

TALK ABOUT TIMING CREAGER TAKES THE HELM OF LEADING MOLECULAR DIAGNOSTICS COMPANY

BY RACHEL MENNIES



Southern California-based Creager is helping current Pitt graduate students think about their careers. (Photo: Courtesy Creager. Photo illustration: Brandon Copp-Millward)

In February 2020, Richard Creager (PhD '81) received a phone call. It was from a friend at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) who knew that Creager was taking on projects as a consultant, helping companies enter or improve their position in the global medical diagnostic market.

Would Creager be interested in working on developing mechanisms for testing infectious diseases?

Creager was especially well-suited for the NIH stint because, before becoming a consultant, he worked for nearly two decades at Beckman Coulter, a diagnostics company that develops, manufactures and markets biomedical technologies. Among his roles there: chief science officer from 2011-2016. Over the course of his career at Beckman Coulter and other companies, he led the development and commercialization of more than 160 IVD (in vitro diagnostic) products.

Creager told his friend, sure, he'd take on the NIH assignment. That was supposed to be for 3 or 4 hours a week. Then came March 2020, and the assignment turned into a 30-40 hour a week gig.

Talk about timing, says Creager.

He says, "It's still going on."

What's still going on is RADx, the NIH's Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics initiative, which works with scientists and companies to steward speedy innovation for novel COVID-19 testing approaches from the lab bench to the public. As part of a consortium, Creager helped assess funding proposals for RADx by asking: "Do you have a novel technology? Do you have any technology that is developed and ready to go to market?" He says the team of

50 eventually winnowed applicants down and began working with the selected companies and organizations to develop testing.

At that time, the supply chain was wearing thin, and hospitals struggled to maintain their equipment supplies. RADx was forced to get creative. "I was designing experiments for them to do, but nobody could get clinical samples. We were reaching out to our networks of hospitals around the country—and," he says, "we couldn't get swabs. Nobody could get swabs. So, we were using the U.S. government, the Army to try and get us swabs." Despite those challenges and several more to come—like a scramble around Christmas 2021 to develop tests that detected the Omicron variant—Creager says he embraced the opportunity.

His efforts didn't go unnoticed by Seegene Technologies, South Korea's leading molecular diagnostics company and an international COVID-19 test pioneer, whose annual sales surged to \$1.2 billion, 10 times its pre-pandemic revenue. Seegene, headquartered in Seoul with subsidiaries around the globe, is planning to expand beyond COVID testing to establish a broader market for laboratory tests that can quickly and cheaply unveil the cause of many seasonal ailments.

To help it do so, the company recruited Creager to become CEO of its southern-California-based U.S. subsidiary, a position he

assumed in March 2022.

Creager says he was ready for the role, in large part, because of his time at Pitt.

"I really learned science there," he recalls, "how to do solid science.

"I've applied those principles throughout my career—from the bench to management to executive management."

He credits his mentor, the famed Pitt Med virologist Julius Youngner, with his strong basic science foundation—as well as other skills that've proved vital in his career.

"The most important thing that Juli taught me was how to write," he says, "and how to put a team together—how to motivate people without knocking them down."

Creager is still connecting with Pitt Med PhDs, too: He recently returned to Pittsburgh and served on a panel as a representative from industry for biomedical graduate students to explore job opportunities.

At Seegene, Creager is tasked with growing the company's American presence.

Seegene offers an array of tests for SARS CoV-2 and its ever-changing variants; and Creager notes that they were one of the first to do so. "We test all types of infectious diseases," he adds, "and we're one of the first companies to have a monkeypox test out" for high-complexity laboratory testing.

Once again it's about timing, notes Creager. ■