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One size does not fit all

Industrial design agency Blond is the brains behind everything from energy systems to refillable deodorant. Its latest challenges have been developing devices to aid breastfeeding and to slow the side-effects of chemotherapy



BELOW The Veera breastpump and feeding device enables mothers to track their babies' milk intake



‘The beauty of industrial design is that you get to learn about so many different subjects,’ says James Melia, founder and creative director of London-based industrial design agency Blond. Until recently, he wasn’t at all an expert on breast pumps or the adverse effects of cancer treatment. But after being approached by startups to work on Lily, a medical device that manages the side-effects of hair loss in chemotherapy patients, and Veera, a breastfeeding device, he had to become an expert on both – and fast. ‘I knew nothing about pumping milk before Veera, and I’d only heard about others going through chemotherapy,’ he says.

Not deterred by the challenge of tackling two such complex yet vital projects, Blond approached both much

like it would any other piece of complex design work. The studio found that both became an interesting challenge of imbuing the innovative technology with an aesthetic that was familiar and intuitive for the end user.

According to academic research, nearly half of breast cancer patients consider hair loss one of the most upsetting aspects of their treatment. So the Lily was created to replace the cumbersome hospital-based machinery that cools the scalp to slow the side-effects of chemotherapy. The new technology, developed by Irish startup Luminate, delivers controlled compression to the scalp instead.

Luminate tapped Blond for the agency’s ability to translate the emotional connection people have with objects

BELOW Blond's Lily design for Luminate resulted in a lightweight helmet with cushioned, adjustable straps



‘The idea was to simplify it so it would look like a bike helmet that people may be happy to go outside in and walk around in’

into human-centric design. The result of Blond's work is a minimal, lightweight helmet with cushioned, adjustable Velcro straps that accommodate a range of head shapes. Every design decision, from the intuitive touch interface to the removable, magnetically fastened straps, was made to empower the user and normalise the experience of wearing the helmet, which resembles a premium wellness accessory rather than a traditional medical device.

‘The idea was to simplify it so it would look like a bike helmet that people may be happy to go outside in and walk around in,’ says Melia. ‘We found that the best blend for user perception would be something a little medical, so you’ve got this finish that feels clean and medical [to give you confidence that it’s going to do its job] but then we merged it with this typical bike-helmet aesthetic.’

When it was time to turn his attention to Veera, the breastpump and feeding



BELOW Veera has been designed to reflect the curves of the body, imitating natural breastfeeding processes



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device developed by US startup Avira Health, Melia was shocked to discover how many women struggle with their breastfeeding journey, especially at the beginning. ‘It’s this world that is invisible, especially to people who haven’t had kids,’ he says. The gently curving, breast-shaped pump allows mothers to feed and pump breastmilk at the same time, as well as track their babies’ milk intake. The device is designed to closely imitate natural breastfeeding, which helps create

a stronger emotional bond while also helping to reduce pain and discomfort.

While both designs await Food and Drug Administration approval in the US, Melia has time to consider his contribution to their success and how these products might well change many lives for the better. ‘Working on these projects was rewarding because [cancer and breastfeeding] will touch everybody’s life, in some way, shape or form. So they feel very close to home.’