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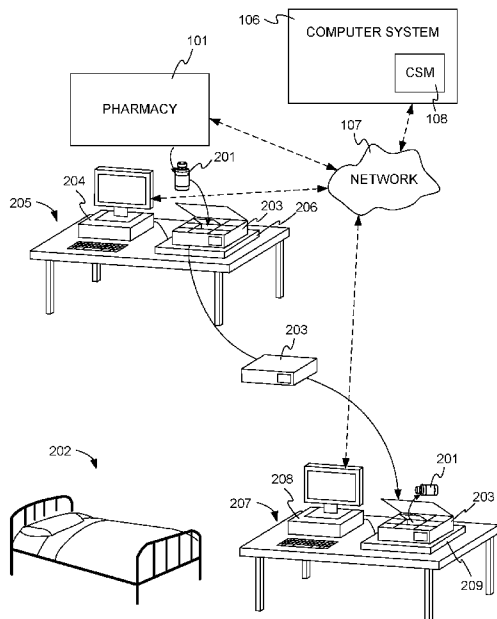


FIG. 2

(57) Abstract: A relay tray for securely transporting items includes a lockable transportable container for holding items to be transported, and an electronic controller including a processor. The relay tray receives electric power through a power interface, and includes a communication interface through which the controller can communicate electronically. The relay tray includes a mechanism operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked container accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface, the mechanism operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power interface. In some implementations, the power interface includes four electrical contacts on an outside surface of the container for receiving power and a rectifier that produces voltage of a polarity suitable for powering the controller. The power interface may function as the communication interface.



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RELAY TRAY

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] This application claims the benefit and priority of U.S. Patent Application No.

5 15/884,073, filed January 30, 2018, entitled "RELAY TRAY." The entire contents of the above filing are incorporated herein by reference.

[0002] Many industries rely on the accurate inventory and dispensing of secure items. For example, in a hospital setting, medications are often stored in lockable cabinets in communication with a computer system that tracks inventories of the medications. The cabinets, or individual compartments within the cabinets, may be opened only under control of the computer system. For example, a nurse or other health care worker may provide authentication credentials to the computer system and indicate that a particular medication is needed for a particular patient. The computer system can then open the compartment in which the particular medication is stored, so that the health care worker can retrieve it and administer it to the patient.

10 The computer system can adjust its tracking records accordingly. Such systems help ensure that the correct medication is dispensed for the correct patient, that controlled substances are properly secured and tracked, and that detailed inventory records are kept.

[0003] Various dispensing cabinets and carts have been developed to assist in the management of medications and other items. However, improvements are still desired in the dispensing and tracking of items, especially during transport of items such as medications from one location to another within a facility.

[0004] Similar requirements for secure transport and tracking of items arise in other industries, for example transport of cash or other valuables in a banking or business environment.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

25 **[0005]** According to one aspect, a relay tray for securely transporting items comprises a lockable transportable container for holding items to be transported, an electronic controller including a processor, a power interface through which the relay tray can receive electric power, a communication interface through which the controller can communicate electronically, and a mechanism operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked container

accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface. The mechanism is operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power interface. In some embodiments, the mechanism is a lock operable by the controller to unlock a compartment of the relay tray. In some embodiments, the controller further comprises a
5 nonvolatile memory storing a listing of an item or items in the relay tray. In some embodiments, the relay tray further comprises a plurality of compartments within the container, wherein the compartments are individually lockable, and are individually openable under control of the controller in response to communications received via the communication interface. In some
10 embodiments, the relay tray further comprises a plurality of lights associated respectively with at least some of the compartments, the lights being individually operable under control of the controller. In some embodiments, the power interface also serves as the communication interface, and the controller is configured to extract incoming communications signals from the power interface, and to impose outgoing communication signals on the power interface. In some
15 embodiments, the power interface comprises four electrical contacts on an outside surface of the container for receiving electric power connections ; and a rectifier that receives power from the four electrical contacts and produces voltage of a polarity suitable for powering the controller. In some embodiments, the four contacts are positioned at the vertices and center of an equilateral triangle. In some embodiments, the four contacts also serve as the communications interface, and the controller is configured to extract communications signals imposed on the contacts in
20 addition to the power voltages. In some embodiments, the relay tray is configured to receive DC power, and the rectifier produces DC voltage of a polarity suitable for powering the controller. In some embodiments, the relay tray is configured to receive AC power, and the rectifier produces rectified AC voltage. In some embodiments, the communications interface is a short range wireless communications interface. In some embodiments, the communications interface
25 is a wired communications interface. In some embodiments, the power interface comprises a coil that receives power by inductive coupling. In some embodiments, the relay tray includes one or more electromechanical actuators; and the relay tray does not include a battery powering operation of any of the one or more electromechanical actuators. In some embodiments, the mechanism comprises one or more electromechanical dispensers configured to dispense items
30 under control of the controller. In some embodiments, items are dispensed in response to communications received via the communication interface. The relay tray may also be openable by a key. In some embodiments, the relay further comprises a nonvolatile display on an outside

surface of the container. In some embodiments, the relay tray stores a hashed identifier of a person for whom an item in the relay tray is intended. In some embodiments, the relay tray further comprises a passive externally-excitable memory device storing an identifier of the relay tray. In some embodiments, the controller is configured to authenticate the source of the communications received via the communication interface before making an item in the locked container accessible. In some embodiments, the relay tray further comprises a low power wireless beacon receiver, and during transport of the relay tray, the controller records the detection of any beacon signals detected by the low power wireless beacon receiver.

[0006] According to another aspect, a charging and communication surface for electronic devices comprises a plurality of first linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces. The first linear electrical conductors are connected to each other and held at a first voltage. The charging and communication surface further comprises a plurality of second linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the second linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a second voltage different from the first. The first and second linear electrical conductors are disposed in alternating arrangement to form a flat surface, and adjacent conductors are spaced apart from each other. The charging and communication surface further comprises a controller including a modulator that imposes communications signals onto the voltage between the first and second linear conductors. In some embodiments, the charging and communication surface further comprises a demodulator that extracts communications signals from the voltage between the first and second linear conductors. In some embodiments, the charging and communication surface further comprises a power outlet configured to be connectable to another charging and communication surface in daisy chain fashion.

[0007] According to another aspect, a system for securely transporting medications or other items comprises a central computer system and a plurality relay trays. Each relay tray further comprises a lockable transportable container for holding items to be transported, an electronic controller including a processor and non-volatile memory, a power interface through which the relay tray can receive electric power, a communication interface through which the controller can communicate electronically, and a mechanism operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked container accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface, the mechanism operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power interface. The system further comprises a plurality of charging and

communication stations in dispersed locations, each of the plurality of charging and communication stations including a power interface for supplying power to one of the relay trays at the station, and a first communication interface for communication with the relay tray at the station, and a second communication interface for communication with the central computer system. In some embodiments, the system further comprises an electronic network over which the central computer system communicates instructions to authorize access to the interiors of the lockable transportable containers. In some embodiments, the power interfaces of the relay trays and the charging and communication stations also serve as the communication interfaces of the relay trays and the first communications interfaces of the charging and communication stations.

5 In some embodiments, each of the charging and communication stations comprises: a plurality of first linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the first linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a first voltage; and a plurality of second linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the second linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a second voltage different from the first; wherein the first and second linear electrical conductors are disposed in alternating arrangement to form a flat surface, and wherein adjacent conductors are spaced apart from each other. In some

10 embodiments, the central computer system maintains an inventory of any medications stored in the plurality of relay trays. In some embodiments, the central computer system maintains an inventory of any controlled substances stored in the plurality of relay trays.

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20 **[0008]** According to another aspect, a method of transporting an item comprises connecting, at a first workstation, a first source of power to a power interface of a relay tray. The relay tray comprises a lockable transportable container for holding items to be transported, an electronic controller including a processor and non-volatile memory, the power interface, a communication interface through which the controller can communicate electronically, and a mechanism

25 operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked container accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface. The mechanism is operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power interface. The method further comprises placing the item to be transported into the relay tray, locking the relay tray, disconnecting the relay tray from the source of power, transporting the relay tray containing

30 the item to a second workstation, and connecting, at the second workstation, a second source of power to the power interface of a relay tray. The method further comprises sending, at the second

workstation, to the relay tray via the communication interface an instruction to make the item accessible. In some embodiments, connecting the relay tray to the first or second source of power comprises placing the relay tray on a charging and communication surface such that contacts on the relay tray come into contact with conductors in the charging and communication surface to supply power to the relay tray. In some embodiments, the method further comprises causing electronic communication to occur between the relay tray and the charging and communication surface via communications signals imposed onto the voltage between two of the conductors of the charging and communication surface, such that the power interface of the relay tray also functions as the communication interface of the relay tray.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] FIG. 1 illustrates an environment in which embodiments of the invention may find utility.

[0010] FIG. 2 illustrates the use of a relay tray in a hospital environment, in accordance with embodiments of the invention.

[0011] FIG. 3 shows the relay tray of FIG. 2 in more detail, in accordance with embodiments of the invention.

[0012] FIG. 4 illustrates the relay tray of FIG. 2 and a docking and communication surface, in accordance with embodiments of the invention.

[0013] FIG. 5 illustrates simplified electrical block diagrams of the relay tray and the docking and communication surface of FIG. 4.

[0014] FIG. 6 illustrates simplified electrical block diagrams of a relay tray and a docking and communication surface in accordance with another embodiment.

[0015] FIG. 7 illustrates a wireless reading station installed in doorway, in accordance with embodiments of the invention.

[0016] FIG. 8 illustrates a relay tray in accordance with other embodiments.

[0017] FIG. 9 shows a lower oblique view of the relay tray of FIG. 8.

[0018] FIG. 10 illustrates a relay tray in accordance with other embodiments.

[0019] FIG. 11 shows two docking and communication surfaces connected in daisy chain fashion, in accordance with embodiments of the invention.

[0020] FIG. 12 shows an example wall mounted workstation, in accordance with embodiments of the invention

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0021] FIG. 1 illustrates an environment in which embodiments of the invention may find utility. Specifically, FIG. 1 illustrates a hospital environment **100**, but it will be recognized that embodiments of the invention may be used in other environments as well.

10 [0022] In the example hospital environment of FIG. 1, a central pharmacy **101** serves as the primary medication storage location. However, various stationary cabinets **102**, carts **103**, portable cabinets **104**, and other storage and dispensing devices may be stationed in different parts of the hospital, for temporary storage of medications and other items. For example, medications commonly used in a particular ward or department of the hospital may be stocked in
15 a cabinet such as cabinet **102**, for convenient access by floor personnel. In another example, medications expected to be dispensed to patients during a particular shift may be transferred to a dispensing cart **103** that can follow a nurse on his or her rounds to the patients in beds **105a-105e**.

