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Entrepreneur's Toolkit: Patch Works

By Ryan Dezember

Maria Bennett already had one successful medical device startup under her belt when she began working to bring a 30-day pain relief therapy to market.



Benjamin Wirtz Siegel

Four years ago, Maria Bennett was part of a team that hit the jackpot, developing a neurostimulation treatment for urinary incontinence and selling it for a fortune.

They had spent years undergoing clinical trials, jumping regulatory hurdles and studying the market before medical device giant Medtronic paid \$42 million for the treatment.

It was a windfall, to be sure, but one that left Bennett and her team at NDI Medical, a Cleveland medical device developer, wondering what came next.

"Being an entrepreneur, you either love it or you don't," Bennett says. "And once you have a success like we've had, you get that taste for wanting to do it again."

Soon, they had an assignment: NDI spun off a company called SPR Therapeutics, put Bennett in charge and tasked her with launching its Sartpatch System, a 30-day

pain relief therapy that Bennett hopes will be used to

treat patients who find no relief from anti-inflammatory drugs but may not need to resort to narcotics.

An Indiana native, Bennett has spent most of her adult life in Ohio. She studied first at Miami University and later earned a master's degree in biomedical engineering from Case Western Reserve University.

In large part because of CWRU, Cleveland is a hotbed for neuro-device innovation. Such devices attack ailments by stimulating nerves with tiny pulses that scramble certain signals before they reach the brain. Bennett found her way into the field at CWRU, where she helped researchers with clinical trials and got a close look at the impact those therapies could have on patients' lives.

Even a seemingly simple problem like chronic shoulder pain can lead to bigger issues such as trouble sleeping, even depression, Bennett says.

"Knowing that we're doing something that is going to significantly change someone's life is very rewarding," she says.

Her second job took Bennett to Minneapolis, but Geoff Thrope, a former colleague, called her back to Cleveland in 2004 to oversee clinical trials for NDI.

What to Ask

Am I promising too much?

Keep things realistic or risk turning off your investors, says NDI Medical's Maria Bennett. "Pretty much anyone who's been in the business world can see right through that," she says.

Have I aligned with experts?

Many small companies can't afford big staffs. Bennett's team of four at SPR leans on a stable of consultants, both paid and pro bono, for expert advice and outside perspectives.

Am I listening?

"You've got to be able to just kind of open the shop," Bennett says. And be willing to take criticism as well as compliments.

After the sale to Medtronic, Bennett and her co-workers went looking for the next way to apply NDI's technology. At CWRU, Bennett had developed a stimulator to treat chronic pain, and she decided to combine that idea with NDI's implantable device technology. The result is a 30-day therapy in which fine leads are needled into an affected area and pulsed by an external stimulator.

"We did groundwork in market research and some of the product development, and we said, 'We think we have a product here,' " she says.

So did JumpStart, a nonprofit that assists and invests in technology-based Northeast Ohio startups, which placed a \$250,000 bet on the Bennett-led and Beachwood-based spinoff SPR and its Smartpatch. "We definitely felt it had potential given the background of the principals," says Lynn-Ann Gries, JumpStart's chief investment officer. "The technology seems to be something that's needed in the marketplace."

The 30-day therapy should hit the European markets within the next 12 months with a stateside launch soon after. "What gets me through the day," Bennett says, "is the chase for the business win, the successful commercialization of our products."

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