

In search of deals, the Md. Bio+Tech conference brings two industries together

By: Tim Curtis, The Daily Record
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BETHESDA — The Maryland Bio+Tech conference wants to make the state the No. 1 place in the country for the biotech industry.

The two-day event, which began Thursday at the North Bethesda Marriott Conference Center and continues through Friday, puts biology and technology companies in the same space, hoping to spur collaboration.

“I want deals,” said Tami Howie, president of the Maryland Tech Council. “I want the bio side to meet the tech.”

The partnership doesn’t come easily to the two sides, she said, but the area is ripe for the combination.

“Over the last five years, whether the industry has wanted it or not, there’s been a collision of bio and tech,” she said. “We are the center of the convergence of bio and tech.”

The conference, which had around 400 people registered to attend, forced the two sides into the same spaces.

It put attendees on one of three tracks, and each track had a tech or bio element to it.

When the conference is over, attendees will be able to get in touch with each other via the conference's app. There will also be follow-ups and other monthly meetings to continue to encourage collaboration, Howie said.

"In Maryland, let's share resources and help us get better," she said. The conference's keynote speaker, Keller Rinaudo, provided the attendees an example of what can happen when the two industries meet.

Rinaudo founded and runs Zipline, which develops and runs drones designed to deliver critical medical supplies quickly.

His company operates in Rwanda, delivering blood to the region's hospitals from a central location. It delivers to the farthest hospital in about 30 minutes, a delivery that could take hours by road in a nation roughly the size of Connecticut.

"It's cheaper, it's 10 times as fast and you never suffer from problems with infrastructure," Rinaudo said in an interview. "It doesn't matter how hard the ministry of health works, if the infrastructure doesn't work you're just not going to be able to effectively serve these people because they can't get to them."

Rinaudo has also been working on bringing the company to Maryland to deliver medicine to Smith Island.

The island has recently set up its health center for telemedicine, connecting residents to doctors for consultations and diagnoses. But when they need to fill prescriptions, residents still need to take a ferry to the mainland, which takes three hours.

"Telemedicine is a critical part of what we do," Rinaudo said in an interview.

"Telemedicine is half the solution, instant delivery is the other half."

In his address, he encouraged conference attendees to work to find places where the need for their innovations outstrips regulations. It's what he said allowed his company to set up in Rwanda before moving on to the more regulated United States.

"I think a lot of people in medicine and biotechnology in particular have come to the conclusion that change is just impossible," Rinaudo said. "It's impossibly hard. It's too expensive and it's too hard to get regulatory permission. ... At the very least, our story should be a direct contravention of that, or a direct disbelief of that."