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Business

Taking the MRI to heart

The founders of Imricor Medical Systems in Burnsville think they have a better path for surgeons implanting devices to treat atrial fibrillation, one that would end patients' exposure to radiation and use more sophisticated imaging.

By Christopher Snowbeck
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Atrial fibrillation is all the rage among medical device makers in the Twin Cities.

Little Canada-based St. Jude Medical already sells more than a half-billion dollars worth of devices to treat the heart rhythm disorder. Fridley-based Medtronic spent \$600 million last year to buy two companies that are developing catheter-based ablation treatments. And the CEO of Boston Scientific, which has major operations in the Twin Cities, said recently it was time for his company to "get serious" about the device treatments.

But a startup called Imricor Medical Systems of Burnsville thinks it has a better idea about how to treat the disorder, which can lead to problems ranging from chronic fatigue to stroke.

Atrial fibrillation is the most common type of heart rhythm disorder and is caused by a problem with electrical signals that coordinate the muscles of the heart's upper chambers.

The problem throws off the normal rhythm between those chambers and makes the upper chambers less effective at pumping blood.

This can cause stagnant blood to pool in parts of the upper chamber, increasing the risk of blood clots that could lead to a stroke. Short of that, atrial fibrillation patients may experience uncomfortable symptoms such as shortness of breath and palpitations.

With ablation, doctors can use small devices passed through tubes into the body, scarring heart tissue and disrupting the electrical signals that cause atrial fibrillation.

Physicians must rely

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on imaging technology to see what they're doing as they provide the treatments — the point where Imricor Medical hopes to distinguish itself from competitors, said Steve Wedan, president and CEO of the company.

While doctors using ablation tools from other manufacturers rely in part on images from sophisticated X-ray machines when providing the treatments, Imricor Medical wants to make tools that are compatible with MRI machines, so doctors can use magnetic resonance images of the heart.

The MRI approach could be superior, Wedan said, because doctors and patients wouldn't have to worry about exposure to radiation from X-ray machines.

Wedan also thinks MRI images have advantages that could let doctors perform the procedures more quickly.

"This is a big change that we're proposing for cardiology," he said.

While Imricor Medical is tiny in comparison with some of its competitors, it isn't going forward alone.

In April, Imricor Medical announced a partnership to develop its products in conjunction with GE Healthcare, a leading manufacturer of MRI machines.

GE was interested in Imricor Medical because it stands a good chance of being the first to market with MRI-compatible ablation tools, said Bryan Van Meter, a marketing manager for GE's MRI business.

What's more, Imricor Medical is working with some of the leading doctors in the field, Van Meter said, and has strong patents for its technology. GE likes the market opportunity, he said, because atrial fibrillation affects an estimated 6.3 million patients annually.

Although Van Meter said "GE is not an investor in Imricor at this time, " that is possible in the future.

The GE connection is no accident. Wedan started his career as an electrical engineer with GE near Milwaukee, where he worked on MRI and ultrasound systems. He left to work at another startup company and consulted for GE as well as the pacemaker operation of the old Guidant Corp. in Arden Hills.

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Guidant was interested in developing pacemakers compatible with MRI scanners. In the process of trying to develop such technology, Wedan came in contact with doctors at Johns Hopkins University who also were developing MRI-safe ablation tools.

In both cases, the technical challenge involves making devices that completely lack magnetic material.

What's more, the metals used in the devices must be engineered so that they don't heat up during an MRI scan and cause injury.

Imricor Medical has been funded with Small Business Innovation Research grants worth \$1 million from the National Institutes of Health. The company hopes to soon raise its first substantial investor round of financing, but Wedan said the recession isn't helping small device companies raise money.

"The typical funding mechanisms for startups such as ours have really evaporated over the last year and a half," he said.

Imricor's products are far from having been approved for use. If the company is successful in developing the technology, it will then have to confront another hurdle: Most operating rooms for ablation procedures are outfitted with sophisticated X-ray machines — not MRIs.

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COMPANY SPECS

Business: Medical devices

Location: Burnsville

Web site: imricor medical.com

Founded: 2006

Owners: Steve Wedan, NF Technology Holdings of Switzerland and a handful of private investors.

Competition: Large medical device companies including Medtronic, St. Jude Medical and New Jersey-based Johnson & Johnson

Employees: Six full-time, two part-time

2008 revenue: None

Challenge ahead: Raising money to fund studies of the technology, which could form the basis for regulatory approval.

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