[0023] The various dispensing devices **102**, **103**, **104** may include devices such as those
20 described in the following commonly owned U.S. Patents and patent applications, the entire contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference herein for all purposes: U.S. Patent No. 6,272,394, issued on August 7, 2001 to Lipps, U.S. Patent No. 6,385,505, issued on May 7, 2002 to Lipps, U.S. Patent No. 6,760,643, issued on July 6, 2004 to Lipps, U.S. Patent No. 5,805,455, issued on September 8, 1998 to Lipps, U.S. Patent No. 6,609,047, issued on August 19, 2003 to
25 Lipps, U.S. Patent No. 5,805,456, issued on September 8, 1998 to Higham et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,745,366, issued on April 28, 1998 to Higham et al., an U.S. Patent No. 5,905,653, issued on May 18, 1999 to Higham et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,927,540, issued on July 27, 1999 to Godlewski, U.S. Patent No. 6,039,467, issued on March 21, 2000 to Holmes, U.S. Patent No. 6,640,159, issued on October 28, 2003 to Holmes et al., U.S. Patent No. 6,151,536, issued on
30 November 21, 2000 to Arnold et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,377,864, issued on January 3, 1995 to

Blechl et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,190,185, issued on March 2, 1993 to Blechl, U.S. Patent No. 6,975,922, issued on December 13, 2005 to Duncan et al., U.S. Patent No. 7,571,024, issued on August 4, 2009 to Duncan et al., U.S. Patent No. 7,835,819, issued on November 16, 2010 to Duncan et al., U.S. Patent No. 6,011,999, issued on January 4, 2000 to Holmes, U.S. Patent No. 7,348,884, issued on March 25, 2008 to Higham, U.S. Patent No. 7,675,421, issued on March 9, 2010 to Higham, U.S. Patent No. 6,170,929, issued on January 9, 2001 to Wilson et al., U.S. Patent No. 8,155,786 to Vahlberg et al., issued on April 10, 2012, U.S. Patent No. 8,073,563 to Vahlberg et al., issued on December 6, 2011, U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2008/0319577 of Vahlberg et al., published on December 25, 2008, U.S. Patent No. 8,140,186 to Vahlberg et al., issued on March 20, 2012, U.S. Patent No. 8,126,590 to Vahlberg et al., issued on February 28, 2012, U.S. Patent No. 8,027,749 to Vahlberg et al., issued on September 27, 2011, U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2008/0319790 of Vahlberg et al., published on December 25, 2008, U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2008/0319789 of Vahlberg et al., published on December 25, 2008, U.S. Patent No. 8,131,397 to Vahlberg et al., issued on March 6, 2012, U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2008/0319579 of Vahlberg et al., published on December 25, 2008, U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2010/0042437 of Levy et al., published on February 18, 2010, and U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2016/0253860 of Wilson et al., published on September 1, 2016. Embodiments of the present invention may incorporate features from the devices described in these documents, in any workable combination.

[0024] A computer system **106** may execute a program for tracking of medications and supplies throughout the hospital, and may communicate via electronic network **107** with the various dispensing devices **102, 103, 104**, to record transactions involving medications or supplies. Electronic network **107** may be a wired network, a wireless network, or may have both wired and wireless portions. Any suitable networking technology or combination of technologies may be used, for example WiFi™, Bluetooth™, Ethernet, a cellular data network, or other technologies.

[0025] Computer system **106** may be informed when a particular medication is removed from or returned to one of the dispensing devices. In particular, computer system **106** may execute a controlled substance management (CSM) application **108**, for particular tracking of legally controlled substances. Additional details of systems and methods for tracking supplies,

including controlled substances, may be found in U.S. Patent Application Publication Number 2013/0006652 of Vahlberg et al., published on January 3, 2013, the entire contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference herein for all purposes.

[0026] Ideally, medications leave the system in only three ways. In a first way, medication is administered to a patient. In a second way of leaving the system, medication may be wasted. For example, if the medication is packaged in a quantity that exceeds the prescribed dose for a particular patient, each administration may result in a leftover amount that is not reusable, and must be discarded **109**. In another example of waste, a vial may be dropped and broken, rendering its contents unusable. In a third way of leaving the system, medication may be returned to pharmacy **101** for disposal in a controlled manner **110**, for example because the medication has reached its beyond use date.

[0027] However, medications can also leave the system in other ways, for example due to inadvertent mistake, but also intentionally for illicit use or sale. The illicit removal of controlled substances is known in the art as diversion. It is highly desirable to prevent or at least discourage diversion of medications and supplies.

[0028] Computer system **106** may track the movements of medications and supplies into and out of pharmacy **101** and dispensing devices **102, 103, 104**. However, many transfers of items are required. For example, a pharmacy technician may periodically physically visit dispensing devices **102, 103, 104** to restock depleted items, and to recover returned or unused items. This requires transferring of items from pharmacy **101** to the technician's cart, and transferring the items again from the technician's cart to the dispensing devices. Later, a nurse will remove the items from the dispensing devices. Each of these transfers must be tracked and documented. In addition, substantial pharmacy time is consumed in making the rounds to the dispensing devices. Similar transfers and documentation are required for moving items from the dispensing devices back to the pharmacy.

[0029] Relay boxes have been developed for transferring items via normal intra-facility mail systems and the like. A relay box is a secure transportable container that can preferably be conveniently opened only at the location where it is filled (for example pharmacy **101**) or at its destination (for example a nurse station). Medications or supplies may then be transferred from the relay box to a dispensing device, or may be used immediately. More detail about relay boxes

may be found in U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2017/0228951 of Foot et al., published August 10, 2017, the entire disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference herein for all purposes.

5 [0030] According to embodiments of the invention, items are packaged in relay trays that have expanded features as compared with relay boxes.

[0031] FIG. 2 illustrates the use of a relay tray in a hospital environment. In the example depicted, it is desired to transport a vial 201 of medication from pharmacy 101 to a patient room 202. A relay tray 203 is used to transport vial 201. Relay tray 203 is a transportable secure container with an electronically-controlled locking mechanism. Like a relay box, a relay tray in accordance with embodiments of the invention is a secure container that can preferably be
10 conveniently opened only at the location where it is filled or at its destination. Vial 201 is placed in relay tray 203, and relay tray 203 is locked under control of a computer 204 at a workstation 205. Computer 204 is in communication with computer system 106, which oversees the process and records the transfer of vial 201 into relay tray 203. Relay tray 203 is locked in response to a
15 command from computer 204, in accordance with instructions from computer system 106.

[0032] Relay tray 203 includes an electronic controller that is powered while relay tray is at workstation 205. For example, relay tray 203 may receive power and communication through a docking and communication surface 206, or directly through a cable (not shown). Information about the contents of relay tray 203 may be written to nonvolatile memory within the controller.
20 For example, a listing of items within relay tray 203 may be written to the memory. Other information may be written to the nonvolatile memory as well, for example an indication of the room number or other destination of the relay tray, an identifier of the patient for whom the contents of the relay tray are intended, or other information. The controller may conveniently be in a “false bottom” of relay tray 203, or any other workable position.

25 [0033] In some embodiments, each relay tray 203 is assigned a unique serial number or other identifier, which is stored within relay tray 203. For example, the unique identifier may be stored in the nonvolatile memory, in a secure element, in an identifying tag as described below, or in another location or in a combination of locations. The unique identifier is preferably difficult or impossible to change, so that each relay tray 203 is permanently uniquely identified.

[0034] Once relay tray **203** is locked and removed from workstation **205**, it may be completely unpowered, and may not include a battery or other power source. In other embodiments, relay tray **203** may include a small battery or capacitor for maintaining timekeeping circuitry, tracking, and the like, but even in this case, relay tray **203** preferably has no means for unlocking itself when it is disconnected from an external power source as may be found at a workstation such as workstation **205**. This inability to unlock when not at a suitable workstation makes transport of items in relay tray **203** secure. Without a suitable electronic connection and command from computer system **106**, items in relay tray **203** cannot be removed without physically damaging relay tray **203**. In some embodiments, a mechanical means may be provided for opening a locked relay tray, for example a key that can be used in the event of a power failure or other emergency. Preferably, the access to the key is tightly controlled and permitted only to authorized personnel.

[0035] As is shown in FIG. 2, relay tray **203** (with vial **201** inside) is transported to another workstation **207** in or near patient room **202**. Relay tray **203** is placed in connection with computer **208**, for example using another docking and communication surface **209**. In accordance with instructions from computer system **106**, relay tray **203** is opened, and vial **201** can be removed so that the medication in vial **201** can be administered to the patient. Preferably, relay tray **203** authenticates computer system **106** before opening, to ensure that the instruction to open came from a legitimate source.

[0036] Any patient information stored in relay tray **203** may be hashed, so that it is unique to the intended patient, but not human-readable. For example, the patient's name may be hashed using an agreed-upon algorithm at workstation **205**, and the result stored in the nonvolatile memory within relay tray **203**. When relay tray **203** arrives at workstation **207**, the name of the patient in room **202** may be hashed using the same algorithm, and the result compared with the hashed name stored in relay tray **203**, to help verify that relay tray **203** has reached the correct patient. In this way, the patient's name is not displayed or otherwise available while relay tray **203** is in transit, in the interest of patient privacy. In other embodiments, patient information stored in relay tray **203** may be encrypted, and recoverable only at an authorized and authenticated location such as workstation **207**.

[0037] Preferably, relay tray **203** will not unlock at workstation **207** until it is confirmed that relay tray **203** has arrived at its correct destination for the correct patient. The confirmation is preferably performed over the authenticated channel between relay tray **203** and computer system **106**.

5 [0038] While FIG. 2 shows transporting relay tray **203** within a facility, relay trays may be transported between facilities, which may be widely separated. For example, a relay tray **203** may be shipped to nearly any location, for example to restock medication supplies at a nursing home or to deliver medications to a patient in home care. The shipment may be by any suitable means, including ground or air shipment. A relay tray lacking a battery may be especially
10 amenable to air shipment.

[0039] FIG. 3 shows relay tray **203** in more detail, in accordance with embodiments of the invention. Relay tray **203** includes a main container portion **301** defining a compartment of the relay tray, and a hinged lid **302**. In other embodiments, a sliding, removable, or rotating lid may be used, or another suitable kind of lid. A relay tray in accordance with embodiments of the
15 invention may be of any suitable size. For example, relay tray **203** may conveniently be about 10 to 14 inches wide, about 8 to 12 inches deep, and about 3 to 5 inches high. Other larger or smaller sizes are possible. In many embodiments, a relay tray is of a suitable size to be transported throughout a facility in a manner similar to internal mail. However, in some
20 embodiments, a relay tray embodying the invention may be too large or heavy to be carried by an unassisted person.

[0040] The outer shell of relay tray **203** may preferably be made of a strong, durable material such as steel, aluminum, a reinforced polymer, or another suitable material, or a combination of materials. In some embodiments, lid **302** may be transparent or translucent, or include a transparent portion so that the contents of relay tray **203** may be visible when lid **302** is closed.
25 Relay tray **203** is preferably readily cleanable.

[0041] Relay tray **203** further includes a display **303**, which may display a destination address for relay tray **203**, an identifier of a patient for which the contents of relay tray **203** are intended, or other information. Display **303** may be simply a typed or written label attached to any part of relay tray **203**, or may be an electronic display. Preferably, any electronic display is nonvolatile,
30 so that information on display **303** can be read during transport, in the absence of any power

input into relay tray **203**. For example, display **303** may be an electrophoretic or other “electronic paper” display than remains readable even when unpowered. Such displays are manufactured by E-Ink Corporation of Billerica, Mass., USA and others.

[0042] In some cases, multiple different medications intended for different patients may be transported in relay tray **203**. For example, medications may be transported to the same nursing station near which two patients are located. In that case, both patient names or other identifiers may be hashed and stored in relay tray **203**. To implement usage of a single relay tray for the benefit of multiple patients, a relay tray may be logically defined as multiple trays.

[0043] FIG. 4 illustrates relay tray **203** and docking and communication surface **206**, in accordance with embodiments of the invention. Docking and communication surface **206** includes a set of exposed metal conductors **401** and **402**, alternating ones of which are held at different voltages. In the example of FIG. 4, conductors **401** are held at a low or ground voltage, and conductors **402** are held at a higher voltage, for example 12V DC or another suitable voltage. Gaps are provided between the alternating conductors **401** and **402**, such that adjacent conductors **401** and **402** are spaced apart from each other.

