second air bladder cells, respectively, each of said sensors having an electrical characteristic which varies in a predetermined way with a force exerted on a said air bladder cell by a said body,

c. a pressurization device for pressurizing a hollow interior space of each of said air bladder cells to an individually controllable pressure,

d. at least one pressure transducer operatively coupleable to each of said air bladder cells to thereby measure gas pressure within said hollow interior spaces of each of said air bladder cells, and

e. a control apparatus having a force sensor interface port for receiving signals from said force sensors, a pressure transducer port for receiving signals from said pressure transducer, and an output port for providing control signals to said pressurization device to thereby pressurize air within said air bladder cells to individually controllable values which minimize a sum of forces sensed by said force sensors.

2. The apparatus of Claim 1 wherein each of said force sensors is further defined as including a flexible planar envelope located on at least one of upper and lower walls of a said air bladder cell, said envelope including an upper flexible electrically conductive sheet comprising an upper sensor conductor, a lower flexible electrically conductive sheet comprising a lower sensor conductor, and a flexible piezoresistive layer located between said upper and lower conductive sheets.

- 23 -

3. The apparatus of Claim 2 wherein said envelope of said sensor is further defined as being made at least partially of an elastically stretchable material.
4. The apparatus of Claim 3 wherein said elastically stretchable material is further defined as being a stretchable elastic fabric.
5. The apparatus of Claim 1 further including in addition to said first and second air bladder cells an additional $p-2$ air bladder cells, where p is an integer.
6. The apparatus of Claim 5 further including an additional $p-2$ force sensors, each of which is associated with one of said additional $p-2$ air bladder cells.
7. The apparatus of Claim 5 wherein said p air bladder cells are further defined as being arranged in a matrix of m rows and n columns.
8. The apparatus of Claim 7 further including an additional $p-2$ force sensors, said total of p force sensors being arranged in a matrix array of m rows and n columns aligned with said m rows and n columns of said air bladder cells.
9. The apparatus of Claim 8 wherein said force sensor interface port is coupled at least in part to said p force sensors by interface electrical conductors.
10. The apparatus of Claim 9 wherein at least one of said force sensors is further defined as having a non-bilateral current-versus-voltage impedance characteristic.
11. The apparatus of Claim 10 wherein said interface electrical conductors which join said force sensor interface port to said sensor array are further defined as comprising m interface conductors connected to m row sensor conductors and n interface conductors connected to n column sensor conductors of said force sensor array.
12. The apparatus of Claim 8 wherein said pressurization device is further defined as being responsive to command signals emitted by said control apparatus to thereby alternately inflate and deflate individual ones of said air bladder cells to controllable pressures measurable by said transducer and adjusted in accordance with an algorithm implemented in said control apparatus to values which are effective in minimizing force concentrations on said cushion.
13. The apparatus of Claim 12 wherein said algorithm is further defined as including the steps of cyclically varying the air pressure in a first individual air bladder cell, monitoring a physical characteristic of each sensor to thereby measure the values of

- 24 -

forces exerted on each of said air bladder cells, summing said measured values, restoring the air pressure in said first cell to that value which resulted in the minimum of said sum of measured values of forces from all of said force sensors, and repeating the foregoing steps for each of said bladder cells 2 through p.

14. The apparatus of Claim 13 wherein said algorithm is further defined as including a first initialization step of inflating each said air bladder cell to a predetermined initial upper set pressure.

15. The apparatus of Claim 14 wherein said step of cyclically varying air pressure in a said air bladder cell is further defined as including the initial step of deflating said air bladder cell from a predetermined upper set pressure to a predetermined lower pressure.

16. A method for reducing the magnitude of reaction force concentration exerted on parts of a human body in response to contact with a supporting object, said method using the apparatus of Claim 1 and comprising the steps of;

- a. providing a cushion for placement between a supporting object and a human body, said cushion having at least first and second hermetically sealable air bladder cells each made of a thin, flexible, air impervious material,

- b. providing at least first and second force sensitive sensors associated with said first and second air bladder cells, respectively, each of said sensors having an electrical characteristic which varies in a predetermined way with a force exerted on a said air bladder cell by a said body,

- c. providing a source of pressurized gas for pressurizing a hollow interior space of each said air bladder cells to an individually controllable pressure,

- d. providing at least one pressure sensitive transducer operatively coupleable to each of said air bladder cells to thereby measure gas pressures within said hollow interior spaces of each said air bladder cells,

- e. providing a control apparatus for receiving signals from said force sensors and said pressure transducer and providing control signals to said pressurization device to thereby pressurize air within said air bladder cell to a value which minimizes a sum of forces sensed by said force sensors,

