

UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

BEFORE THE PATENT TRIAL AND APPEAL BOARD

IGB AUTOMOTIVE LTD. and I.G. BAUERHIN GMBH,
Petitioner,

v.

GENTHERM GMBH,
Patent Owner.

Case IPR2014-00666
Patent 7,229,129 B2

Before JOSIAH C. COCKS, BENJAMIN D. M. WOOD, and
RICHARD E. RICE, *Administrative Patent Judges*.

WOOD, *Administrative Patent Judge*.

FINAL WRITTEN DECISION
35 U.S.C. § 318(a) and 37 C.F.R. § 42.73

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Background*

Petitioners IGB Automotive Ltd. and I.G. Bauerhin GmbH (collectively, “IGB”) filed a Petition (Paper 1, “Pet.”) requesting an *inter partes* review of claims 1–12 of U.S. Patent No. 7,229,129 B2 (Ex. 1001, “the ’129 patent”). Patent Owner Gentherm GmbH (“Gentherm”)¹ filed a Preliminary Response (Paper 6, “Prelim. Resp.”). On September 30, 2014, we instituted an *inter partes* review based on the grounds that (1) claims 1–3, 6, and 7 are unpatentable under 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) as obvious over Wyon² and Spitalnick³; and (2) claims 4 and 5 are unpatentable under 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) as obvious over Wyon, Spitalnick, and Larsson.⁴ Decision on Institution (Paper 7, “Dec.”) 19. After the Board instituted trial, Gentherm filed a Patent Owner Response (Paper 14, “PO Resp.”), to which IGB replied (Paper 19, “Pet. Reply”). Oral Hearing was held on June 9, 2015 and the Hearing Transcript (Paper 26, “Tr.”) has been entered in the record. For the following reasons, we determine that IGB has shown by a preponderance of the evidence that claims 1–3, 6, and 7 are unpatentable as obvious over Wyon and Spitalnick, and that claims 4 and 5 are unpatentable as obvious over Wyon, Spitalnick, and Larsson.

¹ The Petition names W.E.T. Automotive Systems, AG (“W.E.T”), as the Patent Owner. Paper 1, cover page. In its Mandatory Notice Information filed May 9, 2014 (Paper 5), Gentherm gave notice that W.E.T., which originally owned the ’517 patent, merged with Gentherm, which now owns all right, title, and interest in the ’517 patent. Paper 5, 1.

² US 4,946,220 to Wyon et al., (iss. Aug. 7, 1990) (Ex. 1007).

³ US 4,997,230 to Spitalnick (iss. Mar. 5, 1991) (Ex. 1014).

⁴ US 6,003,950 to Larsson (iss. Dec. 21, 1999) (Ex. 1009).

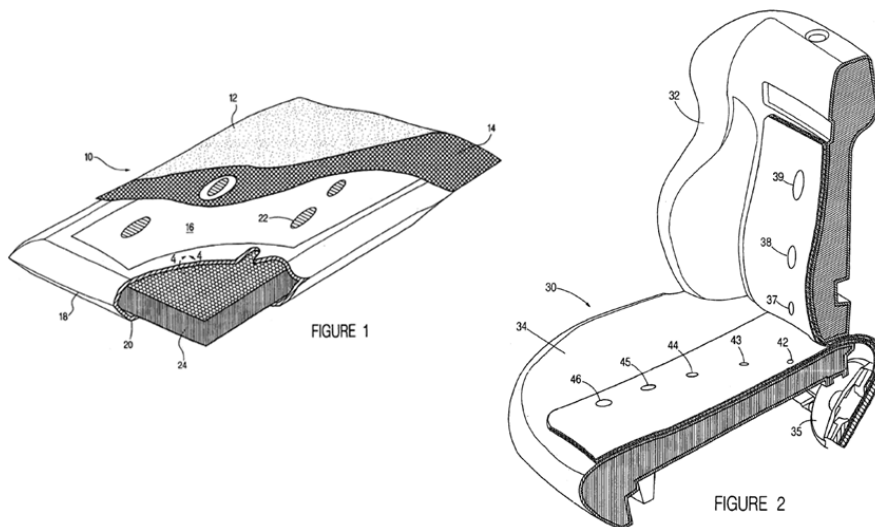
B. Related Proceedings

The '129 patent is involved in *W.E.T. Automotive Systems, Ltd. v. IGB Automotive Ltd.*, Civ. No. 2:13-CV-11536-AJT-PJK (E.D. Mich.). Pet. 2; Paper 5, 1.