[0044] Relay tray **203** includes a set of four contacts **403**, exposed on an outside surface of relay tray **203**. In this example, contacts **403** are on the bottom surface of relay tray **203**. Contacts **403** are smaller in diameter than the spacing between conductors **401** and **402**, so none of contacts **403** can touch adjacent conductors **401** and **402** at the same time. However, when relay tray **203** is placed with its bottom surface down on docking and communication surface **206**, at least one of contacts **403** will touch one of lower-voltage conductors **401**, and at least one of contacts **403** will touch one of higher-voltage conductors **402**. Rectifier circuitry within relay tray **203** generates DC voltage of a polarity suitable for powering electronics within relay tray **203** when any one of contacts **403** is held at the lower voltage and any one of the other three contacts **403** is connected to the higher voltage, regardless of whether each of the remaining two of the electrical contacts is held at the lower or higher voltage. In some embodiments, contacts **403** and docking and communication surface **206** may conform to the Open Dots™ standard, which specifies a workable set of dimensions for conductors **401** and **402**, and contacts **403**. In an embodiment according to the Open Dots™ standard, contacts **403** would have a maximum diameter of 1.8 mm, and would be placed at the center and vertices of an equilateral triangle,

such that the outer three contacts are on a circle having a nominal radius of 9.73 mm. Each of conductors **401** and **402** would be between 10.09 and 10.18 mm wide, conductors **401** and **402** would be nominally spaced at 12.2 mm intervals, and adjacent conductors **401** and **402** would be separated by nonconductive areas between 1.86 and 1.96 mm wide. Other arrangements are possible.

[0045] In other embodiments, relay tray **203** may receive power and communication signals through a cable, rather than through contacts such as contacts **403**. In other embodiments, relay tray **203** may receive power and communication signals through inductive coupling. For example relay tray **203** may include a wire coil near its bottom surface or at another location.

The wire coil may be used to receive power and exchange communication signals with another wire coil at a workstation. An inductive interface may include features similar to those of an interface according to the Qi interface standard promulgated by the Wireless Power Consortium. Multiple power and communication interfaces may be provided. For example, any or all of a cable connection, an inductive connection, and contacts such as contacts **403** may be provided, so that relay tray **203** can be used at workstations having different capabilities.

[0046] Docking and communication surface **206** can communicate with a computer such as computer **204** via cable **404**, or may communicate wirelessly. Docking and communication surface **206** may receive power through cable **404**, or through a dedicated power connection (not shown).

[0047] FIG. 5 illustrates simplified electrical block diagrams of docking and communication surface **206** and relay tray **203**, juxtaposed with contacts **403** of relay tray **203** about to contact conductors **401** and **402** of docking and communication surface **206**. Docking and communication surface **206** includes a controller **501**, which may in turn include a processor, memory, and other circuitry for performing the functions of docking and communication surface **206**. Docking and communication surface **206** receives power from an external source, for example mains power, a power supply, or a cable from an attached computer. Docking and communication surface **206** passes voltages to conductors **401** and **402** on the surface of docking and communication surface **206**. While FIG. 5 shows the voltages received by docking and communication surface **206** being simply passed through to conductors **401** and **402**, other arrangements are possible. For example, docking and communication surface **206** may receive

power from the mains and may rectify and filter the power to provide DC voltages to conductors **401** and **402**. Docking and communication surface **206** is also in electronic communication with an attached computer, for example via cable **404** or another communication mechanism. In some embodiments, the power and communication connections to docking and communication surface **206** are carried by a single multi-conductor cable, for example a Universal Serial Bus (USB) cable or another kind of cable.

[0048] Docking and communication surface **206** further includes a modulator and a demodulator, represented as modem **502**.

[0049] Relay tray **203** also includes a controller **503**, which may include another processor, memory, and other circuitry for carrying out the functions of relay tray **203**. Relay tray **203** includes a rectifier **504**, which produces voltage at terminals **505** of the correct polarity to operate controller **503**, regardless of which of contacts **403** are against which of conductors **401** and **402**. The received voltage is used to power controller **503** and other functions of relay tray **203**. Controller **503** controls an electromechanical lock **506**, and can cause information to be displayed on display **303**.

[0050] Relay tray **203** also includes a modulator and demodulator, shown as modem **507**. Docking and communication surface **206** and relay tray **203** can communicate through conductors **401** and **402** and contacts **403** by imposing (modulating) communication signals onto the DC power lines by the transmitting device and by extracting (demodulating) the signals by the receiving device. For example, the imposed signals may be of a relatively high frequency that is detectable by the respective demodulators, but has little or no effect on the quality of the power carried by the same lines.

[0051] Docking and communication surface **206** may include a power outlet connection **508**, allowing additional docking and communication surfaces such as surfaces **509** and **510** to be daisy chained together, each receiving power from the last, for example via cables **511** and **512**. Additional relay trays such as trays **513** and **514** may be placed on surfaces **509** and **510**. Once placed, the additional relay trays are powered up and can communicate with docking and communication surface **206**, and ultimately computer system **106**, via the power connections between the docking and communication surfaces.

[0052] In the embodiment of FIGS. 4 and 5, the power interface between relay tray **203** and docking and communication surface **206** uses direct current (DC). In other embodiments, alternating current (AC) may be used. **FIG. 6** illustrates electrical block diagrams of a relay tray **601** and a docking and communication surface **602** in accordance with an AC embodiment.

5 Relay tray **601** may include contacts **603** on an outer surface, similar to contacts **403** of relay tray **203** described above. Docking and communication surface **602**.

[0053] Docking and communication surface **602** includes exposed conductors **604** in an outside surface, similar to conductors **401** and **402** of docking and communication surface **206** described above. Docking and communication surface **602** receives AC power **605**, and passes it
10 to conductors **604**, for transfer to relay tray **601** through contacts **603**. Docking and communication surface **602** conditions the AC power, for example using a filter and regulator **606**, to provide DC power for powering controller **501**. Controller **501** is in communication via a cable **404** with an external computer system, and controls modem **502** to impose and extract communications signals onto and from the AC signal. The AC signal may be provided to a
15 power outlet connection **508**, to allow multiple relay trays to be connected together in daisy chain fashion.

[0054] Relay tray **601** includes a rectifier **504** which, when supplied with AC power **605**, produces rectified AC power **607**. A filter and regulator **608** provides DC power to controller **503**, which controls lock **506**, modem **507**, and display **303**.

20 [0055] In the example of FIG. 6, docking and communication surface **602** receives low voltage AC power **605** at, for example 12 volts or another suitable voltage. Thus, the voltage on exposed conductors **604** is also low voltage and safe for operators. In other embodiments, AC power **605** may be received at line voltage, for example 110 volts. In that case, docking and communication surface **602** may include a transformer or other circuitry for stepping down the line voltage to a
25 lower voltage before providing it to conductors **604**.

[0056] In any event, the voltage at conductors **604** is highly preferably not line voltage, but is a safe low voltage, for example less than about 50 volts.

[0057] Whether the voltage produced at the conductors of a docking and communications surface is AC or DC, short circuit protection is preferably provided, for example as specified in
30 the Open Dots™ standard, or in another arrangement.

[0058] In some embodiments, the communications carried out over the power line connection between docking and communication surface **206** and relay tray **203** may conform to or resemble communications described in the G3-PLC power line communication standard promulgated by the G3-PLC Alliance. Such communications use orthogonal frequency division multiplexing sampled at 400 kHz, with adaptive modulation and tone mapping. Error detection and correction may be made by a convolutional code and Reed-Solomon error correction.

[0059] In other embodiments, the communications between docking and communication surface **206** and relay tray may conform to or resemble communications described in the PRIME power line communication standard promulgated by the PRIME Alliance. Any other suitable standard or propriety communication format may be used as well, for example IEEE 1901.2. In other embodiments, broadband power line communication may be used, for example similar to the arrangement used in the HomePlug[®] standard promulgated by the HomePlug Powerline Alliance.

[0060] As is discussed above, relay tray **203** preferably authenticates computer system **106** before opening, to ensure that the instructions to open originated from an authorized source. In this way, illicit “open” instructions can be detected and ignored. The authentication can be performed in any suitable way, but in some embodiments, may be performed using public key authentication.

[0061] In public key authentication, computer system **106** has public and private keys, and creates a signature using both. Relay tray **203** knows the public key of computer system **106**, and can determine using it whether the signature is genuine, although relay tray **203** need not and does not have the private key of computer system **106**.

[0062] In some embodiments, a relay tray such as relay tray **203** may include a passive, externally-excitable memory device such as a radio frequency identification (RFID) tag or similar device. An identifier of relay tray **203** may be stored in the RFID tag, and used for additional tracking of relay tray **203** within a facility. For example, as is shown in **FIG. 7**, a wireless reading station **701** is installed in doorway **702**, through which relay tray **203** may pass on its way from workstation **205** to workstation **207**. Wireless reading station **701** may excite an RFID tag or other device within relay tray **203**, causing relay tray to divulge its stored identifier.

Reading station **701** can receive the identifier and send it to computer system **106**, which can

record the fact that relay tray **203** passed through doorway **702**. Other information such as the time and date of the passage may be recorded. Reading stations **701** may be placed at multiple locations around the facility, so that relay trays can be passively tracked if desired. Reading stations may be placed at the exits of the facility, so that any attempt to remove a relay tray from the premises will be detected. In some instances, such removal may be legitimate, for example when a medication or other item is being shipped to another location in a relay tray. In other cases, removal of a relay tray from the facility may signal a diversion attempt.

[0063] Tracking of relay trays throughout a facility may be accomplished in other ways as well. For example, a relay tray that includes a battery may also include a low power wireless receiver such as a Bluetooth[®] LE or another similar receiver. (As is discussed above, the battery preferably does not supply power to any mechanism for unlocking the relay tray or otherwise retrieving items from the relay tray during transit.) A number of beacon transmitters may be placed in known locations around the facility. During transport, the relay tray may periodically or occasionally, for example every few seconds, detect any nearby beacons, and record the time that any beacon is detected. Once the tray arrives at its destination and is connected to a communication interface, the record of detections can be retrieved. The journey of the relay tray from one workstation to the other can be reconstructed based on the known locations of the beacon transmitters. Any deviations from an expected route or timing of the journey may signal attempted diversion. The records of the journeys of the relay trays may be used for analytic purposes as well, for example to optimize pharmacy cart routes for fastest or most efficient delivery, or the like.

[0064] Beacon-based tracking may be implemented even for relay trays that have no batteries, for example by transporting the relay trays on carts that have power-only docking surfaces or other suitable power connections. A power-only docking surface may outwardly be similar to docking and communication surface **206** or **602** described above, but lacks any capability to communicate through the power interface, for example through conductors such as conductors **401** and **402** or via an inductive coil. Thus, a relay tray positioned on a power-only docking surface may be able to operate a beacon receiver using power received through its surface contacts or coil, but will not unlock itself or otherwise make its contents accessible because it cannot receive any instruction to do so from computer system **106**. In other embodiments, a

simple plug-in power-only connection may be provided between a transport cart and a relay tray, so that the relay tray can receive power to perform tracking, but will not open during transport.

5 [0065] While relay tray **203** has only one compartment, other relay trays may be more complex. For example, a relay tray embodying the invention may have multiple compartments, which may be individually lockable.

[0066] **FIG. 8** illustrates a relay tray **801** in accordance with other embodiments. Relay tray **801** includes several individually-lockable compartments **802**. Guiding lights **803** may be provided, so that a user retrieving medication from relay tray **801** for a particular patient can be guided to the correct compartment **802**. For example, at the time relay tray **801** is loaded at workstation **205**, computer system **106** can record which medications are placed in which compartments **802** of relay tray **801**. Once relay tray **801** arrives at patient room **202** and a medication is to be retrieved for administration to a patient, computer system **106** can instruct relay tray **801** to illuminate the guiding light **803** corresponding to the compartment **802** holding the medication for the patient. Relay tray **801** can illuminate the correct guiding light **803** and unlock the correct compartment **802**.

