

The recently reported pessimism among researchers over the failure of an AIDS vaccine has reignited a spectacular scientific controversy.

Is HIV the cause of AIDS? Last September, AIDS researchers were dealt a heavy blow when clinical trials of the most promising candidate for an HIV vaccine were stopped after it turned out to be a dud. The clinical trials showed that the vaccine might have just the people who received it at greater risk of infection rather than preventing HIV or reducing its effect. A survey of top AIDS scientists conducted by The Independent showed most believed a vaccine was nowhere near, with some even believing that effective immunization against HIV may never be possible.

"Nearly a billion dollars is spent globally on AIDS research annually, and yet the sobering reality is that at present there are no promising candidates for an HIV vaccine," wrote Harvard Medical School's Bruce Walker in the journal Science, summing up the failure of the expensive effort.

The development has strengthened the position of a vocal minority of scientists who argue that HIV is a harmless passenger virus (found in diseased tissue, but not contributing to the cause of the disease).

This community of scientists includes Peter Duesberg, professor of molecular and cell biology at the University of California, Berkeley; David Basnick, a prominent American biochemist, and Nobel laureate Kary Mullis, another American biochemist, and enjoys the support of South African President Thabo Mbeki. They have from the very beginning of the AIDS era—supposed to be 1984 when HIV biomedical researcher Robert Gallo published a series of papers asserting that HIV was the cause of AIDS—questioned the "causal link" between the virus and the disease.

Other developments, too, have strengthened the position of the AIDS dissidents. Among these were: periodic revisions of the number of people suffering from AIDS; the demographic factor, which is against the nature of infectious diseases to spread regardless of identity clusters; and AIDS symptoms like tuberculosis and cancer being common results of lifestyle conditions. Duesberg even says "it is AIDS-drugs, such as AZT, that cause the disease owing to their high toxicity. The dissidents also cite data showing HIV+ individuals tend to get AIDS when they stop taking AZT and not when they start taking the drug.

Does HIV cause AIDS?

AIDS?

The failure of a much sought-after vaccine against the virus has re-ignited an old debate. **Mayank Tiwari** explores the controversy

Illustration by...

centers cite in favour of their movement is skewed health funding, especially in developing countries. On May 10, the British Medical Journal carried an article calling for UNAIDS to be shut down as it distorts health funding. In it, Roger England, who heads a Grenada-based think tank, Health Systems Workshop, argued that too much is being spent on HIV compared to other diseases which kill more people. "It is no longer heresy to point out that far too much is spent on HIV relative to other needs and that this is damaging health systems. Although HIV causes 3.7% of mortality, it receives 32% of international health care aid and a big chunk of domestic expenditure. HIV aid often exceeds total domestic health budgets themselves."

Purusottam Muloi, a New Delhi-based member of Rethinking AIDS, a loose group of scientists

and policy makers who do not agree with the prevalent HIV/AIDS theory, says he has been questioning the Indian health ministry and UNAIDS about the scientific evidence behind labelling sections of the population, such as homosexuals, high-risk groups. "The health key of the country is being controlled by international donors. Can you believe that the entire health budget of India is less than the amount of international funding the country receives on HIV?"

Rethinking AIDS president David Crowe says the AIDS "dogma" persists because doctors are trained to obey their superiors. "There are many examples of bad medical advice becoming dogma due to the power of senior middle people. The dogma of AIDS has resulted in hopelessness and despair caused by the stigma of HIV+ status."

Dissident notes

HIV tests are unreliable. People can get falsely positive outcomes for reasons such as pregnancy, flu and auto-immune diseases

HIV belongs to a class of viruses that do not cause disease. These are called passenger viruses. It is in epidemiological studies that HIV shows up as being correlated with AIDS

There HIV+ "long-term survivors" who never develop AIDS. Magic Johnson, who tested positive for HIV in 1991, is probably the most famous example

AIDS cases are concentrated in high-risk groups such as homosexual men with a history of drug use. An infectious disease gets distributed evenly without respecting demographics

The diseases combined under the umbrella of AIDS are so vastly different that only HIV unites them. Some, like Kaposi's sarcoma, lymphoma, and cervical cancer, do not even involve the immune system despite the description of AIDS being "acquired immune deficiency syndrome". Worse, the same disease (tuberculosis) is called one thing if a person is HIV- and another (AIDS) if he or she is HIV+

An increase in AIDS-related deaths corresponds to consumption of AZT, a DNA-chain terminating drug which kills cells. The logic is spurious: HIV, which is supposed to kill cells, is being treated with a drug that itself kills cells

Mainstream view

The HIV pandemic fits the definition of "unusual, not typical". We all know this in our hearts. Can a single-minded global effort be successful? The answer is yes! One has only to recall the total success of the small pox eradication campaign of the mid-1900s and the remarkable advances of the STOP-Polio campaign today.

—Michael I. Rekart, Director, STI/HIV Prevention and Control, British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, Vancouver

AIDS and India?

The controversy surrounding HIV/AIDS is well known in the country's government circles. Health ministry officials told DNA they were aware of the dissident.

"The debate is within the scientific community and can only be resolved by them. We will go with the consensus on HIV/AIDS," a senior official said on the condition of anonymity. Last year, following the National Family Health Survey, the union health ministry reworked the India-specific HIV/AIDS statistics and brought down the number of HIV+ people from 5.1 million to 2.5 million. Though UNAIDS was initially reluctant to admit it had been wrong all along, it revised its estimates to match India's.

It violates human rights

David Crowe, president, Rethinking AIDS, gives his reasons for being violently against "AIDS orthodoxy."

"AIDS involves serious rights issues. People are being forcefully administered toxic drugs.

"Third-world countries are diverting sizeable funds for AIDS drugs purchase, ignoring diseases like malaria that kill more people.

"In the US, women who do not give HIV+ children anti-retroviral drugs are forced to give up their custody.

"In Texas, an HIV+ man has been sentenced to 35 years in prison for spitting at a cop.

HIV is an emergency requiring an unprecedented response. AIDS doesn't fit neatly into a health box. AIDS has its tentacles in all sectors. It is mostly about sensitive issues: sex, gender inequality, sex work, homosexuality, drug use, stigma and discrimination, and all have proved to be enormous barriers to government and civil society."

—Paul De Lay, Director, Evidence, Monitoring and Policy Department, UNAIDS