C. The '129 Patent

The '129 patent issued on June 12, 2007 from an application filed October 26, 2005, and claims priority to January 5, 2001. Ex. 1001, (45), (21), (22), (63). The '129 patent describes a ventilated vehicle seating system. *Id.* at 1:13–16. The seating system is generally located on top of a seat and back cushion and beneath a trim layer that is in contact with the occupant. *Id.* at 2:16–17, Fig. 2. The system includes a bag made from upper and lower sheets of non-permeable material that enclose a three-dimensional spacer material. *Id.* at 2:19–23. Forced air enters the spacer and exits through perforations in the bag's upper sheet and out through the trim cover to enhance occupant comfort. *Id.* at 2:34–38.

Figures 1 and 2, reproduced below, illustrate one embodiment of the invention:



Figures 1 and 2 depict seat assembly 10. Perforated trim 12 covers heater layer 14 and air-impermeable bag 18. Bag 18 is comprised of top layer 16 and bottom layer 20 attached together around their edges. *Id.* at 4:5–24, Fig. 1. Bag 18 encloses spacer material 24, which is designed to permit air flow in any direction within the bag. *Id.* at 3:52–56. A bag is installed in each of seat base 34 and seat back 32 and the bags are connected to fan 35. *Id.* at 4:40–59. The ventilation holes in each bag are made gradually larger as the distance between each hole and fan 35 increases. *Id.* at 4:43–46, Fig. 2. This arrangement contributes to a more uniform air flow. *Id.* at 4:54–57.

A. *Illustrative Claims*

Independent claim 1, reproduced below, is illustrative of the claimed subject matter:

1. A ventilated seat assembly for use with an air mover comprising:
 - a seat having a seat base and a backrest, at least one of the seat base and the backrest comprising:
 - a cushion;
 - a trim cover;
 - a generally enclosed chamber formed by a top portion and an air-impermeable bottom portion and including an opening for receiving air from the air mover, the top portion of the chamber including a plurality of holes configured to provide air movement through the chamber; and
 - a spacer located within the chamber;
 - wherein each of the plurality of holes has a cross-sectional area, the holes located substantially the same distance from the chamber opening defining a group having a total cross-sectional area, the top portion of the chamber including more than one group of holes, with the total cross-sectional area of each defined group of holes increasing the farther each defined group of holes is from the chamber opening.

II. ANALYSIS

A. *Claim Construction*

The claims of an unexpired patent are interpreted using the broadest reasonable interpretation in light of the specification of the patent in which they appear. 37 C.F.R. § 42.100(b); *In re Cuozzo Speed Techs., LLC*, 793 F.3d 1268, 1278 (Fed. Cir. 2015). Under this standard, the claim language should be read in light of the specification as it would be interpreted by one of ordinary skill in the art. *In re Suitco Surface, Inc.*, 603 F.3d 1255, 1260 (Fed. Cir. 2010). Any special definition for a claim term must be set forth in the specification with reasonable clarity, deliberateness, and precision. *In re Paulsen*, 30 F.3d 1475, 1480 (Fed. Cir. 1994).

In the present case, IGB contends that “the terms should be given their ordinary and custom[ary] meaning as understood by a person of ordinary skill in the art,” and proposes constructions for several claim terms. Pet. 11–13. Gentherm responds that while “no express claim constructions by the Board” are required, it proposes, out of an “abundance of caution,” construction for the term “spacer.” PO Resp. 13–14. For purposes of this decision, we determine that no claim term requires express construction. *See Vivid Techs., Inc. v. Am. Sci. & Eng’g, Inc.*, 200 F.3d 795, 803 (Fed. Cir. 1999) (“[O]nly those [claim] terms need to be construed that are in controversy, and only to the extent necessary to resolve the controversy.”).

