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Whiz Kids

Langer protege Pritchard leads R&D at InVivo

By Amy Castor, Special to Mass High Tech

When he was a boy, **Christopher Pritchard** heard a story over the radio about engineers building water pumps in Africa. They had good intentions, but the solutions were not sustainable. When the pumps broke, nobody had spare parts or money to fix them.

The story taught Pritchard a valuable lesson: the best solution to a problem is not necessarily the most cutting edge, but the most practical.

He's applied that philosophy to everything since, including his work as the new director of research and development at **InVivo Therapeutics Corp.**, a Cambridge biotech working on implants for spinal cord injuries. Pritchard is 23.

Born in England, he grew up in Germany. Still thinking of the story on the radio, he returned to England to attend **Oxford University** and earn a degree in engineering. Then he applied for internships with organizations working in the world's poorest communities.

During one summer, he traveled to a remote Mayan village in the mountains of Guatemala to help locals obtain clean drinking water. Getting there involved a treacherous five-hour journey on an "old-school bus driven by a 14-year-old," Pritchard said. "You drive up these cliffs with no safety railings."

A second internship took him to Huamanzana, Peru, to develop low-cost stoves for reducing pollution in the home. "The people lived in thatched huts and cooked with corn stalks," he said. "It generated so much smoke, you couldn't be inside for more than a few minutes without coughing."

Hoping to build a career in nonprofit work, Pritchard enrolled in a dual degree program at **MIT** to earn an MBA and a doctorate in chemical engineering. But before leaving for Cambridge, something happened to modify his plans: a disk injury left his father suddenly unable to lift his arms. His father recovered, but the crisis had a lasting impact on Pritchard.

When he arrived in Boston, Pritchard attended a lecture on spinal cord injuries by **Frank Reynolds**, the CEO of InVivo.

He knew immediately he wanted to work for InVivo. “At first I thought I could work on the business end, but then it dawned on me the important role chemical engineering plays in tissue remodeling and drug delivery,” said Pritchard.

So he ended up doing his thesis with **Robert Langer**, the **MIT** professor who invented InVivo’s technology. That was two years ago, and in 2007 Pritchard joined InVivo, while still continuing his dual degree path at **MIT** and Sloan. Now as InVivo’s director of R&D, Pritchard still takes a practical approach.

“In developing countries, it’s ‘what can you do with little money,’” he said. “Here it’s, ‘what can we can do with our current expertise to help people with spinal cord injuries.’”