MitoSciences Inc. wins entrepreneurs competition and a $150,000 prize

A young biosciences company with ties to the University of Oregon took first place in a competition sponsored by Oregon entrepreneurs that helps identify investment-worthy ventures.

MitoSciences Inc. beat out 58 other companies in the 2006 Angel Oregon competition, run by the Oregon Entrepreneurs Forum.

The prize includes $150,000, and it comes at a great time, said Mike Marusich, MitoSciences senior vice president for research and development.

"We're in the middle of doing a $1.5 million fundraiser to allow us to expand," he said. Because the Oregon Entrepreneurs Forum award involves close scrutiny, not only of the technology but also of the company's being, it may encourage other investors to get on board, he said.

UO biology professor Rod Capaldi and Marusich, the UO monoclonal antibody lab director, started MitoSciences in 2003 because they had developed a tool to help them track and measure the condition of mitochondria.

Mitochondria are the little engines contained within cells. They take in food, combine it with oxygen and release energy. They also govern the life of a cell. When a cell falters, the mitochondrion senses it and executes a suicide program that neatly kills the cell without inflammation, debris or damage to nearby cells.

When things go wrong with mitochondria - our overall health suffers.

At MitoSciences, researchers have figured out how to quickly and easily measure mitochondria function. The technology has attracted several government grants, and the attention of pharmaceutical companies and researchers.

Health researchers are interested because mitochondria figure not only in the aging process, but in common diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and diabetes.
Drug companies are interested because the adverse affects of some medications are centered on mitochondria. The drugs that have turned AIDS from a death sentence into a chronic illness are harsh, said Marusich. Problems they create are wasting of fat from limbs and face, insulin resistance, and peripheral neuropathy where patients lose sensation.

Many of these effects can be traced to problems in the mitochondria, he said.

MitoSciences has developed a way for drug companies to quickly and easily screen drugs for mitochondrial toxicity, said Marusich.

Pfizer Inc., an international drug maker is currently evaluating the technology for suitability in their toxicology program, Marusich said.

The fledgling firm has also developed tests that can detect how well mitochondria are functioning in AIDS patients, results they presented at a recent meeting of AIDS researchers in Denver, Marusich said.

And the company is already selling kits to researchers.

"People find these tools very useful for them to better understand how cells work," Marusich said.

The $150,000 prize will allow MitoSciences to expand. It currently has seven employees and plans to add eight. Under its five-year plan, the company envisions about 100 employees, Marusich said.

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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