

Better than a Band-Aid



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A new company at the Flagstaff business incubator is currently testing a biopolymer that could replace stitches and the use of gauze when treating a deep cut or similar wound.

The material, known as Elastatropin, might help wounds heal faster and reduce the amount of scarring, said Protein Genomics CEO Burt Ensley.

The lab-grown material is similar to human tropoelastin, an organic material that helps keep skin and other tissues in the body flexible.

The move to the Northern Arizona Center for Emerging Technologies follows a recent announcement that the company had received a \$150,000 research grant from the National Science Foundation.

The grant will help pay for the rent at the incubator and allow Protein Genomics to establish its own lab.

The company has previously relied extensively on contract research organizations.

"We have been outsourcing most of our research," Ensley said. "Doing (research and development) with PhD's is extremely expensive.

Ensley, who has a doctorate in microbiology, said he is glad to have his own lab. He said there are some distinct disadvantages in relying on outsourced research.

"If you want them to discover something or to design something and it doesn't work, they don't care," Ensley said.

The company hired Flagstaff resident Robert Kellar last year to help develop several products. Kellar has extensive experience in research and product development for FDA-regulated products.

Ensley said he hopes to outgrow the incubator in the next two years, migrating to larger research space near Flagstaff Pulliam Airport.

The company's four employees could grow to a dozen employees as the type of research

evolves beyond tabletop tests, he said.

However, Ensley doesn't believe that his company will ever completely outgrow the need for contract research firms.

He said the contractors are better suited to ramp up on clinical trials, which call for animal and human testing.

"They have lists of human volunteers; they really are the wave of the future and important to us in getting out of this start-up mode," Ensley said.

But regardless of how successful his company becomes, Protein Genomics will never be as big as Flagstaff's largest biomedical employer, W.L. Gore & Associates, Ensley said.

He said changes in how investors look at fledgling companies have changed since Gore was founded.

"The opportunity to raise money to support that kind of operation is past. These days, it is a more modest expectation for financial transactions," Ensley said.

The company has raised roughly \$300,000 from local investors.

Protein Genomics was formed by Ensley in 1993 to "capitalize on opportunities presented by rapid progress in the fields of genomics."

It currently sells Elastatropin to several companies that make commercially available eye creams and has several patents related to the use of Elastatropin.

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