

The finer points of tech entrepreneurship

***Ingenuity 601* and *Science to Society* help scientists, engineers and other professionals understand the nature of innovation and creating a tech venture**

When neurosurgery resident Alim Mitha and his attending staff supervisor Dr. John Wong in the Department of Clinical Neurosciences at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Medicine came up with an idea for a novel surgical device, they knew they were onto something. Their idea would help brain surgeons more effectively drain subdural hematomas – blood that has collected underneath the skull – solving an important medical issue.

But the life of a surgeon is busy, to say the least, and to get the idea off the ground, they needed to create a team and get business expertise in a hurry. So, they approached a University of Calgary professor looking for a couple of talented engineering students. It didn't take long to find Buke Chen and Justin Waghray, two students who'd recently

approached the same professor looking for leads on a would-be inventor who might need engineering know-how. Serendipitously, the two had recently decided to explore entrepreneurship after a casual conversation about Waghray's cousin, a successful entrepreneur. "I thought we were kind of joking at first – but it turned into a serious conversation," laughs Chen.

Soon, Mitha and Wong partnered with Chen and Waghray and hit the ground running. But while the team had the technical chops, no one had a solid understanding of the business elements.

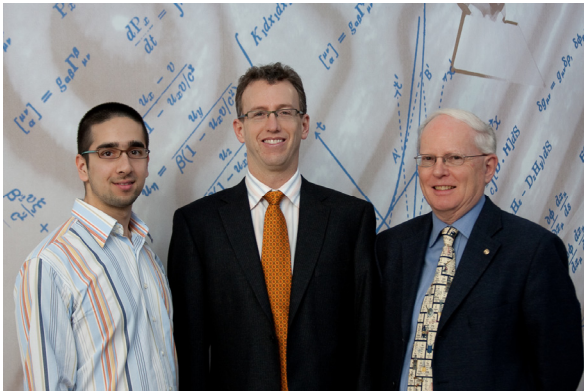
The solution, says Mitha, was the Science to Society

Workshop, supported by Ingenuity Enterprise, and run by the Centre for Innovation Studies (THECIS), a Calgary based not-for-profit innovation research centre. The weekend workshop provides a crash course in commercialization at the Banff Centre. The program has both an introductory and advanced stream and features speakers from the province's tech-transfer organizations, TEC Edmonton and University Technologies International (UTI), as well as lawyers, government officials, patent experts, venture capitalists and others.

Mitha says the workshop offered comprehensive information on everything from creating a business plan to finding investors.

"If you have any idea (for a company), the workshop helps you figure out how to get it to the stage where it'll be used by society," he says.

Mitha adds that the company is now on its way to securing funding for a biocompatible version of the prototype and will probably be pursuing licensing opportunities with larger companies, rather than manufacturing the device themselves. They also recently



Justin Waghray, Jeff LaFrenz, and Peter Josty, Executive Director of THECIS

entered and won the Student Technology Innovation Challenge (STIC), which comes with a \$6,000 prize. “Everything we used at STIC we learnt at the workshop.”

Science to Society’s sister program, Ingenuity 601, is also funded by Ingenuity Enterprise, and run by THECIS. Peter Josty, executive director of THECIS, says the concept of the program emerged from a conversation between one of THECIS’ board members and some industry professionals. The idea struck a chord with Josty.

“I have a PhD in chemistry and when I was completing it in England, I had the opportunity to go on a course very similar to Ingenuity 601 and I found it to be a life-changing, career-changing event. It gave me much more interest in having a career in industry,” says Josty.

He says his situation is all-too common. Many scientists don’t look beyond academia when they’re planning their careers.

“I think what (Ingenuity 601) does is really open their eyes to the ways in which their research can get used. It’s not that we’ll just do this biochemistry research or whatever it may be -- it can be commercialized and used by society.”

Launched in 2008, Ingenuity 601 blends face-to-face workshops at the Banff Centre with a half-dozen online sessions.

Jeff LaFrenz signed up for Ingenuity 601 at the advice of a colleague. The project management PhD student has a long history in industry, having worked as a systems engineer, run a technical sales support division of a telecommunications device manufacturer and even an entrepreneur (he recent sold a power system protection company he started with a friend).

LaFrenz says the experience has given him a broader perspective which will help with any future tech ventures he takes on, as well as with his work as a project manager for the University of Calgary’s CREATE (Centre for Research Entrepreneurship and Applied Technology Education) and to future ventures.

“Right now I’m transitioning into life sciences and biotech...I think, that’s an area with a lot of growth opportunities.”