The road between DVD's and sleep apnea appears long and circuitous, but for Mike Schmidt, it only took one step.

Mr. Schmidt is the president of SoClean Inc., an Oxford-based company that has automated the cleaning process for continuous positive airway pressure machines (CPAP), used to help regulate breathing during sleep. Before this, Mr. Schmidt worked for a company that cleaned and repaired electronic media discs. The popularity of streaming media created an opportunity to do something different, and Mr. Schmidt specifically set out to find something that would help others.

"This has been a team effort," he said. "The goal is bettering someone's life, and you can't put a yahoo on that. It feels so good."

How did you come to create SoClean?

I joined VenMill Industries in 2007. It's a manufacturer of disc-repair machines for DVD's, CD's, and Blu-rays. Video stores and libraries were our big customers. We started looking for another product, and that's when the SoClean idea came. We looked at a lot of different areas to add a product that might bring value, and we asked our employees, and cleaning CPAP machines came up. In talking about it amongst ourselves, we knew many people who had the machines, but had to clean it by hand, and were frustrated with it. We did surveys and found out we weren't the only ones, and we found out from working with CPAP users what they wanted from a machine. The machine we have was really developed, semi by us, but more by the users, as to what their need was and what convenience they were looking for.

What exactly does the machine do?

We designed this CPAP machine. The patient should empty the water and clean the reservoir every day, clean the mask and put it in fresh distilled water. That just takes a few minutes, but once a week they used to wash out the hose, take the mask apart, take the reservoir apart and wash them with soap and water. That can take anywhere from 25 to 30 minutes, and then you must let it dry for the rest of the day. Now all they need to do is put the mask in our machine, close the lid and walk away... it's totally automated — no disassembly, no emptying the water, if there is water, we distill the water as well... it comes on during the day, goes through the distilling processes, and then when you come home, they have a completely clean system. So it's a comfort as well as a convenience, knowing there is no harmful bacteria left, and we hope that leads to better compliance... I want the CPAP user to get up in the morning, drop their mask in the machine, go about their day and then come back at night and get a good night's rest. That's the whole goal.

How would this technology translate to other areas?

We have a bigger unit coming out for sleep labs that does this thing, but there are other avenues and other opportunities for it. We use ozone, which is the most effective gas at killing pathogens. It's a dry system even for smoke, so we are hoping it could be a benefit to homes, for their masks, or labs that use masks, and perhaps even for hospitals to distill CPAP machines that come in and go out... Anything with hoses or tubes is difficult to clean, but if you can put a gas through that kills the bacteria and pathogens, you have improved the treatment.

Did you find a large market for the SoClean?

CPAP has been around for about 20 years, so we were surprised someone hadn't thought of this before. I'm very fortunate I have some clever people I work with. The inventor of the product (Tim Leyva) is still with us, he has certain areas worked with technologies in protecting food, so the idea was trying to use a known disinfectant, and adapting that technology.

What's the future of SoClean?

There is a lot of market left. We quadrupled last year. We're going to triple this year. We want to put the word out to let people know that yes, there is another way to clean your system, without 30 minutes of soap and water. We are starting to expand worldwide... it's a growing market. More and more people are getting diagnosed. It's not a new condition, it's been there, but now it's being recognized, and there's a treatment for it.

— Compiled by correspondent Christine H. Hoyle