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AIDS cure isn't out of reach

By Kate Krauss

In the 27 years since the virus that causes AIDS was first isolated, scientists have been working tenaciously, and largely anonymously, to cure the disease. Twelve years ago, Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and other researchers concluded that AIDS could be destroyed in all but a few pockets in the body, known as "viral reservoirs." Kill or neutralize the virus in those reservoirs, and AIDS would be cured. The scientific problem is that difficult and that simple.

Outside medical research circles, though, the idea of a cure for AIDS is rarely discussed seriously. There is no special organization or department at the National Institutes of Health dedicated to a cure. There are no editorials in the press calling for more research into "HIV eradication," the technical term for a cure. There is no annual research update on the subject for the general public or annual prize for the most promising work in the field - even though 33 million people have HIV and 25 million have died of AIDS.

Yet, in private conversations, small meetings, and medical journals, leading researchers are calling for a renewed focus on eradicating the AIDS virus. They also have identified promising avenues for attacking the problem. Although few people realize it, eradication studies require fewer patients than the huge trials needed to test a vaccine, and they can often be done more quickly.

At the same time, the National Institutes of Health - perhaps our best hope for funding a cure for AIDS - has been underfunded since 2003. One consequence has been less money for HIV eradication research, and less hope for younger scientists and innovative ideas.

But the NIH received a windfall in the form of \$10 billion from the federal stimulus package. A small fraction of that is designated for HIV eradication research. This is a welcome but temporary fix, as the money will be spent by September. To cure AIDS, funding must be available for promising research projects on a

continuing basis - for conservative studies and novel ideas, for new researchers and those who have devoted their whole careers to finding a cure. And the funding process must be streamlined so that researchers can easily apply for the money.

AIDS advocates are calling for the NIH to be funded at \$35 billion next year and \$40 billion the following year so that the new projects funded by stimulus money can be continued. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases has made a good start by designating some funding for viral eradication research, but this project and its funding must be made permanent.

A cure for AIDS could save the lives of tens of millions of people and prevent hundreds of millions of children from being orphaned. It could also reduce U.S. AIDS spending by nearly \$20 billion a year. We spend \$11 billion a year caring for people with AIDS in the United States and at least \$6 billion funding AIDS programs abroad. Put together, this constitutes more than half the budget of the National Institutes of Health.

Today, World AIDS Day, finds us getting closer to a cure, and the stakes are extremely high. It comes down to both money and vision - the vision to imagine a world where people in Philadelphia and Capetown are lining up at clinics not for their monthly allotment of AIDS medication, but for the last AIDS drug they will ever need.

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