Share Your News Now

If you would like to share news or information with our readers, please send the unique stories, business news organization events, and school news to us includinig your name and phone number in case more information is needed.

For news and information consideration, please send to News@scdaily.com
or contact
John Robbins 281-965-6390
Jun Gai 281-498-4310

Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

Southern Daily News is published by Southern News Group Daily

Publisher: Wea H. Lee
President: Catherine Lee
Editor: John Robbins

Address: 11122 Bellaire Blvd., Houston, TX 77072
E-mail: News@scdaily.com

Inside C2

Monday, December 06 2021|

WHO chief scientist urges people not to panic over Omicron

GENEVA, Dec 3 (Reuters) - The World Health Organization's (WHO) chief scientist told the Reuters Next conference on Friday that people should not panic over the emergence of the Omicron coronavirus variant and said it was too early to say if vaccines would need to be reworked.

Soumya Swaminathan told the conference that the fast-spreading variant would have to become more transmissible to out-compete the Delta variant, which accounts for 99% of current transmissions.

"We need to be prepared and cautious, not panic, because we're in a different situation to a year ago," she said.

Swaminathan cited data showing the number of Omicron cases is doubling daily in South Africa, where it was first identified.

Nevertheless, Omicron has been identified in 40 countries, Rochelle Walensky, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said at a White House briefing.

A corporate Christmas party in the Norwegian capital Oslo resulted in at least 13 infections, making it the biggest outbreak outside of South Africa, officials said. read more

Much remains unknown about Omicron. Parts of Europe are grappling with a wave of infections of the more familiar Delta variant.
WHO's emergencies director, Mike Ryan, said there was no evidence that existing vaccines needed to be modified to fight Omicron. He said officials should focus on getting more people inoculated with vaccines currently on the market.
"We need to focus on getting people most at risk vaccinated," Ryan said at a social media event.

However, WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier told a United Nations briefing in Geneva that vaccine makers should prepare for the likelihood of adjusting their products. read more

Ugur Sahin, CEO of Germany's BioNTech (22UAy.DE), which makes a COVID-19 vaccine with Pfizer (PFE.N), told Reuters Nextthe company should be able to adapt the shots relatively quickly.
Sahin also said current vaccines should continue to provide protection against severe disease, despite mutations.

People walk along a platform at Kings Cross train station during morning rush hour, amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in London, Britain, December 1, 2021. REUTERS/

Jurors at Ghislaine Maxwell's trial shown Epstein's massage table, photo of sex toys

NEW YORK, Dec 3 (Reuters) - A green massage table seized from Jeffrey Epstein's Palm Beach estate was carried into a Manhattan federal courtroom on Friday, where British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell is on trial for her alleged role in the sex abuse of underage girls.
Prosecutors have said many of Epstein's encounters with teenagers began as massages before escalating, calling the term "massage" a "ruse" to get girls to touch Epstein.

Maxwell, 59, has pleaded not guilty to eight counts of sex trafficking and other crimes for allegedly recruiting and grooming girls for Epstein to abuse.

Her attorneys argue she is being scapegoated because Epstein cannot be prosecuted, after killing himself in a Manhattan jail in 2019 at age 66 while awaiting trial on sex abuse charges. Maxwell is a former Epstein girlfriend.
Jeffrey Parkinson, a retired police officer involved in the 2005 search as part of an investigation into Epstein's conduct, testified on the fifth day of Maxwell's trial that he carried the massage table from Epstein's estate.
Prosecutor Maurene Comey also showed jurors a photo of a box labeled "Twin Torpedos" that a colleague of Parkinson's, Michael Dawson, said contained sex toys taken from an upstairs closet.
"We were looking for massage tables, we were looking for massage oils, we were looking for sex toys, we were looking for correspondence," Dawson testified on Friday afternoon.

The demonstrations came after Epstein's former house manager, Juan Alessi, completed his own testimony.
Alessi had testified on Thursday that Epstein was receiving about three massages every day by the time he left his job in 2002.

He said he sometimes found sex toys while cleaning the massage room and stored them in Maxwell's bathroom.

Alessi called Maxwell the "lady of the house" at the Palm Beach property, saying she often directed him to schedule Epstein's massages, and that he sometimes drove her on scouting missions to spas to find new therapists for Epstein.