[0067] A relay tray such as relay tray **801** with multiple compartments may be especially useful for transporting medications for more than one patient, for transporting multiple medications for a single patient, or for transporting multiple doses of a controlled substance. For example, medication may be loaded into relay tray **801** with a single dose per small compartment. The compartments can be opened only upon instructions from computer system **106**, which may issue the instructions one at a time according to the dosage schedule of the particular medication. Thus, only one dose of the medication can be accessed at a time, reducing opportunities for dosing errors or diversion.

[0068] In some embodiments, a relay tray such as relay tray **801** may store a record of which medications are stored in which compartments **802**. For example, the record may be stored in nonvolatile memory within relay tray **801** when relay tray **801** is loaded at pharmacy **101**. In this arrangement, computer system **106** does not need to track medications to the compartment level, but only needs to track which medications are in which relay tray. To dispense an item, computer system **106** may simply send an instruction to relay tray **801** to dispense one dose of a particular medication. Relay tray **801** can confirm that the medication is present, locate the

correct compartment **802** using its internal record, illuminate the correct guiding light **803**, and open the compartment **802**. The interface between computer system **106** and relay tray **801** in this arrangement may be called a medication abstraction layer, because instructions from computer system **106** need only reference medications, and not specific compartments **802**.

5 **[0069]** In other embodiments, computer system **106** may track items to the compartment level. In this arrangement, computer system **106** stores a record of which medications are in which compartments of which relay trays. The record is constructed when the relay tray is loaded at pharmacy **101**. To dispense an item, computer system **106** sends an instruction to relay tray **801** to unlock a specific compartment **802**. In this arrangement, no abstraction is involved, and relay
10 tray **801** may or may not have a record of the contents of compartments **802**.

[0070] FIG. 9 shows a lower oblique view of relay tray **801**. In this example, relay tray **801** has contacts **403** on its bottom side, like contacts **403** of relay tray **203** described above. Relay tray **801** can thus receive power and communication signals from a docking and communication surface such as docking and communication surfaces **206** and **209**. In other embodiments, relay
15 tray **801** may be connected to a computer at a workstation using a cable carrying power and communications signals, instead of using a docking and communication surface. In that case, relay tray **801** may not include contacts **403**. In other embodiments, both a cable connection and contacts such as contacts **403** may be provided, so that relay tray **801** can be used at workstations having different capabilities.

20 **[0071]** FIG. 10 illustrates a relay tray **1001** in accordance with other embodiments. Relay tray **1001** has features that may be especially useful in the transport of controlled substances, although it may be used for transport and dispensing of any compatible kind of item. Relay tray **1001** includes a cabinet **1002** housing a number of dispensing mechanisms **1003**. Dispensing mechanisms **1003** are electromechanical devices that can dispense a single dose at a time of a
25 medication. Each dispensing mechanism **1003** holds a supply of the items to be dispensed, and can dispense them one at a time under control of a controller within relay tray **1001**. Different dispensing mechanisms may be configured to dispense oral solids in blister packs, syringes, vials such as vial **1004**, or other kinds of items. Relay tray **1001** may be configured with different mixes of types of dispensing mechanisms **1003**, depending on the expected usage of medication
30 package types. One dispensing mechanism **1005** is shown being inserted into relay tray **1001**.

Preferably, each dispensing mechanism **1003** makes electrical and mechanical connection with structure (not shown) inside of relay tray **1001** upon insertion. In other embodiments, a relay tray may include only a single dispensing mechanism, for example a mechanism integrated into the structure of the relay tray.

- 5 **[0072]** In use, dispensing mechanisms **1003** are preferably loaded at pharmacy **101** with medications or other items to be dispensed, and are locked inside of relay tray **1001**. For example, dispense drawer **1006** may be opened, giving pharmacy personnel access to dispensing mechanisms **1003**. Once dispensing mechanisms **1003** are loaded, dispense drawer **1006** can be closed and locked.
- 10 **[0073]** During transport, relay tray **1001** is unpowered, and the dispensing mechanisms cannot be used to dispense items. When relay tray **1001** is connected to power and a network at a workstation such as workstation **207**, relay tray **1001** can dispense individual items in response to commands from computer system **106**. Relay tray **1001** may include contacts such as contacts **403** to receive power and communication signals from a docking and communication surface, or
- 15 relay tray **1001** may receive power and communication signals through one or more cables. In other embodiments, both a cable connection and contacts such as contacts **403** may be provided.
- [0074]** Each dispensing mechanism **1003** may drop items downward into dispense drawer **1007**, which can be pulled out of relay tray **1001** to reveal the dispensed item. The user of relay tray **1001** thus does not have access to the interior of relay tray **1001** or dispensing mechanisms
- 20 **1003**. This arrangement reduces opportunities for human error and restricts access to the medications inside of relay tray **1001**, possibly deterring diversion. Examples of dispensing devices suitable for use in embodiments of the invention are described in U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2016/0253860 of Wilson et al., previously incorporated by reference. Other kinds of dispensing devices may also be used in other embodiments of the invention.
- 25 **[0075]** A system of relay trays and workstations may be used as part of a medication distribution and management system within a hospital or other facility. For example, relay trays may be loaded at pharmacy **101** with medications and other items expected to be needed at various workstations around the facility. The loaded relay trays may be delivered to the workstations by a pharmacy technician or other intra-facility delivery, and may be swapped for
- 30 “used” relay trays previously delivered to the workstations. The used relay trays can be returned

to pharmacy **101** so that any unused medications or other items can be restocked or disposed of if necessary, and the relay trays can be reused.

[0076] As was discussed above, docking and communication surfaces in accordance with embodiments of the invention may be connectable together in daisy chain fashion, so that multiple relay trays can receive power and communicate with computer system **106**. An example of this arrangement is shown in **FIG. 11**. In **FIG. 11**, relay tray **203** is placed on a first docking and communication surface **206**, and relay tray **801** is placed on a second docking and communication surface **206**. The two docking and communication surfaces **206** are connected together by a cable **511**. The first surface in the chain connects with a computer system via cable **404** or another arrangement. Any number of docking and communication surfaces can be daisy chained together, for example via additional cables **512**, limited only by the amount of power available in the chain. As is shown in **FIG. 11**, the relay trays in the chain can be in any mix of types, for example the types exemplified by relay trays **203**, **801**, and **1001**, or other types.

[0077] A workstation such as workstations **205** and **207** may include multiple docking and communication surfaces **206**, so that the collection of relay trays at any workstation functions in a way similar to cabinet **102** shown in **FIG. 1**, but without the need for a large cabinet structure. The relay trays may be simply arranged on a work surface, or stored in simple drawers. The relay trays remain powered while stored, so that they are visible to computer system **106** over the network.

[0078] **FIG. 12** shows an example wall mounted workstation **1200**, in accordance with embodiments of the invention. Work surfaces **1201** and **1202** may fold up for storage and down for use. Either or both of work surfaces **1201** and **1202** may have a built-in docking and communication surface such as docking and communication surface **206**, so that a relay tray **1203** can be placed directly on one of the fold-down work surfaces. A computer such as computer **208** may be built in, for example behind panel **1204**, and may have a touchscreen display **1205**.

[0079] Drawers **1206** may also include built-in docking and communication surfaces, so that relay trays stored in drawers **1206** remain powered while stored. Thus, computer system **106** can query any relay tray stored in drawers **1206**. When a medication is to be retrieved from one of the relay trays, the user can unlock the appropriate drawer **1206** and move the relay tray to a work surface such as work surface **1202**, where the medication can be accessed. Any docking

and communication surfaces in work surfaces **1201** and **1202** and drawers **1206** may be connected in daisy chain fashion, or may be separately connected to a power source and to a computer system. A workstation such as workstation may have the advantages that it takes up very little space in a patient room, and allows management of patient medications with added flexibility and lower cost than in some other arrangements.

[0080] In the claims appended hereto, the term “a” or “an” is intended to mean “one or more.” The term “comprise” and variations thereof such as “comprises” and “ comprising,” when preceding the recitation of a step or an element, are intended to mean that the addition of further steps or elements is optional and not excluded. It is to be understood that any workable combination of the elements and features disclosed herein is also considered to be disclosed.

[0081] The invention has now been described in detail for the purposes of clarity and understanding. However, those skilled in the art will appreciate that certain changes and modifications may be practiced within the scope of the appended claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A relay tray for securely transporting items, the relay tray comprising:
a lockable transportable container for holding one or more items to be transported;
an electronic controller including a processor;
5 a power interface through which the relay tray can receive electric power;
a communication interface through which the controller can communicate
electronically; and
a mechanism operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked
container accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface,
10 the mechanism operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power
interface.
2. The relay tray for securely transporting items of claim 1, wherein the
mechanism is a lock operable by the controller to unlock a compartment of the relay tray.
3. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim,
15 wherein the controller further comprises a nonvolatile memory storing a listing of an item or
items in the relay tray.
4. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim,
further comprising a plurality of compartments within the container, wherein the compartments
are individually lockable, and are individually openable under control of the controller in
20 response to communications received via the communication interface.
5. The relay tray for securely transporting items of claim 4, further
comprising a plurality of lights associated respectively with at least some of the compartments,
the lights being individually operable under control of the controller.
6. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim,
25 wherein the power interface also serves as the communication interface, and wherein the
controller is configured to extract incoming communications signals from the power interface,
and to impose outgoing communication signals on the power interface.

7. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim, wherein the power interface comprises:

four electrical contacts on an outside surface of the container for receiving electric power connections; and

5 a rectifier that receives power from the four electrical contacts and produces voltage of a polarity suitable for powering the controller.

8. The relay tray for securely transporting items of claim 7, wherein the four contacts are positioned at the vertices and center of an equilateral triangle.

9. The relay tray for securely transporting items of claim 7 or claim 8,
10 wherein the four contacts also serve as the communications interface, and wherein the controller is configured to extract communications signals imposed on the contacts in addition to the power voltages.

10. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any of claims 7-9,
15 wherein the relay tray is configured to receive DC power, and wherein the rectifier produces DC voltage of a polarity suitable for powering the controller.

11. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any of claims 7-9,
wherein the relay tray is configured to receive AC power, and wherein the rectifier produces rectified AC voltage.

12. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim,
20 wherein the communications interface is a short range wireless communications interface.

13. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim,
wherein the communications interface is a wired communications interface.

14. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim,
wherein the power interface comprises a coil that receives power by inductive coupling.

25 15. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim,
wherein:

the relay tray includes one or more electromechanical actuators; and
the relay tray does not include a battery powering operation of any of the one or more electromechanical actuators.

5 16. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim, wherein the mechanism comprises one or more electromechanical dispensers configured to dispense items under control of the controller.

 17. The relay tray for securely transporting items of claim 16, wherein items are dispensed in response to communications received via the communication interface.

10 18. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim, wherein the relay tray is also openable by a key.

 19. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim, further comprising a nonvolatile display on an outside surface of the container.

 20. The relay tray for securely transporting items of claim 19, wherein the relay tray stores a hashed identifier of a person for whom an item in the relay tray is intended.

15 21. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim, further comprising a passive externally-excitabile memory device storing an identifier of the relay tray.

 22. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim, wherein the controller is configured to authenticate the source of the communications received via the communication interface before making an item in the locked container accessible.

 23. The relay tray for securely transporting items of any preceding claim, further comprising a low power wireless beacon receiver, and wherein during transport of the relay tray, the controller records the detection of any beacon signals detected by the low power wireless beacon receiver.

