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High hopes for flu shots, new jobs

By: Mary Ellen Godin , Record-Journal staff

MERIDEN - Protein Sciences Corp., of Research Parkway, is providing hope not only for quick production of pandemic flu vaccines, but also for much-needed jobs.

About 80 people with a wide range of biomedical experience filled Protein Sciences' lobby Friday in the hopes of getting an interview with a department head or to be considered for a later interview.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services recently informed Protein Sciences that it had been awarded a \$150 million five-year contract to develop Flublok, a seasonal and pandemic flu vaccine, a spokesman said Friday. The company is expecting to sign the final deal within the next few weeks.



Johnathon Henninger / Record-Journal

Kathy Holz, left, a scientist at Protein Sciences Corp. in Meriden, interviews Colleen Fenn, an East Lyme resident seeking a job, in the company's lobby Friday. About 80 people came looking for work at Protein Sciences, which is in line for federal funding to develop and manufacture a flu vaccine.

If awarded, the government contract is the first for Protein Sciences and would mean about 15 to 25 jobs within the next six months. Other positions could be available sooner if the company raises more money through philanthropic organizations and builds a large-scale manufacturing plant, said Manon Cox, chief financial officer.

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"I expect the U.S. government funds coming in a slow fashion," Cox said.

Jamie Whitman, a research scientist, came from Colchester in the hopes of finding work. Whitman had worked for Pfizer Inc. and was laid off three years ago. She was hired by Bristol-Myers Squibb, where she worked in toxicology discovery, but she lost that job in a companywide restructuring in December.

"They're telling me I'm doing everything right," Whitman said. "It's tough like I've never seen it before. I've never thought I'd be unemployed for six months."

High school and college students came from as far away as Rhode Island and New Hampshire seeking internships, part-time jobs or full-time jobs with the company. Most had submitted resumes on Protein Sciences' Web site and were invited to the job fair by e-mail.

"I'm just starting out," said Gina Troy, who graduated from Hartwick College in Oneonta, N.Y., with a degree in biology and chemistry. "It's tougher than I thought."

The company sought the five-year grant to, among other things, pay the costs of more clinical trials to support pediatric and pandemic formulations of Flublok and purchase equipment for large-scale manufacturing at 875 Research Parkway. Protein Sciences expects to host at least one more job fair this year.

"We saw a lot of intelligent people from a variety of backgrounds," said David Turrill, controller and human resources manager. "It's exciting to be part of a company that is really growing. We're hoping to provide the state and the city of Meriden with jobs for the long term."

Protein Sciences makes its flu vaccine using insect cell technology, considered a cleaner and faster technology than traditional chicken-egg embryo technology. According to a recent issue of Science Insider, Protein Sciences is further along in the technology than other vaccine makers, including those who received larger shares of HHS funding for vaccine development.

Protein Sciences has completed late-stage clinical trials for Flublok and is expected to receive a federal Food and Drug Administration license in September. It is also developing a vaccine for the H1N1 virus, and expects to produce 100,000 doses this month at its headquarters at 1000 Research Parkway. The vaccine would cost about \$15 per dose initially and the technology could easily be transferred to other manufacturers worldwide in the event of a pandemic.

A large-scale production plant would allow Protein Sciences to produce about 1 million doses of vaccine in a five-day workweek. Additional demand for Flublok and new vaccines would result in a continuous operation and mean even more jobs, Cox said.

Friday's job fair was designed to help the company identify and interview potential molecular biologists, biologists, quality control, production manufacturing, and administrative support personnel.

Protein Sciences was founded in 1983 and is privately held. It has raised more than \$45 million in non-equity licensing fees and generated about \$8 million in revenue from its service business, proteins business and technology licenses. But a clinical trial costs about \$18 million alone and research is expensive. Marketing Flublok could generate \$150 million annually, Cox said.

On Friday, Whitman spoke with managers in Protein Sciences' quality control division and waited to speak with representatives in its quality-assurance division.

"I'm very hopeful," Whitman said. "I would be thrilled."

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