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Medical test keeps milk cows healthy

Sunday, September 10, 2006

By JEANNE RIDGWAY
Courier-Post Staff
MOORESTOWN

Five hundred cows at Wellcrest Dairy in Mullica Hill remain in the pink of health, producing more than 350,000 gallons of milk each day, thanks to watchful dairymen and a medical test developed by PortaCheck.

In business for only two years, PortaCheck is a division of PortaScience Inc., a tiny Moorestown research and development company founded in 1999 by chemist Dr. Wai (pronounced "Why") Tak Law.

The company devises portable and easy-to-use tests for the health-care, veterinary and consumer markets.

"We want to develop simple, affordable tests that you can do on the spot," said Law, 55, PortaScience's president and a resident of Moorestown.

So far, PortaScience and its division have received three U.S. patents. Two others are pending as well as several international patents.

The company has developed and licensed at least eight products. One, a human fertility test, was released under license to the consumer market in June.

In the future, patients living with AIDS, cancer, heart problems and other chronic conditions may expect to be helped by PortaScience products.

In the meantime, the company's bread and butter is with its PortaCheck division working with dairy farmers.



Photos by DENISE HENHOEFFER/Courier-Post
Guillermo Yanez hooks up cows for milking under the watchful eye of Marianne Eachus at Wellcrest Dairy in Mullica Hill.

PORTASCIENCE, PORTACHECK
Address: 1 Whittendale Drive, Suite E, Moorestown 08057

Phone: (856) 231-9922

Web site: www.portascience.com, www.portacheck.com

President/Founder: Dr. Wai Tak Law

Employees: 20

Industry: Portable diagnostic tests for both the human and animal health-care industries.



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PortaCheck has a test that detects mastitis, an infection of the udder that can spread within a herd of milk cows. The test finds the problem even before an animal exhibits symptoms.

Distributed in 20 countries, the product is called the PortaSCC milk test.

PortaCheck got its start in the export market as a member of the World Trade Center of Greater Philadelphia.

Here in New Jersey, Wally Eachus, 46, and his wife and partner Marianne, 43, say the PortaSCC milk test has been useful to their business at Wellcrest Dairy.

Wellcrest, and 50 other dairies throughout the state, are using the PortaSCC milk test to detect mastitis as part of a year-long study by the Garden State Dairy Alliance.

The purpose of the study is to improve the health of dairy cows and, therefore, the production and quality of milk, according to David Lee, coordinator of the state milk quality program and a professor at Rutgers University, Department of Agriculture and Resource Management.

The test, which costs about \$1.30 per cow, provides results at the dairy within 45 minutes. The test reader, also developed by PortaScience, is hand-held and costs under \$200. This compares to other test readers which can cost thousands of dollars.

"The test picks up on problem cows quicker," according to Marianne Eachus. The sooner an affected cow is taken off the milk line and made healthy again, the better it is for business, she said.

PortaScience got its start in 1999 when Law and his two associates -- chemists Ron Yankowski and Yuri Nikolukin -- began brainstorming about developing innovative medical products for consumer markets. The scientists applied for grants, writing their applications around Law's kitchen table.

Throughout the years, PortaScience has received 11 Small Business Innovation Grants and others from the National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Drug Administration.

The best ideas for new products, Law said, come from talking to people who perceive a diagnostic need. Often, these conversations start unexpectedly.

"I met an oncologist who is director of a major cancer center in Texas," he said. "He asked me, "Can you develop something that cancer patients can use at home to measure their white blood cell count?" "

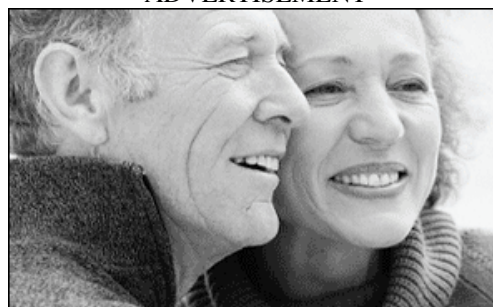


Dr. Wai Tak Law (right) and Wally Eachus pet one of the cows. Law is founder of PortaCheck, a company that developed a test to detect disease in cows.



Marianne Eachus shows a sample taken from a cow that will be tested for mastitis.

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PortaScience could and did. The product is available for licensing.

The test tells when a patient's white blood cell count is appropriate for receiving chemotherapy treatment. According to Law, up to 50 percent of cancer patients are turned away from chemo appointments because their white blood cell counts are too high.

Today, PortaScience and its division employ 20 chemists and engineers and occupy a 5,000-square-foot office/lab.

The building's decor pays tribute to the company's mainstay customer -- the humble dairy cow. Perched on shelves throughout the lab/office, fuzzy toy cows and cow knickknacks peer down among the gleaming test tubes and computers. Amusing bovine posters adorn the walls.

Law gets a kick out of cows. Last week, during a visit to the Eachus farm, the chemist happily patted the nose of Angel, a friendly, overbearing bovine who tried to swipe him with her long, raspy tongue.

He is also pleased that PortaCheck is proving a solution for cows and their owners. But he wants his inexpensive products to help treat illness among humans, too, especially in the Third World.

For instance, PortaScience has developed a piece of inexpensive equipment for testing the blood of AIDS patients. AIDS physicians rely on frequent blood tests to determine if particular medicines are working. But blood analysis requires use of a \$100,000 flow cytometer. Because of the expense, many health-care facilities do not have them.

By contrast, PortaScience has developed an affordable blood testing system that can be used in the field and does not require a flow cytometer. The company is working with a partner to commercialize the product in the nonprofit sector.

Business and scientific awards abound for PortaScience and its division. In May, PortaScience was named New Jersey Member Company of the Year by the World Trade Center of Greater Philadelphia.

In August, the company received the national Tibbetts Award, which recognizes the successful commercialization of technical products developed using Small Business Innovation Research grants.

Reach Jeanne Ridgway at (856) 486-2479 or jridgway@courierpostonline.com

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