

Features

State-Owned Universities Get First Commercialization Success

REBECCA VANDERMEULEN | THURSDAY, JANUARY 31, 2013



PENNSYLVANIA STATE REP. MARIO SCAVELLO PURCHASES A LYME-AID TESTING KIT AT DUNKELBERGER'S -

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In 2010 she entered the kit into a campus business plan competition and won a [\\$3,000 state grant](#) to make a prototype. Over the next several months Huffman received another \$10,000 grant to develop the Lyme-Aid kit further, and various people from the university tapped their business networks to license it, manufacture it and get it in stores.

Ever been bitten by a tick and panicked over whether it gave you Lyme disease? Now you can find out in a few days by mailing the tick to a research lab in the Poconos.

In November a company founded by a student-faculty team at [East Stroudsburg University](#) launched its product, the [Lyme-Aid Diagnostic Tick Testing Kit](#). It grew out of [East Stroudsburg's Northeast Wildlife DNA Laboratory](#). And it happens to be the marketplace's first product that came from research at one of [Pennsylvania's 14 state-owned universities](#).

Jane Huffman, the lab's director, explains that it has been testing ticks for Lyme since 2006. Lyme-Aid was the brainchild of graduate student Melissa Shaw, who has since graduated and left the company.

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"How many people does it really take to commercialize one idea?" reflects Mary Frances Postupack, VP of Economic Development and Research Support at the university.

Simple and portable

Lyme disease is an illness spread by bites from blacklegged ticks. It's most [prevalent in the northeast, mid-Atlantic and upper Midwest](#). More than [24,000 cases were reported nationwide](#) in 2011, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Within a few days of being bitten by a tick that carries Lyme, people experience symptoms including a rash that looks like a bulls-eye, fever, chills and muscle aches. If left untreated Lyme can lead to arthritis, meningitis, loss of muscle tone in the face, and other maladies.

Shaw came up with the idea of a testing kit so more people could send ticks that they found on their children or pets.

"You can put them in your backpack," says Huffman, co-founder of Lyme-Aid. "You can keep them at home in case you have to deal with a tick."

The kit, which sells for \$5.99 on [Lyme-Aid's website](#), has everything needed to remove a tick and prepare it for testing. For an additional \$39.95, the lab at East Stroudsburg will examine the tick's DNA for the bacteria that causes Lyme disease. Huffman explains that a tick is ground up and its DNA is extracted. A lab test amplifies the DNA of the bacteria if the tick is carrying it, and a special dye shows whether the bacteria are present. People who send ticks for testing typically get results within three days.

The kit was first available for sale after the ticks' active season. Huffman is waiting to see how many ticks arrive for testing come spring.

"We don't have any idea how much volume we're going to have to deal with," she says.

The Lyme-Aid kit was licensed by [Garret Hewitt International](#), a Connecticut company that specializes in cosmetics and new inventions. Garrett Hewitt manufactures and sells the kits.

The Lyme-Aid kit was first available for sale in November at [Dunkelberger's Sports Outfitter](#) in Stroudsburg. Now it's on shelves at about 100 stores in 20 states, says Joe Orloski, Garrett Hewitt sales manager. He's receiving positive comments from national distributors and hopes to sell a half-million kits by 2014.

"I think we have an item that has a lot of potential," Orloski says.

New focus on commercialization

The 14 universities that belong to the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education were founded as regional teachers' colleges. They're still known mostly for their contributions to the communities in which they're based. But the colleges are dedicating more resources to their labs.

"Our faculty, especially our recently hired faculty, come with an expectation that they'll do research," says Angela Smith-Aumen, the system's director of

sponsored programs.

The Lyme-Aid kit is an example of the universities' new efforts at encouraging entrepreneurship. Smith-Aumen says one reason it was a likely candidate to be the system's first commercialized product is that it addressed an unfilled need among people with concerns about Lyme disease. "No one else has really marketed a product to help people deal with it," she says.

The system has also begun hosting an [annual business plan competition](#) and partnering with the [Penn State Research Foundation](#). The relationship with Penn State gives state-system faculty access to technology licensing officers who know what it takes to commercialize a product.

[Research at labs across the state](#) is pointing toward several new inventions, from a method to measure how quickly food spoils to a new kind of dental implant.

REBECCA VANDERMEULEN is a freelance writer who lives near Downingtown. As she tells friends out of state, that's between the cheesesteaks and the Amish. Send feedback [here](#).

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Trisha Scarcia-King

What a useful product! The many dog owners, hunters, fishermen, campers, etc. across the northeast will truly benefit from this invention! Business at it's best, filling a void in a beneficial way for a broad range of people! Kudos to the folks at ESU for fostering a good idea through to completion. A great way to showcase student initiatives. True Winning!

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Pamela Shupp

As a product of a state-owned university (Bloomsburg University) , I can attest to the fact that the spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship is alive and well in PA.

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