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Announcer:

In this episode of Sustainable Healthcare, we venture into the role of entrepreneurs and their development of sustainable products and discuss how healthcare can approach eco-friendly innovations.

Tim Doak:

Welcome, listeners, to Sustainable Healthcare. I'm Tim Doak, and today we're talking about plastic in healthcare, and what goes into the development of sustainable products in the healthcare field.

Joining me today is Lara Solomon, the founder and CEO of Hoopsy, which is a company producing eco-friendly home pregnancy tests that are 99% plastic-free. Lara is an entrepreneur who can help us better understand the hoops she went through to develop, pitch, and distribute her product. She started five different businesses over her career, she's an author, and she now finds herself in the sustainable product development field. Lara, welcome to the show.

Lara Solomon:

Thank you. It's great to be here.

Tim Doak:

Well, it's great to have you with us. So let's jump right in with where you find yourself today. Can you talk about your company? What was the genesis for it? How did it start, and where are you currently as a company?

Lara Solomon:

Yeah, so my journey started in 2021 when I went through IVF, and I joined lots of online groups and I kept seeing people posting up photos of their pregnancy tests.

Tim Doak:

Sure.

Lara Solomon:

And it wasn't just one or two, it was sometimes five or 10 or 15, and they were all plastic, and I just didn't realize the women use that many tests. And I just thought, why is something that's used for literally five minutes plastic? It just seems crazy. So, unfortunately my IVF didn't work, but I couldn't get this image out of my head. And so, looked into it and found that there was no non-plastic alternatives.

Tim Doak:

Sure.

Lara Solomon:

So I thought someone needs to do something about this, and I thought, "Okay, that's going to be me. I'll do something about it." And that's what started it all off.

Tim Doak:

Fantastic. So where are you today as a company?

Lara Solomon:

So today we're working on a hundred percent plastic-free pregnancy tests for the US market. So we're about to start clinical testing, then we'll do FDA submission to launch next year. So we have been selling a product in the UK, which has been really well received, but the US seems to be more open to sustainable options than the UK was.

Tim Doak:

That's very interesting actually, to hear. So imagine as you've gone down this journey, supply chain is something that certainly must have come into play. What are some of the challenges and roadblocks you face with your product development? Things like acquiring materials, maybe even inventing materials along the way that haven't existed, and then ultimately in finding an outlet for distribution for your finished product.

Lara Solomon:

Yeah, there's loads of challenges. I have to say. I didn't realize when you start developing a diagnostic test, what is involved, and cost of what's involved.

In terms of the materials, we're lucky in that everything we're using is existing being used in other products, medical devices or medical materials. So that's quite straightforward. But what's more complicated is a diagnostic test looks really simple, but actually lots and lots of layers of different things, and they have to all be working together to get the right result, which is your positive or your negative.

So our challenges have been, we've got the product developed, that wasn't too bad, but the challenge is now coming to clinical testing, we have to get 1300 women to basically wee on a test for the FDA, and they have to be American, to do our submission. And so that's very expensive and time-consuming. And then the other challenge has been around manufacturing. I want to manufacture in the US, but there's not actually that many manufacturers of diagnostic tests in the US. And the ones I have found, some of them have been like, "Well, we can do the first bit, but then we'll send it to the other end of the country and they'll do another bit, then they'll send it back to us to finish it." And I'm like, "Well, I'm trying to reduce carbon emissions in transport, so I don't want it to go round the US three times before it's finished."

So it's been tricky to find someone that can do everything in one spot, but I think we've identified two places now. But yeah, the US is a big country.

Tim Doak:

It is. It is, for sure. And so once you have this finished product, how do you get it out to the masses and what does that process look like?

Lara Solomon:

I'm talking to lots of hospitals and clinics, and also Planned Parenthood and those kind of places. Everyone has been really excited about the product, because it's basically used the same as current product. It's the same accuracy, same sensitivity, so all people have to do is just literally swap. There's nothing different in how you use it. And everyone has said if the price is the same, then yes, I'd love to have it. So we'll be selling it to hospitals and clinics, but also through private label to retailers such as CVS, so that consumers can use it in their homes as well as hospitals using it in a clinical setting.

