Examiners’ Report Paper C 2010

General Comments

1. All relevant facts and arguments relating to the grounds of opposition should appear in the notice of opposition, since the notice of opposition is the document filed with the EPO.

2. In general, marks are awarded for identifying relevant information, such as claim features, technical effects, problems, hints in the prior art and using that information in an appropriate way. The specific reference in the relevant document (e.g. paragraph, figure, reference number) has to be cited.

3. When comparing a claim with a prior art document, it may not be sufficient to simply repeat the wording of the claim and refer to the relevant passage in the prior art document. If a feature in the claim uses a different terminology, it should be explained why it has the same meaning on the basis of the information provided in the annexes.

4. The problem-solution approach requires identification of the closest prior art for each inventive step attack. A reasoning for the choice of the closest prior art taking into account the context of the selected document is expected. The feature(s) distinguishing the claim from the closest prior art should be identified. The technical effect(s) associated with that/those feature(s) has/have to be identified from the patent to be opposed and the appropriate basis must be cited. This applies to independent and dependent claims. The objective technical problem to be solved has to be established based on the technical effect. Further, it has to be explained why the closest prior art would be combined with another document to arrive at the claimed subject-matter. In addition to the possible solution, marks were awarded for other plausible, well-reasoned attacks.

5. As set out in the instructions to candidates, it is advisable to use the form 2300 in order to make sure that all information needed for an admissible opposition is given (Rule 77 EPC). For the opposition to be admissible it is required that the patent to be opposed as well as the opponent is identified. Payment of the opposition fee should be indicated. Failure to indicate these aspects resulted in marks being deducted. It should be borne in mind that the opponent is generally the company and not the person signing the client’s letter. In addition to the possible solution, marks were awarded for other plausible, well-reasoned attacks.

6. All pages of the answer paper must be numbered consecutively. The Annexes provided should not be renumbered. Legible handwriting is appreciated.
Specific Comments

Client's Letter

Clear answers to the client’s letter giving a conclusion were expected. Answers which did not cite the correct legal basis were not awarded full marks. For those issues which it was necessary to include in the notice of opposition, a reference to the notice of opposition in the client's letter was sufficient.

Text of the patent:

The misprint in claim 5 does not constitute added subject-matter. The ground of opposition under Art. 100(c) EPC was not expected. The misprint was not an error in the of Rule 139 EPC or Rule 140 EPC.

Limitation:

It was usually recognized that ongoing limitation proceedings was not a bar to the filing of an opposition. The client was sometimes wrongly advised to wait for the end of the limitation proceedings. Clear advice was required that the client should not wait to file the notice of opposition. Indeed the opposition period was due to expire very soon, in all likelihood before the end of the limitation proceedings.

Priority:

It should have been noted that the patent is entitled to the priorities of the parent application because the patent is issued from a validly filed divisional application.

Notice of Opposition

Priority and EPC 2000:

It should have been noted that claims 1 to 3 were entitled to the oldest priority date. Claim 4 contained two alternatives that were entitled to different priorities. Therefore claim 5 dependent on claim 4 also had two priorities.

It was necessary to recognize that the EPC 2000 applied to the patent because of the filing date of the divisional application. Otherwise Annexes 4 and 6 would only have applied for the common designated states for which the designation fees were paid.
Art. 100(b) EPC:

It is reminded that Rule 25(5) of the Implementing provisions to the Regulation on the European qualifying examination excludes the ground of opposition under Art. 100(b) EPC. Arguments supporting this ground of opposition were therefore not expected.

Claim 1:

In the novelty attack using Annex 4, the interpretation of the terms "releasably trapped" or "coated" of claim 1 in the context of Annex 4 was expected.

It was expected to provide an inventive step attack using Annex 5, as closest prior art, in combination with Annex 2. If the inventive step attack on claim 1 was not provided, marks were awarded if a corresponding attack on claim 2 was made, giving appropriate arguments.

The reservoirs of Annex 5 can be considered as a trapping material in the sense of claim 1.

The device of Annex 2 is not intended to expel a liquid product and the valve of Annex 2 does not allow the presence of a dip tube as required in claim 1. Inventive step attacks starting from Annex 2 as closest prior art were generally found to be not convincing.

