

Mississauga man responsible—

— for one millionth patent

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He ensures that it's yours

By ALEXIS SHIELDS

A Mississauga man, Robert Hirons, is responsible for the one millionth patent to be issued in Canada, since Confederation, a patent which provides an economic method of making plastic disappear within a few months.

Hirons, who works as a patent and trademark agent out of the office of Hirons and Rogers, Toronto, was presented with a gold medal for his part in the patent application by Consumer and Corporate Affairs Minister Anthony Abbott at a ceremony at the National Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa.

As a patent agent, Hirons offers a service to private inventors and companies who have a new product they want to protect.

"They explain their invention to me and how it works and its uses as well as how they came to make it," he said, "and I advise them on how they can protect it."

"First," he said, "I must decide on the type of protection that is applicable to the development. It may be a technical invention, such as a product or process or chemical compound that,

if new, we may be able to get a patent for, or it may be ornamentation, such as a new shape of an old product, in which case it will be protected by a registered design. If it is an artistic, literary, dramatic or musical work it is protected by copyright laws."

PROCEDURE

"If the article or process is patentable," he said, "a search is done to see if it really is new and if this is the case, I prepare and file a patent application with the federal government patent office, under the Bureau of Intellectual Property."

The application then goes to the attention of an examiner who checks to see that it is new and allows or rejects the application or calls for an amendment to the original application.

"I have to give a definition of the invention in the broadest terms possible," said Hirons, "so that I can define the protection the client gets."

During the search to see that another patent outlining the same invention has not been issued, Hirons sometimes goes down to Washington to check in the United States Patent Office but

more often has an other agent do this search for him, as well as checking in the files of patents in the Ottawa patent office.

"I search in the U.S. files because this is the best collection of previously issued patents and contains all the U.S. and Canadian patents, as well as patents from Britain and many other countries," he said.

He said that if the invention is something peculiar to Canada, such as a piece of hockey equipment, then he would be more likely to find something like it in the Canadian office.

But, if it is a household gadget, he heads right for the American office.

How does someone get into this kind of work? Well, says Hirons, a person articles with a patent agent for a total of 18 months, then takes an exam to become a patent agent. It also helps to have a degree in science, he said, so that you can better understand the inventions.

Hirons, who originally came from England, has been in this business for nine years now. One of the most important aspects of his job is secrecy, he said. Also like lawyers, doctors and many other professions,



Robert Hirons, displays the gold medal he won as a result of his work in presenting the patent application for the one millionth patent in Canada since Confederation.

Staff photo by Fred Loek

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Hirons, Robert

the patent agent is not allowed to advertise.

"I got into this work when I looked around for a job in scientific writing after receiving my degree in chemistry," he said, "and found patents."

He pointed out that a patent gives whoever owns the patent a monopoly of 17 years from the date of issue for that product or invention. The important thing in applying for a patent is to have an added feature on a gadget or a way to make it easier or cheaper to manufacture, or have added an ingredient to a chemical for a different effect. In other words, he said, the invention must show ingenuity and be unobvious.

Hirons pointed out that only five per cent of inventions given a patent make it to the commercial product stage.

MILLIONTH

Commenting on the ingenuity of the millionth patent, issued to Dr. James E. Guillet, professor of chemistry at the University of Toronto, and Dr. Harvey G. Troth, a researcher with Royal Packaging Industries Van Lees, BV, based near Amsterdam, The Netherlands, he pointed out that it was Guillet who discovered in 1970 the keytone, a light sensitive molecule that could be placed at the start of a polymar chain to break up the chain and thus make the plastic biodegradable when hit by the ultraviolet rays of the sun.

Guillet gave the invention and all the patents to the university, who then granted the exclusive licence under the patents to EcoPlastics, a company in North York owned by Guillet. While holding off interested American investors with one hand, Guillet tried vainly to find a Canadian company or investor for his product. Finally, he gave a sublicense to the Van Lees company and began working with Troth out of the company's English

office at Passfield, Hamshire.

After joint investigation into the invention, Troth and Guillet discovered that if they added only a small amount of the compound to the regular polyethylene compounds, the biodegradable compound could still be made.

This meant that companies who had already invested millions of dollars in equipment and a plant wouldn't have to invest more money to add more equipment. The biodegradable plastic could be made by adding a small amount of the keytone to the regular polymar chain. This was discovered by 1972.

At a time when people are interested in controlling litter, this looked like a tremendous achievement. It was, except that in 1974 oil prices rose higher than expected and made the manufacture of plastics a much more expensive operation. Now, manufacturers didn't want to throw plastic products away so easily.

Instead of this compound now being added to a great number of plastic products, it has been re-oriented into such things as plastic sheeting placed on fields in order to stop weeds from growing among the crops and biodegradable fertilizer bags left on fields after farmers have used them.

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