

VGTI scientists putting PSL on industry's map

By Jonathan Mattise

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PORT ST. LUCIE — When he first toured Tradition's biotech complex, Dr. Elias Haddad of the Vaccine & Gene Therapy Institute of Florida had to veer from the scientific method and use some imagination.

He had traveled from Montreal to see Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies, the structure that would temporarily house VGTI. During that trip about two years ago, all Haddad got to preview was a partially complete building, alone in a field with no road leading to it.

The rest of the campus existed only in renderings and blueprints.

"We had to wear helmets," said Haddad, a leading viral disease development researcher. "There was no road and we had to walk in the mud. I wasn't like, 'Yeah! We're coming here!' About five months ago, everything was falling into place, I brought my wife here and she loved it."

A little faith and vision have landed Haddad in the middle of a biotech scene he thinks might be on the brink of something big.

About 40 VGTI Florida scientists now bustle about Torrey Pines' third floor, chatting about T-cells and genomes, often with a tinge of a French accent. They're accompanied by about 25 administrative employees, mostly from around the area.

The scientists hail from China, India, France, Canada, Costa Rica and beyond, ranging from fresh out of school in their late 20s to well-established and world-renowned. Their studies on the intricacies of DNA and potential vaccines produce billions of data

they pore through themselves and make available for other research entities to interpret.

In the minds of these researchers, there's little doubt they'll turn Port St. Lucie into more than a blip on the biotech radar. And they're confident it's only a matter of time until the data, studies and trials align to cure cancer, dengue fever and HIV.

"We've got the best of the best from all parts of the world," said research assistant Andrew Smith, 30, a Satellite Beach native. "We have lots of different outlooks on science, and diversity of perspectives is a huge strength. As scientists, we always ask 'Why?' Here, we have a lot of different answers to 'Why?' "

Smith, a self-proclaimed "gene jockey" focusing on genetics' tie to diseases, is a rarity at VGTI Florida. He's a Florida native. But most of his co-workers have been in the United States less than a year.

Seeing a biotech corridor take shape 80 miles south of his hometown — particularly, in little-known Port St. Lucie — was unexpected and convenient for the budding researcher.

"I assumed it would've been in other areas in Florida," Smith said. "I'm happily surprised. Port St. Lucie has a lot to offer. It's about time it got on the map in this industry."

Dr. Rafick-Pierre Sekaly, VGTI Florida's scientific director, started moving his team from Montreal to Torrey Pines in January 2009. So far, the snags haven't been in the science. It's the new country and region presenting a learning curve for the new residents — albeit, an enjoyable one for the most part.

"Everyone is adapting very well," Sekaly said. "We have a lot of people with young kids in school here. It's been a great transition for all of us."

Haddad, who moved here in April, is getting a crash course on the American educational system for his two sons. He's still figuring out foreign concepts like letter grades and "K-8 school."

Fellow principal investigator Dr. Lydie Trautmann, 35, of France, was just relieved her son's teacher at Renaissance Charter School could hold a conversation in French.

Most of the scientists are used to the long, odd hours in the lab. Tradition's neighborhoods house many researchers within walking distance, keeping efforts for the latest breakthrough rarely out of reach or out of mind.

But whenever they get free time, the out-of-towners are enjoying the permanent vacation feel of living in Florida.

"We like it very much here," Haddad said. "The weather's been great. The people are extremely nice and helpful. We noticed it right away."

For the next two years, VGTI will continue to operate at Torrey Pines, with the occasional collaborative project.

In four years, the blueprints and renderings of VGTI should be realities. One wall is already up on the 100,000-square-foot headquarters VGTI will open in 2012. Martin Memorial Health Systems' 80-bed hospital next door, which VGTI will use for clinical trials, will debut in 2014.

By 2018, VGTI Florida plans to have a team 200 employees strong. What they can accomplish by then, however, is still up to their imagination.

"Amazing things are happening right now and great things are right around the corner," Smith said. "It's truly amazing that it's happening here in our own backyard."

