

Innovators

Out of necessity, help for cancer patients

Heated massage chairs provide patient comfort

When Robert Check was diagnosed with breast cancer in early 2001, his business of manufacturing flexible heating elements for aftermarket seat heaters and hot bags for food-delivery chains became a second priority.

But Check Corp.'s business, its president soon discovered, would turn out to be a saving grace.

Though rare in men, breast cancer comes with many of the same grave dangers as it does in women. The same disease killed Check's mother, and his sister also was diagnosed with it.

Check, who also was diagnosed with prostate cancer, underwent a dual mastectomy in May 2001

Know an innovator?

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and began a regimen of chemotherapy at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

As much as anything else, Check "froze my butt off" as the intravenous chemotherapy medications circulating through his bloodstream



Check

company's office and began working to develop a heated seat that could give comfort to cancer and kidney dialysis patients whose body temperatures routinely drop drastically during treatment.

Freelance reporter Todd Davis talked with Check about how his company came to develop heat-massage chairs for cancer patients.

Q.: Tell us about your cancer diagnosis?

A.: In early 2001, I noticed a lump on my right breast. It was

at room temperature lowered his body temperature. "Suddenly, something clicked," he said.

After his second treatment, Check went back to his company's office and began working to develop a heated seat that could give comfort to cancer and kidney dialysis patients whose body temperatures routinely drop drastically during treatment.

very small, and I mentioned it to my wife. She gave me a funny look. I had no clue about breast cancer. That April, I had a breast exam and my internist sent me for a mammogram. At the end of April, I saw a surgeon, and on May 1, Jim Robbins at Beaumont Hospital did a biopsy. They told me the chances were slim it would be malignant.

On May 4, he called to tell me it was cancer. We scheduled a double mastectomy.

I went through chemotherapy. It started June 7. I had my first chemotherapy treatment. After that, that's when I realized, I'm freezing my butt off. They gave me this intravenous chemotherapy at room temperature, and something just clicked.

Q.: Tell us the problem that

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you wanted to solve for chemotherapy and dialysis patients?

A.: Our goal is to help clinics provide state-of-the-art cancer care for patients and caring for them in a way nobody's done yet. To better care for them in a weakened physical and mental state, the key is to make things as comfortable as technology allows.

We donated the first few chairs to the Rose Cancer Clinic at Beaumont Hospital.

Q.: How complicated was it to adapt the technology to clinic chairs?

A.: It took us a little time to come up with the product. In this business, people tell us every day what we should heat up. We had all the testing done for another manufacturer looking at developing a chair for hospital use, but they dropped it, so we had a lot of the specifications already qualified for hospital use.

Q.: What companies are in the loop in terms of manufacturing?

A.: Without naming names, manufacturers of clinical and in-hospital chairs. We're shipping product to one company so far. There are four or five various manufacturers who make these types of chairs (that) we'd like to supply to eventually.

Q.: Why not just heat fluid in dialysis and chemo treatment process?

A.: I don't know why they don't. I think it's difficult to regulate the temperature.

Q.: From a business perspective, how important could this be?

A.: I think there are 3,500-4,000 dialysis outpatient centers (and) inpatient clinics in the U.S., with 20-30 chairs each. But being these products are new, it's going to take some time to get them on the budgets. There are very few of these heated chairs in use today, but as the numbers grow, I believe demand will grow.

Q.: What do you see as the moral to this story – how necessity breeds innovation yet, too, the larger picture of what this means to you personally and your company?

A.: This is bringing better care to those people who desperately need it at an important time in their lives, and giving something back. Everybody in the company knows this is my pet project. Obviously we're in business to grow and to make a profit, but if you can help people and accomplish your entrepreneurial goals, you're really doing something.

I really believe that and think more entrepreneurs should have those goals.

Q.: Are you still in remission?

A.: Yes. May 15, 2001, I had my surgery ... so I've been in remission five years.