A woman who identified herself as Jane testified this week that she frequently massaged Epstein at the Palm Beach home while she was a teenager in the mid-1990s.

She said Epstein often touched her sexually during their encounters, in which Maxwell sometimes participated. Epstein sometimes paid her, she added.

Alessi testified that Jane's real name was in a directory he kept of Epstein's masseusses. He also said that before Epstein and Maxwell arrived in Florida for the weekend, the house staff was instructed to place several $100 bills in Epstein's cars.

Maxwell's attorneys on Friday sought to challenge Jane's recollection of the events when cross-examining Alessi.

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

LOCAL NEWS

New U.S. COVID-19 international travel testing rules take effect Monday

WASHINGTON, Dec 2 (Reuters) - New rules requiring international air travelers arriving in the United States to obtain a negative COVID-19 test within one day of travel will take effect Monday at 12:01 a.m. ET (0501 GMT), according to an order issued late Thursday.

Under current rules, vaccinated international air travelers can present a negative test result obtained within three days of their day of departure. Unvaccinated travelers currently must get a negative COVID-19 test within one day of departure.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky's order says the agency "must take quick and targeted action to help curtail the introduction and spread of the Omicron variant into the United States."

The CDC said beginning Monday "all air travelers, regardless of citizenship or vaccination status, will be required to show a negative pre-departure COVID-19 viral test taken the day before they board their flight to the United States."

The tighter testing timeline "provides an added degree of public health protection as scientists continue to assess the Omicron variant," the White House said in a factsheet released Thursday.

The CDC order noted the Omicron variant has been found in 23 countries. The order didn't require COVID-19 testing requirements for international travelers crossing U.S. land borders with Canada or Mexico.

CDC's order said it "may exercise its enforcement discretion to adjust the scope of accepted pre-departure testing requirements to allow passengers and airline and aircraft operators greater flexibility regarding the requirements."

The CDC is expected to give airlines a three-day grace period to allow for some travelers to return to the United States with tests taken outside of the one-day window, sources told Reuters.

The administration is considering whether to grant temporary exemptions for about two dozen countries where access to same-day testing is limited, but the details are still being finalized, the sources added. Those exemptions could last for only about a week and are expected to be detailed on Friday.

Passengers wait in line inside the terminal at Newark Liberty International Airport in Newark, New Jersey, U.S., November 24, 2021. REUTERS/Eduardo Munoz

On Monday, the White House said it would bar nearly all foreign nationals from entering the United States from eight southern African countries over fears of the spread of the Omicron variant, but has not extended those travel restrictions to other countries where the new variant has been discovered.

The U.S. top infectious disease official Anthony Fauci said Wednesday he viewed the restrictions on the eight countries as a "temporary measure."

White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Thursday she would not "expect the lifting of restrictions before we know more about the variant. We will continue to evaluate if additional restrictions need to be put in place."

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

Editor's Choice

A damaged inflatable dinghy, outboard motors, life jackets and sleeping bags abandoned by migrants are seen on the beach near the Slack dunes, the day after 27 migrants died when their dinghy deflated as they attempted to cross the English Channel, in Wimereux, near Calais, France, November 25, 2021. REUTERS/Pascal Rossignol

Renee Reeves delivers an apple crisp to a home in the evacuation zone after rainstorms lashed the western Canadian province of British Columbia, triggering landslides and floods, shutting highways, in Abbottsford, British Columbia, Canada November 22. REUTERS/Jennifer Gauthier

People feed seagulls from a boat at Yamuna river, on a smoggy morning in New Delhi, India November 18. REUTERS/Navesh Chitrakar

People react outside the Glynn County Courthouse after the jury reached a guilty verdict in the trial of William "Roddie" Bryan, Travis McMichael and Gregory McMichael, charged with the February 2020 death of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, in Brunswick, Georgia, November 24. REUTERS/Marco Bello

Costa Rica's President Carlos Alvarado Quesada pays his tribute during his visit to the National Cemetery in Seoul, South Korea, November 23. REUTERS/Kim Hong-Ji

