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Gallo: two-thirds of HIV-positives may not get AIDS

"There are so many variants [of HIV] that it is impossible to say that a hundred percent of them are going to lead to lethality."

— Dr. Robert Gallo

BY REX WOCKNER

Chief U.S. AIDS researcher Dr. Robert Gallo confirmed September 8 that he told a British newspaper in late June that only about 33 percent of those exposed to Human Immunodeficiency Virus [HIV-1] will develop AIDS.

Gallo — who is credited with co-discovering HIV — was quoted in the July 1 issue of London, England's The Pink Paper [TPP], in the context of criticizing a British ad campaign that states "the only difference between HIV and AIDS is time."

"We have no way of predicting how many people who are infected are going to develop AIDS," Gallo told TPP. "The best data today argues for about one-third but there are so many variants out there, don't start projecting that you know the future."

In a September 8 telephone interview, Gallo termed the TPP news report "reasonably accurate," saying "there are so many variants [of HIV] that it is impossible to say that a hundred percent of them are going to lead to lethality. In fact, I'd be very surprised if every variant caused AIDS in an individual's normal lifetime. Very few bugs do lead to a hundred percent lethality."

"Look at HIV-2," Gallo continued. "Of the thousands of people HIV-2 infected, you can count on a few fingers the ones that have developed any kind of immune deficiency.... And you can look at HIV-2 as just an extreme variant of HIV-1. So, if HIV-2 is so much less efficient [at causing disease], what about other variants that are less variable than the prototype HIV-1?"

"I don't want everybody who is antibody-positive to think, 'Holy shit, it's hopeless,'" Gallo added. "It could be a third, a half [who develop AIDS] — the point is that no one can predict what every variant of this virus is going to do."

Implications for AZT

Gallo was asked whether recent studies showing that AZT slows HIV infection should have taken into account that all variants of HIV are not equally lethal. "Should people exposed to not-particularly-lethal variants," he was asked, "rush out and begin taking a rather toxic drug?"

"That's an extremely good question," Gallo responded. "I would base it on odds. If I were antibody-positive, I would take AZT the day I learned I was infected, if I could afford it. Too high a percentage are suffering too much from this virus. I would take low-dose [AZT] and combine it with something and gamble on that, rather than gambling on having a relatively innocuous strain of the virus."

Co-factors Make HIV More Dangerous

Another increasingly prominent development in Gallo's thinking centers around secondary viruses that, when present along with HIV-1, speed up damage to the immune system.

Gallo says cytomegalovirus and HTLV-1

have been shown in the lab to increase immune system decline "two-to-four-fold" in the HIV-infected. He also expects that human herpes virus six [HHV-6] is an important AIDS co-factor, but has not yet produced data to back up his theory.

Gallo agreed that studies measuring the effect of drugs such as AZT on immune system decline should also look at which subjects are infected with which co-factors. The recent highly-touted AZT studies considered neither AIDS co-factors nor HIV variants.

Analysis: Why Is All This So Interesting?

Gallo's theories about HIV variants, AIDS co-factors, and what percentage of those with HIV will develop AIDS are obviously important because they give HIV-positives hope and raise legitimate questions about treatment of those who show minimal or no signs of illness.

But his ideas are also significant in light of ongoing dissent to the U.S. government's (and Gallo's) insistence for the past five years that HIV-1 is the sole cause of AIDS.

The New York Native, a gay newspaper, Berkeley professor Dr. Peter Duesberg, New York doctor Joseph Sonnabend, PWA activist Michael Callen, British author Jad Adams and others have argued (in complicated presentations that will not be reproduced here) that HIV is not the cause of AIDS.

Several dissidents believe Gallo and the government are clinging to the HIV theory to save political face and protect scientific reputations. They say evidence exists that HIV is not the whole AIDS story — if, in fact, any of the story.

It is thus significant when Gallo speaks of non-lethal HIV variants and/or AIDS co-factors — other viruses besides HIV that may be part of the AIDS story.

Although no one has proved that HIV-1 is not the cause of AIDS, the dissidents' ideas remain interesting as long as many HIV-positives remain healthy.

And the suggestions that there could be a "conspiracy" to promote the "HIV myth" are intriguing because media reports have previously questioned Gallo's personal integrity.

Beginning with Randy Shilts' book *And The Band Played On* and continuing sporadically thereafter, reporters have hinted that Gallo did not in fact discover HIV, but rather swiped the virus from the Pasteur Institute in Paris.

More recently, reports appeared suggesting unethical behavior by Gallo's lab associates — this time centering on alleged improper business dealings with commercial labs.

At last June's Fifth International Conference on AIDS, Gallo promised to write a book proving definitively that HIV-1 by itself can cause AIDS. Although this won't answer the question of who first isolated the virus, it will be a valuable and overdue addition to the 10-year-old AIDS/HIV story.



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