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BUSINESS CITY LIFE

Ever Vigilant

February 1, 2017 Dori Zinn





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Fort Lauderdale company is becoming an international leader in oral cancer prevention.



For Matthew Kim, the idea for his company came when he was taking his mother to doctor visits for her cancer treatments.

She was on her third battle with oral cancer, while Kim had a consulting firm and the fortunate flexibility to take her to her chemotherapy, radiation and rehabilitation.

“It was then that I started learning more about oral cancer,” Kim says. “I’m an attorney by training, but an entrepreneur by passion.”

His business aspirations and desire are what got him to start the Fort Lauderdale-based Vigilant Biosciences, maker of products that help in the early detection of oral cancer. “When I started this, I was looking at different products on the market and there was nothing about early detection,” Kim says. “I was looking at different products in the pipeline and eventually found innovative technology at the University of Miami.”

Kim contacted UM about their work on early detection for oral and throat cancers, and Dr. Elizabeth Franzmann joined Vigilant as the Scientific Founder and Chief Scientific Officer.

“I like the technology at UM and through some of the funding resources [through the school], we were able to get investments in Florida,” Kim says. “We wanted to be close to UM and attract groups from all over South Florida.” Kim has been in South Florida since 2015; Vigilant is based in Fort Lauderdale.

Kim was born in South Korea but grew up just outside of Atlanta. While his mother is a Stage IV cancer survivor, his father passed away in 2015 from long-term side effects of the disease. Although both parents had been diagnosed, it was Kim's mother that wasn't a "typical risk profile" for oral cancer. Vigilant Biosciences was created in part to help detect cancer earlier than it was for Kim's mother.

According to the Oral Cancer Foundation, almost 50,000 Americans are diagnosed every year with oral cancer, and close to one-fifth of those will die from the disease. Worldwide, more than 450,000 cases are diagnosed every year, but those are only reported cases. Oral cancer deaths are higher than other cancers, like cervical, Hodgkin's lymphoma, and laryngeal cancers.

The Foundation says that death rates in oral cancer are high because it is found late in its development, as it was with Kim's mother. "Often oral cancer is only discovered when the cancer has metastasized to another location," the Foundation's website says. "At these later stages, the primary tumor has had time to invade deep into local structures."

Vigilant is hoping to stop late detections, and the world is noticing. By the end of 2016, the company had raised \$12.5 million since its creation 2011. Even with the huge funding success recently, Kim says it wasn't always easy.

"We ran into a lot of problems," he says. "We were bootstrapping for a while." This means Kim was running his company without any external funding and it survived on internal cash flow, with help from him and family support. Money was tight, but that changed a few years ago.

"We got our first round of funding in 2013. We've been around since 2011 but really didn't accelerate to the place we are now," Kim says. "Before [funding], we just met with a lot of groups to build the foundation."

Now, with almost four years of funding, Vigilant is already on track to make early oral cancer detection a reality. In Europe, the company's OncAlert Oral Cancer product line is hitting the market. Both the RAPID test and oral rinse are available early this year in Spain, Portugal and Germany.

"We have international doctors and clinical trials going on in Europe and India," Kim says. "With our product, we're looking to get data points soon."

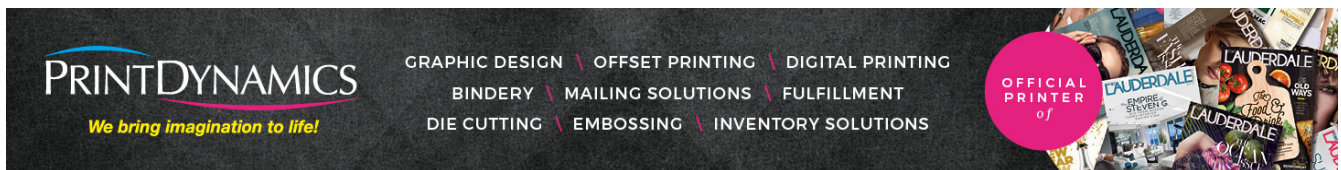
Right now, treatment typically follows a late diagnosis, but that's because in the United States, there isn't a comprehensive program to screen for oral cancers, the Oral

Cancer Foundation says. Kim is hoping to change that with the OncAlert line, which is not yet available in the US. The tests, Vigilant says, answer an unmet need of catching oral cancer earlier and in a completely non-invasive way. “One of the real dangers of this cancer is that in its early stages, it can go unnoticed,” the Foundation site says.

The only requirement for patients is to swish and gargle a little bit of the OncAlert saline for 10 seconds, spit into a specimen cup, and after 20 minutes, doctors will be able to see through a colorimetric result if cancer is detected. After that, doctors can do an examination on a patient’s head and neck to see if any visible irregularities are spotted. If cancer is detected early enough, treatment and intervention can help a patient fight and survive the disease — the ultimate goal of Vigilant.

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