

Body Part Manufacturer In High Demand

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ATHENS, Ala. (AP) — Bill Turner's company manufactures products nobody wants to use, but people are thankful they are available if needed.

If a wreck crushes bones in a motorist's back, Turner's company makes a metal implant doctors can insert in the spine to fuse to the remaining bones.

If an elderly woman or injured athlete needs a knee replacement, Turner's company makes the metal part that acts as the kneecap.

Turner Medical in Athens makes these orthopedic implants and surgical products because of a declining automotive industry.

Turner found this niche after demand for automotive products waned, garnering his company the Alabama Small Manufacturer of the Year award.

He said his father, John Turner, started the tool and die company more than 30 years ago in his backyard. They made automotive parts and later expanded their business into Turner Machine.

"The market in automotive gradually decreased," Bill Turner said. "My father had retired. We had people depending on us for jobs. A friend told me we do such precision work, we should look at the medical field. I told my father it was either try that or go to the house."

The medical industry designs the products and sends his company the instructions for making them.

Turner started manufacturing medical parts six years ago, but retained his automotive customers. The demand for medical parts increased so fast he had to double his staff and buy more equipment. He now has 90 employees at his facility on Durham Drive.

Three years ago, the company closed its automotive manufacturing line, and Turner Machine became Turner Medical.

Turner said he plans another expansion, adding another building and possibly doubling his staff over the next 11/2 years. He is doing \$1.5 million in sales a month, he said.

"Right now, all of our customers are in the U.S., but one customer we build for is going to start exporting to Japan," Turner said.

The company uses only American products, including its titanium and steel, and is

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registered with the Food and Drug Administration. His customers visit and audit the plant, and he must maintain records on the parts for 30 years.

"The medical industry stresses getting its products on time and that the products are of high quality," he said. "I take pride — my team takes pride — in making quality products because we know what we make is going into someone's body."

Turner said a doctor recently asked his company to make a specific part for a specific patient. Due to trade secrets, he cannot divulge specifics about his products.

"I will never know who that patient was, but I know we were able to enhance a person's quality of life," he said.

Limestone County Commission Chairman David Seibert supported Turner Medical for the Small Manufacturer of the Year Award because the company was able to make a transition and remain open.

"They took a gamble, and it paid off and was successful," Seibert said. "He deserves credit for that. We need more companies that can adapt to the changing economy by making tough choices."

Seibert, Turner and his wife, Cheryl, and other city and county leaders attended an awards ceremony in March. "I thought we would go and eat dinner and come back," Turner said. "I didn't know I was getting an award from the governor. It was also my wife's birthday, so that was a good present for her."

The Business Council of Alabama, the Alabama Technology Network, the Chamber of Commerce Association of Alabama and the National Association of Manufacturers sponsored the award.

It goes to a manufacturer that has 99 or fewer employees and has demonstrated superior performance in the areas of customer focus, employee commitment, operational excellence, continuous improvement, profitable growth and investments in training and retraining.

"Many people in Limestone County don't realize what we do here," Turner said. "They still call us Turner Machine and think we are a greasy, dirty shop, and that's OK. We are quietly moving right along with our new venture."

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