

News

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Wichita composites project gets \$20 million grant

BY ROY WENZL

PHOTOS



Dave Williams/The Wichita Eagle

Haiying Yu implants a composite bone replacement in the leg of a rat used in research by the team of Paul Wooley at Wichita State University.



Dave Williams/The Wichita Eagle

Paul Wooley checks on data in his lab at Wichita State University.

GRANT MILESTONES

The Center of Innovation for Biomaterials in Orthopaedic Research (CIBOR) has an ambitious timeline for its \$20 million state grant, according to center director John Moore and scientist Paul Wooley. Here are the first milestones:

- **June-July:** The first equipment purchases will be made.
- **Fall:** Initial hiring of scientists, technical staff and support staff
- **In two years:** Several of Wichita's two dozen composites manufacturers will produce newly invented devices that don't require extensive FDA testing, such as hospital gurneys and operating tables made from composites.
- **In five years:** CIBOR hopes to be financially self-sustaining, no longer needing state money.
- **In 10 years:** The center hopes to have passed the testing imposed by the Food and Drug Administration and be manufacturing composite versions of artificial hips and other medical implants.

WICHITA - Grant will change face of orthopedic medicine, Wichita scientists say

For decades now, Tom Thornton said, "one of the more distressing things Kansans have told each other is that for their children to get good jobs, they need to move out of state." That is no longer true, said Thornton, director and president of the Kansas Bioscience Authority.

The KBA voted Tuesday to give a \$4 million first installment on a \$20 million, five-year grant to Wichita scientists who say they will reinvent orthopedic medicine and create 2,600 jobs here in the next decade.

The decision will continue making Kansas a new national leader in science, Thornton said.

In December, the KBA helped persuade the federal government to locate the \$450 million National Bio and Agro-Defense facility in Manhattan. State politicians said that coup was the biggest boost to the Kansas economy since the railroads arrived on the prairie.

The group that earned the grant says it will use the money to make millions for the state by inventing medical devices made from composite materials developed in recent years by the aircraft industry.

Partners in the project include Wichita State University, Via Christi Health System, and bioscientists from Pittsburg and Kansas State universities.

The project leaders are Paul Wooley, Michael Good and David McQueen of Via Christi and David McDonald, John Tomblin and Tom Aldag of WSU.

The grant money will go to the Center of Innovation for Biomaterials in Orthopaedic Research, or CIBOR, an entity separate from but affiliated with Via Christi and WSU.

"We've already got the T-shirts made; I'm not kidding," Wooley said.

The center will be led by John Moore, the longtime Cessna senior vice president who was lieutenant governor of Kansas until 2007.

"My job will be to run it like a business," Moore said Tuesday.

He said the new center's goals are formidable: to be making all its own income within five years and to employ workers at local composite companies to manufacture medical devices within two years.

The first money spent will be for equipment Wooley needs, Moore said. By fall, they hope to hire scientists, technical staff and support staff.

For a while, Moore said, CIBOR will work out of borrowed space at Via Christi and WSU. Eventually it will have its own space.

Wooley's vision is for the team to invent and make simple medical devices at first, such as hospital gurneys and operating tables made from composites, to get a quick revenue stream coming.

But he has his sights set on a much bigger game: making a new generation of composite implants for the human body, replacing hips and knees.

New jobs

When she learned of the grant, Vicki Pratt Gerbino, president of the Greater Wichita Economic Development Coalition, couldn't contain her enthusiasm.

"Oh, my gosh, what's not to love about this?" she said.

The project's jobs will boost the local economy in ways most people don't foresee, she said.

"This will be a new product line, and that means it will be labor-intensive. If your goal is to create a lot of new jobs, a new product line is the way to go. A more mature business is not as labor-intensive."

Some people, she said, might argue that 2,600 jobs is not much, or that the number is dwarfed by the number who have been laid off in recent months.

According to the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas, 73 Wichita area companies have laid off or plan to lay off 13,321 workers as of April 30. More than half of them are in aviation manufacturing.

"But ask any of the laid-off people whether 2,600 is a small number," Gerbino said.

"For that matter, ask them if only 26 new jobs is too small a number."

Meaning of 'cluster'

Entrepreneurs, politicians and business leaders who have studied economic success know the word "cluster" has special significance, said Thornton, the KBA president.

Clusters -- as in clusters of agri-businesses, clusters of composite manufacturers, and clusters of bioscience research -- seem to develop economic vitality that multiplies itself several times over, and quickly.

Kansas now has a composite manufacturing cluster and a bioscience cluster working together.

The grant "will make possible a broad and dramatic advance in medicine," Wooley said.

Thornton said their work will also build a fourth leg for the state's economy.

"Wichita already had three of those legs: energy, aviation, manufacturing. In fact Wichita may be the only place in the state that has all three. And now it has a fourth, and that's bioscience," he said by phone from Atlanta, where he and other KBA members are attending the 2009 Bio International Convention.

"You should see what I'm seeing here," he added, minutes after the KBA board vote. "There's a Kansas science booth, and the line to get into it goes out and around a corner and stretches a long way out there."

"People from all over the world want what we are making happen here."

Reach Roy Wenzl at 316-268-6219 or rwenzl@wichitaeagle.com.