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Researching Success

by Suzanne Schreiner

In his mind's eye, Lewis Rumpler can picture the Institute for Systems Medicine. The picture features hundreds of high-paying jobs and medical advances being developed — not in Seattle, but right here in Spokane. All it's going to take to realize is about \$100 million, a building and a couple hundred researchers.

So far, Spokane County has already contributed \$250,000 to support the planning stages of the project. In the state Legislature, there's a \$1 million budget request pending — and with the political support of lawmakers like state Sen. Lisa Brown, Rumpler is optimistic. "The Institute could be a poster child for the Life Sciences Discovery Fund," he adds, referring to funds from the state tobacco settlement initiative that will begin to flow to research projects in 2008.

But the project to develop a private biomedical research institute in Spokane is still in its infancy. "There are lots of things being discussed, but nothing is set," says Rumpler, who until December was CEO of INTEC and is now executive director of ISM. "It's a very dynamic project, and there are a lot of different milestones ... to achieve success."

Right now, Rumpler is focused on generating a prospectus, the business plan for the Institute, which he would like to complete in the next three to four months as a guide for potential investors.

"Why an Institute like this?" asks Rumpler rhetorically. "First, you have a highly collaborative medical enterprise. You've got two medical centers [Sacred Heart and Deaconess] that are willing to collaborate. But they really have not developed substantial research activities on their own." Though the idea for ISM centered on Gonzaga initially, Rumpler says it is not "GU-centric" anymore; now it's an equal partnership of GU, WSU, Empire Health Services and Providence Health Care.

"It's really talking about translational medicine," says Rumpler, "taking basic discovery and bringing it to the clinic as quickly as possible" — what researchers describe as "bench to bedside." This would be basic science that is targeted at clinical applications from the start, he adds.

To address disease, Rumpler says you must fully understand how the system works — thus the name "Systems Medicine."

"If you don't understand the biological system," he says, "it's very difficult to identify the best possible way to generate a therapy." So rather than simply addressing symptoms, systems biology deals with the root cause of the disease. These are the kinds of things, says Rumpler, that Dr. Lee Hood is doing at the much-heralded Institute for Systems Biology in Seattle.

The Translational Genomics Research Center in Phoenix, known as TGen, is the model upon which the Institute is pinning its hopes. "This is an example of how you can build an asset based on the strategic direction of the community," Rumpler says. Begun in 2002, TGen had 250 employees by 2006, he says. About \$200 million was raised, with \$50 million kicked in by the city of Phoenix alone. Though Rumpler concedes that Phoenix is much larger than Spokane, he points out that Spokane is the second-largest city in the state, and that the funds contributed so far demonstrate that political support is there. "It's a very powerful idea. It's one that links the key assets for our region, which are higher education and health care." Rumpler calls it a "catalytic activity," one that can "bring resources that didn't exist before and build critical mass that we don't have right now."

Dr. Kathy Tuttle, director of research at the Heart Institute, thinks ISM shows great promise. If the promise is realized, she believes it is "where science will happen" because it will bring high-level people from outside the community, from whose research profitable companies will eventually emerge.

It may sound like a big dream for a smallish city, but Rumpler says there are assets in the area that can be tapped. "This community raised a \$100 million for street repair. McCarthy [Athletic Center at GU] was just built with \$25 million of private money. I think there is capacity."

Can the funds be raised? Will the Institute succeed in attracting researchers who will bring discoveries from "bench to bedside" and improve health care in the state? Only time will tell.

"We're going to have to run the experiment," says Rumpler. "You can't achieve great things without taking some risk."

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