Claim 2:

Claim 2 has two distinguishing features over Annex 5. These can either be dealt with explicitly under claim 2 or a reference to the first difference can be made in respect to claim 1 and the additional feature (latex) being dealt with fully.

It was sometimes overlooked that latex did provide a technical effect.

Claim 3:

Annex 5 discloses a container made of plastics (paragraph [0001]), it explicitly deals with the problem of the patent (paragraph [0005]) and already discloses the use of a trapping material. Annex 5 is the closest prior art. Annex 3 was sometimes used as the closest prior art for claim 3 (dependent on claim 1). Unlike the dispenser of claim 3 which is made of plastics (by way of its dependency with claim 1), the bottle of Annex 3 is made of metal (aluminium), (paragraph [0002]) in order to provide strength to withstand pressures of 1000 kPa (paragraph [0003]). There is no incentive in Annex 3 to replace aluminium by plastics. There
is also no incentive in Annex 3 to add a trapping material in the bottle. Inventive step attacks starting from Annex 3 as closest prior art were generally found to be not convincing.

Claim 4:

The two different alternatives (ceramic or plastics) present in both claims 4 and 5 must be dealt with separately in view of the prior art.

The selection of a narrow range in a broader range disclosed in the prior art does not automatically deprive the claim of novelty. The general principles for the assessment of novelty and inventive merit of selection inventions (Guidelines C-IV, 9.8) have to be applied to deal with claims 4 and 5.

Claim 4 (ceramic):
The novelty attack using Annex 6 was generally well-recognized.

Claim 4 (plastics):
An inventive step attack using Annex 4 in combination with Annex 3 was expected. The selection of the sub-range of claim 4 is novel over Annex 4 (Guidelines C-IV, 9.8ii: The new technical effect occurring within the selected range may also be the same effect as that attained with the broader known range, but to a greater extent.). Annex 1 states that a pore size in the range of 1 µm to 3 µm allows the production of an aerosol that can be expelled over a greater distance from the dispenser (Annex 1 paragraph [0012]) as compared to a valve for which the pore size is chosen outside this range. The selection of claim 4 (1 µm to 3 µm) made in the range of Annex 4 (0.1 µm to 20 µm) is therefore associated with a new technical teaching (further improvement of the spray reaching distance in the pore size range of 1 µm to 3 µm) which is not known from Annex 4.

Claim 5:

Claim 5 relates to the valve of claim 4 wherein the pore size is less than 1.8 µm. By way of its dependency, claim 5 effectively claims a valve with a pore size range of between 1 µm to less than 1.8 µm. Novelty attacks using Annex 4 were not awarded full marks.

Claim 6:

Annex 6 discloses the presence of a tube attached to the valve (HDPE tube in paragraph [0002]). The feature distinguishing the subject-matter of claim 6 over Annex 6 is the nature of
the material from which the dip tube is made (Silicone versus HDPE) and not the presence or absence of the dip tube.
Response to the client’s letter

Text of the patent:

The text of claim 5 of the European patent on which the decision to grant was based reads "1.8 µm" and is the authentic text. The use of mm (millimetres) instead of µm (micrometres) in claim 5 is an alteration that was produced during printing and is a result of a misprint. According to the Legal Advice 17/90 OJ 1990, 260, the text of a European patent in the language of the proceedings shall be the authentic text in any proceedings before the European Patent Office and in any Contracting State. Mistakes in the specification of a European patent arising in the course of its production have no effect on the content of the granted patent (Guidelines C-VI, 14.8).

We cannot use the misprint to oppose the patent under Article 100(c) EPC but we must take it into account in our opposition as microns should be read in claim 5.

Limitation:

Even if a request for limitation was filed by the proprietor, an opposition must be filed before the end of the opposition period, on the 04.03.2010. According to Art. 105a(2) EPC and Rule 93(2) EPC the opposition proceedings takes precedence over the limitation proceedings.

Priority:

The claims of Annex 1 are entitled to the priority right of the parent application as it is a validly filed divisional (Art. 76(1) EPC or Art. 89 EPC).

