

United Therapeutics: Making more lungs viable for transplants

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Rich Pietroski, center, and his team at United Therapeutics subsidiary Lung Biotechnology can preserve lungs for transplant for up to 22 hours.

For Martine Rothblatt, nothing is off limits. Not even death.

The founder of Sirius XM Satellite Radio and United Therapeutics Corp. (NASDAQ: UTHR) is the quintessential innovator who lives life asking the question: “Why can’t we?”

She’s the kind of dreamer that believes she can reach immortality and has even created digital consciousness that would allow humans to essentially live forever as robotic doppelgangers.

She’s already taken on pulmonary arterial hypertension, a life-threatening condition with which her daughter, Jenesis, was diagnosed.

In a 2015 TED Talk, Rothblatt said she simply refused to give up when pharmaceutical company leaders told her that the drug candidate she believed would save her daughter wasn’t for sale. Instead, she got them to sell her the worldwide rights to the patent for that drug for \$25,000, along with an agreement to pay 10 percent of any resulting revenue.

“The astonishing thing is this absolutely worthless powder that had just a sparkle of hope for Jenesis is not only keeping Jenesis and other people alive today, but produces almost \$1.5 billion a year in revenue,” said Rothblatt in the TED Talk.

Rothblatt has since built a bio-technology empire with \$1.47 billion in revenue that centers on the development and commercialization of products that treat cardiovascular problems, infectious diseases and cancer.

But it's still not good enough, Rothblatt says. Too many people with pulmonary hypertension still succumb to their disease while waiting for lung transplants. So United Therapeutics created Lung Biotechnology, a Silver Spring-based company that preserves and restores selected donor lungs, making them viable for transplantation.

"We're taking lungs no one else wants and making them transplantable 65 percent of the time," says Rich Pietroski, president of Lung Biotechnology.

The company's ex-vivo lung perfusion technology can keep lungs outside the body for up to 22 hours. Many of their competitors try to get the organ transplanted within six hours.

The company's goal is to double the number of lungs transplanted in the U.S. annually from 2,000 to 4,000, he says.