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Combating Childhood Obesity and Nerve Gas

Three startups provide a look at novel medical technologies

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Products made by Switch2Health Corp. look to target childhood obesity. Above, CEO Seth Tropper and creative director Amado Batour. [Steven J. Dundas/NJBIZ]

SOMERSET—Garden State health care innovations were on display when a trio of startups showed off their wares at the New Jersey Technology Council Venture Conference in Somerset late last month. Switch2Health Corp., in North Brunswick, offered up a motion meter to motivate kids to go outdoors and play, while Countervail Corp., in Marlton, unveiled a means of protecting soldiers from nerve gas. Medit Corp., in Mount Laurel, exhibited a rubber bracelet engraved with an ID number that enables medical workers to access information in emergency situations.

Two-year-old Switch2Health took home the "Most Innovative Product" award for a device aimed at combating childhood obesity. Founded by CEO Seth Tropper and creative director Amado Batour, the company makes a watch-like digital sensor that is worn around the wrist and registers the wearer's physical activity.

Video games and other distractions keep kids from burning off their sugary snacks, says Tropper. The company's motion meter, designed for youngsters aged 6 to 11, comes with a code that kids can enter into a forthcoming Web site, S2H.com, to claim rewards like downloadable ringtones. The awards are pegged to the amount of activity registered by the meter.

Tropper says he, Batour and angel investors have put \$400,000 into Switch2Health so far. The company received a \$50,000 grant last June from the New Jersey Commission on Science and Technology.

Tropper aims to attract companies eager to distribute their ringtones and music to the youth market. "We want to direct individuals to our Web site and build a database that has value for content providers," he says.

The first version of the motion meter is due out later this month at a promotional event in New York City. Tropper says Switch2Health plans to make money by supplying the devices to companies to use as promotional giveaways in ways that could include putting them in cereal boxes. "Ideally I would like to take this to the school systems to be distributed to all the children to encourage physical activity," he says.

While Switch2Health is looking out for kids, Countervail aims to safeguard U.S. troops.

The company sees an opportunity in repurposing an Alzheimer's drug called galantamine to block nerve agents on the battlefield. The drug, developed and marketed as Razadyne by Johnson & Johnson's Janssen Pharmaceutica, "has been tested against Sarin, VX and in agriculture against pesticides," says Ron Lynch, Countervail's chief operating officer.

The 10-month-old company acquired the license for this usage of galantamine from the University of Maryland in Baltimore, which is conducting the research. Lynch says the U.S. Army and the National Institutes of Health have invested \$5 million to develop the product.

He says galantamine protects the brain more effectively than products now on the market, and he expects initial sales to the military to begin in the second quarter of 2009. "We anticipate within five years post launch we will be in excess of \$100 million in revenue," he says.

Lynch says Countervail is testing the anti-nerve agent in tablet form, with an injected version pending. He says the drug can be taken seven hours prior to exposure to nerve gas, or up to 25 minutes after an incident. He says exposure causes convulsions and can quickly become lethal without protection.

Medit Corp. is offering a service to respond to a different type of emergency. The company's Medical Information In Case of Emergency system combines a rubber ID bracelet with a database of information accessible via the Web or cell phone.

CEO Carl Jarvis says the three-year-old company evolved out of the challenges his family faced when father-in-law Phillip Robinson was being treated for terminal cancer.

"Toward the end of his life he had to carry all his personal medical information back and forth," Jarvis says.

For an annual membership fee of \$19.95, users get a coded bracelet, a wallet ID card, and access to MyMIICE.com for the entry of personal information. Emergency responders can log on to the site or call a toll-free number to enter the MIICE wearer's code.

This gives access to information such as known allergies, contact phone numbers and other details that the subscriber has entered.

Jarvis says he and backers have put \$750,000 into the company and hope to generate \$50 million of annual revenue within several years.

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