{Legal marks awarded: 5}
Notice of Opposition

{Total marks for Use of Information: 42 / Total marks for Argumentation: 53}

General:

The subject-matter of claims 1 to 3 was part of the oldest priority document LU12345. The effective date of the object of these claims is the oldest priority date, i.e. the 30.06.2005.

The subject-matter of claims 4 and 5 of the patent pertains to a valve comprising a valve housing made of ceramic or alternatively plastics. The "ceramic" alternative was first disclosed in the oldest priority LU12345 of the 30.06.2005. Claims 4 and 5 validly claim the priority of the 30.06.2005 when the valve housing is made of ceramic.

The "plastics" alternative was first disclosed in the priority LU54321 of the 04.04.2006. Claims 4 and 5 validly claim the priority of the 04.04.2006 when the valve housing is made of plastics.

The last sentence of paragraph [0014] and the subject-matter of claim 6 both relate to the dip tube being made of silicone. This subject-matter was first disclosed upon filing of the parent application, in particular, the combination of features in claim 6 (silicone dip tube and ceramic valve housing) finds no support in the priority documents. This means that the effective date of claim 6 of the patent Annex 1 is the filing date of the parent application, i.e. 29.06.2006.


Annex 4 is a European patent application designating the states DE DK ES FR GB filed on 02.08.2004 and published on 02.02.2006. Annex 4 is a document according to Art. 54(3) EPC for claims 1 to 3 (effective date of 30.06.2005) and claims 4 and 5 relating to ceramic for all the designated states (EPC 2000 applies). Annex 4 is a document according to Art. 54(2) EPC for claims 4 and 5 relating to plastics and for claim 6 as well (effective date of 29.06.2006).

Annex 6 is a European patent application designating the states AT BE CH LI and GB. Annex 6 was filed on 15.11.2004 and published on 15.05.2006. Annex 6, although it has only...
one designated state in common with the patent to oppose (GB), is a document according to Art. 54(3) EPC for all states designated in the patent (DE DK ES FR GB) for claims 1 to 3, 4 and 5 (ceramic or plastics) as Art. 54(4) EPC 1973 does not apply to the patent to oppose (EPC 2000 applies). Annex 6 is also a document according to Art. 54(2) EPC for claim 6.

{Use marks awarded: 8}
Lack of novelty (Art. 54(3) EPC2000) of claim 1 over A4

Annex 4 discloses a dispenser (paragraph [0001]: device for dispensing an aerosol) and a pressurized receptacle (paragraph [0001] or paragraph [0002]: pressure), made of plastics (paragraph [0002]: plastics receptacle 40), a liquid product (paragraph [0002]: liquid pharmaceutical product 48) to be dispensed, a liquefied gas as a propellant (paragraph [0001] or [0002]: liquefied propellant 46), a valve coupled with the container (paragraph [0002]: metering valve; Fig), a dip tube extending into the liquid product (paragraph [0002]: extraction tube 47 extends... into a liquid) and wherein the container wall is coated on its inner surface with a trapping material in which propellant is releasably trapped (Figure Ref. 45, 46 and paragraph [0005]: thick layer of material 45... sticks to the inside wall of the receptacle...some propellant 46...temporarily incorporated).

Because it sticks or adheres to the container walls the thick layer of material can be seen as a coating. "Temporarily incorporated" can be seen as meaning "releasably trapped".

The subject-matter of claim 1 lacks novelty over Annex 4.

{Marks for Use of Information: 4.5 / Marks for Argumentation: 3}
Lack of inventive step (Art. 56 EPC) of claim 1 over Annex 5 in combination with Annex 2:

Annex 5 is the closest prior art because it discloses a dispenser for liquids (paragraph [0001]) and has the purpose of preventing wastes of liquefied propellant (Annex 1 paragraph [0005] and Annex 5 paragraph [0004]) using an enclosing material to store the liquefied propellant.

Annex 5 discloses a dispenser with a plastics pressurized container (paragraph [0001]: pressurized apparatus...plastics container 51), a liquid product to be dispensed (paragraph [0001] or [0002]: apparatus for dispensing an aerosol, liquid product 52), a liquefied gas as a propellant (paragraph [0001] or [0005]: liquefied propellant 53), a valve (paragraph [0002]; figure ref 54) coupled with the container, a dip tube (paragraph [0002] or [0003]: eduction pipe 55) extending into the liquid product (paragraph [0002] or [0003]: reaching to the bottom of the container; figure).

