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Maltese medical devices company channels brain power thanks to EU funding and advisory services

Dementia has a physical, psychological, and socioeconomic toll – not just on individuals and their families, but also society at large. The Maltese medical devices company BrainTrip has developed an affordable and easy to use electroencephalogram EEG-based solution for early-stage dementia screening thanks to the support of the Enterprise Europe Network, the largest global network supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) co-financed by the EU.

Every year, around 10 million new cases of dementia emerge worldwide, and the total number of cases is expected to reach 150 million by 2040. General practitioners are less inclined to subject patients to costly and invasive diagnostic tests for dementia, such as MRIs and CAT scans, unless they already show symptoms of the disease. Yet, an early diagnosis can help families save thousands and the society billions of euros. The earlier dementia is detected, the more likely the symptoms can be managed and the quality of life improved for those with dementia as well as the relatives caring for them.

The looming threat of dementia has been at the center of Jurij Dreo and David Sakić's work and research for quite some time. They met in Ljubljana, Slovenia, bonding over their neuroscience research as well as a shared desire to turn their findings into "positive societal benefits". In January 2019, Dreo and Sakić co-founded the Maltese medical devices company BrainTrip. A fairly young company, BrainTrip received initial funds from the Maltese government and the European Union's Horizon 2020 [SME Instrument](#) programme.

Malta proved to be the ideal setting for developing and initiating the testing of a fast, non-invasive, affordable diagnostic device – known as an 'EEG' (electroencephalogram) – at a small scale. "Our device looks like a swimming cap and can record about 5 minutes of human brain activity." This data is fed into an algorithm and can indicate the likelihood of a person having early stage dementia. The algorithm can also measure the extent and rate of cognitive deterioration for cases where early stage dementia has been detected.

At this point, BrainTrip had a diagnostic tool that could improve the lives of patients at a fraction of the cost and time of a standard diagnosis. That said, they still needed to overcome funding and regulatory hurdles to have the desired impact on the medical sector. Unsure of how to scale up their business, Dreo approached the Malta Council for Science & Technology, a partner of the Enterprise Europe Network located in Kalkara (Malta). The Network, with its 3,000 experts from more than 600 member organisations based in 60 countries worldwide, is a valuable source of support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in accessing EU funding and partnerships.

Tilting the scale

During Phase 1 of the SME Instrument programme, BrainTrip was approached by the Malta contact point for the Enterprise Europe Network. "We conducted a needs analysis and then worked with Dreo and his team to define growth priorities and challenges," recalls Steven Frigerio, National Contact Point Executive for SME Instrument at Malta Council for Science & Technology.

An integral component of the Network's support was matching BrainTrip with business coaches and mentors who could provide expert insight at the national and EU level. In one instance, Frigerio contacted a medical device certification expert for a meeting at the BrainTrip premises. Over a two-day period, the expert answered all of their questions about the certification process for medical devices on the EU market. "Without the Network, expert advice would have cost an arm and a leg. And we wanted to keep all of our arms and legs," says Dreo. Furthermore, Dreo and his colleagues were surprised and grateful for the dedication and attention they received through the Enterprise Europe Network. "Whenever we sent an email, we would get a response right away!"

Ready for take off

The Network's support was substantial for BrainTrip, who would have not been able to navigate the EU regulatory and marketing landscape alone. "Getting access to an expert advisor proved crucial to bringing BrainTrip to the next stage."

Thanks to the Network's guidance, the company has completed phase one of the SME Instrument funding programme. They have a proof of concept for a non-invasive dementia screening device at a fraction of the time (15 minutes) and cost (€100-150) of a standard diagnosis. "We're just getting ready to enter the market," says Dreo who – prior to March 2020 – was gearing up to run clinical trials in various European health centres or hospitals.

Today, BrainTrip has business activities in Malta, Slovenia, Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In addition to receiving €50,000, as part of the SME Instrument, BrainTrip is applying for another Horizon 2020 programme, which supports next-stage healthcare SMEs.

Frigerio is confident that BrainTrip will scale up their business further. He adds, "through the Enterprise Europe Network, we will continue to support their growth by providing them with advice and guidance." With the sustained support of the Network, Dreo looks forward to expanding staff and business prospects with EU funding as well as through the Rockstart Health accelerator and other partnerships with pharmaceutical and healthcare companies throughout Europe.

Disclaimer

Interviews with SME owner(s) and the Enterprise Europe Network were completed before the Coronavirus outbreak that put many European businesses in a difficult situation.

To support the economy and protect business like Braintrip, the European Union is working closely with Member States since the outbreak of the coronavirus, putting in place COVID-19 support measures and recovery plans. Read more about the [Coronavirus Response](#) and the [Recovery Plan for Europe](#).

About the Enterprise Europe Network

The world's largest support network for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) brings together 600 member organisations in more than 60 countries, providing their advice and support to help SMEs to scale-up, access funding and finances, understand EU legislation and find potential business partners across Europe and beyond. The European Commission launched the Enterprise Europe Network in 2008. It is co-financed under the [EU's programme for the competitiveness of SMEs](#) (COSME).

For further information: www.enterprise-europemalta.com



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