The relationship between Dalhousie University’s Industry Liaison and Innovation (ILI) Office and the Academic Health Science Centres (composed of the IWK Health Centre and Capital Health) has always been symbiotic and collaborative. Over the past two years, however, the network has been enhanced by regular monthly meetings with the key players from each institution.

Seated at the table is a group of leading researchers from the IWK, Capital Health, and Dalhousie’s faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Professions. The group gathers to share information about current and potential research projects, to enhance the understanding of each institution and the faculty’s strategic developments, and to lend each other support. The ILI Office is located in Dalhousie’s Life Sciences Research Institute (LSRI), a state-of-the-art building in Halifax on Summer Street that opened in June of 2011; it provides much-needed research and incubator space for the region’s growing life sciences and biotechnology sectors. The LSRI consists of two four-storey towers joined by a central atrium. The North tower is dedicated to increased basic science/discovery research space, with the neuroscience-intensive Brain Repair Centre as the lead tenant. The second tower, under management by Innovacorp, serves as a business incubator devoted to the development and maturing of investment for commercially viable ideas. It houses key organizations, including BioNova, Springboard Atlantic, Nova Scotia Innovation Trust, and Genome Atlantic, alongside small start-up companies that have developed from innovations at Dalhousie, Capital Health, the IWK, and other institutions.

“The LSRI is more than just a building complex,” says Stephen Hartlen, the ILI Office’s executive director and Dalhousie’s assistant vice-president of industry relations. “At the LSRI and the surrounding hospital community, most of the best life sciences researchers in Atlantic Canada are no more than a five-minute walk from each other and the tools they need. The capacity here is to provide a world-class ecosystem of support to the research community.”

By working together to merge ideas, expertise, and resources, Dalhousie, the IWK, and Capital Health have the potential to transform Atlantic Canada’s health and economy. Since 2002 these partners have funneled more than $630 million of out-of-province funds into the regional economy and recruited a host of talented scientists and clinicians to launch new research programs and lead the way to better patient care as they impact clinical-care models and medical-device development.

“We’re revving the region’s economic engines through research spending, job creation, and commercialization,” says Hartlen. In fact, the com-
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— STEPHEN HARTLEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ILI OFFICE, DALHOUSE UNIVERSITY

commercialization of research discoveries plays a vital role in evolving the life sciences industry. Halifax-based scientists are pioneering new materials and remarkable properties that hold immense potential for human health—and commercial success.

MOVING DISCOVERIES TO COMMERCIALIZATION
Dr. Patrick McGrath attends Stephen Hartlen’s monthly meetings at the ILI Office. In September the former vice-president of research at the IWK Health Centre was appointed the integrated VP of research and innovation at the IWK and Capital Health. He has a clear vision of what the LSRI can become thanks to the partnerships that have been formed. “The LSRI isn’t just a building housing individual labs but a focus for commercialization activities that are much broader than what currently exist,” says McGrath, adding that commercialization may mean the licensing of a discovery, the formation of a start-up company, or the development of a not-for-profit. “Commercialization is simply a way of bringing discoveries to citizens. You need all the support and wisdom you can get as researchers from other scientists and companies. At the LSRI, we have many opportunities to interact with each other and with potential colleagues to move discoveries to commercialization.”

Any researcher will admit that the commercialization process can be lonely and difficult. That’s because brilliant discoveries that are made in labs might languish for 10 or 15 years because the commercialization process is so laborious. “If discoveries are made in the lab but no one uses them, they’re a waste,” says McGrath. “Right now no one is really good at commercializing health discoveries in Canada, but it’s a very important way of getting discoveries out of the research labs and into the real world.”

The aim of the newly strengthened Dalhousie/IWK/Capital Health research partnership is to enhance creative discoveries and to expedite the commercialization process. “One of our goals is to move things along more quickly,” says Hartlen. “So, for example, instead of taking five years from discovery to commercialization, we hope to be able to reduce the timeline to three years.”

IDEAS WITH IMPACT
Dr. Raymond LeBlanc is the vice-president of medicine at Capital Health and, until recently, was also the VP of research and innovation. He, too, attends the ILI Office meetings and has a vision of what the LSRI is becoming based on its current mandate. “It’s a supportive environment within which more robust and transparent collaborations around research can take place,” he says. “In the very near future, it will become a fascinating place for researchers from many disciplines to collaborate.”

LeBlanc points to the fact that the most successful research is conducted by teams, not by individuals working in silos. “It doesn’t make sense for each member of this partnership to try to do everything alone because we have different areas of expertise,” he says. “We’re all in a position to incubate ideas, and the hospitals are the best places when it comes to health-impact ideas. Most ideas won’t get to commercialization, but the best and most impactful ones will be given the appropriate environment to develop. You need to generate 100 discoveries to get 10 with commercialization potential, and maybe one or two of those will go all the way. But if we don’t promote incubating ideas in the first place, we won’t even get those one or two.”

Innovative ideas with commercialization potential are vital to the health of Canadians, considering that chronic disease management is rapidly becoming a priority in the redesign of our health care system, as human and economic costs are rapidly becoming unsustainable—particularly in Nova Scotia, where rates of chronic illness and related disabilities are the highest in the country.

The good news is that researchers at Dalhousie, the IWK, and Capital Health are improving care and alleviating costs by helping patients self-manage their chronic diseases and become more physically active—and they’re doing it with innovative technology and interdisciplinary care teams. “We’re much stronger and have more capacity to do cutting-edge research as a partnership,” says LeBlanc. “And our ultimate goal is to improve the health of Nova Scotians.” — JANE DOUCET