

# Innovation & Entrepreneurs: Serial entrepreneurs launch own diagnostics-focused company in state



by Scott Meacham • Published: February 22, 2016 •

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I get really excited when I see an Oklahoma startup improving the lives of people who have incurable debilitating disease.

That's the story of Progentec Diagnostics, a startup that is focused on developing breakthrough diagnostics. The firm's initial focus is on developing a diagnostic test to identify patients at increased risk for flare in lupus, an incurable autoimmune disease that afflicts 1.5 million patients in the U.S.

Progentec CEO Sanjiv Sharma and his co-founding partner, Mohan Purushothaman, who serves as Progentec's president, are serial entrepreneurs with broad experience in the pharmaceutical industry.

“I was leaving my last company, and Mohan also was finishing up,” Sharma said. “We met in a bar over a beer — it sounds like a cliché, but this is a true story — we had been running companies for other people, and we said 'Why don't we do this for ourselves?' Many hours and several napkins later, we had decided that we wanted to be in the diagnostic space.”

Medical diagnostics are the frontier of the future, Sharma said. As DNA research, therapy, and drug development continue to move in the direction of tailoring specific solutions for an individual patients, the demand for cutting-edge diagnostics accelerates.

“Diagnostics are going to explode,” Sharma said. “We had two criteria for starting this company — one that there is nothing yet in the space that can produce predictable diagnosis of that disease or episode, and two that the technology is truly breakthrough.”

Sharma connected with researchers at Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation (OMRF) who have developed a way to identify patients who are likely to experience an attack from their lupus. OMRF is designated as an Autoimmunity Center of Excellence by the National Institutes of Health.

“Lupus is a horrible disease,” Sharma said, “that primarily hits younger women between 15 and 40. With lupus, the body's own immune systems begin to attack normal, healthy tissue. We don't know why. Lupus permanently damages joints, skin, heart, lungs, kidneys and brain. Lupus has two stages — flare or remission. Neither patient nor doctor can tell when a flare is going to happen.”

Lupus flares can strike with lightning speed and can range from a painful body rash to flu-like symptoms to high fevers and acute pain throughout the body that take a patient down for weeks. Besides the pain and extreme fatigue, the dread of not knowing when the next lupus attack will hit can be nearly as debilitating.

But, if, through diagnostics, a physician knew, six weeks in advance that a flare was likely, a course of drug therapy to minimize the effect could start. Patients could regain more control over their lives.

That's the life-changing potential of the diagnostics that Progentec and OMRF are bringing to doctors and patients of this disease. It think it's exciting that an Oklahoma company is having this kind of impact. I bet you do, too.

Scott Meacham is president and CEO of i2E Inc., a nonprofit corporation that mentors many of the state's technology-based startup companies. i2E receives state appropriations from the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology. Contact Meacham at [i2E\\_Comments@i2E.org](mailto:i2E_Comments@i2E.org).



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