25 24. A charging and communication surface for electronic devices, the charging and communication surface comprising:

a plurality of first linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the first linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a first voltage;

a plurality of second linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the second linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a second voltage different from the first, wherein the first and second linear electrical conductors are disposed in alternating arrangement to form a flat surface, and wherein adjacent conductors are spaced apart from each other; and

a controller including a modulator that imposes communications signals onto the voltage between the first and second linear conductors.

10 25. The charging and communication surface for electronic devices of claim 24, further comprising a demodulator that extracts communications signals from the voltage between the first and second linear conductors.

 26. The charging and communication surface for electronic devices of claim 24 or claim 25, further comprising a power outlet configured to be connectable to another
15 charging and communication surface in daisy chain fashion.

 27. A system for securely transporting medications or other items, the system comprising:

 a central computer system;

 a plurality relay trays, each relay tray further comprising a lockable transportable
20 container for holding items to be transported, an electronic controller including a processor and non-volatile memory, a power interface through which the relay tray can receive electric power, a communication interface through which the controller can communicate electronically, and a mechanism operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked container accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface, the
25 mechanism operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power interface; and

 a plurality of charging and communication stations in dispersed locations, each of the plurality of charging and communication stations including a power interface for supplying power to one of the relay trays at the station, and a first communication interface for

communication with the relay tray at the station, and a second communication interface for communication with the central computer system.

28. The system of claim 27, further comprising an electronic network over which the central computer system communicates instructions to authorize access to the interiors
5 of the lockable transportable containers.

29. The system of claim 27 or claim 28, wherein the power interfaces of the relay trays and the charging and communication stations also serve as the communication interfaces of the relay trays and the first communications interfaces of the charging and communication stations.

10 30. The system of claim 29, wherein each of the charging and communication stations comprises:

a plurality of first linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the first linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a first voltage; and

15 a plurality of second linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the second linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a second voltage different from the first;

wherein the first and second linear electrical conductors are disposed in alternating arrangement to form a flat surface, and wherein adjacent conductors are spaced apart from each other.

20 31. The system of any of claims 27-30, wherein the central computer system maintains an inventory of any medications stored in the plurality of relay trays.

32. The system of claim 31, wherein the central computer system maintains an inventory of any controlled substances stored in the plurality of relay trays.

25 33. A method of transporting an item, the method comprising:
connecting, at a first workstation, a first source of power to a power interface of a relay tray, wherein the relay tray comprises a lockable transportable container for holding items to be transported, an electronic controller including a processor and non-volatile memory, the power interface, a communication interface through which the controller can communicate

electronically, and a mechanism operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked container accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface, wherein the mechanism is operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power interface;

- 5 placing the item to be transported into the relay tray;
 locking the relay tray;
 disconnecting the relay tray from the source of power;
 transporting the relay tray containing the item to a second workstation;
 connecting, at the second workstation, a second source of power to the power
10 interface of a relay tray; and
 sending, at the second workstation, to the relay tray via the communication
interface an instruction to make the item accessible.

34. The method of claim 33, wherein connecting the relay tray to the first or second source of power comprises placing the relay tray on a charging and communication
15 surface such that contacts on the relay tray come into contact with conductors in the charging and communication surface to supply power to the relay tray.

35. The method of claim 34, further comprising causing electronic communication to occur between the relay tray and the charging and communication surface via communications signals imposed onto the voltage between two of the conductors of the charging
20 and communication surface, such that the power interface of the relay tray also functions as the communication interface of the relay tray.

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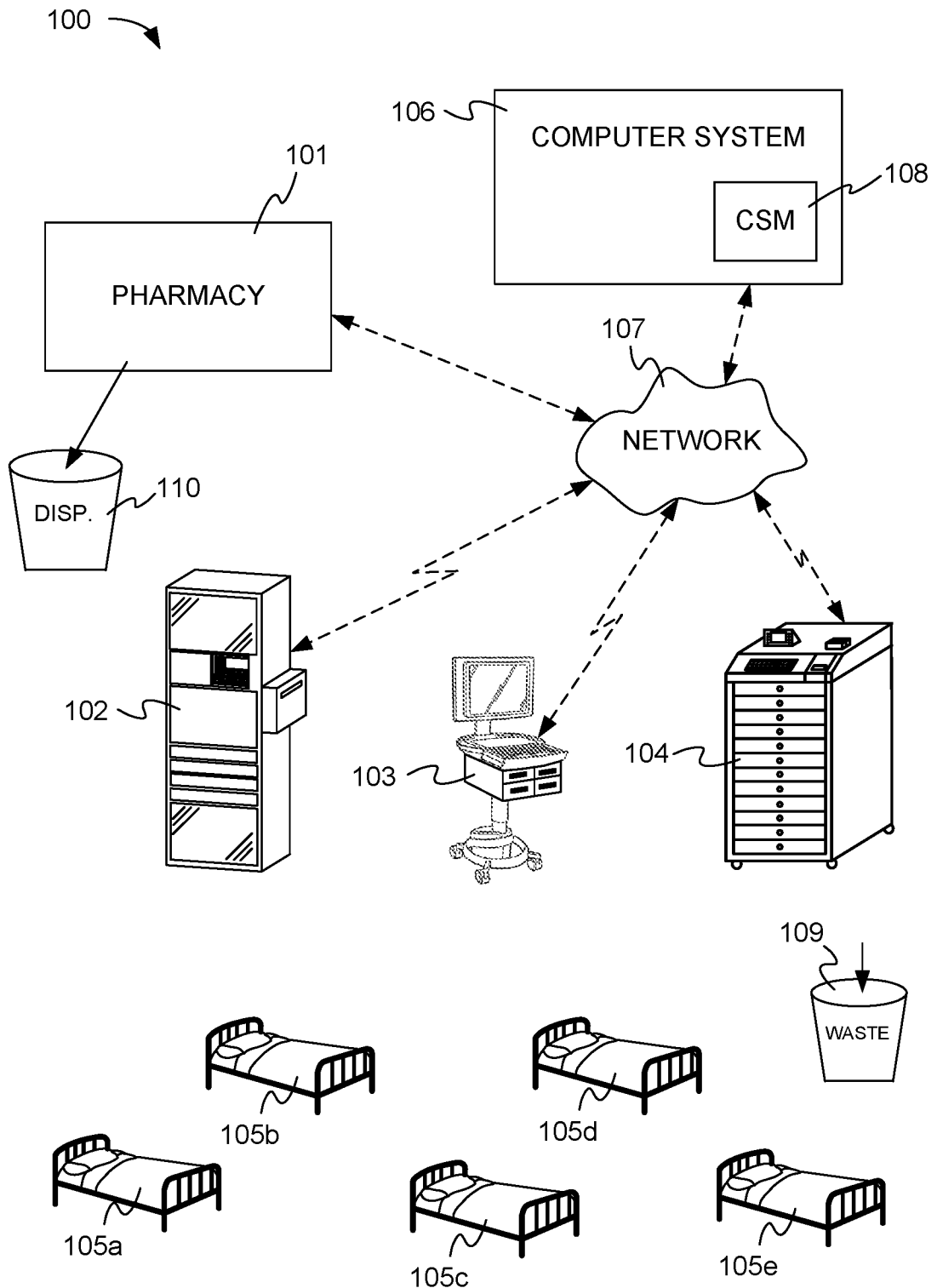


FIG. 1

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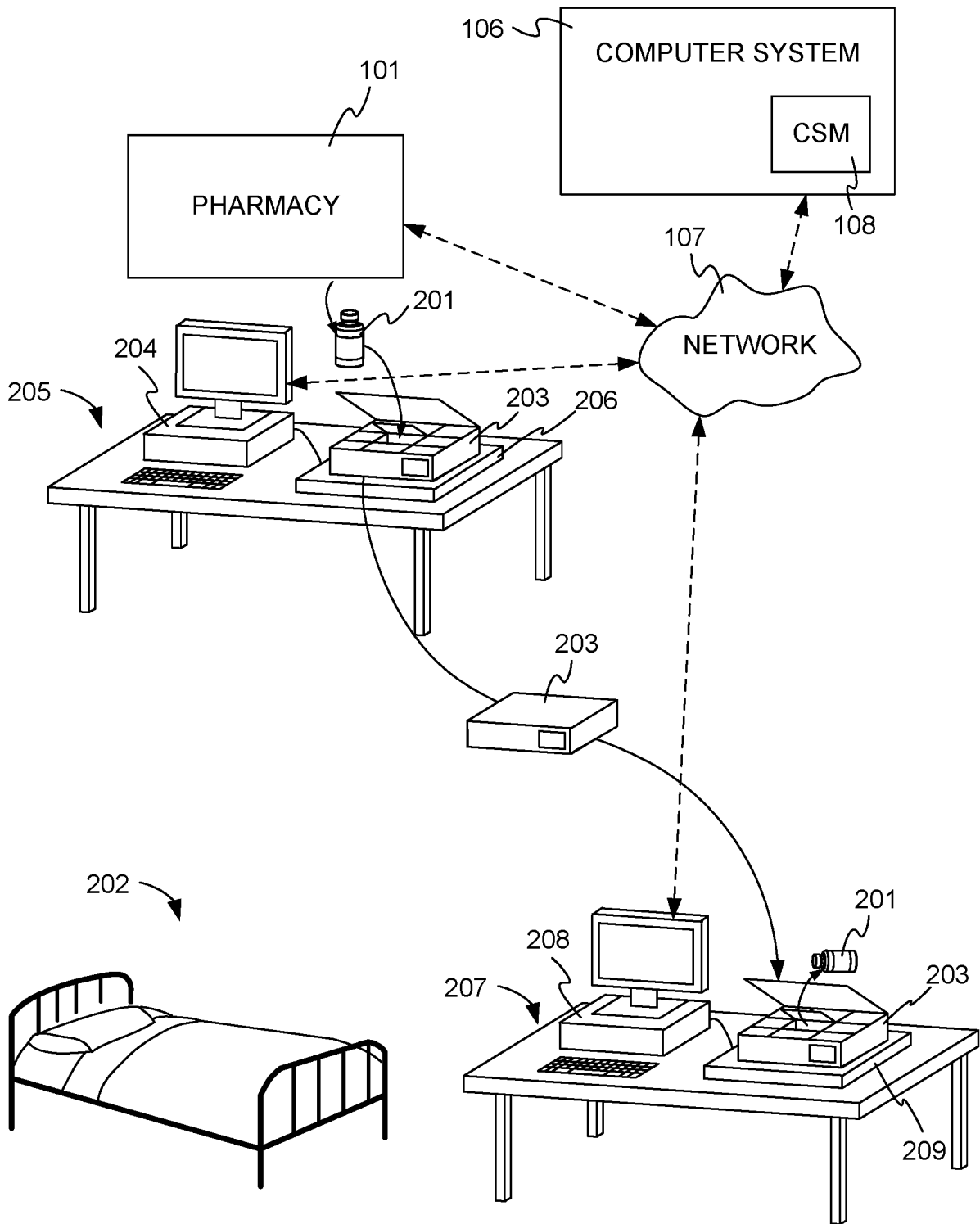


