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Producing science and opportunity at UMBC

By JAMES MOSHER

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Dr. Mona S. Jhaveri-Brown isn't sure a glass ceiling exists in her profession. But, if it does, she's looking to give it a shattering blow. Make that two.

Jhaveri-Brown is CEO and chief scientific officer of **Foligo** LLC, a startup biotech company that recently took up residence at the techcenter@UMBC. Foligo is the first firm to be recruited to the techcenter, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County's business incubator, via a year-old program called **ACTIVATE**.

The program is geared toward helping women start technology companies. The women-in-science debate got considerable fuel in 2005 when Harvard University President Lawrence H. Summers suggested women might not have an aptitude for the sciences.

That, combined with the fact that Jhaveri-Brown's research is directed at creating new drugs to treat ovarian cancer, has the 35-year-old scientist/entrepreneur seeing her situation accomplishing an important two-fer.

"It's not a black-and-white thing," Jhaveri-Brown said of barriers to women in science-related professions.

"Nobody was standing over me telling me that I couldn't do something," Jhaveri-Brown said. "Yet most of my teachers and leaders in the lab are men. I didn't feel discriminated against. It was more a feeling of being lost in the whole soup of academia. I'm glad to be moving away from that."

Jhaveri-Brown's drive to be an entrepreneur and the makeup of her company overlaps another issue that's gotten consider-



ERIC STOCKLIN

Mona S. Jhaveri-Brown is taking advantage of a program at the techcenter@UMBC aimed at helping women start technology companies. Her company, Foligo, is working on a treatment for ovarian cancer.

able press — increasing numbers of foreign-born ethnic minorities, especially Asians, in high-tech professions. Jhaveri-Brown is American born but of Indian descent. Her two Foligo colleagues, Australian-born Business Development Director Helen Karuso and Kenya native Chetan Mahajan, the finance chief, are also of Indian ethnicity.

Jhaveri-Brown expresses gratitude to the United States, where scientists and entrepreneurs are able to do research and produce drugs that help people worldwide. She hopes her work will one day take a place on that honor roll.

That work involves targeting proteins

present in many cancers but not expressed in most normal cells, Jhaveri-Brown said. If successful her research could be used to develop drugs for many kinds of cancer, but she sees the most potential gains coming in ovarian cancer.

Shedding light

Ovarian cancer hasn't gotten enough public attention, Jhaveri-Brown said. Breast cancer is more widely discussed and more easily detected, which has led to decreasing death rates.

Ovarian cancer, although its cases are much smaller in number compared with breast cancer, is much harder to detect.

Thus, by the time ovarian cancer is found it's often too late to arrest its development, the doctor said.

Foligo is collaborating with the **Ovarian Cancer National Alliance**, a Washington-based advocacy group, Jhaveri-Brown said.

"Often drug-development companies are not in touch with constituent groups," she said. "We think it's important to be in touch."

Foligo is aiming to take its DNA-based therapies to Phase II clinical trials before handing off to a large manufacturer who could get product to market faster. Jhaveri-Brown sees her company spending three to five years on development before seeking out a larger partner.

Currently Foligo is engaged in proof-of-principle studies expected to take two to three months. If those go well the company will begin negotiating with the techcen-

ter@UMBC about setting up a lab, Jhaveri-Brown said. Foligo is having staff meetings at UMBC and outsourcing lab work for now.

Her 2004 marriage to Michael Brown, who works in Washington, combined with her learning about the UMBC entrepreneurship program convinced Jhaveri-Brown, a Connecticut native, to set up shop in Maryland, she said.

Foligo is the ninth "technology transfer" company to set up in UMBC's incubator, a center aimed at growing technology firms and keeping them in Maryland. Technology transfer occurs when university research is channeled into commercial ventures.

"Companies tend to stay where they're formed," said Ellen Hemmerly, executive director of the **UMBC Research Park Corp.**, which oversees the incubator and the **ACTiVATE**, or Achieving the Commercialization of Technology in

Ventures Through Applied Training for Entrepreneurs, program.

Maryland's skilled work force and plentiful investment capital are two things working to strengthen the technology sector, Hemmerly said. Something of a void exists in developing and training entrepreneurs, she said.

"Historically, Maryland hasn't done a great job at this," Hemmerly said. "That's where we'd like to build a bridge."

The void is even more noticeable in the area of female technology leaders, she said.

Being a female business pioneer who may be on track to produce major cancer drugs is heady stuff for Jhaveri-Brown. And it's a position she likes being in.

"I'm combining the best of the both worlds," she said.

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