Health & Medicine

A Columbia Startup Finds a Way to Clean Up

Kinnos, a biotech company, has a simple but effective new disinfection tool for the pandemic era and beyond.

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|
Spring/Summer 2021



A Highlight wipes dispenser. (Courtesy of Kinnos, Inc.)

Over the past year, the pandemic has inspired a widespread awareness of disease transmission accompanied by a frenzied surge in cleaning-product sales. Kinnos, a biotech startup founded by Jason Kang ’16SEAS, Katherine Jin ’16CC, and Kevin Tyan ’16CC, is ready to meet that demand. “It’s an exciting time to be in infection prevention,” says Kang, the CEO.

Based in Brooklyn, Kinnos produces Highlight, an additive that colors bleach bright blue so that users can see that every inch of a surface has been adequately sanitized. The dye disappears several minutes after application. “The real-time colorized feedback gives people assurance that they’ve done an effective job,” explains Kang. Designed to be combined with bleach spray or wipes, Highlight is primarily used in hospitals to help prevent the spread of deadly diseases like MRSA and *C. difficile* infections.

Kang, Jin, and Tyan met during their freshman year of college and started Kinnos after participating in Columbia Engineering’s 2014 Design Challenge. Tasked with developing a low-cost, technology-based solution for the Ebola crisis, the team conceived Highlight as a way to help first responders thoroughly disinfect their hazmat suits. Shortly after the challenge, the FDNY purchased a supply of the product to integrate into their own hazmat-response protocols. Kinnos then received a government grant to deploy Highlight in West Africa.



Kevin Tyan, Katherine Jin, and Jason Kang. (Kinnos, Inc.)

Since 2017, Kinnos has shifted gears to focus on the US health-care industry and, in the past year, assist with pandemic efforts. At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the company donated supplies of Highlight to several hospitals and also

manufactured hand sanitizer. Last fall, Kinnos became a finalist in the Transit Innovation Partnership's COVID-19 Response Challenge and partnered with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to pilot Highlight in one of the authority's public restrooms.

Although it's now understood that COVID-19 spreads primarily through aerosol respiratory droplets rather than contaminated surfaces, the demand for superior disinfection techniques in health care, transportation, and other industries continues to be high. "We've seen a tremendous increase in people reaching out to learn more about our product," says Kang, who notes that Kinnos's staff count jumped from five to eighteen over the past year.

Right now, Kang, Jin, and Tyan are focused on getting Highlight into as many hospitals as possible. The research and development team led by Jin, the CTO, is creating versions of Highlight that work with chemicals such as ammonium and alcohol. "Once we have that capability, we'll be able to enter new markets like household cleaning products and food processing, where non-bleach disinfectants tend to be used more often," says Kang.

Whether Highlight is targeted to health-care workers or everyday clean freaks, Kinnos's founders see huge potential for their product in a post-pandemic world. "Bleach was never a sexy topic until now," says Kang. "People are suddenly very excited about disinfecting things."

This article appears in the Spring/Summer 2021 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title "New Company Cleans Up."*

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