

Fortov Seeks to Convert Discoveries Into Cash

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ST. PETERSBURG — The new chief of the country's largest research organization, Vladimir Fortov, is holding the recently announced sale of a Russian cancer-blasting device to the Massachusetts General Hospital as a case in point for his push to convert scientific discoveries into currency.

The hospital said, however, that the contract was still on the bidding stage.

A plasma physicist and former science and technology minister, Fortov, 67, won election as the president of the Russian Academy of Sciences last month with an agenda that included a greater focus on finding commercial application for research.

In a short interview on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum last week, one of his first encounters with the press in the new job, he spoke with fascination about the cancer treatment technology.

“It’s an accelerator of ions ... that allows for the destruction of cancer tumors inside a human brain,” Fortov explained. “And the standard choice is to do a trepanation for a special tool to reach the spot — with the danger of catching on some neuron.”

The academy’s Lebedev Physics Institute, the developer of the technology, announced the sale of one device to the Massachusetts hospital last month.

Casting a shadow on the quality of information coming out of the academy of sciences, the institute appeared to have jumped the gun.

Jay Loeffler, the hospital’s chief of radiation oncology, issued a statement on May 28 when the doctors first became aware of “misinformation” from the Lebedev Institute, a hospital spokeswoman said in an e-mail Tuesday.

The company called Protom, which is the American company that bought out the Russian inventor of the equipment, is in the running for the contract, but no final decision has been made, Loeffler said in the statement.

Fortov listed the academy’s other commercial prospects. For one, the Budker Nuclear Physics Institute is marketing an X-ray technology that uses lower doses of radiation for the common tests of bones and tissues, he said.

The research organization where Fortov was director before moving to the higher office, the Joint Institute for High Temperatures, also has a medical know-how, which uses plasma to kill drug-resistant bacteria, he said.

But Fortov expressed discontent about a lack of broad-based success in marrying research and commerce. He especially lamented poor connection between doctors and physicists, which hampers the advancement of innovative treatments.

“There is a wall, if not an abyss, between these specialists because a physicist doesn’t make an appointment with a doctor unless he gets sick,” Fortov said. “Nevertheless, there is a lot of examples when the methods of physics proved absolutely effective in medicine. It’s important to link these two continents.”

He said the United States, South Korea and China had an enviable knack for transferring cutting-edge technology from research institutions to business.

“I see the development of a similar system as a goal for the near term,” Fortov said.

The academy is collecting promising ideas for pitching to business and will unveil the proposals by the end of this fall, he said.

Fortov appears ready to display his affinity with the global scientific community. On one of the days at the St. Petersburg forum, he wore a pin with the logo of Israel’s Ben-Gurion University on the lapel of his jacket — a symbol resembling a flame. An honorary professor at the institution, he explained that the logo stands for the light of education.

In addition to the new post, Fortov has another reason to celebrate this year: the Gazprom-backed Global Energy award for his research of the properties of fluids and construction

materials. Rosneft chief Igor Sechin bestowed the prize on Fortov on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg forum.

Fortov shared the 33 million ruble (\$1.2 million) endowment with Japanese Akira Yoshino, who received recognition for his role in the development of rechargeable lithium-ion batteries.

The president of the Russian Academy of Sciences immediately donated 3 million rubles of the money to Russian charity Give Life, founded by actresses Chulpan Khamatova and Dina Korzun to support children suffering from cancer.

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