



THE PLAIN DEALER

Technology to go

The CCF Innovations unit at the Cleveland Clinic turns medical ideas into businesses

Sunday, February 25, 2007

Mary Vanac
Plain Dealer Reporter

Several years ago, Dr. Mark Penn and his colleagues at the Cleveland Clinic were trying to figure out why certain stem cells target the heart.

Christopher Coburn, who had recently landed at the Clinic to start its product commercialization unit, CCF Innovations, sat in on a cardiology staff meeting around that time. He encouraged the heart doctors to patent their interesting ideas.

"We'd identified some factors. We decided to protect them [as] intellectual property," said Penn, director of the Clinic's Bakken Heart-Brain Institute.

Penn, who also is medical director of the Clinic's coronary intensive care unit, didn't realize then that his discovery would be used to attract stem cells from elsewhere in the body to repair damaged hearts.

He also didn't know that his genetic therapy would be licensed by BioHeart Inc. in Sunrise, Fla., or that it would be the basis for RegenRX, the company spun off in 2005 by CCF Innovations and now poised to get its first operating investment and chief executive.

"We never would have thought of doing this without CCF Innovations," said Penn, an M.D. and Ph.D. who received the Innovator of the Year Award from the Clinic last year.

Few doctors or researchers think about commercializing a medical device or a laboratory discovery. Most scientists don't know how to create a product, much less a business to make one. But the technology transfer and commercialization professionals at CCF Innovations do.

The Clinic unit that began quietly in 2000 has spun off 18 companies since 2003, Coburn said. Most of those companies are generating license or commercialization revenue, about \$6.5 million a year.

Some of the companies are still getting their operating legs, testing therapies or medical devices. Some are waiting for their first investor money to really get started. One is changing direction because investors cooled to its initial technology.

Most of the companies have only a handful of employees. One, Cleveland BioLabs Inc., the largest CCF Innovations spinoff, has gone public, offering initial shares to investors last summer.

But all of the companies were started with an idea that could help patients by pushing the boundaries of medical science.

"Remember, the institution was established in 1921 specifically to bring a new approach to the practice of medicine," said Coburn, who left in 2000 as leader of the commercialization consultancy of Battelle in Columbus to become executive director of CCFI.

Starting the process

For CCF Innovations, the commercialization process starts when a Cleveland Clinic doctor or researcher files an invention disclosure.

The disclosure goes to an in-house peer group for review.

Then it's assigned to one of about 20 CCF Innovations staff members.

Every disclosure gets three reviews: Can the invention be patented? Is there a market for the invention? Does the invention appear to be clinically effective?

"If we still think we have a possibility for a spinoff, then we write a four- to five-page analysis," said Christopher Coburn, CCF Innovations executive director.

The analysis is vetted by an industrial advisory board and often by other experts.

A staffer modifies the analysis, based on feedback.

"Now, we go to the investment committee of our IAB," Coburn said of the industrial advisory board.

The commercialization staff might look for a small grant, up to \$250,000, from the Clinic's biovalidation fund.

"Then we create the company," Coburn said.

-- Mary Vanac