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Upper Valley innovators position NH as the next medtech hub

By Erica Swallow Special to the Union Leader

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Tracy Hutchins, president and executive director, UVBA and Greg Lange, UVMC steering committee chair (and chief business development officer of Simbex) for the Upper Valley MedTech Collaborative at Simbex in Lebanon.

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California, Minnesota and Massachusetts have become known for thriving medical technology hubs. A group of innovators in the Upper Valley aims to add New Hampshire to the list.

Founded in January 2020, the Upper Valley MedTech Collaborative wants to promote a vibrant medtech community in the Upper Valley region, which includes the cities of Hanover, Norwich and Lebanon, among other surrounding towns in New Hampshire and Vermont.

The collaborative hosts networking and educational events that bring medtech professionals from the region together to learn from one another.

“If you bring all of these groups together, the collective will help the medtech ecosystem grow,” says Greg Lange, UVMTC steering committee chair, also the chief business development office at medical device design, development and commercialization firm Simbex. “We bring the community together around funding, product development, regulatory issues, distribution and the many challenges founders face.”

The collaborative’s first event, held in March just before the COVID-19 pandemic halted in-person gatherings, was attended by representatives from 30 to 40 local medtech entities. The founding team realized they were onto something.

“Because of Dartmouth College, the strong engineering discipline there, the affiliation with Dartmouth-Hitchcock (Medical Center), the giant academic center and all of the companies that have grown around that community, there is really an opportunity for innovation,” Lange says. “This is growing on the heels of some of the early biotech and life sciences work done in the region, from companies like GlycoFi or Adimab, that really created a tremendous amount of value and were grown right here in the Upper Valley.”

The Upper Valley MedTech Collaborative is funded by the Upper Valley Business Alliance, a regional chamber of commerce that supports economic development in the region. Coincidentally, the alliance — like the collaborative — was also founded in January 2020, when the Hanover and Lebanon chambers of commerce merged. UVBA has taken on the collaborative as a key initiative.

“For having a population of thirty to forty thousand people between Hanover and Lebanon, the area is surprisingly medtech dense,” says UVBA President and CEO Tracy Hutchins, who oversees the collaborative alongside the steering committee, led by Lange. “To support these seed stage medtech companies, and to have them grow here, is just really important for the economic development of the region.”

Hutchins has nearly two decades of economic development experience, having served as the president of both the Hanover and Souhegan Valley chambers of commerce in the past, as well as having led multiple economic development initiatives across the Granite State.

Her economic development experience is matched by Lange’s background in medical innovation, spanning nearly two decades as well, in the disciplines of bioengineering and medical technology.

Lange, as well as two other Simbex leaders — President Rick Greenwald and Chief Technical Officer Jeff Chu — are largely responsible for the formation of the collaborative. It was them — alongside Hutchins, Alice Peck Day Hospital Vice President of External Affairs Peter Glenshaw, and Lodestone Biomedical CEO and Dartmouth engineering professor Solomon Diamond — who first gathered in early 2020 to develop a vision and plan for UVMTC.

The collaborative has since added two additional steering committee members, Reia CEO and co-founder Kaitlin Maier and medtech investor Jenny Barba of BioVentures MedTech Funds.

“The concept of the collaborative started with Greg, Jeff and Rick reaching out to start this,” Hutchins says. “They’ve spent considerable time — all volunteer time — building it. In some ways, we’re bringing in companies that directly compete with them, and yet, they do not see it as competition. They see it as rising the tide for everybody.”

One such company that’s benefited from the exposure of the collaborative is Reia, a healthcare startup focused on improving treatment options for people with pelvic organ prolapse — that’s when the muscles supporting the uterus, bladder or rectum become weak and sag inside the body, often protruding down into or out of the vaginal area. (See related story on page 20.)

Reia developed a nonsurgical pessary that supports the organs and empowers users to insert and remove the device without the need for a doctor’s visit, a huge burden for patients using existing solutions.

CEO and co-founder Kaitlin Maier, who now serves on the UVMTC steering committee, first got involved in the collaborative as an attendee at its first event. As a repeat attendee for the virtual events that followed once the pandemic hit, she found value in the knowledge exchange.

“(The collaborative) isn’t just for early-stage startups. It also includes established companies and people who are on the resource side, including investors and service providers,” Maier says. “Our lawyer is in this group. Our accountant is in this group. Our insurance agency is in this group — really just every aspect of the business cycle is in this group.”

Beyond finding key service providers, Maier says she’s met investors and received strategic business advice from other members of the collaborative. Her team was one of five startups that pitched at the UVMTC Pitch Night in October 2020.

The collaborative's key partners include MassMEDIC and the New Hampshire Tech Alliance, both of which are partners for the upcoming Northern New England MedTech Conference. The Oct. 1 event will bring together medtech experts from Massachusetts, Maine, Rhode Island, Vermont and New Hampshire — all gathering in Hanover. NextPhase, Dartmouth-Hitchcock, Nolato are also key contributors.

“To have this medtech presence here, from across the entire New England region, is a positive thing,” Lange says.

“People realize that the quality of life in New Hampshire is great and that the Dartmouth affiliation is great — so, this is an opportunity for us to introduce them to our area, and also to broaden appreciation for the (medtech) work we are doing.”