

Medical device company looks to a bright future

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The new company's product is being used at an Army hospital in Texas.

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YOUNGSTOWN — A tiny medical device company has big plans — international sales, local manufacturing and distribution plants, hundreds of jobs.

But Gary Wakeford, president of Syncro Medical Innovations, makes it clear those are just projections.

"There's a lot of work to do," he said Tuesday after a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the company's new office at 20 Federal Place, the former Phar-Mor Centre downtown.

Right now, the company has just three executive employees and contracts out its distribution and manufacturing to a Florida company. Its product, a feeding tube that is magnetically guided into place, is being used in just a few hospitals.

Wakeford isn't the only one hyping the company's growth prospects, however.

U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan of Niles, D-17th, attended the ribbon-cutting and said he has placed \$1 million in funds for the company in a federal defense bill that's expected to be passed later this year. Ryan said he expects the money to be approved because of the company's work in the burn unit at an Army hospital in San Antonio, Texas.

Wakeford said he would use the money to train other military hospitals on how to use the feeding tube and for further research and development.

The company's tube is helping soldiers who have been burned in Iraq, Wakeford said. The body uses a large amount of calories while regrowing skin, and the tube allows medical personnel to quickly place a tube into the intestines where nutrients can be absorbed rapidly.

Wakeford said the tube can be just as important to patients in critical care units in regular hospitals.

Inserting a feeding tube often is a cumbersome process that requires several X-rays to be sure it is in the right place, he said.

He said Syncro Medical's tube can save the U.S. health-care industry \$2 billion a year by simplifying the process and eliminating the need for X-rays and bringing in medical specialists. The end of the tube has

a small magnet, and it is guided into place by a large magnet that is held outside the body.

Wakeford has spent the last 20 months examining the market and preparing the company for growth.

He said Syncro's patented system can be a "platform technology" that can be used for other types of tubes and catheters. He said he has been speaking to doctors in Pittsburgh and Cleveland about other uses for the technology and expects the company to have additional products.

He said he expects a distribution center to be set up in the area within 12 to 18 months. It would have between 30 and 50 jobs. He hopes to have manufacturing plants set up locally in two to three years. If sales take off as he expects, the company could have between 300 and 500 jobs down the road.

Wakeford, 48, of Canfield, said he wants all of the growth to happen in the Mahoning Valley.

Syncro Medical was created by Norwich Ventures, a venture capital company in Massachusetts. It recruited Wakeford to run Syncro Medical because of his past success in sales management at other companies, but he said he would agree only if he could locate the new company here.

The company's tube was developed by Dr. Sabry Gabriel of Georgia, who sits on the board of Syncro Medical.

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