B. *Claims 1–3, 6, and 7—Obviousness over Wyon and Spitalnick*

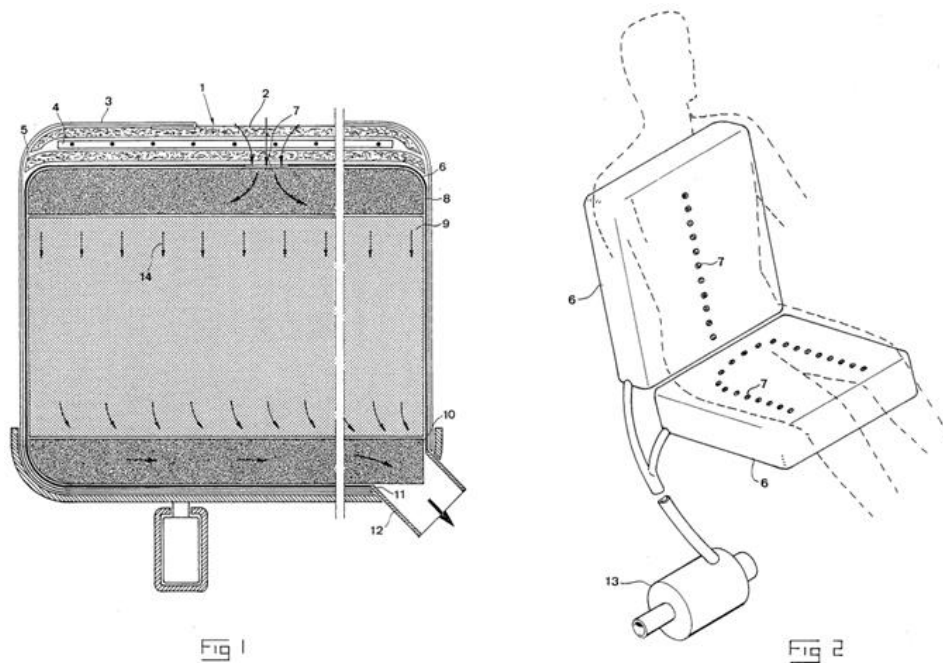
A claim is unpatentable under § 103(a) if the differences between the claimed subject matter and the prior art are such that the subject matter as a whole would have been obvious at the time the invention was made to a person having ordinary skill in the art to which said subject matter pertains.

35 U.S.C. § 103(a); *KSR Int'l Co. v. Teleflex Inc.*, 550 U.S. 398, 406 (2007). The question of obviousness is resolved on the basis of underlying factual determinations, including: (1) the scope and content of the prior art; (2) any differences between the claimed subject matter and the prior art; (3) the level of skill in the art; and (4) where in evidence, so-called secondary considerations. See *Graham v. John Deere Co.*, 383 U.S. 1, 17–18 (1966). Prior art references must be “considered together with the knowledge of one of ordinary skill in the pertinent art.” *Paulsen*, 30 F.3d at 1480 (citing *In re Samour*, 571 F.2d 559, 562 (CCPA 1978)).

In the present case, IGB contends that claims 1–3, 6, and 7 would have been obvious over Wyon and Spitalnick

1. Wyon

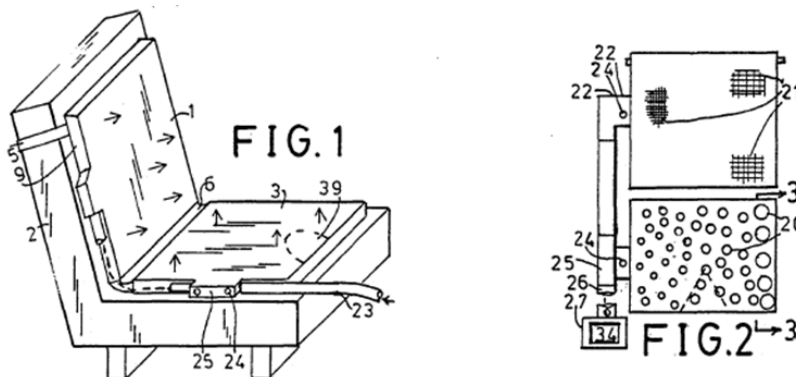
Wyon describes a ventilated vehicle seat. Ex. 1007, Abstract, 1:5–14. Figures 1 and 2, reproduced below, depict a preferred embodiment:



