KU office’s NCI role: discover, deliver and develop drugs

A UNIQUE PIECE: One standard that cancer centers must meet for National Cancer Institute designation is a proven ability to translate research discoveries into better cancer treatments, diagnostic tools and prevention methods. Toward that end, the University of Kansas Cancer Center created the Office of Therapeutics, Discovery and Development. Although housed on KU’s main campus in Lawrence and medical center campus in Kansas City, Kan., the office applies a pharmaceutical-industry approach to transforming research into new drugs. Its pipeline contains 72 drug projects aimed at a wide range of diseases. However, 34 of those projects are focused on cancer treatment and prevention. “There aren’t any cancer centers that have the program we do in terms of combining drug discovery, delivery and development,” said Scott Weir, director of the office.

PROUD TRADITION: Weir, a veteran of Marion Laboratories Inc. and successor firms, was recruited by KU Cancer Center in 2006. One of his jobs has been to help integrate KU School of Pharmacy activities into the KU Cancer Center initiative. The KU School of Pharmacy has been among the top four U.S. pharmacy schools in terms of National Institutes of Health financing for the past several years. For the past 33 years, its department of pharmaceutical chemistry has held an NCI contract to formulate anti-cancer compounds into safely deliverable new drugs. During that time, the NCI has advanced 17 new drugs into clinical trials. Seven of those were formulated at KU, including four that won regulatory approval and made it to market.

KEY PLAYER: Dr. Valentino Stella, a KU distinguished professor of pharmaceutical chemistry, has been principal investigator for the NCI contract for 25 years. Before that, he assisted with the department’s formulation of Taxol, whose active ingredient originally was extracted from the bark of the Pacific yew tree. At the time, Stella said, the industry wasn’t interested in developing anti-cancer drugs because the market wasn’t deemed lucrative. Taxol, a multibillion-dollar drug, changed that, he said.

THE NANOTAX TRIAL: Taxol is used to treat ovarian, breast and other forms of cancer. One problem is that it is delivered in a harsh solution called Cremophor, which causes serious allergic reactions in some patients. Working with Bala Subramaniam at the KU School of Engineering and others, Stella helped reformulate Taxol into extremely small, water-soluble particles. The technology was licensed to a Lawrence-based startup, CritiTech Inc., and has been tested in animals by Katherine Roby, a researcher at KU Medical Center. Phase I human trials of the new drug — Nanotax — are scheduled to begin in June at KU Hospital’s outpatient cancer center in Westwood. That will make it the first cancer drug to be developed all the way from the bench to the bedside within the KU system.

COLLABORATION: The KU Cancer Center’s goal is to establish KU as the No. 1 academic institution in advancing anti-cancer agents from discovery to patients. But the Office of Therapeutics, Discovery and Development also collaborates with KU Cancer Center partner institutions, external academia, industry and disease-specific advocacy groups. In fact, many of the 34 cancer drugs in its pipeline involve such collaborations.

SHARED RESOURCES: In October, Weir’s office recruited a new deputy director, Sitta Sittampalam, a veteran of Eli Lilly & Co. He will co-lead two of KU Cancer Center’s shared resources programs: flow cytometry, a method of sorting and measuring cells; and high-throughput screening, through which a library of 120,000 compounds can be tested against drug targets. Weir is co-leading another shared resource that aids in drug formulation, and he or his deputy director will co-lead three more drug-related shared resources in the development stage. The Office of Therapeutics, Discovery and Development also provides oversight management for the drug projects in its pipeline, and it meets with KU Cancer Center’s multidisciplinary disease working groups to identify opportunities for new drug projects. The working groups, which bring together a variety of clinical professionals, will focus on seven types of cancer.

Rob Roberts
More clinical trials help link new drugs to patients

DESCRIPTION: Improving access to clinical trials is a key piece of the University of Kansas Cancer Center’s initiative to receive National Cancer Institute designation. Dr. Karen Kelly, deputy director of KUCC, said the staff has been working to make sure all of the parts are in place to apply for NCI designation.

