Think about why you are reading the patent before you start. If you want to know if the patent could stop you from doing something, then concentrate on the claims, comparing what you plan to do with what it says in the claims. Use the rest of the patent to help you understand what the claims mean. You will also need to establish whether the patent has been granted in the relevant country and is still in force. Many of the commercial patent search programs will summarise this information for you for the whole patent family. However, apparently "dead" patents might still be able to be restored, or there may be other relevant rights; if it is important, seek professional advice.

If you have recently made an invention and are reading a published patent to check whether your invention is novel, then the whole patent is relevant. It does not matter if the patent has been granted or has expired. If your invention has already been described in a patent (or any other publication) then it is not novel.

Front Page. A reproduction of a European Patent front page is shown in Figure 29.2, downloaded from the *Espacenet*® service of the European Patent Office. Each item of information is marked by a number in brackets. These numbers are called "INID codes" (internationally agreed numbers for the identification of bibliographic data) and because these numbers are consistent in every country, they allow you to identify important information from a patent even if you do not understand the language it is printed in. For example the title of the invention is marked (54).

The patent number (11) is at the top right of the page. The first two letters, "EP", mean that it is a European Patent, this is followed by a number to identify the patent and then there is a code such as A1 or B1. The patent in Figure 29.2 has A1 after the number. The "A" means that this version of the European Patent is an application. You might want to look on a database such as *Espacenet*® to see if there is the granted version (which in fact there is for the patent in Figure 29.2) and this will have a "B" after the number. The granted version may be quite different from the version that was originally filed. Since 2001 the United States Patent Office has also adopted "B" to signify a granted patent, but different countries use different codes in their patent numbers and these have changed over the years, so it is worth checking the exact meaning of the codes on the appropriate patent office website.

The filing date (22) is towards the top of the page on the left hand side. This date is important because generally patents are only valid for 20 years after the filing date. (There are some exceptions to this, particularly for pharmaceutical patents, so if it is critical seek advice.) For this patent there is another important date, the "priority date" (30). This is printed below the filing date and for the patent in Figure 29.2 there are two priority dates. Most likely these correspond to different material within the patent. The priority date is the date of an earlier patent filing (or in this case, two filings) from which this patent "claims priority"

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(54) Apparatus comprising independently suspended core members for the production of shells of fat-containing chocolate-like masses

(57) The invention relates to a system for moulding of shells of fat-containing, chocolate-like masses, especially for chocolate articles through immersion of more than one core member 6, 6', 6" into liquid mass in more than one associated mould cavity 3, 3', 3". The core members are independently suspended from a holding device 7. Thereby is obtained that it is possible to lower the cores to different depths to compensate for inaccuracies in the dosage of chocolate or in the depth of individual mould cavities and still obtain complete articles 11, 11', 11".

Fig. 7

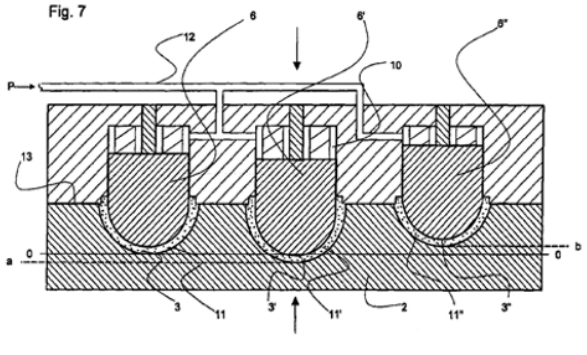

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Figure 29.2 Example of a front page from a European patent application (downloaded from the *Espacenet* service of the European Patent Office).