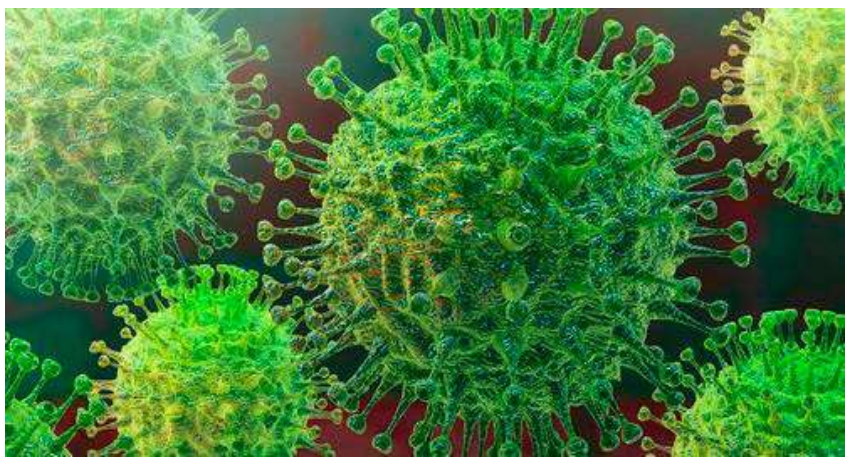
People take a selfie in front of the Grogu "Baby Yoda" balloon as it is inflated the day before the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in Manhattan, New York, November 24. REUTERS/Carlo Allegri

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

BUSINESS

First Confirmed U.S. Case Of Omicron Coronavirus Variant Detected In California

Omicron Coronavirus Variant Is Putting The World On Edge



Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

(CNN)The United States' first confirmed case of the Omicron coronavirus variant has been identified in California.

In a White House news briefing, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said the case was in an individual who traveled from South Africa on November 22 -- before travel restrictions were in place -- and tested positive for Covid-19 on November 29.

That individual, Fauci said, is self-quarantining and close contacts have tested negative for the coronavirus so far.

The person was fully vaccinated and is experiencing "mild symptoms, which are improving at this point," Fauci said. Dr. Grant Colfax, San Francisco's director of public health, said the person had not had a booster shot.

The California and San Francisco public health departments confirmed the case was caused by the Omicron variant through genomic sequencing conducted at the University of California at San Francisco, and the sequence was confirmed by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Color Health said in a statement it returned the positive test result through an San Francisco Covid-19 testing program, and Omicron was identified in under 30 hours "from the time of collection to strain confirmation."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

That individual, Fauci said, is self-quarantining and close contacts have tested negative for the coronavirus so far.

The person was fully vaccinated and is experiencing "mild symptoms, which are improving at this point," Fauci said. Dr. Grant Colfax, San Francisco's director of public health, said the person had not had a booster shot.

The California and San Francisco public health departments confirmed the case was caused by the Omicron variant through genomic sequencing conducted at the University of California at San Francisco, and the sequence was confirmed by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Color Health said in a statement it returned the positive test result through an San Francisco Covid-19 testing program, and Omicron was identified in under 30 hours "from the time of collection to strain confirmation."

The World Health Organization designates Omicron a "variant of concern." In a technical brief released this week, WHO noted that the variant poses a "very high" global risk. The variant was first identified by scientists in South Africa, and has since been detected in several countries.

Scientists are working to determine how transmissible the variant is, how sick it makes people and how well current vaccines work against it. Until more information is learned about the variant, the United States restricted travel from South Africa and seven other countries.

On Monday, President Joe Biden called the variant "a cause for concern, not a cause for panic," saying "we'll have to face this new threat just as we face those who have come before it."

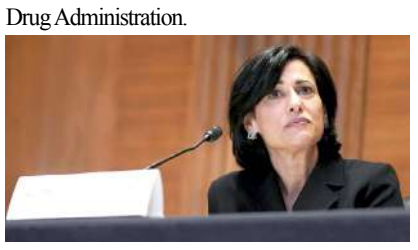
Health officials are urging people to get vaccinated against Covid-19, or get a booster if they're eligible. Other measures such as masks, handwashing, physical distancing and ventilation will still work against the Omicron variant.