As depicted in Figures 1 and 2, the top of seat 1 is covered by air-permeable woolen supporting surface 2, which, along with airtight layer 3 to which it is attached, covers the seat. *Id.* at 2:48–53, Fig. 1. Cover surface 2 overlays electrical heating layer 4, second woolen layer 5, and airtight bag 6. *Id.* at 2:60–3:2, Fig. 1. Bag 6 tightly encloses first layer 8 of a fibrous material, e.g., horsehair; porous body 9 of foamed plastic; and a second horsehair layer 10 at the bottom of the bag. *Id.* at 3:8–15, Fig. 1. Flexible tube 12 connects opening 11 in bag 6 to suction turbine 13. *Id.* at 3:15–20, Figs. 1, 2. Holes 7 are cut in the top of bag 6 to allow suction turbine 13 to draw air through the woolen layers, top horsehair layer 8, porous foam body 9, and second horsehair layer 10. *Id.* at 3:29–39. Holes 7 are arranged in a pattern “which substantially corresponds to the shape of the projection on the seat and the backrest of those parts of the body that would normally bear thereupon.” *Id.* at 3:40–44, Fig. 2.

2. *Spitalnick*

Spitalnick describes an air-conditioned seat cover. Ex. 1014, 1:4–8. Figures 1 and 2, reproduced below, depict the preferred embodiment:



Figures 1 and 2 depict a cushion cover with back rest cushion 2 and seat cushion 4. *Id.* at 2:33–37. Each cushion is composed of an air

impervious rear panel 14 and an air-pervious front panel 15 joined together at their sides to create an enclosed space. *Id.* at 2:39–43. The space between these panels is kept open against the bodyweight of an occupant by air pervious “spacer means” 10, e.g., wire coils 12 and spaced projections 13 molded into rear panel 14. *Id.* at 2:45–49, Figs. 1, 3. The spacer means permits the free flow of air-conditioned air between panels 14 and 15. *Id.* at 49–51. Air is supplied to this space through the air inlet at valve 24. *Id.* at 60–61, Figs. 1, 3. “The air permeability of the front panel may be made non-uniform to ensure equal air flow at regions close and far from the air inlet. The non-uniformity may be achieved by the variable perforations 20.” *Id.* at 2:54–58, Fig. 2.

3. *Claim 1*

a. Wyon and Spitalnick teach all of the limitations of Claim 1

IGB contends that Wyon teaches all of claim 1’s limitations except for the limitation relating to relative hole size. Pet. 24–26. For this limitation, IGB relies on Spitalnick. *Id.* at 29–31. IGB further contends that Wyon and Spitalnick both disclose similar ventilated vehicle seats, and that “Spitalnick teaches an improvement in which the cross-sectional area of the perforations increases as the distance from the air source increases in order to ensure equal air flow at regions close and far from the air source.” *Id.* at 30 (citing Ex. 1014, 2:54–56). IGB also argues that this combination “amounts to use of a known technique to improve a similar device in a similar way.” *Id.* at 24.

Having reviewed the record and the parties’ contentions, we are persuaded that IGB has shown by a preponderance of the evidence that

Wyon and Spitalnick teach the limitations for which they are being offered. Specifically, Wyon teaches a ventilated seat assembly for use with an air mover comprising: (1) a seat having a seat base and a backrest, at least one of which comprises a cushion (Ex. 1007, 1:5–15, 2:46–51, 62–66; 3:11–13, 4:18–19; Figs. 1, 3); (2) a trim cover (layers 2 and 3) (*id.* at 2:46–54); (3) a generally enclosed chamber (bag 6) formed by a top portion and an air-impermeable bottom portion and including an opening (opening 11) for receiving air from the air mover, the top portion including a plurality of holes (holes 7) to provide air movement through the chamber (*id.* at 3:1–20, 29–33, Figs. 1, 2); and (4) a spacer (porous body 9) (*id.* at 3:11–12, Fig. 1).

Further, Spitalnick describes a cushion (i.e., a “generally enclosed chamber”) with front and rear panels enclosing a “spacer means,” the front panel of the cushion having a plurality of holes or perforations. As depicted in Figure 2, these perforations satisfy claim 1’s requirement “the holes located substantially the same distance from the chamber opening defining a group having a total cross-sectional area, the top portion of the chamber including more than one group of holes, with the total cross-sectional area of each defined group of holes increasing the farther each defined group of holes is from the chamber opening.” Ex. 1014, Fig. 2.

