

Nonprofit SIGN gets innovation award from Tri-Cities Research District



by Drew Foster

What started 15 years ago as a pilot program to better treat bone fractures in Southeast Asia has blossomed into a worldwide health care initiative for SIGN Fracture Care International, a Richland nonprofit.

The company is being recognized today by the Tri-Cities Research District with the inaugural Innovative Partner of the Year award.

The awards ceremony is scheduled for 10:30 a.m. at SIGN's orthopedic implant manufacturing facility on Hills Street in Richland.

An open house will follow at 4 p.m.

About 135,000 bone fracture patients worldwide have been treated with Dr. Lewis Zirkle's SIGN intramedullary nail since 1999. The nail is inserted into the canal of the broken bone and eliminates the need for traction, greatly reduces hospitalization time and lowers the chance of complications arising from surgery.

About 25,000 SIGN IM nails were sold or distributed to 280 hospitals in 52 countries last year.

The nail is used to treat tibia, femur, hip and humerus fractures in adults and children. SIGN is developing nails that can be used to treat fractures that enter joints, which should be available in four to six months, Zirkle said.

Gary Spanner, Tri-City Research District board of directors chairman, called SIGN a "model of invention and advancement."

"SIGN grew from a small nonprofit to making a major worldwide impact right here in the research district, and they aren't slowing down," Spanner said. "Their implant designs and technical innovations are nothing short of life-altering for the more than 130,000 patients treated to date."

The Tri-Cities Research District encompasses 1,700 acres in Richland and has five major landowners -- Battelle, DOE, Port of Benton, Washington State University-Tri-Cities and a private developer.

The district's executive director, Diahann Howard, called SIGN's rise from innovative startup to international provider "a home run."

"I think that's the perfect story," Howard said. "We have a great medical device that's being manufactured locally and sent all over the world."

The first SIGN IM nails were used in 1999 in Vietnam and Thailand. CEO Jeanne Dillner said the pilot program was designed to see that surgeons would accept the new device and had the skills to perform the procedure. Fifteen years later, 5,000 doctors worldwide have been trained to use it.

Before the implementation of the IM nail procedure, patients often were laid up for months after a bone fracture. They weren't able to work or provide for their families.

But with the procedure, patients can "come in on Friday, have surgery Saturday and go home on Sunday or Monday," Dillner said.

The nail is designed to remain in the bone forever, but many patients in developing countries -- especially in Asia -- opt to have the nail removed after the fracture has healed, perhaps for cultural reasons, Dillner said.

The company donates 70 percent of its nails and sells the rest to hospitals and nonprofits on a cost-reimbursement basis.

"This award really goes to the whole SIGN family -- the staff here in the Tri-Cities and the 5,000 trained surgeons around the world," Zirkle said.

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