The Delta variant of the coronavirus remains the dominant variant globally and in the United States. (Courtesy cnn.com)

All vaccinated adults should get a Covid-19 booster shot because of the Omicron variant, CDC says

(CNN) The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention strengthened recommendations for booster doses of coronavirus vaccine Monday, saying all adults should get boosted six months after the second dose of Pfizer/BioNTech's or Moderna's vaccine or two months after the single dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

It's a slight but significant tweak to the wording of guidance issued earlier this month when the CDC endorsed an expanded emergency use authorization for boosters from the US Food and Drug Administration.



CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky

"Today, CDC is strengthening its recommendation on booster doses for individuals who are 18 years and older," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said in a statement.

"The recent emergence of the Omicron variant (B.1.1.529) further emphasizes the importance of vaccination, boosters, and prevention efforts needed to protect against COVID-19," she added.

"Early data from South Africa suggest increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant, and scientists in the United States and around the world are urgently examining vaccine effectiveness related to this variant. I strongly encourage the 47 million adults who are not yet vaccinated to get vaccinated as soon as possible and to vaccinate the children and teens in their families as well because strong immunity will likely prevent serious illness."

Previously, the CDC said people should get a booster if they are 50 and older, or 18 and older and living in long term care. Otherwise, it advised that anyone 18 and older may get a booster. Now the word "should" applies to everyone 18 and older.

It will take a few weeks of testing to know for sure whether the Omicron variant is more transmissible than Delta, and whether it evades the protection offered by natural infection or vaccines. Scientists will also be looking to see if it causes more severe disease or evades the effects of treatments.

In the meantime, CDC will be watching for Omicron to appear in the US. That requires an extra step of testing as the tests used to diagnose Covid-19 won't tell people which variant they are infected with. "I also want to encourage people to get a COVID-19 test if they are sick. Increased testing will help us identify Omicron quickly," Walensky said.

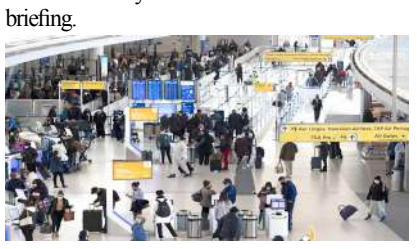
"And finally, to stop the spread of COVID-19 we need to follow the prevention strategies we know work," she added. These include vaccination, wearing masks, improving ventilation indoors and keeping a distance from others, especially if they are unvaccinated. (Courtesy cnn.com)

CDC expanding surveillance at 4 big U.S. airports to look for Omicron, agency's director says

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is expanding surveillance at four major international airports to keep an eye out for the Omicron variant of coronavirus in travelers, the agency's director said Tuesday.

The airports include two in the New York City area, plus ones in Atlanta and San Francisco.

"CDC is evaluating how to make international travel as safe as possible, including critical partner testing closer to the time of flights and considerations around additional post arrival testing and self-quarantine," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky told a White House Covid-19 briefing.



Travellers walk through Terminal 4 at John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) in New York, U.S., on Wednesday, November 24, 2021. (Angus Mordant/Bloomberg/Getty Images)

"Currently CDC is expanding a surveillance program with XpresCheck to JFK, San Francisco, Newark and Atlanta airports – four of the busiest international airports in the country. This program allows for increased Covid testing for specific international arrivals, increasing our capacity to identify those with Covid-19 on arrival to the United States and enhancing our surveillance for the Omicron variant," Walensky added.

"Thanks to our updated travel policies earlier this month, we are also actively working with the airlines to collect passenger information that can be used by CDC and local public health jurisdictions to enhance contact tracing and post-arrival follow-up should a case be identified in a traveler."

CDC is also keeping in close touch with state and local health officials, she said.

"As we have done throughout the pandemic, we are holding regular, even daily calls, with local county and state health officials and our public health partners. These calls include state, county and city health officials, state epidemiologists, laboratory directors and partners from public health organizations. And we are conveying the knowledge we have to these partners and we are relying on their local expertise to provide information," Walensky said.

"We have worked to address that spread of infection for travel during travel through nesting vaccination and pre departure testing for international passengers. And we are continuously working closely with our public health partners, both here in America and around the world," she continued. (Courtesy cnn.com)

Israeli health minister says there are "indications" Covid vaccine protects against Omicron

A health worker administers a dose of the Pfizer-BioNtech COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine on a man in Jerusalem on August 29, 2021 (Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty Images)

There are "indications" that people who received a coronavirus vaccine booster are "protected" against the Omicron variant, Israeli Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz said Tuesday.