That includes getting infrastructure to support clinical trials up and running and preparing research nurses to work with clinicians, understand the data and screen patients for trials. KUCC has been putting a budget in place and making sure the center’s institutional review board is managing the process to ensure adherence to the extensive regulatory guidelines imposed on all trials by the National Institutes of Health.

The center’s office staff has grown from three to 22 in the past year, and Kelly said she looks for it to continue to grow.

WHY NCI: Kelly said the crux of what NCI designation will do for KUCC is enable the center to take cancer research from bench to bedside. A trial will be opening in mid-June for Nanotax, a drug designed to treat ovarian cancer and which was created at the KU Medical Center. Kelly said she hopes to have more medications like this created locally.

“There are lots of trials out there, but what we really want to do is create ideas … and be well positioned to become leaders in drug discovery and examine and evaluate (medications) in patients here,” she said.

PHASE 1 TRIALS: Because being a generator of new drugs is an important part of KUCC’s progress toward NCI designation, Kelly said KUCC is focusing on completing a program to support phase 1 clinical trials. These trials are the first time a drug is introduced in humans.

“It is very important that we mesh that first step of getting into patients with a premier, comprehensive program,” she said.

Kelly said phase 1 is unlike later trials because it monitors many factors, including what the drug is doing in patients’ bodies, what concentrations to use and how to evaluate side effects.

Phase 2 and 3 trials will be at the center’s Westwood campus. Phase 1 trials will be at a building in Fairway that has been bought by the Hall Family Foundation. The building will be donated to KU Medical Center should the Johnson County Research Triangle Initiative pass in November, Kelly said.

PATIENT POPULATION: To apply for NCI designation, an organization needs to have 10 percent of its total patient population in clinical trials. KUCC has between 6 percent and 7 percent in trials, and Kelly projected that by year’s end, KUCC will be close to 10 percent. But the center is aiming higher than that in coming years because she said a majority of cancer centers have between 12 percent and 15 percent of patients in trials.

The patients will participate in clinical trials at KUCC, and all of the Midwest Cancer Alliance hospitals in Kansas that have the infrastructure and staff to host trials: KU Hospital, Hutchinson Hospital in Hutchinson, Mt. Carmel Regional Medical Center in Pittsburg and Stormont-Vail HealthCare in Topeka.

Goodland Regional Medical Center in Goodland is a member but does not yet have the infrastructure set up for trials.

Kelly also said the center actively recruits by sending out a booklet of available trials to physicians. In June, KUCC will launch a Web site where patients can learn about trials.

LOOKING AHEAD: KUCC is undertaking more than 100 trials. Kelly estimated that KUCC will double its trials to around 200 once the phase 1 program is up and running and NCI designation is accomplished.

“We’re all about helping patients with cancer, and the best way to do that is through science,” Kelly said. “Understanding the biology of cancer and attacking it.”

Tammy Worth
Building blocks of research remain basic to NCI efforts

DESCRIPTION: The root of the pathway to National Cancer Institute designation is basic research, or basic biology. This is early discovery research and hypothesis testing, which can provide new strategies for diagnosing cancer early or improving the quality of life of cancer survivors. Basic research is the first link in the bench-to-bedside model. It provides ideas for a cure that can go to clinical trials, produces new diagnostic techniques or helps solve unanticipated problems that arise during clinical work, said Brian Petroff, assistant professor of internal medicine and co-leader of the Cancer Prevention & Survivorship group at the University of Kansas Cancer Center.

THE RESEARCH LINK: Once a cancer center receives NCI designation, it becomes more competitive for financing from the National Institutes of Health, and more and higher-quality research typically is undertaken, Petroff said.

One purpose of a cancer center is to enable everyone to communicate better, from basic scientists to those operating clinical trials. Petroff said KUCC already has increased the amount of team projects and collaboration in preparation for designation.