Annex 5 also discloses the use of one or several reservoirs 56 enclosing the liquefied propellant (paragraph [0005]) that can be seen as a trapping material in the sense of claim 1 of the patent as they enclose the liquefied propellant (paragraph [0005] or [0006]).

Claim 1 differs from Annex 5 in that the trapping material used to enclose the liquefied propellant is coated on the inside wall of the container instead of floating in the liquid product.

The effect of coating the material enclosing the propellant on the inside wall of the container is to further reduce clogging of the gas inlet of the valve or of the dip-tube (Annex 1 paragraph [0008] or [0005]) arising when free bodies are immersed in the liquid product.

The objective technical problem is to further reduce clogging of the valve or dip tube.

The person skilled in the art would have consulted Annex 2 as it aims at preventing the accidental release of liquefied gas (paragraph [0001] or [0003]). Annex 2 discloses the use of a material which adheres the inside wall of the plastics container to avoid clogging (Annex 2 paragraph [0003] third sentence).

The person skilled in the art would also expect the material of Annex 2 to adhere to the container of Annex 5 because the containers are made of the same material in both documents. The person skilled in the art would therefore replace the floating bodies of Annex 5 by the coating of Annex 2 with the expectation of successfully solving the objective technical problem.
The subject-matter of claim 1 lacks therefore an inventive merit over the combination of Annex 5 with Annex 2.

{Marks for Use of Information: 7 / Marks for Argumentation: 7}
Lack of inventive step (Art. 56 EPC) of claim 2 over Annex 5 in combination with Annex 2:

Claim 2 is dependent on claim 1.

Annex 5 remains the closest prior art for the same reasons as mentioned for claim 1.

Claim 2 differs from Annex 5 in that i) the material is coated on the inside wall of the container and in that ii) the material chosen to enclose the liquefied propellant comprises latex.

The feature i) has been dealt with in view of claim 1 and lacks an inventive merit in respect of Annex 5 in combination with Annex 2.

As for the feature ii), the effect of using latex known from Annex 1 is its ability to absorb higher quantities of propellant (Annex 1 paragraph [0015] second sentence).

The objective technical problem can be seen as improving the service life of the dispenser or providing a coating material that absorbs higher quantities of propellant.

Annex 2 paragraph [0003] discloses latex as an enclosing material that can contain higher quantities of liquefied gas, which is the solution to the posed problem.

The two features distinguishing claim 2 from Annex 5 are obvious from the combination of Annex 5 with Annex 2.

The subject-matter of claim 2 lacks therefore an inventive merit over the combination of Annex 5 with Annex 2.

{Marks for Use of Information: 2 / Marks for Argumentation: 6}
Lack of inventive step (Art. 56 EPC) of claim 3 over Annex 5 in combination with Annex 2 and Annex 3:

Annex 5 remains the closest prior art for the same reasons as mentioned for claim 1.

The subject-matter of claim 3 differs from Annex 5 in that i) the trapping material enclosing the liquefied propellant is used to coat the inside wall of the container and in that ii) a plastics pocket is used to contain the liquid product.

The feature i) has the effect of reducing the clogging of the inlets on the valve and has already been dealt with above with Annex 5 in combination with Annex 2.

The feature ii) has the effect of protecting a pharmaceutical liquid product from additives that may spoil it (Annex 1 paragraph [0015]).

The partial objective technical problem of ii) can be seen as preventing the additives from spoiling the pharmaceutical product.

The effects provided by the distinguishing features of claim 3 are unrelated to one another; the two objective problems defined for claim 3 can be handled as individual problems (Guidelines C-IV, 11.5, 11.7.2 or 11.8).

The skilled person looking for the prevention of any contamination of the pharmaceutical product by additives would have been further motivated to seek a solution to this problem on the basis of Annex 5 because this annex already acknowledges that the additives in the reservoirs are not fully isolated from the liquid product (paragraph [0007]).

The person skilled in the art would have consulted Annex 3 because, like Annex 5, it deals with spray bottles for medical applications in which additives can be added.

