cardiff Medicentre, on the Heath Park Campus, was established in 1992 as a not-for profit business incubator unit. The University is a major shareholder in the joint venture, along with the Welsh Government, Cardiff Council and Cardiff and Vale University Health Board.

The facilities include desk areas, where people planning their own start-up, including University graduates, can work on their business plans. There are small units, typically taken by new companies, who can then expand into one or more of the larger units.

According to Dr Mark Bowman, the Medicentre’s Director of Innovation, the average tenant is in the centre for three to six years. Dr Bowman, a Cardiff Business School PhD with a background in venture capital, said: “Typically, the incubation stage is about three years, with a follow-on development stage of three more years before people are looking for their own premises. However, we don’t set hard and fast time limits.”

At present there are 18 tenants occupying 32 units, more than half of whom have a Cardiff University connection. Their activities include training in keyhole surgery, cancer drug discovery and data analysis for the pharmaceutical industry. They vary in size from two to three employees to around ten to fifteen employees. In all, some 120 people work in the Centre.

A key feature of Medicentre is a sense of togetherness. Dr Bowman said: “We have here a community of like-minded businesses. We do encourage companies to talk to each other, to share ideas, to identify opportunities for collective purchasing. We have monthly breakfast briefings, to equip tenants with the latest information on what’s going on in the sector. We have a network of professional advisers – lawyers, accountants with the relevant high tech experience – who tenants can draw on for advice.”

Many Medicentre tenants comment on the flexibility of the units – this month’s office could be next month’s lab. The centre also offers professional support services and meeting rooms, open to all tenants, even those at the planning desk stage. Dr Bowman said: “First impressions count – whether with potential funders and clients. We help our tenants in presenting a professional approach. What we are trying to do is match the aspirations of the kind of businesses we want to recruit.”

Distinguished Medicentre “graduates” who have since moved on include Q-Chip, the Wales Gene Park and the Wales Cancer Bank. Dr Bowman added: “This is the key outcome for us. We want to create a succession of decent-sized knowledge-based enterprises, who can make a real difference to the Welsh economy.”

Q-Chip was founded in 2003, a University spin-out based on Professor David Barrow’s research in the School of Engineering.

The company is now an international business based around microcapsules with applications in drug delivery, diagnostics and cell therapy.

Dr Dan Palmer, Q-Chip’s Chief Science Officer, says the company’s period at the Medicentre played an important part in its growth.

When the company arrived at the Medicentre in 2005, it employed around five members, occupying one small office unit. On “graduation” in 2009, the team was around 15, having occupied a number of units for a variety of functions.

Dr Palmer said: “One of the nice things about Medicentre is that the space is so convertible. They have a very good provision for science there, so we were able to change an office to a lab and back again quite easily.

“The location was very useful, given the nature of the business. We were able to interact with many University and Hospital groups. We built a lot of collaborative projects, many of which are still on-going.”

The company now employs around 30 people at its headquarters in central Cardiff, developing a range of microspheres – precision products 40 to 2000 micrometres in diameter. A range of materials, including pharmaceuticals, can be encapsulated in the spheres and injected in tiny, but precise, amounts. The first product, qPCR assays for molecular diagnostic products, was developed while Q-Chip was at the Medicentre.

The company now has its first overseas base, having set up a second hub in the Netherlands. It maintains strong University links, however, with partnerships with Cardiff neuroscientists, bioscientists, pharmacists and chemists.

The company looks back on its Medicentre years with fondness. Dr Palmer said: “As a small company in the health sector, we could interact with other tenants and share ideas and experiences. Medicentre describes itself as a business incubator, and it was an ideal one for us.”
**Medaphor**

Medaphor arrived at the Medicentre around four years ago as a Cardiff University start-up occupying a small office unit.

The company is now an award winning leader in the provision of ultrasound simulation training to postgraduate doctors, with international customers. In 2010, the company, funded by Fusion IP and Finance Wales, launched ScanTrainer, a virtual ‘real feel’ ultrasound-training simulator. Students can literally ‘feel’ what they see on a computer screen but without the need for an ultrasound machine or a patient. Trainee obstetricians and gynaecologists can build up substantial experience, which would normally involve seeing large numbers of patients.