Gentherm argues that “Wyon does not teach positive air pressure or blowing forced air,” a requirement that Gentherm derives from claim 1’s recitation of a “generally enclosed chamber . . . including an opening for receiving air from the air mover.” PO Resp. 15. According to Gentherm, this limitation “indicates a *positive* pressure system that *blows* air from the opening, through the chamber, and out the plurality of holes at the top of the chamber.” *Id.* at 15–16 (emphasis in original). Gentherm asserts that “[i]n

contrast, Wyon teaches ‘a *suction* device capable of producing a *negative* air pressure connected to the opening.’” *Id.* at 16 (quoting Ex. 1007, Abstract) (emphasis added by Gentherm).

IGB responds that “the recitation ‘a generally enclosed chamber . . . including an opening for receiving air from the air mover’ in claim 1 only positively requires that the generally enclosed chamber have an opening.” Pet. Reply 1. According to IGB, “[t]he recitation ‘for receiving air from the air mover’ focused on by Patent Owner is merely an intended use.” *Id.*

The language “for receiving air from the air mover” constitutes a functional limitation, in that it describes the chamber opening’s function: receiving air from the air mover. Our reviewing court’s decision in *In re Schreiber*, 128 F.3d 1473 (Fed. Cir. 1997), is instructive. In *Schreiber*, the claim at issue recited a conical dispensing top for dispensing popcorn from an open-ended container where “the opening at the reduced end allows several kernels of popped popcorn to pass through at the same time.” *Id.* at 1475. The court deemed the phrase “allows several kernels of popped popcorn to pass through at the same time” to be a functional limitation for “the opening at the reduced end” of the top. *Id.* at 1478. The court then affirmed the finding that this functional limitation was an inherent characteristic of a prior-art spout used to dispense oil from an oil can, reasoning that the claimed top and the prior-art spout shared the same structural characteristics. Specifically, the court noted that there was nothing in *Schreiber*’s claim to suggest that the claimed container was “of a different shape” than the prior-art spout, and that the prior-art spout and an embodiment in *Schreiber*’s application had “the same general shape.” *Id.*

Here, likewise, there is nothing in claim 1 that suggests that an opening “for receiving air from the air mover” differs structurally from Wyon’s opening 11. Further, the Specification describes the preferred embodiment as operating in either “a pressurizing or suction mode” (Ex. 1001, 5:18–32), indicating that the structure of opening 49 is unaffected regardless whether it receives air from the air mover or expels air to the air mover. Moreover, as in *Schreiber*, the opening 49 depicted in Figure 3 of the ’129 patent and opening 11 depicted in Figure 1 of Wyon appear to be of “the same general shape,” i.e., simply openings in material through which air passes. Finally, we observe that Gentherm does not assert that “for receiving air from the air mover” imposes any specific structural requirements on the chamber opening. For these reasons, we find that Wyon’s opening 11 corresponds to the claimed “opening for receiving air from the air mover.”

b. A Person of Ordinary Skill Would have had Reason to Combine Wyon and Spitalnick

We agree with IGB that the combination of Wyon and Spitalnick amounts to the use of a known technique to improve a similar device in a similar way. *See KSR*, 550 U.S. at 417 (holding that “if a technique has been used to improve one device, and a person of ordinary skill in the art would recognize that it would improve similar devices in the same way, using the technique is obvious unless its actual application is beyond his or her skill”). Both Wyon and Spitalnick teach devices for improving the comfort of automotive vehicle seats by causing air to flow past the seat occupant. Ex. 1007, 1:9–14, 61–67; Ex. 1014, 1:39–40, 1:65–2:3. Spitalnick further teaches that “equal air flow at regions close [to] and far from the air inlet”

can be ensured by making the perforations nearer the air inlet smaller than the perforations farther from the seat. Ex. 1014, 2:54–58, Fig. 2. A person of ordinary skill would have understood from Spitalnick that modifying the size of holes 7 in Wyon’s vehicle seat in accordance with Spitalnick’s teaching—*i.e.*, reducing the size of Wyon’s holes 7 that are closer to inlet 11 and increasing the size of the holes that are farther away from inlet 11—would achieve the predictable result of helping equalize air flow past the holes.

