

Briton wins pounds 17m for 'stolen' invention

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A BRITISH inventor won pounds 17 million yesterday from the electrical appliance firm Electrolux after he claimed that the company "stole" his design for a vacuum cleaner. John North, 67, said he would take his family to Disneyland after he agreed to the out-of-court settlement with the Swedish company. Mr North, an engineer, from Norwich, claimed that he had invented an upright, bagless vacuum cleaner and had signed non-disclosure agreements with Electrolux on the design, which had taken him 10 years to complete. However, months later he saw a similar machine in an electrical store. "I just took it apart and looked at the workings," he said. He accused Electrolux of copying his invention without permission. "It was so simple that they thought 'anybody could do this'," he said. "We decided to take them on. It took over two years before everything got to a courtroom." The trial had run for over three weeks in El Paso, Texas, before the two parties settled.

The jury heard that the new vacuum cleaner sold nearly three million units, amassing profits of more than pounds 58 million. The design that Mr North claimed to have invented allowed the vacuum cleaner to exert greater downward force on a surface than any other device had been able to do. Electrolux had made no provision for the court case, despite the fact that the dispute has been running for more than four years.