

Non Profit Company of the Year



By Bill Virgin for Seattle Business Magazine

FROM THE PRINT EDITION
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1, 2011

Orthopedic surgery is a standard feature of medical care in the developed world. But, in developing countries, it's often not even available—and when it's not, what might seem to be a routine broken bone can leave a patient permanently disabled.

The Surgical Implant Generation Network (SIGN) is seeking to change that picture. Founded in 1999 by Dr. Lewis Zirkle, who had been an orthopedic surgeon in the U.S. Army in Vietnam, Richland-based SIGN is a nonprofit that designs and manufactures surgical kits featuring a nail-and-screw system that can be implanted without the need for surgical imaging or other expensive equipment or facilities rarely found in developing countries. SIGN not only makes and assembles the surgical kits, but also trains doctors in their use. SIGN says that, since 1999, more than 200 hospitals in 48 countries have treated a total of 70,000 patients using its system.

SIGN relies mainly on donations to fund its production, which grew by 33 percent from 2009 to 2010; employment was up 12 percent. Its nonprofit status makes it even more attuned to lean manufacturing concepts. By collecting packing peanuts and cardboard boxes from local companies and consumers, SIGN hasn't had to buy either item for three years, and it has reduced by half the average cost to manufacture surgical nails since 2008.

The company continues to innovate. It has launched a pilot project for a hip-repair system in eight countries, and is developing a pediatric implant to treat children ages 10 to 16 with badly broken bones.

*Seattle Business Magazine • Article written by Bill Virgin • Featured in the June 2011 Issue
Posted to seattlebusinessmag.com on Wednesday, June 1, 2011. View the original post at:
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