"In the coming days we will have more accurate information about the efficacy of the vaccine against Omicron, but there is already room for optimism, and there are initial indications that those who are vaccinated with a vaccine still valid or with a booster will also be protected from this variant," Horowitz said at a news conference.

Boosters have been available in Israel to anyone over age 16 since late August, five months after their second dose of the vaccine. A person is not considered fully vaccinated in the country until they have received a third dose, once they are eligible for it. (Courtesy cnn.com)

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

COVID Immunity Levels Can Be Measured In 15 minutes

Houston Startup Develops Ground Breaking COVID Immunity Test

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

A team of researchers at Brevitest has developed a quick, finger-stick blood test to determine immunity to COVID-19. using a small, desktop device they invented that conducts the test using robotic technology with proprietary testing cards used to analyze the blood samples. Photographed at their offices, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021, in Houston. (Photo/Mark Mulligan, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer)

A Houston startup has developed a revolutionary COVID-19 test that can measure immunity levels and determine whether or when people need a new vaccine or booster to protect themselves from the disease.

The instant test could be widely available soon, if the Food and Drug Administration grants the new device fast-track approval. Knowing personal immunity levels could become increasingly important in the face of new variants, like omicron, when people need to decide whether or when they need a new vaccine or booster shot.

The affordable, first-of-its-kind fingerstick blood test is offered by Brevitest, a company developed at Fannin Innovation Studios, a life sciences incubator in River Oaks. Researchers invented a new method for measuring antibodies, using cloud computing to process results and delivering them in 15 minutes to determine if an immune system needs a boost.

Doctors, companies and public health officials can use the tests to determine the COVID immunity levels for individuals, workforces or entire communities so they can employ more targeted strategies for slowing the disease. Since the technology is protected by patents, Brevitest can license the unique device and potentially become one of the most significant startups to emerge from Houston's life sciences community in a decade.

Leo Linbeck III, the CEO and co-founder of Brevitest, said his company's technology builds on recent research that has determined how many antibodies per unit of blood people need to fight off or minimize a coronavirus infection. The new test lets people know where they stand, whether from a vaccination or natural immunity to determine if they need a booster or difference vaccine Brevitest can adapt the test to detect antibodies for any variant, including omicron. Once approved, the company could begin deploying the device across the country within a few months to carry out millions of tests a week.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — worried about vaccines wearing off — recently authorized COVID-19 booster shots six months after vaccination, prioritizing those over 65 years old. But individual needs vary widely and some people lose antibodies quicker than others.

"Everyone's biology is different, and the data seems to indicate that it could be anywhere from three months to 12 months when you see the antibody level begin to wane," Linbeck told me. "That's particularly problematic for older people who tend to have less of an immune response or those who are immunosuppressed or immunocompromised."

Fast tests to detect SARS-CoV-2 antibodies have been on the market since early in the pandemic, but they only offer positive or negative results and don't measure anitbodies.

Doctors who have patients with weak immune systems have relied on a precise blood test called an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay, or ELISA, that are currently done at central laboratories. But those results can take several days to return.

"We're trying to build a point-of-care ELISA because the way we look at it, either you can have accuracy that will take time or you can have speed, and then you lose accuracy," explained Dr. Dev Chatterjee, a co-founder and co-inventor. "The question we asked ourselves is, is there a way we can marry the two?"

The Brevitest device allows a technician to place a small blood sample on a custom-designed cartridge, which is inserted into a shoebox-sized device that produces digital diagnostic data, the same as the precision test.

The device sends the data to the cloud, where it is processed using proprietary software Linbeck wrote. Patients receive an alert and can access the results with their phones, which also allows them to compare their result with the latest COVID immunity data.

The new company can make a profit at the same $43 reimbursement rate insurance companies pay for a central lab test, Linbeck said. Brevitest is offering tests at its lab in Houston.

Until recently, researchers were unsure how many antibodies someone needed to fend off the virus. But that changed in September when the journal Nature Medicine published a new study that used the World Health Organization standard to measure antibody levels and showed a correlation between antibody levels and infection rates.

Healthy people can use the test to determine if they need a booster or should wait a few months to take full advantage of their vaccine or illness-induced antibodies.

