

## IDSA CONFERENCE/AUSTIN, TEXAS

# Aging population inspires plastics, design

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AUSTIN, TEXAS — The business worlds of design and plastics are coming face-to-face with the changing realities of the real world.

With the global population aging — especially in North America and Europe — consumers will be looking for products that allow them to hang onto their existing lifestyle for as long as possible. That means products that are easier to hang onto and easier to use.

And at the same time, they'll be relying more on the medical industry as they encounter the implications of getting older.

As a result, designers are looking for ideas that will make products more accessible to a wide group of users, and plastics suppliers are reaching out to those designers with information on resins that fit into that demand.

"We have a demographic shift," said Bill Green, emeritus professor at the University of Canberra in Canberra, Australia, during the Industrial Designers Society of America's annual conference Sept. 17-20 in Austin. "We have a very significant demographic shift. The market is shifting. The world is getting older, and it's happening in a strange kind of way.

"Our parents were comfortable in their 70s, sitting in an armchair, but we're not. We have a lot of discretionary money. We can buy things and we want to buy things."

That shift helped motivate Eastman Chemical Co. as it created a new design focus for its resins in the medical industry.

The Kingsport, Tenn.-based firm has been reaching out to designers during the past three years, working closely with them to educate them about ways plastic can be used.

In new links on its Web page that are geared at designers, the company worked with students from the Savannah College of Art & Design in Savannah, Ga., to help them create innovative concepts for medical tools.

Designers clicking through to the Eastman "innovation lab" Web site can access

design concepts such as a baby scale that replaces cold metal with a sculptured warm surface using Tenite cellulotics, and a resealable copolyester packaging system for syringes used in emergency medical situations that allow first responders easier access to medication quickly, as well as a safe place to dispose of used needles.

The concepts within the medical section have the same intention as the rest of Eastman's outreach programs — helping designers better understand polymers by using simple language.

"We wanted to tell the story about materials and how materials compare, without relying on the chemistry symbols that we'd normally use," said Jack Chan, Eastman field market development manager for medical devices.

By using student concepts, Eastman had a freer hand to show a range of ideas, rather than relying on case studies from specific medical-device makers that may not emphasize the design elements the company wanted to see.

And the students also were free to explore their ideas of what medical design could cover, said Bob Fee, director of the industrial design graduate program at the college.

"They were asked to look at problems," he said. "They weren't just asked to look at a device and make the knob look nicer. Instead, they could go in different directions."

One student, for instance, proposed an incubator for premature infants that would use minute holes in the resin allowing the child to hear its mothers' voice.

Another took an existing device — a glucose meter diabetics use to monitor their blood sugar — and redesigned it to look more like a fashionable wristwatch, to help

decrease the stigma of using the meters.

That ability to more easily hide needed medical devices will be an important part of the trend as the population ages, Green said. Someone who has led an active lifestyle does not necessarily want the outside world to know they are having problems hanging onto a bottle of water, for instance. So a water bottle with a contoured shape that is easier to grip becomes an attractive way to provide help, and it hides the help at the same time.

Eastman Chemical Co. photos



Eastman's Eastar copolyester 6763 can provide safe and efficient rigid medical packaging.

The desire to ease the handling of objects has helped boost the use of thermoplastic elastomers on everything from toiletries to underwater cameras, said Peter Bogle, executive account manager with GLS Corp. of McHenry, Ill.

That is one reason the Oxo line of kitchen gadgets has been so popular, Green said. The company has designed objects that look good, but they also are easier to use.

It is all part of a movement within the design community labeled "inclusive design," which is geared to help people cope with the changes in their abilities.

"This generation of college graduates is going to bear the brunt of the aging population," said Glenda Eilo, global industry leader, medical specialty plastics marketing for Eastman. "These students [at Savannah] asked why? Why not be better?"

"This has allowed us to come up with an entirely different kind of dialogue with designers," said Gaylon White, Eastman's director of design industry programs. "Design in hospitals is going to be huge, and we want to be a part of it."