



Weaving a tale of two med techs in Rhode Island

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In the suburban city of Warwick, R.I., there are two Stop & Shop supermarkets, a couple of Wal-Mart retail stores -- and now there will be a pair of bio-absorbable fabric companies.

The growing market for threads and patches compatible with the environs of the human body has fueled the expansions of both Concordia Medical and Biomedical Structures LLC in Rhode Island. Now the two medical device firms and sometime competitors are in the same industrial area near TF Green Airport. Concordia Medical, a unit of Concordia Manufacturing LLC, said last month it would relocate from its parent's facilities in Coventry, R.I.

"We're looking at a very ambitious growth curve," said Arthur Burghouwt, executive vice president of Concordia Medical. He said his company plans to begin operations Aug. 1 at its new facility at 60 Commerce Drive, which features five times as much clean-room space as its existing facility and will enable a sizable jump in output.

Concordia Medical produces polymer-based fabrics to serve as medical implants and scaffolds on which cells are planted to grow replacement tissues for patients. Concordia Manufacturing, an 88-year-old maker of industrial fabrics, has built the medical business in recent years with new backing from Ocean State investors and technology purchased from New York-based textile firm Albany International Corp.

Ironically, Albany International is where the founders of Biomedical Structures met each other before striking out on their own several years ago, said John Gray, president of the 5-year-old company. Gray also had his eyes on the same Albany technology that Concordia purchased in 2005 for its medical fabric business. "In fact, I wanted to buy that (equipment) and I got outbid," he said.

The equipment is used to make Concordia's trademarked Biofelt, a nonwoven material it crafts into squares, tubes and other shapes for use in medicine. Biomedical Structures makes its own nonwoven fabric it calls Scaftex. Concordia says the science behind Biofelt is rooted in research from the lab of renowned MIT professor Robert Langer.

Both companies have attracted big-name development partners. Concordia's Burghouwt said that his team works with such medical device giants as Johnson & Johnson of New Jersey, Boston Scientific Corp. of Natick, and St. Jude Medical Inc. of Minnesota, among others. Gray declined to say the names of his clients due to confidentiality agreements, but said they include large U.S. medical device firms.

It's tough to tell which of the privately owned firms has the edge in the market, as both declined to reveal financial details. And it's in no way a two-horse race: both Biomedical Structures and Concordia face competition from medical textile firms Atex Technologies Inc. of Pinebluff, N.C., Secant Medical in Perkasié, Pa., and others.