Gentherm raises several arguments for why a person of ordinary skill would not have combined Wyon and Spitalnick. First, Gentherm argues that a person of ordinary skill would not have incorporated Spitalnick’s teaching of using positive air pressure with Wyon’s seat. PO Resp. 17–19. However, IGB does not propose changing Wyon’s seat to a positive pressure device in accordance with Spitalnick; IGB only proposes incorporating Spitalnick’s teaching of variable hole sizes to ensure equal air flow. Pet. Reply 4–5. Therefore, this argument is moot.

Next, Gentherm argues that “a skilled artisan would have no motivation to modify Wyon’s hole pattern in view of Spitalnick.” PO Resp. 19. Gentherm first asserts that adopting Spitalnick’s hole pattern would not actually improve Wyon’s device, as IGB argues, because “Wyon’s device already provides equal air flow.” *Id.* Further, Gentherm characterizes Wyon as discouraging any modification of its hole pattern, because “Wyon emphasizes multiple times that combining negative air pressure with regularly placed holes of the *same* size (about 20 mm) . . . evenly distributes the pressure and generates an equal suction effect at each hole.” *Id.* at 20 (citing Ex. 1007, 3:2–5, 33–39, 65–67) (emphasis in original). Thus, in

Gentherm's view, "Wyon's repeated announcement of achieving uniform pressure distribution with same-sized holes deters one of skill from incorporating Spitalnick's variable perforations." *Id.* (citing Ex. 2001 ¶ 50).

We have reviewed Wyon's disclosure, including the excerpts on which Gentherm relies, and are not persuaded by these arguments. Gentherm urges us to read in isolation Wyon's description of its device as producing "substantially the same suction effect at each of the holes 7." But it is improper to read a reference in isolation when the ground of unpatentability is based on a combination of references. *In re Merck & Co.*, 800 F.2d 1091, 1097 (Fed.Cir.1986). Rather, a reference must be read for what it fairly teaches in combination with the prior art as a whole. We do not believe that Wyon's teaching of achieving "substantially the same suction effect at each of the holes 7" would have suggested to a person of ordinary skill that no improvement in equalizing the suction effect is possible, when that description is read in conjunction with Spitalnick's teaching that varying the hole size based on the hole's distance from the air mover would help equalize air flow.

Second, we disagree that Wyon attributes achieving substantially equal suction at each hole to a combination of "negative air pressure with regularly placed holes of the *same* size." PO Resp. 20. Instead, Wyon credits the air-permeability of foamed plastic body 9 and horsehair layers 8 and 10 in airtight bag 6 for achieving this effect:

Both horsehair layers 8, 10 are permeable to air, as is the porous foamed plastic body 9 itself, and they have a tendency to distribute a concentrated negative air pressure uniformly over a larger area. This fact and the action of the suction turbine create a negative air pressure substantially evenly distributed over the upper side of the porous body, as indicated by the

small arrows 14. This evenly distributed negative air pressure provides substantially the same suction effect at each of the holes 7 in the perforated sheet rubber material 6.

Ex. 1007, 3:29–39. Thus, we do not agree that a skilled artisan would have been dissuaded from modifying the hole sizes in accordance with Spitalnick.

Gentherm next argues that “an ordinary artisan would understand from Wyon’s disclosure that incorporating [Spitalnick’s] variable perforations jeopardizes [Wyon’s] uniform air pressure distribution.” PO Resp. 20 (citing Ex. 2001 ¶¶ 59–61). Relying on the testimony of its Declarant, James Rice, Ph.D., Gentherm contends that [w]hile same-sized holes distribute an equal amount of this uniform air flow, varying the size of the holes or hole pattern would vary that distribution.” *Id.* at 21 (citing Ex. 2001 ¶ 60). The result “would render the device inoperable for its intended purpose of providing uniform air flow.” *Id.* But this argument and Dr. Rice’s opinion ignore Spitalnick’s teaching that air flow is also affected by the hole’s distance from the air inlet. Neither Gentherm nor Dr. Rice contends or presents evidence that this teaching is erroneous. Indeed, at his deposition, Dr. Rice acknowledged that (1) the distance that air must travel through a ventilated seat generally affects the air flow rate whether the air is traveling to the fan or from the fan (Ex. 1015, 81:21–24, 109:19–110:17); and (2) increasing the size of Wyon’s holes as the hole gets farther away from the inlet “has the potential to further equalize the flow rates in the holes” (*id.* at 134:10–136:15).