FIG. 2

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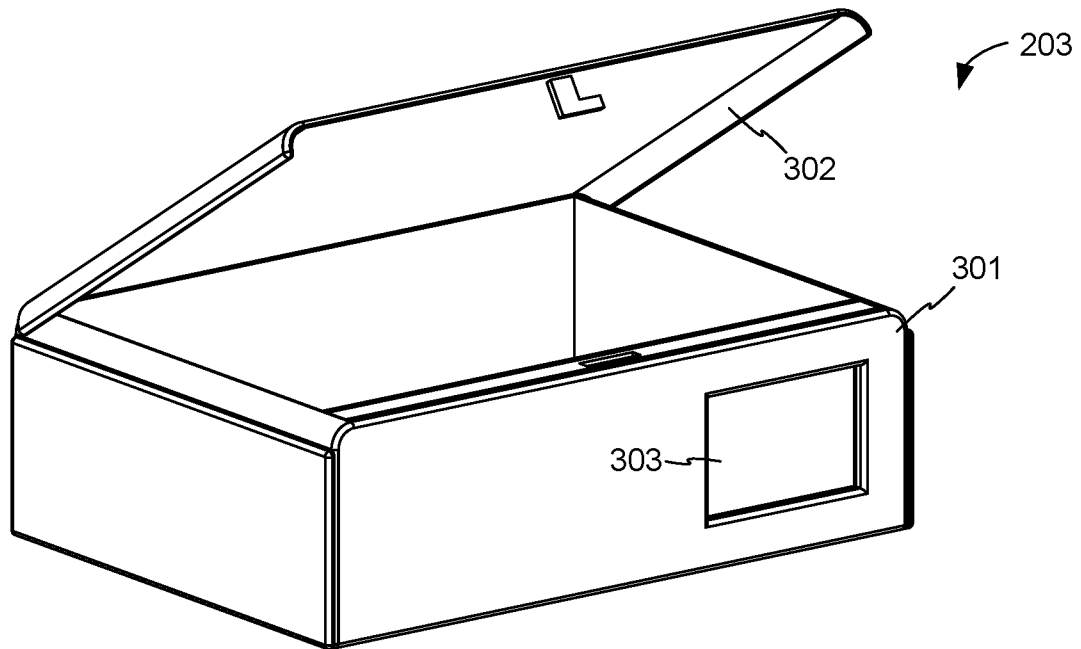


FIG. 3

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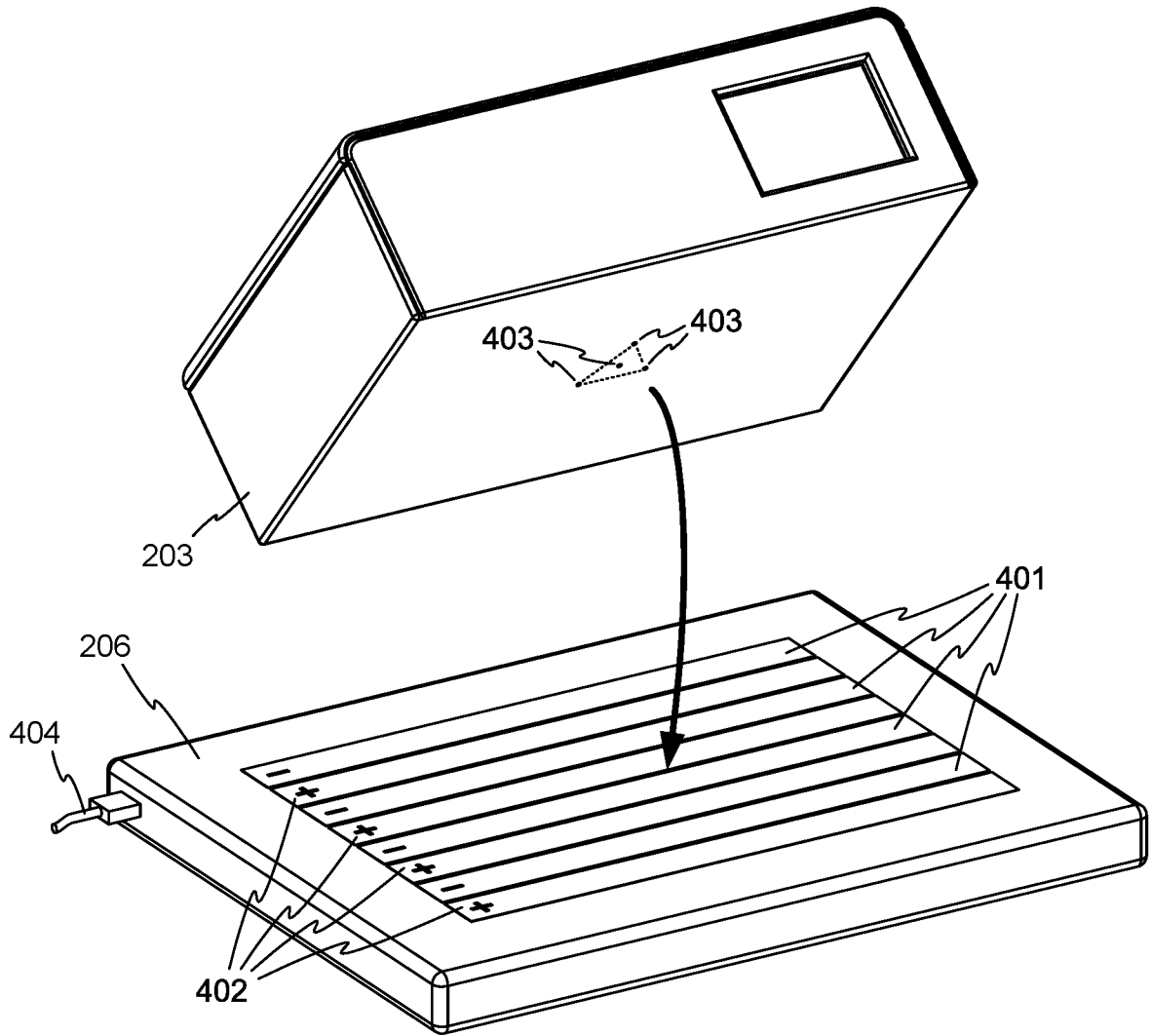


FIG. 4

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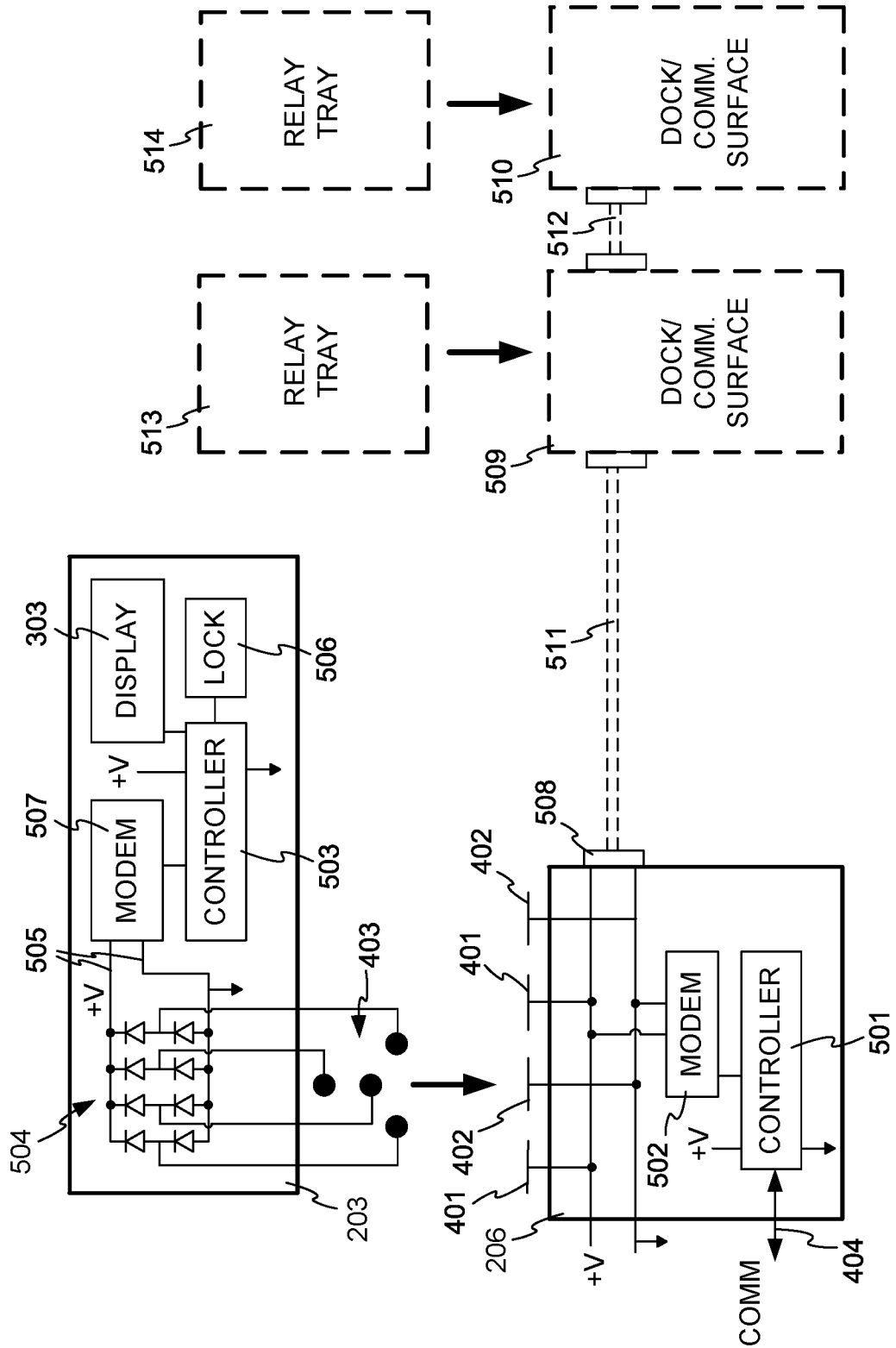


FIG. 5

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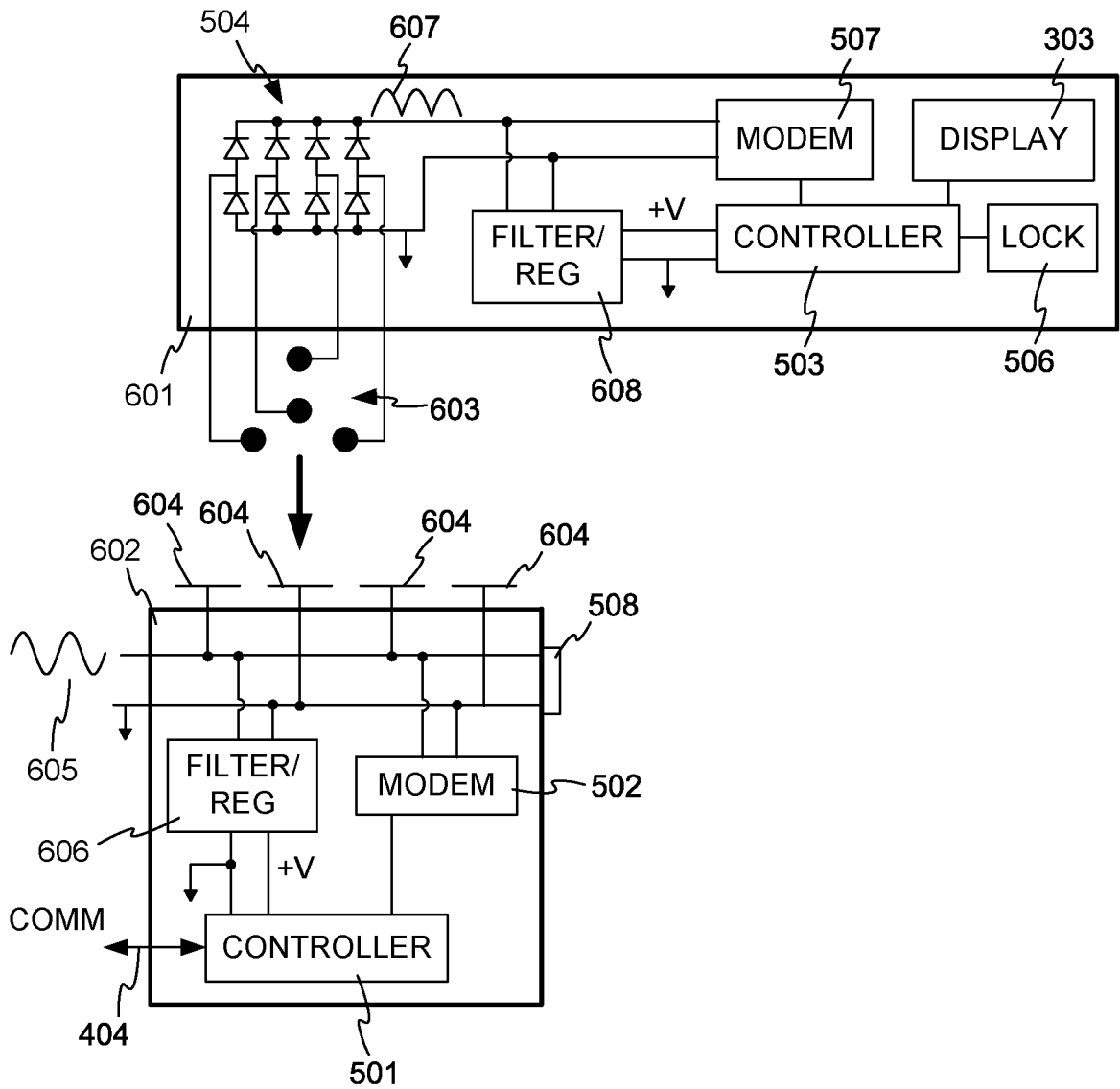