Tim Doak:

Excellent. So you're certainly an entrepreneur, you've started several businesses. What have those prior ventures taught you about this business and how have they helped inform this latest venture?

Lara Solomon:

So many learnings. It's all the stuff ups that you make along the way that help you. I think one of the biggest things, I was thinking about this last night, is about building relationships with people.

Of my previous businesses, four of them have been manufacturing. I have a manufacturer, I've used a contract manufacturer, which is what I'll be doing here. And building those relationships with manufacturers is so important because that's what enables you to get the product when you need it, to get the right quality, the right quantity, and people will do more for you if you have better relationships with them. It sounds quite mercenary saying it like that, but we all know in business, people do business with people they like and they trust.

Tim Doak:

Sure.

Lara Solomon:

And so, that's a really important thing I'm bringing into this business. I also think for me a really important part is trusting my gut. So I used to be very focused on doing what I felt was right, and then I worked for a large corporate, they were all about the analytics and it had to be the numbers and if the numbers didn't show X, you couldn't do it. And I've realized that both of those routes are actually not right for me. For me, I need to combine the two, the numbers and the gut feelings.

And when you think, "Oh, I'm not sure about this, I'm not sure about this person." You need to listen to that. And I think that's a really important thing for going forward.

Tim Doak:

Relationships, and maybe a bit of a leap of faith in all of this too, right?

Lara Solomon:

Yeah. Definitely. Yeah.

Tim Doak:

So if we think broadly about plastics, plastics are basically oil and chemicals mixed together in certain proportions to achieve what we all use today. They're single use. They contain chemicals and different admixtures to modify them to meet certain design criteria, but oftentimes those aren't the best for humans. And so, in healthcare we use a significant amount of plastic. As you look at potential other opportunities within the universe of plastic in healthcare, do you find other opportunity?

Lara Solomon:

I think there's so many opportunities out there. I think it is just a case of having an open mind. There's things, products coming up in terms of plant-based with seaweed and algae and onion skins, and all of these things that you wouldn't realize that it is made from that material, because it looks like plastic, it operates like plastic. And I think it's just a case of, as a manufacturer or a designer, being open to those opportunities.

And the thing is that it's not as easy as doing what you've always done, and that's the bit that people need to get over. It's not as easy, but it's better longer term.

Tim Doak:

Sure.

Lara Solomon:

And there's so many implications to our health. And it seems crazy that as a medical company, that companies are using a product that harms people's health when they're supposed to be helping them.

Tim Doak:

Right.

Lara Solomon:

And I think it's really about looking at each product and saying, "Okay, well, what else can we use for that?" And doing the research and making the effort to actually make the change. But I think we can ultimately replace most of them.

Tim Doak:

I think you're right. Tremendous opportunity here. So what advice would you give other entrepreneurs who are blending sustainability and product development, specifically targeted at the healthcare field?

Lara Solomon:

Well, I think one thing I found in healthcare is it's quite siloed, in that everyone is in their own little piece of the business and they don't necessarily talk to each other.

And that's been one of the challenges I've had in building this business is it's been very hard to find someone that has done the whole process of thinking of a product, taking it to FDA approval. So I would say that finding people who believe in your mission and can support you on that is really important. And it might mean that you can't find one person, but you actually have to go to, say, five different people to get the whole parts of the chain of your process covered. But I also think that it's about challenging the status quo.

And just because it's always been done like that, doesn't mean it always needs to be done like that. And yes, that is harder, and yes, that will potentially take longer, but that is I think the big challenge in healthcare, that everyone's used to being like, "We need more of those. Let's just press the button and get more." We don't need to do it that way. And it will be more time-consuming upfront, but ultimately it gives us a better outcome.

Tim Doak:

Change is hard, but it's certainly worth the effort.

Lara Solomon:

Exactly.

Tim Doak:

In this case in particular.

Lara Solomon:

Definitely.