"That’s one of the things you are evaluated on — the breadth and depth of science and the amount of interaction that is going on with research." Petroff said.

"One of the exciting things about having designation is the capability of taking ideas through preclinical testing to the bedside to test them in trials here in Kansas City without having to look somewhere else."

PILOT FINANCING: Another opportunity for scientists and investigators once NCI designation has been achieved is pilot money for new projects. Petroff said small amounts of money are provided to perform “early hypothesis testing.”

This is important for investigators who have an idea but not enough preliminary data to compete for financing on a national level. Pilot money is provided to generate data to either move forward or find out the hypothesis is incorrect. He said that most cancer centers have some pilot financing but that those with designation have much more money to offer.

Tammy Worth

County: Jackson

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Eventful marketing

BY M. STEELE BROWN | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

EPIC Entertainment Inc. saw that the path forward lay in backing into each success. A decade and three straight years of profitability on its balance sheet later, that plan has proved out.

A Kansas City-based event production company with a unique bent on party planning, EPIC mixes an ability to throw a spectacular gala with a laser-focused marketing strategy that brings clients their desired results.

Principal and COO Bill Hartnett said that as companies large and small look for new ways to market themselves, many are beginning to stamp their brand identity on all events — everything from sales meetings, customer and employee functions, and product launches to the odd 5K or charitable fund-raiser.

Offering its event planning, video production and entertainment services for a wide variety of venues, EPIC gives clients the ability to entertain a target demographic while delivering an important and memorable message that sticks with attendees.

“What we focus on is helping our clients with the events they put on as part of the marketing mix their company employs,” he said. “We help by identifying certain targets and focusing the event on meeting those objectives in the end.”

OSCAR-WINNING PERFORMANCES

EPIC’s unique strategy proved especially flexible for PRA International Inc., a drug-development company based in Raleigh, N.C., that recently opened a 13,000-square-foot, 80-bed testing clinic for early human trials in Lenexa.

Olo Szyleyko, PRA’s local global product manager for early development services, said the company wanted to introduce itself to the community and show off its new facility with a grand opening. He said he chose EPIC because its roots in the community gave it the pull to bring in the kind of guests he wanted to attract.

“They brought in the Kansas secretary of commerce and a number of dignitaries from the county, just to name a few, but most importantly, they covered the whole event from beginning to

SEE EPIC | 20
EPIC: ‘Pie-in-sky’ ideas come back ‘10 times beyond what we were thinking’ client says
FROM PAGE 19

end,” Szylleko said. “They provided a great band and good catering that was elegant but not opulent. It was wonderful they understood that was the point: to allow people to come in and talk and learn about the clinic in a nice friendly way without any pressure.’"

What really set EPIC apart were the tour guides it provided, he said.

“I asked Bill to provide guides who were well-versed in each region of the clinic,” he said. “So EPIC hired people and taught them enough about the lab to answer questions in specific areas.

“They started the tour with a discussion in one particular area and handed the group off to another guide in each new area. Maybe what we do is not the core of (EPICs) business, but things went so smoothly it was impossible to tell.”

Parris Communications has partnered with EPIC in a variety of ways, Senior Vice President Laurie Roberts said.

“We can give them pie-in-sky, and they come back with something 10 times beyond what we were thinking,” she said. “They produce an annual fund-raiser for us every year – the night out for the Boys’ and Girls’ Club – which always has a celebrity keynote speaker, and they are charged with tying an event into the speaker’s persona. One year we had John Travolta, so they came up with the idea to auction off a dance with him.”

“Not only did they get him to agree to do it; he liked the idea so much he agreed to do two. Each of those dances raised $35,000 apiece. That pretty well sums up what EPIC brings to an event.”

THE SCRIPT

Hartnett said EPIC “builds” an event to meet goals using what he calls a “story art process” that begins with the end in mind.

“We start with the customer’s end objective – how do you want this to end up?” he said. “For example, a company may have an event at which it might touch 10,000 interested customers. I want to know what you want them to think and feel, what you want them to remember after it is over.”