"There's some evidence that if you wait longer and you let your antibody count drop, when you get that vaccine (booster), you get a bigger bump. You get more antibody production than you would if you had taken it while you still have active antibody response," he added.

Linbeck, Chatterjee and co-inventor Dr. Atul Varadhachary founded Brevitest in 2013 to create an office-based blood testing system that would generate precision blood test results quicker. The National Institutes of Health provided a grant during the test's early development, and the Centers for Disease Control asked Brevitest to develop an Ebola test during the 2014 outbreak.

Aquinas Companies CEO Leo Linbeck works on code for a BreviTest analyzer, BreviTest is one of the startup companies helped by Fannin Innovation Studio which helps researchers and scientists with life science product development July 7, 2016, in Houston. (Photo/ James Nielsen / Houston Chronicle)

Chatterjee and Varadhachary said the scientific challenge was far more formidable than expected. Designing a new cartridge that prepared the blood for scanning in a new way took years. Linbeck, an engineer, worked on reliability and durability to meet exacting medical standards.

"Once you actually get down to developing for the real world versus creating something for the lab, there is a whole ocean of problems that you have to solve," Chatterjee explained.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the company refocused on measuring SARS-CoV-2 antibodies.

Brevitest is one of four life science start-ups spun out of Fannin Innovation Studio, Linbeck's biotechnology development company. He is best known as the executive chairman of the Linbeck Group, a construction company founded by his grandfather that built many of the structures at the Texas Medical Center.

Linbeck and Varadhachary started Fannin to commercialize discoveries made at TMC. But Brevitest was Fannin's homegrown effort to address the lengthy delay in returning accurate blood test results, a goal of many companies.

A team at Brevitest has developed a quick, finger-stick blood test to determine a person's immunity to Covid-19 using a small, desktop device they invented that conducts the test using robotic technology with proprietary testing cards used to analyze the blood samples. Photographed at their offices, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021, in Houston. (Photo/ Mark Mulligan, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer)

The most famous attempt to develop a rapid diagostic device is Theranos, a Silicon Valley-based company that promised a full blood workup from a tiny vial using a handheld device. Linbeck, Chatterjee and Varadhachary say Theranos's claims never made any sense to them, and the company's founder, Elizabeth Holmes, is in federal court this week fighting federal fraud charges. In contrast to Theranos, Brevitest only claims to conduct one test per fingerstick and will release its testing data for outside review, Chatterjee said.

Brevitest will never replace the broad tests best done by a central lab, for things like annual physicals, because they require a large amount of blood and the big machines are more efficient, Linbeck said. But the team foresees doctors and clinics using Brevitest to routinely monitor patients with compromised immune systems or to track specific biomarkers for cancer and other infectious diseases.

Most breakthrough research in health care and medical devices never makes it out of the lab because investors lack the patience required to bring a product to market.

Leo Linbeck III, left, founder and chairman of Fannin Innovation Studio and managing partner Atul Varadhachary, right, develop medical technologies along with their portfolio companies like Procyrion. Wednesday, Nov. 12, 2014, in Houston. (Photo/Marie D. De Jesus, Staff / Houston Chronicle)

The company's strategy of licensing bio-medical discoveries and gathering researchers under the studio's umbrella to keep administrative overhead low until they had a commercial product. Linbeck said the investor community needs to have more conversations about the best way to finance life science startups.

"There's a lot of misconceptions about the way that this stuff works," he said. "Having been down in the weeds, I have a greater level of humility and respect around just how difficult this is. The human body doesn't like to be tinkered with, which is great news for us from an evolutionary standpoint, but it's not so great from a medical innovation development standpoint."

From an investor perspective, Linbeck said the most significant challenge was finding the right people to manage the transition from the research lab to a for-profit company. Fannin recruits and trains people with medical and life science skills who are interested in entrepreneurship.

"This is about making a big pile of money because that's also what will sustain us over the long haul," Linbeck said. "That means that we get involved early, and it takes longer, but when the payoff happens, I think it'll be really-big multiples."

Energy projects and technology investments can pay off big, too, and take less time. But Linbeck said he doesn't mind the wait to build a business that saves lives.

"Anything really important and high impact takes a decade," he said. "It just does." (Courtesy houstonchronicle.com)