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# A new approach to tumor biopsies

By **ALAN DESSOFF**

Special to The Daily Record

The diagnosis and treatment of cancer are undergoing dramatic change as knowledge of genetics improves and new targeted drugs are discovered and tested. However, the effectiveness of new diagnostic tests and treatments has been limited by methods of sampling and preserving cancer tissue, which date to the 19th century.

That is likely to change as a result of a project underway at **BioMarker Strategies**, a 4-year-old company in the **Johns Hopkins Science + Technology Park** in East Baltimore.

Under a Fast-Track Small Business Innovative Research contract it received last fall from the **National Cancer Institute**, BioMarker Strategies is developing an innovative approach to the biopsy of tumors to enable oncologists to determine the most effective drug treatment for their cancer patients. Called SnapPath, it is “a testing platform that would allow for personalized medicine for patients,” said Kären Olson, the company’s CEO.

Biomarkers are molecules whose detection may indicate the particular state of a disease. Currently, Olson explained, doctors treat cancer patients based on guidelines from past clinical trials. “You as a patient are an individual but you are being treated as a statistic,” she said.

The promise of the SnapPath system is the ability to test live tumor



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

**BioMarker Strategies' CEO, Kären Olson, says SnapPath will 'predict the specific type of treatment you would need to help kill your cancer. It tests live cells rather than dead samples.'**

cells quickly to determine the most effective drug treatment for individual patients. SnapPath will “predict the specific type of treatment you would need to help kill your cancer,” Olson explained.

SnapPath’s key distinguishing feature is its focus on “the testing of live cells rather than dead samples,” which is not possible using current tissue-processing methods, emphasized Scott Allocco, president of BioMarker Strategies.

The company raised approximately \$1.7 million last year from private investors, including the **Abell Foundation**, to support development of SnapPath. It also is developing a series of biomarker tests to help guide the use of targeted cancer therapeutics.

The NCI contract provided an initial award of \$254,000 for the first phase of work on SnapPath, to develop a device for the system, and the company will be eligible to receive an additional \$2 million when that is completed.

Olson credits Dr. Douglas P. Clark, BioMarker Strategies’ chief scientific officer and also a professor of pathology and oncology at the **Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions**, with coming up with the concept for SnapPath. The company makes it clear that Clark, who has been at the forefront of efforts to integrate molecular biomarkers into the field of pathology, maintains his affiliations with Johns Hopkins and BioMarker Strategies with the approval of the Johns Hopkins

Conflict of Interest Committee.

"I really think BioMarker Strategies is one of the better health science start-ups in the Baltimore area," said David J. Fink, director of entrepreneurial services at the **bwtech@umbc** incubator and accelerator at the **University of Maryland, Baltimore County**. "They are working on a good project and certainly are capable of doing an excellent job."

With SnapPath, Biomarker Strategies is operating in "a competitive field but also a timely one," added David S. Block, president and CEO of **Gliknik**, another Baltimore-based company that develops new therapies for patients with cancer and autoimmune/inflammatory diseases. Its expertise is modulation of the immune system. "We have been able to help each other on a variety of strategic and entrepreneurial issues," Block said.

Meanwhile, Olson, who received an MBA from what is now **Loyola University Maryland** and is completing her M.S. in biotechnology at Johns Hopkins, serves on the boards of directors of several private companies and nonprofit organizations, including the



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**Olson's company, BioMarker Strategies, raised approximately \$1.7 million last year from private investors, including the Abell Foundation.**

**Sellinger Business School** Board of Sponsors at Loyola. She also is an instructor in the national award-winning ACTiVATE program for women entrepreneurs at UMBC.

She has received many honors for her professional achievements, including Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year, Smart Woman's Woman of the

Year, and the Greater Baltimore Committee's 2009 Leadership in Bioscience awards.

Olson likes to be involved in a wide range of professional and business activities, she said, as a way to "have my hand on the pulse of what is happening" and also to "give back" to the biotechnology industry.

## Expanding >> Forensic center to open this summer

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capital is very tough to find these days," says Jim Hughes, president of **UMB BioPark**. "This has meant that companies have not expanded as quickly as they would wish and that they have to do more with less. When it is harder to raise money, everything slows down."

Nonetheless, the two UMB buildings currently open have five drug development companies and another

five that sell their services to biotech companies.

"These companies are alive and well, but they are just not expanding as quickly as possible," notes Hughes. "In January, several new companies moved in."

On the horizon is the new Forensic Center, which is expected to be completed this summer. The center will help retain 100 jobs in the city.

In partnership with the **University**

**of Maryland Smith School of Business**, which has been offering courses on a small scale in Baltimore for 10 years in the **School of Nursing**, the biopark is offering employees of its companies the opportunity to complete an MBA.

"Most biotech people do not understand hard-core business skills," says Hughes. "Having an MBA will make it easier for them to become more entrepreneurial."