The problem is solved in Annex 3 paragraph [0005] which discloses a supple (Annex 3 paragraph [0004]: flexible or collapsible) plastics pouch isolating the solution from the additives in the propellant.

The person skilled in the art would therefore use the pouch of Annex 3 to solve the objective technical problem.

The subject-matter of claim 3 lacks therefore an inventive merit over the combination of Annex 5 with Annex 2 and Annex 3.

{Marks for Use of Information: 2.5 / Marks for Argumentation: 8.5}
Lack of novelty (Art. 54(3) EPC2000) of claim 4 (ceramic) over Annex 6

Annex 6 discloses a valve comprising a valve housing (paragraph [0002]: valve chamber, hollow body) provided with an inlet (paragraph [0002] or [0003]) and an operating member having an outlet (paragraph [0003]: movable stem), said operating member being movable between a closed position and an open position and wherein the operating member, by actuation thereof, is adapted to close the inlet before opening of the outlet (paragraph [0003]: The metering is achieved by plugging the valve inlet by pushing down on the stem). 

The stem closes the valve inlet before opening the outlet to the atmosphere (paragraph [0003]), thus allowing the expulsion of the fluid product located in the chamber only and wherein the valve housing comprises a gas-permeable porous material, said material being ceramic (paragraph [0004] or [0001]).

Annex 6 discloses a preferred pore size range greater than 0.9 µm and not greater than 2 µm, which greatly overlaps the range of claim 4 of the patent (between 1 µm and 3 µm). The person skilled in the art would be led to work within the range of 0.9 µm and not greater than 2 µm because it is the most preferred range of Annex 6. The range of Annex 6 can therefore be seen as anticipating the range of claim 4.

Alternatively, the sentence "when the pore size of the gas-permeable porous ceramic is greater than 2 µm, the material becomes permeable to liquids, which can lead to leakage of liquid product through the valve when the device is tilted" in paragraph [0006] of Annex 6 can be seen as meaning that a pore size of the gas-permeable porous ceramic of about 2 µm has been realised, anticipating the range of between 1 µm and 3 µm of claim 4.

The subject-matter of claim 4 lacks novelty over Annex 6 for all designated states of Annex 1.

{Marks for Use of Information: 4 / Marks for Argumentation: 3}
Lack of novelty (Art. 54(3) EPC2000) of claim 5 (ceramic) over Annex 6

Claim 5, by way of its dependency with claim 4, defines a pore size range of between 1 µm and less than 1.8 µm.

In Annex 6 a pore size range comprised between 0.9 µm and 2 µm is seriously contemplated (paragraph [0005] or [0006]).

The range of claim 5 (1 µm to 1.8 µm) is a selection in the range already known from Annex 6 and lacks novelty as it does not fulfil the requirements set out in Guidelines C-IV, 9.8. The selected subject-matter of the claimed range is not narrow, it is not sufficiently far removed from the endpoints of the larger range and it is not purposive as the same effect observed for this pore size is already disclosed in Annex 6 (paragraph [0006]: when pore size greater than 2 µm, the material becomes permeable to liquids).

The subject-matter of claim 5 lacks novelty over Annex 6.

{Marks for Use of Information: 1.5 / Marks for Argumentation: 4.5}
Lack of inventive step (Art. 56 EPC) of claim 4 (plastics) over Annex 4 in combination with Annex 3:

Annex 4 is the closest prior art as Annex 4 pertains to the metered delivery of products (Annex 4 paragraph [0001] and Annex 1 paragraph [0001]).

Annex 4 discloses a valve comprising a valve housing (Figure: valve wall 41 and chamber 42) provided with an inlet (paragraph [0003]: inlet 43a) and an operating member (Figure: valve member 44) having an outlet (paragraph [0003]: outlet 43b), said operating member being movable between a closed position and an open position and wherein the operating member, by actuation thereof, is adapted to close the inlet before opening of the outlet (paragraph [0003]: the actuation of the valve member 44 closes the inlet 43a and opens the outlet 43b such that the content of the valve is expelled in the atmosphere) and wherein the valve housing comprises a gas-permeable porous material, said material being plastics and having a pore size comprised between 0.1 µm and 20 µm (paragraph [0004]).

