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## Biotech firm developing test tool for cancer research

Premium content from Business First - by Annemarie Franczyk, Business First

Date: Monday, January 14, 2008, 12:00am EST

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Next year at this time, AndroBioSys Inc. could have a significant customer base, revenues of \$1 million and dozens of employees.

That's the plan for the region's newest biotechnology company, the third to be spun off from Roswell Park Cancer Institute in 2007. AndroBioSys initially is marketing its unique testing services to drug developers to support its own work on therapies for prostate cancer.

The company is banking on its screening tool that uses human cells and tissues in the early stages of the evaluation of potential drugs. The process is believed to be better than animal testing to predict the drug's behavior during clinical trials, and that's attractive to drug developers that want to avoid expensive failures during human testing, CEO Michael Zwick said.

Analysis is under way for its first client, Entegriion, a life sciences company from North Carolina's research triangle that is developing products for hemorrhage control. Negotiations are in the final stages with other potential customers, including a large pharmaceutical company, Zwick said. AndroBioSys is looking for more than a business arrangement: It is poised to become partners with its customers, seeking joint publication and presentation opportunities that will help establish the company in the scientific community.

At the same time, the company is waiting for word on four grant applications for its work in the development of therapies targeting tumor stem cells and the growth of tumor blood vessels related to prostate cancer. The company's goal is to lengthen the remission period for more effective suppression of the male hormone androgen, which causes prostate growth.

"The real excitement for us with Andro is the promise for prostate cancer. There's a lot of excitement and promise of what they'll be able to do," said Candace Johnson, who heads translational research at Roswell Park.

AndroBioSys was founded by Dr. James Mohler, a prostate surgeon, and researcher Gary Smith, co-leaders of the prostate cancer program at Roswell Park. It is temporarily renting space from Cleveland BioLabs at 73 High St., in the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, but expects to outgrow those offices in six months to a year. It has five employees: Zwick and two lab technicians are full-time; Mohler and Smith are part-time. Employment could double in the spring and be up to 25 by year-end, depending on the success of the business and science ventures, Zwick said.

AndroBioSys followed two Roswell Park spin-off companies: Empire Genomics, developer of genetic tests, and PersonaDX, developer of a diagnostic tool to provide an early warning of fast-growing tumors. The trio represent a portion of the budding biotech industry that is promised to spur economic and job growth in the region. Roswell supports them through seed funding and, in the case of AndroBioSys, makes laboratories and specimens available for testing.

"We play an active role to encourage them. We could be wrong but we don't think so," Johnson said. "Everything has risk. I actually think they have less risk because they have something big pharma wants."

The risk involved in the biotech industry became apparent to Western New York on Jan. 4. That's when Cleveland BioLabs Inc. unexpectedly lost a \$224 million military contract for self-administered injectables to counteract radiation exposure. The company was stunned, Chief Scientific Officer Andrei Gudkov said, in part because the Department of Defense offered guidance through the application process.

He called the rejection an "unfortunate event" but said the company will pursue other funding and military and civilian markets for the drug. Further, work continues uninterrupted on other products, including drugs that could replace bone marrow transplants and those that fight cancer, he said.

To those building the biotech market here, the loss of the contract is not devastating. Johnson said Cleveland BioLabs, a publicly traded company, has a deep portfolio of products and correctly didn't bet its future entirely on the military contract.

Marnie Lavigne, director of biomedical business development at the University at Buffalo, said it's not unusual to have significant bumps in the road during product development in the life sciences industry.

"The good news is that an adaptable company with robust science and clear competitive advantages has a much better chance of overcoming these kinds of challenges, and sometimes new, even better opportunities arise to move their product to market," she said.