

Halting fibroids

Brentwood Company awaiting approval for device that may curtail hysterectomies

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BRENTWOOD, CA – Halt Medical is one of the best kept secrets in Jeffrey Cohen's entrepreneurial project portfolio.

Short for hysterectomy alternative, Halt Medical is lead by Cohen and two other founders who believe they have a tool that can revolutionize the female health care market.

The device, called the Halt Fibroid System, is targeted at 7 million women impacted by uterine fibroids, which are benign tumors that can cause extreme pain.

Cohen said he feels like he's sitting on a gold mine. "This is the best thing I've ever done in my life, because we are fundamentally helping women's health care," Cohen said. "It will change women's lives."

Cohen said it could still be late 2011 before the system is approved by the Food and Drug Administration, but the project's financial backing comes with a huge feather in the hat.

Paul Volcker, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan and current aid to President Barack Obama, has personally invested multiple series of funding into the project. Volcker is currently chairman of the Economic Recovery Advisory Board.

"He's one of the top financial officers in the country," Cohen said. "I believe he's investing in us because we are doing something good for women's health care."

Cohen wouldn't be specific on the dollar amount of the donation, but said it was "well into six figures."

The project was brought to Cohen's attention by Monterey-based gynecologist Bruce B. Lee.

Since he began his practice in 1985, Lee said uterine fibroid is one of the most common issues in women's health care. About 325,000 women are treated with a hysterectomy, while others just live with the pain.

“I wanted to find a new treatment that would give patients a much better option without having to go through all the issues that a hysterectomy offers,” Lee said.

The answer came when he found a procedure that has been approved for liver and bone cancer.

Using ultrasound, a scope is put into the abdomen to find the fibroids. Once identified, a needle is guided into it and heat is transmitted through radio frequency. The fibroid is shrunk about 50 percent, which alleviates most of the issue.

Since such a device had already been approved for other conditions, Lee tried it on several of his patients off label and it showed great promise.

“Other gynecologists liked what I was doing, but it was very difficult to use,” Lee said.

Thus the decision to create Halt Medical and come out with something more practical.

Dr. Donald Galen, surgical and research director at the Reproductive Science Center in San Ramon, says being able to do the surgery in an outpatient setting with fast recovery and only puncture marks instead of a large scar is a huge advantage. Galen is one of the doctors that has patients involved in the study.

“I never really thought about it, but when it was explained to me it made sense,” Galen said. “Sometimes the most obvious idea is the best solution.”

The device is currently in an FDA trial in eight U.S. cities, and two sites outside the country. The hope is to have the study done by this summer, and to have approval sought late 2011.

To make money, the electronic generator that attaches to the tool will be sold to medical offices cheaply. Then, the needlelike tool will be sold for several thousand dollars a piece. Each device can only be used once.

There has been no conclusive evidence whether fertility can be retained after the procedure, but Lee says two patients that have had it did get pregnant and had the baby with no problems.

Cohen is the entrepreneurial mastermind behind the project. Featured recently on the television show “Shark Tank” that offers capital for products, Cohen brought in a folding guitar that he and his son manufactured. The offer made on “Shark Tank” was turned down.

“I will always be known as the Guitar Guy,” but honestly if I had my choice I’d want to be known for Halt Medical,” Cohen said.

Besides the market being targeted, the location for Halt Medical is a gamble for Cohen as well. Instead of having the company in South San Francisco or the Peninsula, where many medical companies begin, he chose Brentwood as his location.

His colleagues thought it would never work. He is looking to prove them wrong.

“A lot of people thought we couldn’t do it if we weren’t in Palo Alto, but what they don’t realize is that on this end of Vasco Road, there’s a huge amount of talent,” Cohen said. I think if it goes well for us, you’ll find others following our lead.”