FIG. 6

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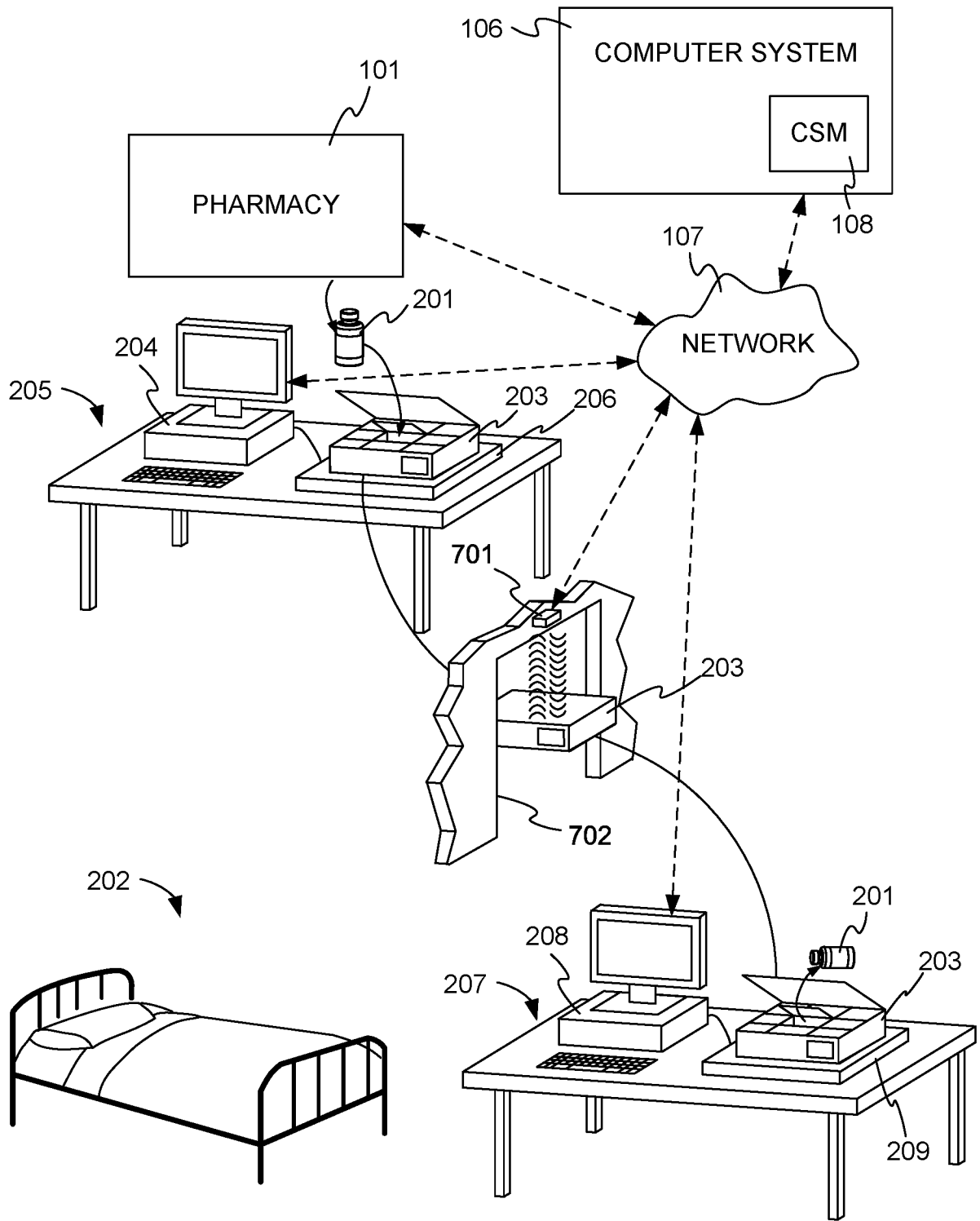


FIG. 7

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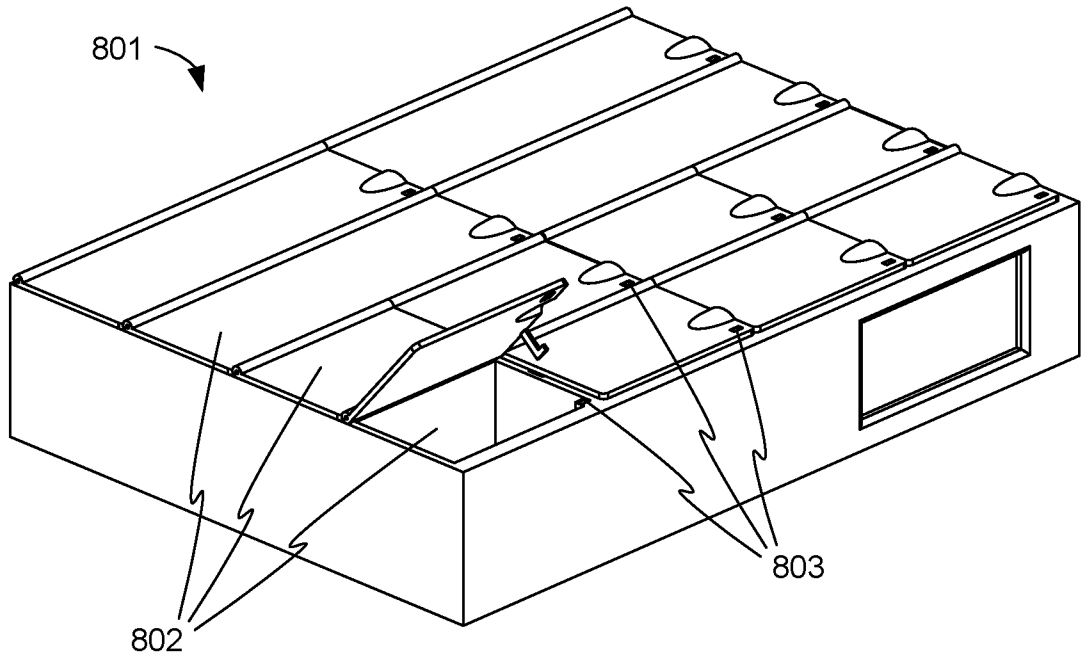


FIG. 8

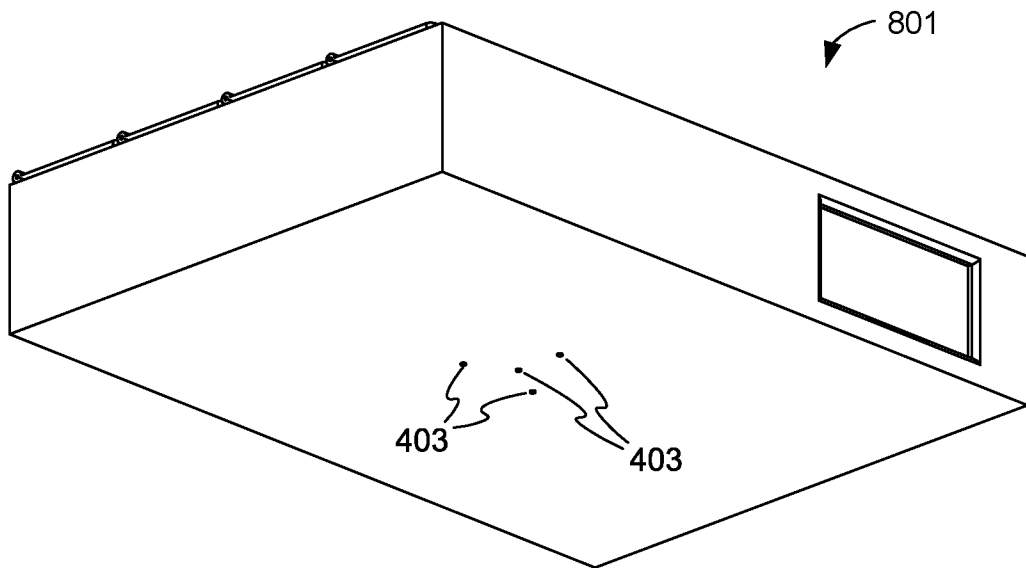


FIG. 9

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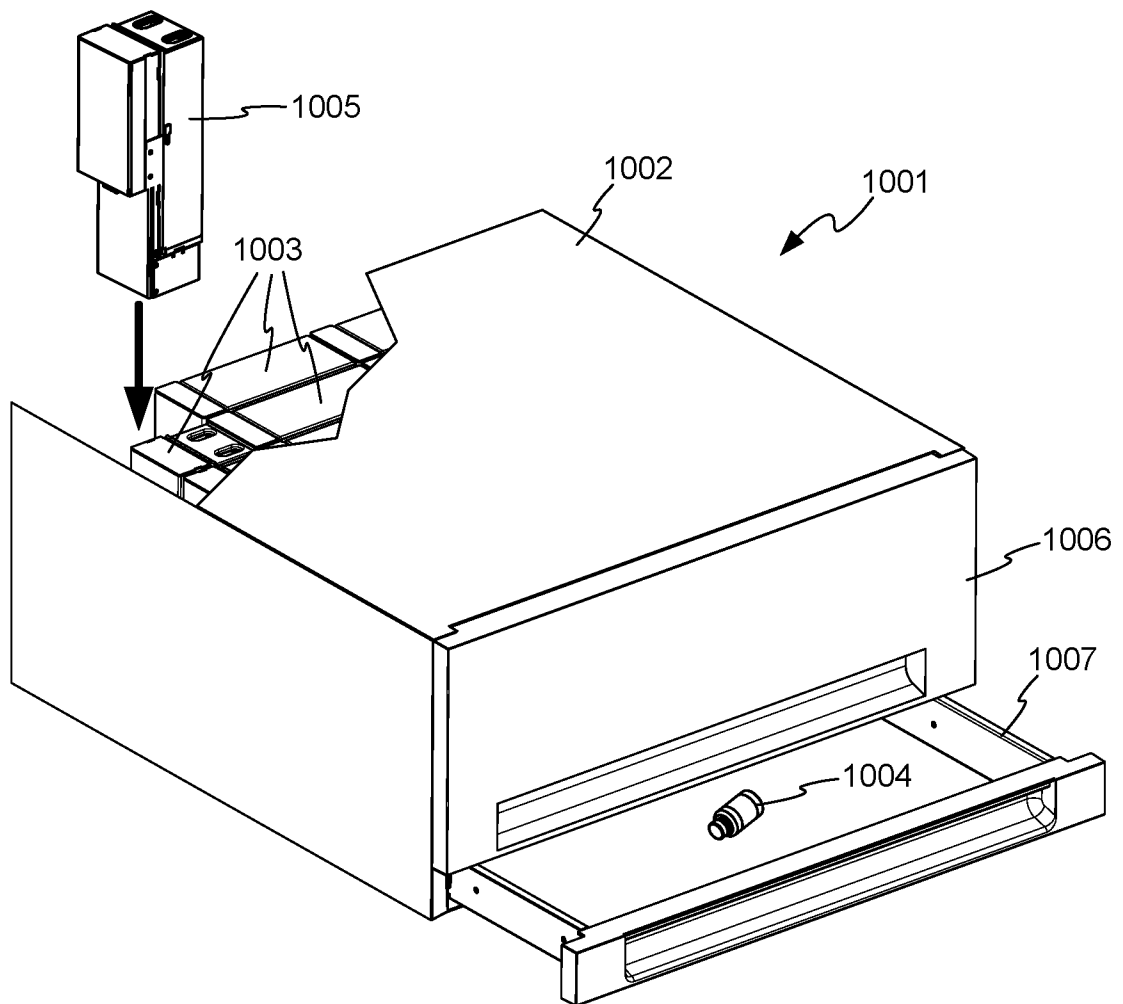


