

Serial inventor patents new allergy-free latex

By Erin Moriarty
STAFF WRITER

Travis Honeycutt, who holds about 100 patents, will soon be marketing an invention that could change the lives of many health-care workers.

A chemical engineer and health-care entrepreneur, his inventions range from light-weight fiberglass casts for injured limbs to novel technology for treating medical waste. His latest venture, Flowery Branch-based Vystar Corp., came from his interest in a problem that affects many health-care workers — an allergy to latex.

Having been in the health-care industry for decades, Honeycutt had often heard about the problems some health-care workers had when they wore protective latex gloves. About 8 percent to 12 percent of health-care workers have latex allergies, says the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, but allergists say the figure could be as high as 17 percent.

"I was studying this problem and I thought somebody had to do something about it," Honeycutt said. "I thought, 'Give me a couple of weeks and I'll have this figured out.' That was five years ago, and a lot of money ago."

Honeycutt didn't realize the quest would consume a tremendous amount of intellectual energy and cash.

"It turned out to be enormously difficult, but we got there," he said. "It's been five years in the making."

The company received its third patent this month and is in the process of submitting paperwork to introduce a nondrug medical product into the marketplace. Vystar also is seeking more private investors while looking for a commercial partner to help bring the new product to the market.

Vystar's patented process involves removing the allergens from natural latex rubber. The challenge was to deactivate the proteins in latex that cause the allergy, without losing the physical and chemical properties that make latex such a good protective substance.

"Latex is probably the best material that

you can find to make a glove — there's nothing else quite like it," Honeycutt said. "Lots of people have deactivated those proteins in the past, but they have torn the natural latex rubber apart."

Honeycutt said early tests show their redesigned version of latex, which he has trademarked as Vytex, could be an even better barrier than traditional latex.

With the emergence of so many global threats, such as avian flu and SARS, Honeycutt says there is a growing need to protect all health-care workers from these infectious diseases.

"It just doesn't stop — we believe the demand for barrier products will be increasing dramatically," he said. "The best way to stop an epidemic or a pandemic is barrier protection."

Honeycutt, who lives on a farm in Gainesville, is no stranger to solving scientific problems for the health-care industry.

He founded Isolyser Co., which specialized in infectious control products used to immobilize medical waste in the operating room and prevent the spread of germs. The company was granted the first approval from the Environmental Protection Agency to use an antimicrobial to treat medical waste in the operating room, Honeycutt said.

Isolyser later went public and became part of Alpharetta-based Microtek Medical Holdings Inc. (Nasdaq: MTMD).

Honeycutt also developed a way to immobilize and disinfect needles in doctors' offices. He invented a liquid that can be poured into a container full of needles, instantly forming a hard mold around the needles that seals them off to prevent them from sticking anyone.

The invention process is anything but daunting for Honeycutt, who thrives on the process of scientific discovery.

"I have a pretty good background in tackling these sorts of problems," he

said. "I enjoy it."

William Doyle, Vystar's chief operating officer who has known Honeycutt since 1990, said Honeycutt has skillfully mastered the role of a scientist CEO.

"I always knew him as the chemical mind and the scientist, so it's been nice to see him evolve his way into a CEO," Doyle said. "His technical knowledge is inherent — it's just the way he thinks."

Doyle said Honeycutt is a natural leader who lets his employees grow and succeed. The two previously worked together for seven years at Isolyser Co., and Doyle joined Vystar Corp. in 2004.

"He sets the course and then gets out of your way, which is exactly what a good, solid CEO should do," Doyle said. "He's there when you need him, but he's not all over you when you definitely don't."

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