

Discovery of protein leads to AIDS revelation

WASHINGTON (AP) — Scientists have discovered how a little-known AIDS protein pirates its way into cells, revealing a possible new avenue for AIDS drugs.

A virus must get to a cell's nucleus to alter the cell genetically. Various proteins of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, get there by slowly overwhelming cells' defenses.

The Vpr protein not only gets there more quickly, it also forces the cell to help do its lethal job, University of Pennsylvania pathologist David Weiner discovered.

Vpr hijacks another protein naturally present in human cells, one that shuttles certain steroid hormones through cells, he reports Tuesday in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Laboratory tests showed some of these steroids themselves activate HIV production and suppress immune cells, Weiner said. When he added Vpr, the protein not only used the steroids' cellular pathway to reach the nucleus, it triggered steroid overproduction to help it produce HIV, he said.

Scientists already knew some chemicals, including the abortion drug RU-486, can block steroid overproduction in other diseases.

Weiner then tested whether RU-486 could block Vpr as well — and it did. In addition, HIV-infected cells treated with RU-486 produced 70 percent less virus than unmedicated cells, he reported.

But it's much too early to tell if RU-486 would work in people, Weiner cautioned.

Fruits might carry vaccines

WASHINGTON (AP) — A banana that vaccinates against hepatitis or an apple that protects against cholera could be possible by manipulating plant genes, researchers report.

Experimenters at Texas A&M and the Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, N.Y., report they have transferred a protein gene to potato plants that can create in mice the antibodies needed to protect against hepatitis B. They say they believe it may be possible to do the same for other diseases.

A gene that makes an antigen against hepatitis B was transferred from yeast to tobacco to potato and has been successfully tested in mice, said Hugh S. Mason, a Texas A&M co-author of a study to be published Friday in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Laboratory mice eating the potato developed antibodies against hepatitis B, said Mason in an interview. The experiment shows it may be possible to one day grow fruit or vegetables that carry vaccination genes against

other diseases, he said.

"The idea is to produce an edible plant that contains genes that causes it to produce antigens," said Mason. The antigens, absorbed in the gut along with the food, would cause the body to produce antibodies against the target disease, he said. "We hope that many such vaccines could be developed."

The protein gene introduced into the plants could not cause disease, but it would train the body's immune system to recognize and attack a disease, bacteria or virus, he said. Injected vaccines work in generally the same way.

It will be at least 10 years before fruit or vegetables from vaccine plants can be tested on humans, Mason said.

In an experiment reported in Proceedings, the scientists inserted the hepatitis B antigen gene into tobacco plants and then injected mice with extracts made from the plants. The mice developed antibodies similar to the response that occurs after injection by a commercial hepatitis B

vaccine.

Mason said antibodies also occurred when the anti-hepatitis gene was transferred into potato and the mice were fed the raw tuber. However, the researcher said the response was weaker than for the injected vaccine and more research is needed to intensify the effect.

Nonetheless, a co-author of the study, Charles J. Arntzen of Texas A&M, said the work "is the first real evidence that proteins produced in transgenic [genetically manipulated] plants have all the essential features needed to trigger the immune system."

Genes transferred into the plants are incorporated into the normal chromosomes of each cell and are passed to new generations of the plants, Mason said.

Vaccine fruits or vegetables would have to be eaten raw to be effective because cooking causes the antigens to be degraded, he said.

Studies now being conducted are attempting to insert the hepatitis gene into bananas.

Republicans pleased after 100 days, others frustrated

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans couldn't wait to savor the victories culminating their first 100 days in control of Congress, but their fast-paced, ramrod legislating style left some with a sour taste.

Civility often was at a low ebb on the House floor. And even in the more sedate Senate, tempers frequently boiled over.

Partly, it was the size and scope of the issues being debated — from welfare reform to tax cuts to proposed constitutional amendments.

"These are gut-wrenching issues that require gut-wrenching dialogue and debate," explained Rep. Jim Nussle, R-Iowa, who headed the House GOP transition team.

Partly, it was the breakneck speed of work.

In committees all over Congress, lawmakers put in endless days to get legislation out in time for the GOP's self-imposed deadline. The boot-camp regimen was hard for opponents to bear.