ScanTrainer won the MediWales 2010 Innovation Award. Late last year, the University of Washington Medical Centre in Seattle became the first US centre to install the system. This was shortly followed by the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen becoming the first European hospital to introduce ScanTrainer.

The company now employs nine people and now has a simulation centre for demonstrations and training along with the R&D and sales office. The company expects turnover to triple in 2012 with a substantial portion of its sales coming from overseas.

Nick Sleep, Medaphor’s Chief Technical Officer, says the Medicentre has played quite a part in the company’s development. “We’ve been able to grow here – the larger space allows us to train medical students and postgraduates. The proximity to the hospital is also important. An important part of our work is scanning patients in sufficient volume for the simulations, so it’s useful to have them just five minutes away.”

The company is still growing, although it has no immediate plans to leave Medicentre. Nick added: “Despite the pressure on costs facing the NHS, sales both in the UK and overseas are both taking off. While much depends on how quickly the team grows, the Medicentre is the perfect site for us and offers a superb location and networking advantages. We wouldn’t wish to be based anywhere else.”

**Cardiff Scintigraphics**

Cardiff Scintigraphics began life as a six-bed clinical unit in the Welsh School of Pharmacy in 1992.

Initially, the spin-out company only offered scintigraphic services – using radioactive markers to trace drug formulations in different regions of the body. In 2007, the company diversified operations into a new venture, 12c Pharmaceutical Services, which focuses on formulation research and development.

Director of Research, Professor Glyn Taylor, of the Cardiff School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, said: “We can take a drug formulation from first principles through drug development to clinical trials.”

Professor Taylor added: “I think business partners like to see a spin-out that is a research-based but is a clearly identified entity which responds rapidly to clients needs and has autonomy.

“Having your own premises helps provide that identity. We looked at a number of options and found that the facilities at Medicentre were very flexible and of high quality. Initially we leased one unit, then two and are always looking at future opportunities. Medicentre offers a supportive business environment which we have been able to adapt to meet our specific needs.

“Another key feature is access. Most of our visitors travel from the East and they can come straight off the A48M, miss out all the city traffic, and get straight back out again. It’s also useful having other spin-outs in the life sciences sector around. The breakfast meetings, which bring everyone together to discuss business support in Wales, are very helpful.”

Currently, one of the company’s largest contracts is with the UN, to help member countries reformulate inhalers, of the kind used for asthma, so they don’t use CFCs.

The company has grown from two full-time employees to four. The company has an AWARD which was won by the company for the development of the Suretran™ cell transportation system.

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**Abcellute**

Abcellute, which spun out of the School of Biosciences in 2001, is built around the Suretran™ cell transportation system.

The system allows the use and delivery of fresh biological material over a longer time scale, without the need for freezing. However, the company quickly came to realise it was the biological materials transported, rather than the system itself, that were important.

Dr Nathan Griffiths, Commercial Director, said: “We can supply tissue to a growing number of clients, particularly drug developers, allowing them to help predict the potential interaction of the human body with new drugs before they are exposed to patients or trialled clinically. In the past, the pharmaceutical industry has spent a lot of time, money and resource money on a range of studies that ultimately failed to predict the effect in humans. By using the tissue we provide, they have a better idea of what might work, and also hopefully avoid some of the unfortunate side-effects you sometimes get in clinical trials.”

Abcellute’s presence in the Medicentre since 2004 has played a part as this new concept has grown. The company has grown from two full-time employees to four. The business is expanding its presence in Europe and exploring possibilities in the US and Japan.

Dr Griffiths said: “Medicentre gives us a professional setting, which helps the people we are dealing with realise from the start we are a professional outfit. We are close to the hospital and have good transport connections, both of which help, given the nature of the business. The space is very flexible and available on very reasonable terms – far better than we would pay in London, for example.

“I think we’ll remain here for the next year or two certainly. We believe we have identified a high value opportunity for the pharmaceutical industry and we want to continue developing services and products that they deem attractive.”