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Where are they Now? Wear Air Oxygen, Kelowna

More than one million people in North America today must use tanked oxygen to stay alive. In the next three to four years, this number will more than double as the baby boomer generation of smokers moves closer to their '60s and the inevitable results of their smoking – lung problems that will require them to breathe supplemental oxygen.

For Kelowna-based Wear Air Oxygen, a finalist in the New Ventures British Columbia (NVBC) 2001 competition, these figures herald a hot market for their unique invention – a battery-operated, four-pound oxygen concentrator that patients can wear comfortably. Currently, lung patients must push heavy tanks of oxygen on a cart, a difficult feat for those already weakened by poor lung capacity.

Wear Air joined the competition as three partners with a prototype invention and some big dreams. Since finishing the competition in second place, the Wear Air team has really moved ahead with their business idea. They have hired a part-time business manager as well as a part-time administrator to help them get their product from prototype into commercial production. They've begun the patenting process for their product, which is in the early commercial beta testing stage, and they're in the midst of selecting a manufacturer. They're hopeful that the concentrator will be manufactured locally in Kelowna.

Kelowna physician Dr. William Arkinstall, one of the three partners, credits NVBC with his team's quick and focussed move towards commercial reality.

"The competition really made us focus not only on what we were doing day-to-day but where we had to go to prepare for the future – the contest really demanded that of us," he says. Within the six-month run of the competition, the team put together marketing projections, financial projections and set clear short and long-term company objectives as they prepared a polished business plan. Arkinstall says without the competition, he doubts they would have got around to any of these key issues as they attempted to move their business idea forward.

The mentoring and networking were the best part of the competition, he says. "The support, ideas and encouragement we got from our mentor, Daphne Gelbart of InVentures Incubator Inc., was really helpful," he says, as was the ongoing contact with other teams at business education seminars and networking events. "It was such a powerful, keen group," notes Arkinstall. "Interacting with other ventures and projects gave us the exposure to a group of people all doing their own thing but with a similar interest in doing something new of benefit to both society and themselves."

Arkinstall believes placing as a finalist in the competition also had an impact on their approval for funding from the Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP). "It gave us credibility," he says "There was a lot of interest from organizations actually seeking us out to provide funding. Those contacts are still there."

For more information about this year's TELUS New Ventures British Columbia competition, and to enter, visit www.newventuresbc.com.