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O.C. companies target breast cancer

The county has become a hub for new medical techniques and treatments

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Orange County long has been a center for the medical device industry.

Edwards Lifesciences Corp. in Irvine, for instance, built its reputation on making stents and other devices to treat heart disease. Santa Ana-based Abbott Medical Optics Inc. (formerly Advanced Medical Optics) makes laser surgery equipment and other eye treatments while Fullerton's Beckman-Coulter Inc. specializes in highly technical biomedical instruments.

But over the past 10 years, several new companies have developed cutting-edge tools with a different focus: the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

It might seem like an unlikely specialty in the land of the bikini and breast enhancements, but executives at these companies say they are here because Orange County offers important advantages.

They repeatedly cite a highly skilled workforce that has extensive background in the development and production of medical devices.

There also is a network here of longtime suppliers who knows the ropes for everything from making components and packaging to doing final assembly and sterilization.

These three Orange County companies are in the forefront of breast cancer diagnosis and treatment and manufacture all or part of their devices here:

Cianna Medical : This Aliso Viejo company is a spinoff of BioLucent Inc., which developed the MammoPad, a cushion for the breast to reduce the pain and discomfort of a mammogram.

After Massachusetts-based Hologic Inc. bought BioLucent and its MammoPad in 2007, Cianna Medical was created here to continue development of BioLucent's SAVI device, which provides targeted radiation treatment after lumpectomy surgery. Cianna says the procedure reduces radiation treatment from five to seven weeks to five days. In addition, by targeting the area to be irradiated, there is less tissue damage than with whole-breast radiation.

"We hope to make this the standard of care in the future and have it available to everyone who chooses lumpectomy," says Chris Serocke, Cianna chief operating officer who had the same position at BioLucent.

NeoMatrix : This 10-year-old Irvine company concentrates on screening for breast cancer cell growth in the earliest stages.

It developed the HALO Breast Pap Test, which uses a machine that attaches to the nipple and extracts fluid from the milk ducts. (About half of

women from 25 to 55 produce the fluid.) The fluid is then analyzed for abnormal cell growth, which NeoMatrix claims can identify the potential for cancer as much as six years before a mammogram.

Chief executive John Stroh says the test does not diagnose cancer but rather identifies a predisposition for it like the PSA test for prostate cancer.

"Halo screens women to identify those with the highest risk of getting breast cancer," Stroh says. "The goal is to either inhibit abnormal cells from developing into cancer, or to find the cancer when it is most curable."

SenoRX Inc. : Founded in 1998, this Irvine company focuses several minimally invasive devices for the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

Its primary product is the EnCor, which can extract multiple tissue samples during a single biopsy. The company also makes the SenoSonix, which uses ultrasound imaging during the biopsy procedure.

Taking a different tack, SenoRX also developed the Contura Multi-Lumen balloon applicator, which provides targeted radiation for treatment after a lumpectomy. The company says it reduces the amount of breast tissue exposed to radiation and also the duration of the overall treatment.

"We think for many patients you can get the same efficacy as from whole breast radiation with a short-term, five-day approach," says Lloyd Malchow, chief executive. "It has tremendous benefit for the quality of life."

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