

## On-The-Air

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SAfm anchor John Perlman: It is that time on a Friday when we engage in some TechnoTalk with Martin Creamer, Publishing Editor of Engineering News and Mining Weekly. Martin, a very good morning to you. Biotechnology incubator, what on earth is that? Martin Creamer: The biotechnology incubator, which may go public very soon now, and establish itself on the East Rand, is something which will be designed to develop entrepreneurship within the biotechnology field. The incubator concept is fairly successful already in Pretoria, where they have got a business incubator going in the field of information communication technology where there are ten people developing in these incubators. Now they want to transfer this concept to the East Rand, where the CSIR as well, its BioChemtek State-owned operation has space for about 30 people who would have facilities and business backup. Because South Africans have Innovation Funds from the Government, the idea is for funded people to come through with biotechnology projects. These projects now have to turned into commercially-viable enterprises and the incubators will be there to develop these people further and make them commercially viable. We see tremendous success in Australia, where there are about 50 incubators like this, the US has 550 and Europe more than 200, all providing basis for job creation.

Perlman: It has all been given some backing with a biotechnology conference, tell us about that.

Creamer: There is a lot of biotechnology in the news at the moment and the Biotechnology in Africa conference is due to take place on September 26 and 27th, in Johannesburg, to strategise ahead, also, of the big Earth Summit, which comes virtually a year later. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 70% of the people earn a living from agriculture alone. When we look at what biotechnology has done for cotton, just one of the examples of crop production, we see 27% increase in production through the biotechnology influence and 70% fewer pesticides used. The beauty about biotechnology is that it puts the technology into the seed, so that you don't have to have such a lot of training for people who have to plant and nurture the seed.

Perlman: In the midst of all the planning, some people are getting down to business, important computer software being developed in the area of genetics.

Martin: This is also to underpin biotechnology. You have got bioinformatics, which is the computer and software side, which supports the biotechnology and development. We have got a Cape Town company, Electric Genetics, which has been very successful in developing software to analyse human genome data. And their flagship product has already been quite a substantial help with a discovery of a gene for retinitis pigmentosa, which is one of the greatest causes of blindness. This product is also being used now in collaboration with other research, to look deeper at the genetic nature of disease. Particular diseases like diabetes and tuberculosis, malaria, HIV Aids. This particular company, Electric Genetics, operates out of University of the Western Cape, and is linked to a very important South African National Bioinformatics Institute. So, the two are working together and offer their software at no cost to academic institutions and the idea is try and speed up and accelerate the understanding of disease and the promotion of biotechnology in South Africa.

Perlman: We say 'bio dankie' to Martin Creamer, Publishing Editor of Engineering News and Mining Weekly, more TechnoTalk next Friday.