The subject-matter of claim 4 differs from Annex 4 in that the pore size of the plastics material of the valve is a sub-range selected in a broader range (0.1 µm to 20 µm) of Annex 4.

The effect of this selection is the production of an aerosol that can be expelled over a greater distance from the dispenser as compared to a valve for which the pore size is chosen outside 1 µm to 3 µm (Annex 1 paragraph [0012]).

The objective technical problem can be seen as improving the aerosol reaching distance of the device.

Annex 3 would have been considered by the person skilled in the art as it pertains to the spray reaching distance of an aerosol produced by a dispenser with a porous plastics valve (Annex 3 paragraph [0008]).

Annex 3 discloses that the spray reaching distance is improved (paragraph [0008]: maximized) when the pore size of the valve is between about 0.5 µm and below about 2.5 µm (paragraph [0008]), as compared to the broader range of 0.1 µm to 20 µm.

The person skilled in the art would therefore be led to choose a pore size of the valve between about 0.5 µm and below about 2.5 µm, largely overlapping the range of claim 4 (between 1 µm and 3 µm) in order to solve the objective technical problem.
The subject-matter of claim 4 lacks an inventive merit over the combination of Annex 4 with Annex 3.

{Marks for Use of Information: 7 / Marks for Argumentation: 8}
Lack of inventive step (Art. 56 EPC) of claim 5 (plastics) over Annex 4 in combination with Annex 3:

Annex 4 remains the closest prior art for the reasons already given for claim 4.

Claim 5 further differs from Annex 4 in that the pore size of the plastics is between 1 µm and less than 1.8 µm (0.1 µm to 20 µm in Annex 4).

The additional effect associated with the range of between 1 µm and less than 1.8 µm is that any accidental release of liquid through the pores of the valve is prevented, for instance when the device is tilted upon use, as no liquid can percolate through the pores of the valve (Annex 1 paragraph [0013]).

The objective technical problem can therefore be seen as preventing accidental release of liquids when the device is tilted.

The solution to that problem is given in Annex 3 paragraph [0009] as a pore size below about 2.0 µm is said to present the additional advantage of being simultaneously impervious to liquids and permeable to gases and prevents dispensing the liquefied propellant into the atmosphere through the pores of the valve housing.

The range of between 1 µm and less than 1.8 µm is not associated with a further technical effect as compared to the range of Annex 3, therefore the person skilled in the art would expect the same technical effect over the narrower range of claim 5.

The subject-matter of claim 5 lacks an inventive merit over Annex 4 with Annex 3.

{Marks for Use of Information: 1.5 / Marks for Argumentation: 5.5}
Lack of inventive step (Art. 56 EPC) of claim 6 over Annex 6 in combination with Annex 5:

Annex 6 is the closest prior art as Annex 6 discloses a porous metering valve made of ceramic.

Claim 6 is dependent on claim 4. Annex 6 discloses all the features of claim 4 (see above). The valve of Annex 6 comprises a suction tube (i.e. a dip tube) made of HDPE (Annex 6 paragraph [0002]), which is a polyethylene (Annex 1 paragraph [0014]).

Claim 6 differs from Annex 6 in that the dip-tube is made of silicone.

The effect is that the tube can easily move as the container is tipped (Annex 1 paragraph [0014]).

The objective technical problem can therefore be seen as providing of a container that can be also operated in a tilted position or the provision of a dip tube the end of which must remain immersed when the container is tilted.

The solution is found in Annex 5. This document pertains to valve assemblies with dip tubes for dispensing liquid products and would have been consulted by the person skilled in the art.

Annex 5 paragraph [0003] discloses the advantageous use of silicone over the polymers of ethylene (and therefore over HDPE) as silicone is more flexible than polyethylene.

The person skilled in the art would therefore replace HDPE by silicone to solve the problem.

The subject-matter of claim 6 lacks an inventive merit over Annex 6 in combination with Annex 5.

{Marks for Use of Information: 4 / Marks for Argumentation: 7.5}
Examination Committee II agrees on .......... marks and recommends the following grade to the Examination Board:

- PASS (50-100)
- COMPENSABLE FAIL (45-49)
- FAIL (0-44)

01 July 2010

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Chairman of Examination Committee II