FIG. 10

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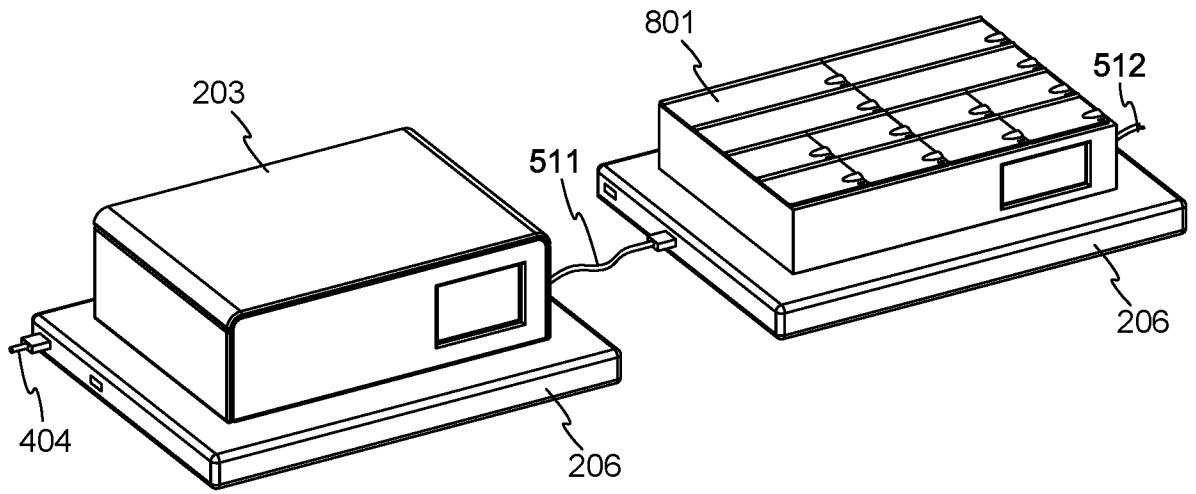


FIG. 11

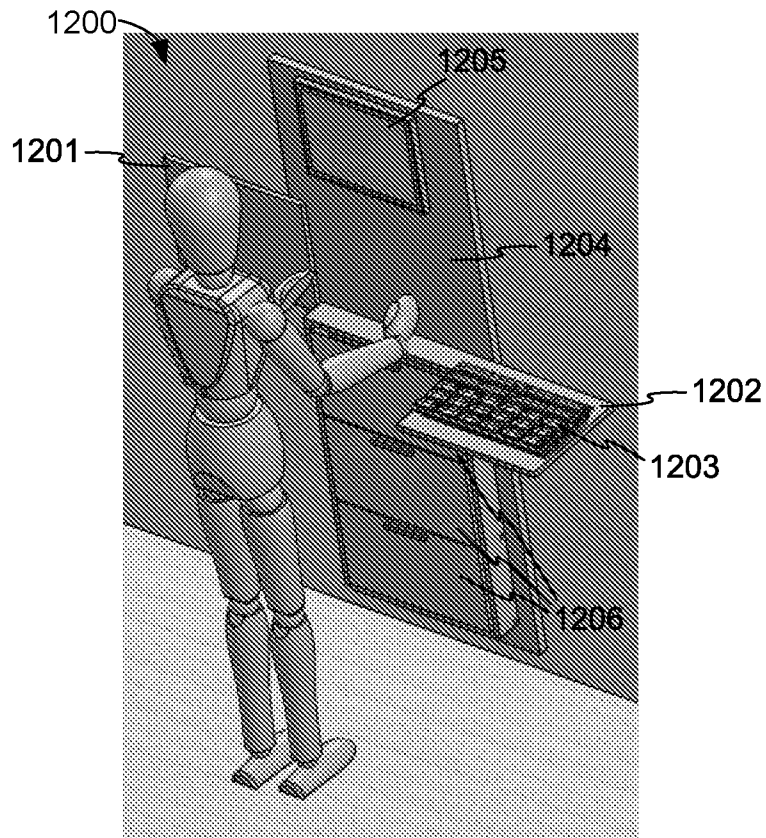


FIG. 12

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US19/15199

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
 IPC - A61J 7/00; H02J 7/00; G07F 11/62 (2019.01)
 CPC - G07F 17/0092, 11/62; A61J 7/0076; H02J 7/0027; B65D 83/00

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

See Search History document

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

See Search History document

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

See Search History document

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X -- Y	US 2013/0187774 A1 (MUECKE, M. et al.) 25 July 2013; Figures 1, 3-5, 9; paragraphs [0007], [0008], [0025], [0028], [0029], [0032], [0040].	1-3, 27-29 ----- 30
Y	US 2007/0194526 A1 (RANDALL, M.) 23 August 2007; Figs. 2, 3; paragraphs [0064], [0066].	30
A	US 2004/0054436 A1 (HAITIN, D. et al.) 18 March 2004; entire document.	1-3, 27-30

Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date	"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone
"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art
"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means	"&" document member of the same patent family
"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed	

Date of the actual completion of the international search

16 May 2019 (16.05.2019)

Date of mailing of the international search report

30 MAY 2019

Name and mailing address of the ISA/

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 P.O. Box 1450, Alexandria, Virginia 22313-1450
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Authorized officer

Shane Thomas

PCT Helpdesk: 571-272-4300
 PCT OSP: 571-272-7774

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US19/15199

Box No. II Observations where certain claims were found unsearchable (Continuation of item 2 of first sheet)

This international search report has not been established in respect of certain claims under Article 17(2)(a) for the following reasons:

1. Claims Nos.:
because they relate to subject matter not required to be searched by this Authority, namely:

2. Claims Nos.:
because they relate to parts of the international application that do not comply with the prescribed requirements to such an extent that no meaningful international search can be carried out, specifically:

3. Claims Nos.: 4-23 and 31-32
because they are dependent claims and are not drafted in accordance with the second and third sentences of Rule 6.4(a).

Box No. III Observations where unity of invention is lacking (Continuation of item 3 of first sheet)

This International Searching Authority found multiple inventions in this international application, as follows:

This application contains the following inventions or groups of inventions which are not so linked as to form a single general inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1. In order for all inventions to be examined, the appropriate additional examination fee must be paid.

Group I: Claims 1-3 and 27-30 are directed towards a relay tray and system comprising a central computing system.

Group II: Claims 24-26 are directed towards a charging and communication surface for electronic devices.

Group III: Claims 1-3 and 33-35 are directed towards a relay tray and method of transporting an item.

-continued in last supplemental box-

1. As all required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers all searchable claims.
2. As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying additional fees, this Authority did not invite payment of additional fees.
3. As only some of the required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers only those claims for which fees were paid, specifically claims Nos.:

4. No required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant. Consequently, this international search report is restricted to the invention first mentioned in the claims; it is covered by claims Nos.:
1-3, 27-30

- Remark on Protest**
- The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest and, where applicable, the payment of a protest fee.
- The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest but the applicable protest fee was not paid within the time limit specified in the invitation.
- No protest accompanied the payment of additional search fees.

-***-Continued from Box No. III Observations where unity of invention is lacking -***-

The inventions listed as Groups I-III do not relate to a single general inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1 because, under PCT Rule 13.2, they lack the same or corresponding special technical features for the following reasons:

The special technical features of Group I include at least a central computer system; a plurality of charging and communication stations in dispersed locations, each of the plurality of charging and communication stations including a power interface for supplying power to one of the relay trays at the station, and a first communication interface for communication with the relay tray at the station, and a second communication interface for communication with the central computer system, which are not present in Groups II-III.

The special technical features of Group II include at least a plurality of first linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the first linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a first voltage; a plurality of second linear electrical conductors with exposed metal surfaces, the second linear electrical conductors being connected to each other and held at a second voltage different from the first, wherein the first and second linear electrical conductors are disposed in alternating arrangement to form a flat surface, and wherein adjacent conductors are spaced apart from each other; and a controller including a modulator that imposes communications signals onto the voltage between the first and second linear conductors, which are not present in Groups I and III.

The special technical features of Group III include at least placing the item to be transported into the relay tray; locking the relay tray; disconnecting the relay tray from the source of power; transporting the relay tray containing the item to a second workstation; connecting, at the second workstation, a second source of power to the power interface of a relay tray; and sending, at the second workstation, to the relay tray via the communication interface an instruction to make the item accessible, which are not present in Groups I-II.

The common technical features shared by Groups I-III are a relay tray for securely transporting items, the relay tray comprising: a lockable transportable container for holding one or more items to be transported; an electronic controller including a processor; a power interface through which the relay tray can receive electric power; a communication interface through which the controller can communicate electronically; and a mechanism operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked container accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface, the mechanism operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power interface.

However, these common features are previously disclosed by US 2013/0187774 A1 to MUECKE et al. (hereinafter "Muecke"). Muecke discloses a relay tray for securely transporting items (a portable container 10 (relay tray) forming a securable storage compartment of contents (items) for transport; Abstract; Fig. 1; para [0002]), the relay tray comprising: a lockable transportable container for holding one or more items to be transported (see Abstract; para [0002]); an electronic controller including a processor (portable container comprises a processor 35 (electronic controller including a processor); Fig. 9 and para [0032]); a power interface through which the relay tray can receive electric power (portable container comprises a connector 32 (power interface), which mates with a docking connector 44 to provide power to the latch of the portable container; Figs. 3-4; para [0027]); a communication interface through which the controller can communicate electronically (processor 35 is coupled to a communication device 39; Figs. 5 & 9; paras [0028], [0032]); and a mechanism operable under control of the controller to make items in the locked container accessible in response to communications received via the communication interface (in order to access contents, a lid 14 is released by a latch (mechanism under control of the processor 35) by providing an access signal (communications received) to the processor 35 via the communication device 39; Figs. 3, 5, 9; paras [0025], [0029]), the mechanism operable by the controller only when power is being received through the power interface (the docking connector 44 provides power to the latch 33 such that the lid can only be released when the portable container 10 is docked to the dispensing station 40; paragraph [0027]).

Since the common technical features are previously disclosed by the Muecke reference, these common features are not special and so Groups I-III lack unity.