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War zone protection hits South Florida shores

BY ED DUGGAN

Joe Gehr, CEO of Aventura-based Technon LLC, expects his Breath of Life mask to have a big future as emergency protection against smoke, dust, chemical or biological agents for the average citizen.

It started life as a surgical mask made in Israel and has morphed into a 1.5-ounce over-the-head mask with an activated charcoal breathing filter. Packaged, it's about the size of a man's handkerchief, and sells for just under \$30. It is a one-time-use device that's just being introduced to the U.S. market.

Gehr is a former captain with the Israeli Defense Forces, where he worked in the intelligence branch.

Professor Stanley Satz, a physicist who heads Miami-based Bionucleonics, serves on Florida Atlantic University's Scientific Advisory Board, and on Technon's advisory board with Charles Mayer, Yoav Cohen and Steven Posner.

"Joe [Gehr] is a fascinating person with an incredible background in Israeli intelligence," Satz said. "He has an interesting product line in which advanced Israeli technologies are being transferred to the U.S. market."

The Breath of Life does not replace a traditional gas mask, nor is it intended to replace first responder equipment. It is temporary protection for potential victims of smoke, chemical or biologic agents, allowing them to safely exit an area or a building and seek treatment or decontamination. Covering the head, it provides air



Most fire deaths are from smoke inhalation, Joe Gehr says.

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filter capability for 15 to 20 minutes and excludes particulates of 0.3 microns or larger, according to its specifications.

A typical bacterium ranges in size from one to 10 microns and an anthrax spore is six microns.

The mask won't work with everything perfectly. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is 0.2 microns, but usually is found in larger molecules, according to the World Health Organization.

Since SARS can be absorbed through the eyes, using a full-face mask – as opposed to a surgical-type half-mask – is important, the World Health Organization said on its Web site.

Initial marketing by Technon's 15-employee firm will introduce the mask to the finance and hotel industries, as well as to building management companies via private presentations, conventions and trade shows.

Forget terrorism, Gehr said: Every two hours, on average, an American is killed in a fire – 75 percent of them from smoke inhalation. He sees much of that loss of life as preventable.

Frank Correggio, public information officer for Boca Raton's fire department, agrees that smoke inhalation is a serious killer, although he is not familiar with the Breath of Life mask.

"I tell people that in a fire, the smoke and fumes will kill you long before the fire will get you," he said.

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