Once EPIC has figured that out, its team then works back from that end objective, figuring out how best to tell that story. What is the company’s brand essence? Who is the target demographic? What are best ways to get there?

“We are sort of chunking back through it and building the event in a sort of ‘want-based’ way, figuring out ways to help identify those customers and tell them the client’s story and hope it hits,” Hartnett said. “We basically back into a plan we can execute, and the plan gets us back to where we started.”

OPENING ACT

Officially spun off from Kansas City’s Starlight Theatre in 2003, EPIC is the brainchild of a local kid who got his first job working backstage for the historic theater at age 16.

After working at Starlight “for a long time,” Hartnett left in 1996 to become the director of events and entertainment at Universal Studios Orlando.

“That job was a great training ground and really allowed me to see entertainment through a marketing lens,” he said.

Hartnett was responsible for putting on an average of 1,500 events a year, from public relations events for the corporation and seasonal events at the theme park to broadcasts for local radio stations from throughout the country.

All of this, Hartnett said, taught him how to find the clients and, more important, how to find the things necessary to keep them. EPIC is present at trade shows and event marketing field gatherings, is active in the Kansas City branch of Meeting Planners International and constantly is strengthening and expanding its network.

“We’ve built up some key alliances with some of our vendors that allow us to build our service offerings while keeping our overhead manageable,” Hartnett said. “This allows us to get the client what they want instead of trying to sell them something we already have.”

Hartnett also keeps EPIC involved in the community, putting his creative energies behind nonprofit events such as the Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs fund-raiser and staying active in the Helzberg Entrepreneurial Mentoring Program (HEMP), where he just started a term as chairman.

“The best thing we get out of HEMP is the networking,” he said. “Being a business owner or leader, there are not always lots of people to seek advice from, but HEMP helps me get the questions answered to get us where we need to go.”

EXTENDED RUN

EPIC recently added the University of Kansas and Bill Self, coach of the 2008 NCAA national champion basketball team, to its roster of nonprofit clients.

“We were just hired by Coach Self’s new Assist Foundation to help with the ‘Bill’s Basketball Boogie’ event out at the Kansas Speedway on June 7,” Hartnett said. “I’m sure glad he stayed in town because this event really has the potential to grow. (The foundation) is doing good work – building athletic facilities and programs to help kids learn to lead healthy lives and get them out of bad cycles.”
And just like its clients, EPIC will continue to grow as well.

M. Steele Brown | Brown is a freelance writer in the Kansas City area.
LAWRENCE — The University of Kansas will host a state recognition program at 1:30 p.m. Sunday, June 1, at the Lied Center for about 400 academically talented seventh-grade students selected for the 2008 Duke University Talent Identification Program.

Seventh-grade students Kyle E. Addington and Marcus M. Houghton, both of McPherson, have been selected to attend.
A senior atmospheric science major at the University of Kansas, Jennifer Jones is a storm chaser during severe weather season. Her ambition is to earn a PhD and become chief meteorologist on the FOX News Network in New York City.

A more immediate goal is to educate the public on child abuse and prevention. She has created an interactive website where children can learn about personal safety and has worked with Child Abuse Prevention Services (C.A.P.S.) in Salina for 10 years and for the past year at Sunflower House of Shawnee.

She is a featured twirler for the Marching Jayhawks, was a member of the 2000 United States twirling competition team that competed in France, and was a featured performer at the 2008 Orange Bowl.

She was the lead performer in the KL production of “Die a la Mode” in 2005 and “Phantom of the Library” in 2007. She is also a successful fund-raiser, helping raise more than $1000,000 for children of Sunflower House.

She works as a math and science tutor, as a TV news meteorologist on KUJH Channel 31, and is a Big Sister with BBBS of Douglas County.

A 22-year-old from Salina, Jones maintains a 4.0 grade point average.

She will perform a vocal solo for her talent competition.
Matthew Roesner

Matthew Roesner is currently the General Manager, U-verse and Employee Development at AT&T Inc, based out of Kansas City.

