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5.11.11 | Brandon Glenn

## Ohio U. spinoff Sanuthera developing iPod-like tinnitus therapy device

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An Ohio University startup is developing a medical device it hopes will represent a breakthrough in treating patients suffering from tinnitus, a ringing or buzzing in the ears. Sanuthera's device involves wireless ear buds connected to an MP3 player that can be customized to a patient's preference to play a number of sounds aimed at masking the ringing in the patient's ears. Along with therapy, the tinnitus-masking device could help retrain patients to avoid focusing on the ringing in their ears, essentially "habituating" them away from tinnitus, according to Sanuthera CEO Jeff DiGiovanni, an OU associate professor of hearing, speech and language sciences.

"Unlike many other tinnitus devices on the market, our sounds are not generated by the device, but stored on the device," DiGiovanni said, noting that the ability to add customized sounds like rainfall or music is a big advantage associated with Sanuthera's device.

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As a bonus, the device can also be used as a hearing aid, meaning it can treat both tinnitus and hearing loss. The young company recently got a boost when it received a \$337,000 investment from TechGrowth Ohio, a state-backed venture development group in Athens, Ohio. Sanuthera will use the investment to produce a prototype of the device, fund an application for federal regulatory approval and back clinical trials aimed at demonstrating the device's effectiveness.

DiGiovanni hopes to have the device on the market within about a year.

About 50 million Americans suffer from tinnitus to some degree, with 16 million of them experiencing it seriously enough to seek medical attention, according to the American Tinnitus Association (ATA). It's the most common service-connected disability suffered by military veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The ATA estimates that by 2014, 1.5 million veterans will receive military compensation for tinnitus at a taxpayer cost of more than \$2 billion.

Tinnitus isn't a disease, rather a symptom of a potentially serious underlying problem. It can be caused by a variety of factors, including noise exposure, head and neck trauma, wax buildup and medication side effects. There is no cure, but tinnitus can be managed. Sound therapy, which is the treatment strategy employed by Sanuthera, is one means for managing tinnitus, but the ATA stresses that it should "always" be combined with counseling.

The greatest problem associated with tinnitus isn't the ringing it causes, but the quality-of-life issues it can cause, such as depression, anxiety and sleep deprivation.

Development of Sanuthera's device started in 2005 by DiGiovanni and colleague Stephen Rizzo, an audiologist. DiGiovanni said the two were frustrated because they felt that major device companies weren't addressing tinnitus.

"It seemed that what appeared to us as a gaping hole in the treatment of hearing disorders — in this case, tinnitus — should be pursued," he said. "So we did."

Sanuthera joins a growing stable of OU-affiliated startups that includes autoimmune disorders drug developer Interthyr. OU's commercialization group scored its biggest win early last year when spinoff diagnostic test-maker Diagnostic Hybrids was sold for \$130 million to Quidel.



**Brandon Glenn MedCity News**