



MICHAEL
GURAU

VENTURE BUILDER

Good vibrations

A conversation with Ariel Wilcox, founder of Access Wellness and Access Sonotect in Portland

Ariel Wilcox is founder of both Access Wellness, a Portland-based physical medicine clinic, and Access Sonotect, a medical device startup. The wellness clinic integrates physician care for chronic problems and pain along with therapy to provide new resources supported by Wilcox's discoveries and developments.

Wilcox has established Sonotect to commercialize a low-frequency acoustic method of locating tension in the soft tissue in the body. The device aims sound waves at the body and picks up the specific responses that result. These signals reveal areas of stress and problems in the body's soft stuff — muscle, fascia, vessels, viscera, nerves — which are otherwise invisible. The procedure can be used as a screening or triage tool to suggest next steps in the diagnostic workup or may confirm a tissue tension origin for a pain problem. For some problems, Wilcox uses a soft-tissue manipulation that is very effective at helping the body unlock long-held or recently acquired tensions in the body, creating for many a permanent healing. (For the record, Venture Builder is a big believer — and periodic recipient — of Wilcox's methods.)

Venture Builder recently spoke with Wilcox about developing the Sonotect product and her plans to market the companies' programs. The following is an edited transcript.

Venture Builder: Tell us a bit about your background.

Ariel Wilcox: I came to Maine to do organic vegetable farming in the 70s, when we built our own houses, grew our food and birthed our own babies. I became a midwife, and when I got tired of getting up in the middle of the night and driving dark country roads in time to make a catch, I switched to massage therapy. I found that I wanted to help people not just to relax but to really recover, and I started on a long pilgrimage to gain skills to accomplish that.

All the treatment systems were limited in success. Since the body is so complex, it is possible to help it a little by doing nearly anything, but very difficult to fully and efficiently recover it. There are two challenges: how to find the most important place, and what to do to get it fixed.

How did you uncover the technology and your method?

I had some lucky experiences where I was able to notice that the body had a process for correcting itself fully if certain manual methods were applied to the right places. In testing how acoustic stimulation might optimize this process, I stumbled onto the sonodetection signals. I immediately got hooked into how it might be able to be picked up electronically, provide an objective measurement never possible before and get it to therapists to help the legions in pain. I also thought, "I better get a patent for this!"

move around the body, finding the location of the problem, watch the signals on the computer screen, color coded for significance, save the data and so forth. We are also developing an imaging system. It is really wonderful to get an image of an inflamed organ, or a muscle in strain or a nerve that is in pain, and know you are seeing the evidence of its physiological function problem as compared with X-ray, MRI or ultrasound, which only show the structure and nothing directly about how it is working.

You've got a very novel way of looking at the human body. Can you describe this in lay terms?

Being able to scan the whole body and catalog and measure the tensional/physiological dysfunctions, and stage their roles and relationships, gives tremendous insight into the diagnostic solution for each individual. For pain treatment, the locked-up injury protection reaction acts like a tight spring that can spring loose when facilitated with my Access Therapy techniques, and full recovery can result. For other problems, being able to directly detect where inflammation is located and determine the type of tissue involved can change the practice of medicine — and veterinary science, since animals can't verbalize their problems.

You've gotten several grants from the Maine Technology Institute. What are your current plans to realize the potential for the Sonotect and for your treatment methods?

We are completing conclusive clinical studies to establish the validity of the findings, the measurements involved, the accuracy of using the wand to discover the sites, and the terrific power of the images in conveying the valuable potential of Sonotect technology in medicine. The scientific basis will be confirmed and further patents will be submitted. Further software development will provide enhanced device capabilities. First sales could occur by mid-2008 for the veterinary market and as bundled with the Access Therapy program.

This turnkey product will consist of training in the therapeutic techniques with the Sonotect used for guidance, along with support components, on a leasing arrangement, so other therapists can offer the Access Wellness benefits within their existing practices. We are currently seeking sufficient funds, hopefully matched with a \$500,000 MTI award, industry partners and an expanded management team to bring the diagnostic technology to commercialization and its place as ubiquitous as the stethoscope and as empowering as the next MRI.

Michael Gurau is president of CEI Community Ventures and managing general partner of Clear Venture Partners, both based in Portland. He can be reached at mg@clearvcs.com.