Tim Doak:

So that's great advice. I am curious to hear more. You mentioned earlier something about marketing in the UK being perhaps a little more difficult than the US, and I'm certainly surprised by that. You've got really a global perspective based on your experience. Can you tell us a little bit more about what it's like to market in various different global markets compared to the US?

Lara Solomon:

Yeah, so we were selling in the UK, and one thing I found that was really interesting there is lots of the big companies, and talking like retailers and the NHS, which is obviously the UK's big hospital system, they all have mandates on high that we need to reduce emissions, reduce plastics, these kind of things. And yes, at the very top level they're doing some of that, but they aren't doing it at the level where us, me as a supplier, is talking to the buyers.

So I was talking to the buyers for Boots, which are one of the biggest pharmacy chains in the UK, and one of their things is to reduce Scope 3 emissions, which comes from the products that you sell in the store. Majority of them do. And so, our product would massively reduce those. But that wasn't a factor in their decision making at all, at all. I actually said to the lady, "What about Scope 3 emissions?" And she said, "What are they?"

So it feels like, in the UK... And it wasn't, that's just one instant, but a lot of other retailers I spoke to had the same perception, they're doing things like putting solar panels on the stores, or getting electric vehicles, but they're not looking at the easy wins, which is potentially the products in the stores. And I feel like in the US everyone I've spoken to has just gone, "Well, yeah, it's no-brainer. Why wouldn't I swap?"

Tim Doak:

Sure.

Lara Solomon:

And there hasn't been any of this, "Oh, it doesn't fit with what we're doing." Or, "It doesn't make us enough money." Or it just seems to be much more open to give things a go here.

Tim Doak:

So does it feel like where we don't have the mandates perhaps that many areas in Europe do, in terms of emission reductions, the support is a little more organic in the US in that it's an individual person doing it because it's the right thing to do, versus we're being told to do it?

Lara Solomon:

I think so. I think definitely in speaking to people who are in charge of sustainability for hospital systems, they personally care. Whereas a buyer who's been told that we are doing this thing, they don't really care necessarily. But I've also found that, it's been interesting, I was dealing with some companies in Europe and we had a 99% plastic-free pregnancy test, and they said they wouldn't take it because they wanted a 100% plastic-free. And I said, "But this is 90% better than anything that's sold."

"Oh no, but you need to get rid of all the plastic and then we'll take it."

And I'm like, "But surely we can do it in steps."

"No, no, no, we can't do it in steps. It's got to be all the way."

And I was just like, it seems so close-minded, like nothing... You've got to take these incremental steps to get to the end result, and in that time you're waiting for approval and the product to be developed and

everything, that's another couple of years, that's another couple of million tons of plastic. Why not start now?

Tim Doak:

Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Lara Solomon:

Exactly. And just sometimes it amazes me how short-sighted people are, and I just think there's a lot we can do, and it's just finding the right champions that are willing to go there and make that change and make that effort.

Tim Doak:

Sure. That's very interesting perspective. Before we wrap up, any final thoughts?

Lara Solomon:

One thing that has really been bugging me lately is greenwashing, which you guys probably know all about. There's a lot of companies recently putting flowers on their website. Well, not just flowers, but plants and stuff.

Tim Doak:

Sure.

Lara Solomon:

And so you instantly think as a consumer, "Oh look, they've got something sustainable." But they haven't. And I think that that's one thing that makes it very hard for companies that are trying to do the right thing, that it's a lot of companies trying to make it look like they're doing the right thing.

And that means it's very hard for consumers to tell the difference. Not just consumers, but retail buyers and hospital buyers and everything. So I think one thing I'd say is just read the fine print and try and find out more about products before you buy them. Don't just trust that just because the packet is green, it's one example of greenwashing, that it actually is more sustainable. So, yeah.

Tim Doak:

Nope. Great advice. Lara, thank you so much for joining us today. We definitely appreciate your insights.

Lara Solomon:

No problem. Thank you for having me.

Tim Doak:

And thank you to our listeners. Until next time, I'm Tim Doak asking you to think sustainably.

Announcer:

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