- 25 -

f. inputting to said control apparatus a signal from said pressure transducer representative of said gas pressure within said hollow interior space of a said air bladder cell,

g. inputting to said control apparatus signals from said force sensors representative of a forces exerted on all of said air bladder cells,

h. providing from said control apparatus a control signal to said source of pressurized gas to thereby pressurize said hollow interior space of a said air bladder cell to a value which minimizes a sum of forces sensed by a said force sensors associated with all of said air bladder cells,

i. calculating by said control apparatus from said transducer signals and said force sensor signals appropriate pressurization values for said hollow interior spaces of said air bladder cells which tend to minimize a sum of force concentration on said air bladder cells, and

j. providing for issuance from said control apparatus to said source of pressurized air control signals effective in pressurizing said air bladder cells to said calculated force-minimizing pressure values.

17. The method of Claim 16 wherein said cushion is further defined as including in addition to said first and second air bladder cell an additional $p-2$ air bladder cells, where p is an integer.

18. The method of Claim 17 further including an additional $p-2$ force sensors each of which is associated with one of said additional $p-2$ air bladder cells.

19. The method of Claim 18 wherein said force minimizing air bladder cell pressurization calculations are further defined as including the steps of cyclically varying the air pressure in a first individual air bladder cell, monitoring a physical characteristic of each force sensor to thereby measure the values of forces exerted on each of said air bladder cells, summing said measured force values, restoring the air pressure in said first cell to that value which resulted in the minimum of said sum of measured values of forces from all of said force sensors, and repeating the foregoing steps for each of said bladder cells 2 through p .

- 26 -

20. The method of Claim 19 further including a first initialization step of inflating each said air bladder cell to a predetermined initial set pressure.

21. The method of Claim 19 wherein said step of cyclically varying air pressure in a said air bladder cell is further defined as including the initial step of deflating said air bladder cell from a predetermined upper set pressure to a predetermined lower pressure.

22. The method of Claim 19 wherein said sequence of steps is repeated until said sum of measured values of forces is reduced below a predetermined threshold value.

23. The method of Claim 22 wherein said sequence of steps is reinitiated if said sum of measured values of said forces exceeds a predetermined threshold value.

24. The method of Claim 22 wherein said sequence of steps is reinitiated if a force measurement of less than all of said cells exceeds a predetermined threshold value.

25. The apparatus of Claim 1 or 16 wherein said surface force sensor for measuring normal forces exerted on a surface, said sensor comprises;

a. at least a first planar sensor element, said planar sensor element including a thin, flexible upper conductor sheet comprising an upper sensor conductor having an electrically conductive contact area,

b. a thin, flexible intermediate sheet having an active sensor region which has an electrical impedance characteristic that varies with a normal force exerted thereon, said active sensor region having an upper surface in electrically conductive contact with said contact area of upper conductive sheet, and

c. a lower conductor sheet comprising a lower sensor conductor having an electrically conductive contact area in electrically conductive contact with a lower surface of said active sensor region.

26. The sensor of Claim 25 further including at least a second planar sensor element.

27. The sensor of Claim 26 wherein at least one of said upper and lower electrically conductive contact areas of said first sensor element is conductively continuous with a corresponding one of said upper and lower conductive contact areas of said second sensor element.

- 27 -

28. The sensor of Claim 26 further including at least third and fourth, planar sensor elements, whereby said sensor has p elements arranged in an array of m rows and n columns.

29. The sensor of Claim 28 wherein said upper contact areas of said sensors have electrically continuous conductor strips corresponding to one of said plurality of m rows and n columns, and said lower contact areas of said p sensors, have electrically continuous conductor strips corresponding to the other of said m rows and n columns.

30. The sensor of Claim 29 wherein at least one of said sensor elements is further defined as having a non-bilateral electrical impedance characteristic.

31. The sensor of Claim 30 wherein said non-bilateral electrical impedance characteristic is further defined as being a diode-like characteristic.

32. The sensor of Claim 31 wherein said active sensor region is further defined as including a layer composed of a piezoresistive material.

33. The sensor of Claim 32 wherein said piezoresistive material is further defined as including electrically conductive particles suspended in a polymer matrix.

34. The sensor of Claim 33 wherein an outer surface of said piezoresistive layer is further defined as having deposited thereon a coating including at least one metallic oxide to thereby form with said layer a semi-conducting, PN junction.

35. The sensor of Claim 34 wherein said metallic oxide is further defined as including at least one copper oxide.