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Maryland cancer-testing firm MarkPap lands first customer

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Nenad and Olivera Markovic labored for years to design a low-cost kit that could be used for the early detection of cervical cancer in women in poor and underdeveloped regions. This month, the two Rockville doctors and their start-up firm landed a first customer.

In a pilot program lasting five years, MarkPap will annually provide rural provinces in China with enough kits to conduct 1 million tests, which the company says work similarly to Pap tests. The deal, made with a Chinese distributor with a presence in six of that country's 22 provinces, is worth \$13.5 million to the local firm. It's the first source of outside revenue for a small company that has subsisted so far on about \$1 million worth of grant money from the National Institutes of Health.

Cervical cancer once was a leading cause of death for women in the United States, but thanks to the widespread use of Pap tests, it's a disease that has become relatively rare here. That's not the case in poorer countries where there is a shortage of

pathologists available to interpret test results. MarkPap's solution to this problem is a version of the test in which results can easily be sent to qualified experts via computer -- or even by cellphone, if that's what is available.

"Telemedicine is what makes this attractive," said Olivera Markovic, who left a career at the NIH as a cancer researcher to launch the firm with her husband, in part from a tiny office space in one of Rockville's business incubators. "You move images, not patients. This test can be done anywhere."

The Markovics hope that India will be the next market for their test kit.

MarkPap employs about 10 people, but that roster doesn't account for the support provided by the Shady Grove Innovation Center, the business-development incubator that has made space available for the firm as it worked to get on its feet.

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As an incubator that is particularly aimed at encouraging businesses in the life sciences sector, the Shady Grove facility also provides lab space for its residents. And there's a lot of publicly shared space: Conference rooms are open for all, as is the copy machine in the building's mailroom. Both Markovics credit the incubator as an inspiration and a tool that helped them move more quickly to market.

While Montgomery County's incubator-based start-ups are under no obligation to set up shop nearby when they "graduate," statistics show that 85 percent of such companies go on to open their doors within five miles of the facility that hosted them, said Sally Sternbach, executive director of Rockville Economic Development Inc. (REDI).

Including the Shady Grove facility, Rockville is home to five incubators.

In the past decade, according to REDI, more than 90 companies have graduated from Montgomery County's five incubators, creating 1,800 jobs and occupying about 625,000 square feet of local commercial space.

Most of that positive news came before the recession, though Sternbach said that local start-up activity appears to be on the rise again. At the beginning of 2009, occupancy sank to 65 percent as many start-ups saw their grants, investors and customers

disappear. "Now, we're full and have waiting lists," she said.

As the Markovics look to expand their company, their next step will be to open a local "tele-health" center, where pathologists will work in round-the-clock shifts to analyze test results. The two doctors anticipate they will need to hire 30 people for the analytic work; they expect to use some currently vacant space at the nearby Montgomery County campus of Johns Hopkins University.

As for the kits, they'll be manufactured at a facility in Texas.

"The manufacturing stays here," said Olivera Markovic, "that was important."

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