"Gingrich put his '100 Days' together and it was full speed ahead. ... I mean, 'What the hell is this '100 Days'?" asked veteran Democrat Joe Moakley of Massachusetts, who came to Congress in 1972.

"They talked so much about a family-friendly Congress and it turned into a nightmare," grouched a worn-out Rep. Bill Clay, D-Mo.

But more than anything, perhaps it was the seismic shift in status that was responsible for the heightened tensions in the U.S.

Capitol.

"I think arguably a minority member may be grappling with their lack of significance — and frustrated about not being able to get a message out," Nussle said.

As for the brash confidence of the new Republican majority, including its 73 "Majority Maker" first-term members, Nussle said, "We're saying too much and we're suddenly being quoted and finding our words on front pages when no one paid much attention before. Now, all of a sudden our words have extreme significance."

The new Speaker, Newt Gingrich, and his leadership team made careers for themselves as minority rabble-rousers — using arcane procedures and after-hours speeches to score points against the Democrats.

When they came to power, the Democrats they had attacked in the past were more than ready to show just how well they had observed the masters' moves.

House Democrats jumped into the attack-dog role on the very first day, questioning the Speaker's ethics and accusing Republicans of supporting measures they once had voted to kill.

Day after day after that, they lined up to give one-minute speeches, questioning the propriety of a book deal that originally would have brought Gingrich \$4.5 million, as well as other Gingrich endeavors, ranging from his televised college course to his political action committee, GOPAC.

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— REP. JIM NUSSLE
R-Iowa

Rep. Carrie Meek, D-Fla., caused a flap early on when she said of the Gingrich book deal, the "perception of impropriety, not to mention the potential conflict of interest ... cannot be ignored."

When Republicans, on a party line vote, ordered Meek's words stricken from the record, Democrats bristled.

But just a few days later, Democrats demanded the words of a Republican, Martin Hoke of Ohio, be taken down — for giving a speech on Democratic hypocrisy after a statement by House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri.

While votes to strike words from the record are relatively rare, language on the House floor was often explosive — especially during the welfare debate.

Time and again, Democrats wearing "Save the Children" scarves and ties called GOP members mean-spirited and cruel, saying their welfare plan took food out of the mouths of children to

give tax cuts to the rich.

Republicans used equally loaded language to say nothing was as cruel as the current welfare system, created by Democrats. Rep. John Mica compared those on welfare to alligators who were fed in his home state of Florida — saying "unnatural feeding and care creates dependency."

Rep. Barbara Cubin, R-Wyo., made a similar comparison with wolves in her state who resisted being set free after being cared for by humans.

Even veteran senators across the Capitol found themselves fighting more fiercely. During the debate over the Balanced Budget Amendment, for instance, Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., angry a promised vote had been put off, accused Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole of "a sleazy, tawdry effort." The Republican leader shot back, suggesting Byrd had violated Senate rules with "conduct or motive unworthy or unbecoming to another senator."

Long before the 100 days were over, patience had run out.

"People are tired. We're a little on edge. People just aren't as friendly as usual. We really don't talk much to each other," lamented Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., who caused fireworks when he alluded to the Holocaust during the welfare debate.

"It's the tension, the stress," he said. "We said things in the heat of debate and in committee meetings that we probably ordinarily wouldn't have said."

Cartoonist's illustration sparks insult

NEW YORK (AP) — A New Yorker cover depicting a business-suited Easter Bunny crucified on a tax form has upset some Christians.

William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, said Monday the illustration is insulting to Christians and "particularly outrageous" during the week before Easter.

The illustration, by cartoonist Art Spiegelman, shows a white rabbit in a suit and tie. He is in a crucifixion pose — arms extended, head sagging, legs together. His pockets are pulled inside out to signify his penury. The image is superimposed on a tax form 1040A. The title: "Theology of the Tax Cut."

Spiegelman said his drawing was inspired by the fact April 15 — the traditional tax deadline — falls this year on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter.

Two years ago, Spiegelman's Valentine's Day cover of a Hasidic Jew kissing a black woman provoked anger among members of both groups.

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