Born in Salina, Mr. Roesner began his career with Southwestern Bell Telephone in 1991 in the consumer sales and marketing organization in San Antonio, Texas. He then progressed through a series of leadership positions in network and marketing, including an international assignment in Johannesburg, South Africa where in 1998 he was named president of Intekom PTY Ltd, a wholly owned Internet subsidiary. He also served on the Intekom Board of Directors from 1998-2001.

Additionally, Mr. Roesner has served as Senior Executive of Subsidiary Operations and as executive of Program Management. Before his current role with AT&T, Mr. Roesner was in various General Management positions within Central Sales Operations and most recently was responsible for local market programs in the state of Kansas and the Kansas City metro, launching AT&T’s U-verse portfolio.

Mr. Roesner holds a master’s degree in Business Administration from the University of Lancaster in England with an undergraduate degree in Business from the University of Kansas.

Mr. Roesner is a resident in Parkville, Mo, residing with his wife and two children.
Local students to attend University of Kansas recognition program

The University of Kansas will host a state recognition program at 1:30 p.m. Sunday, June 1, at the Lied Center for about 400 academically talented seventh-grade students selected for the 2008 Duke University Talent Identification Program.

Selection to Duke TIP is based on college entrance exam scores that are in the top 5 percent while the student are in middle school. Students participate by taking either the SAT or ACT national achievement tests. Working with host academic institutions such as KU, Duke TIP sponsors 35 ceremonies in its 16-state talent search region.

The Duke program is in its 28th year, and this is the 10th year KU has hosted the Kansas recognition program. In addition to Kansans, additional students taking part in the activities are Missouri residents form the Kansas City metropolitan area or towns near the Kansas-Missouri state line. Information tables to answer students' and parents' questions about various KU programs and activities will be available in the Lied Center lobby during the recognition event.

The local students that are to take part in the Duke TIP are, Karsten A. Creech and Gary W. England of Baxter Springs.

Chance M. Hunley and Brandon S. Ledford of Columbus.


After 34 years of driving buses for USD 493, Jerry Watkins, retired last week. A retirement party was held Thursday for Watkins as his fellow drivers wished him well.
Recycalusa, the recycling program for the Wakarusa Music Festival, is headed by two K-State alumni. The program includes over 140 volunteers from K-State, KU, and people across the nation.

Manhattan, Kan., May 22, 2008: The Wakarusa Music Festival will take place at Clinton State Park, approximately 10 miles south of Lawrence, this June 5th through 8th. The festival will host 15,000 people per day as well as accommodate over 100 bands on 5 stages.

For the fourth year in a row, two K-State Alumni will run the recycling program for the music festival, called Recycalusa. Becky Clark, Fort Scott, is a May 2007 cum laude graduate with a Bachelors of Science in Biology, and Rylan Ortiz, Overland Park, is a May 2008 graduate with a Bachelors of Science in Electrical Engineering.

Formed in 2005 as the pilot recycling program for the festival, Recycalusa began and continues to be a grassroots program started by Students for Environmental Action (SEA) at K-State. Since then, Recycalusa has formed a coalition with the KU Environs and now involves over 140 volunteers from SEA, the KU Environs, and people from the entire nation.

In its four years of existence, Recycalusa has diverted over 25,000 pounds of recycling from the Kansas landfills. It has also received over $2,500 in proceeds from recycling aluminum cans, all of which is given back to SEA, the KU Environs, and a local not-for-profit organization of SEA’s choice.
Film student honored

Allison A. Chase of Iola, a junior theater and film major at the University of Kansas in Lawrence and daughter of Robert and Jackie Chase, has received a Brian Ten Eyck Davis Award through the Department of Theatre and Film at KU.

Students were honored May 9 at Crafton-Preyer Theatre, and the 2007-08 Film Awards Spectacular, featuring the announcement of the Tensie Awards, was May 16 at Liberty Hall.