Finally, Gentherm argues that Larsson supports the conclusion that an ordinary artisan would be dissuaded from modifying Wyon in accordance with Spitalnick, because, like Wyon, Larsson teaches a ventilated vehicle seat that uses suction and ventilation holes of the same size despite

Spitalnick being available to the public four years before Larsson was filed. PO Resp. 21–22. This is, essentially, a teaching-away argument. A reference does not teach away, however, if it does not criticize, discredit, or otherwise discourage the solution claimed. *In re Fulton*, 391 F.3d 1195, 1201 (Fed. Cir. 2004). Larsson does not criticize, discredit, or otherwise discourage increasing ventilation hole sizes with increasing distance between the hole and air mover.

Gentherm also argues, relying on *Leo Pharm. Prods. Ltd. v. Rea*, 726 F.3d 1346 (Fed. Cir. 2013), that the “time lapse between Spitalnick and Larsson thus further supports the nonobviousness of the challenged claims.” PO Resp. 22. We do not find this argument persuasive. In *Leo Pharm.*, the court determined that under the circumstances of that case, a time lapse of “decades” between the publication of the prior art at issue and the filing of the patent at issue “evinces that the . . . claimed invention was not obvious to try.” *Leo Pharm.*, 726 F.3d at 1356. Under the circumstances of the present case, we do not consider Larsson’s failure to adopt Spitalnick’s teaching, despite the four-year time lapse between Spitalnick and Larsson, to be so probative that it “evinces” claim 1’s nonobviousness.

4. *Claims 2, 3, 6, and 7*

Claims 2, 3, 6, and 7 depend from claim 1. IGB relies on Wyon as teaching the additional limitations of these claims. Pet. 32–33. Gentherm does not argue separately the patentability of these claims. Having reviewed the record and the parties’ contentions in this regard, we are persuaded that IGB has shown by a preponderance of the evidence that Wyon teaches the additional limitations of claims 2, 3, 6, and 7. We further determine that

claims 2, 3, 6, and 7 would have been obvious over the combination of Wyon and Spitalnick.

C. Claims 4 and 5—Obviousness over Wyon, Spitalnick, and Larsson

Claim 4 depends from claim 1 and additionally recites “a heater for raising the temperature of the air exiting the ventilated seat, the heater positioned beneath the trim cover.” Claim 5 depends from claim 4 and additionally recites “wherein the top portion of the chamber and the heater are separate elements.” IGB relies on Larsson to teach these additional limitations. Pet. 45–46 (citing Ex. 1009, 3:42–46, 3:63–4:7, 4:13–22, 6:11–14, 58–63, Figs. 1, 2). IGB contends that it would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art to include the electric heater 12 of Larsson with Wyon’s vehicle seat “to provide additional heating capabilities.” *Id.* Gentherm does not argue separately the patentability of these claims.

Larsson describes a ventilated vehicle chair. Ex. 1009, 1:7–8, 26–28. Larsson’s ventilated chair comprises seat part 2 and backrest 3. *Id.* at 1:42–45, Fig. 1. Seat cushion 6 of seat part 2 comprises filling 7. *Id.* at 3:63–64. Cushion 6 is covered with enclosing covering 9 that may include electric heater 12. *Id.* at 4:1–7. Insert 15, situated beneath covering 9, comprises airtight material 17 surrounding air-permeable material 16.

IGB has shown by a preponderance of the evidence that Larsson teaches the additional limitations of claims 4 and 5, and that a person of ordinary skill would have combined Larsson with Wyon and Spitalnick to add a heating capability to Wyon’s seat. We determine that claims 4 and 5 would have been obvious over the combination of Wyon, Spitalnick, and Larsson.

III. CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated above, we determine that IGB has shown by a preponderance of the evidence that claims 1–3, 6, and 7 would have been obvious over Wyon and Spitalnick, and that claims 4 and 5 would have been obvious over Wyon, Spitalnick, and Larsson.

IV. ORDER

For the reasons given, it is

ORDERED that claims 1–7 of the '129 patent are held unpatentable.

This is a Final Written Decision. Parties to the proceeding seeking judicial review of the decision must comply with the notice and service requirements of 37 C.F.R. § 90.2.

IPR2014-00666
Patent 7,229,129 B2

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