

AIDS Theories Vary

by Terry Lemison

Bethesda, MD.—Virologists stalking the infectious agent causing AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, discussed state-of-the-art theories at a federal conference here, but reached no consensus on any culpable germ's identity.

However, Dr. Albert Sabin, asked by conference organizers to summarize the group's findings at its concluding session, said a "broad net" must be cast in the search for the agent. Dr. Sabin is the developer of the live-virus polio vaccine.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) asked the scientists to focus on the possibility that one or more viruses might be implicated in AIDS.

Dr. Sabin, asserting he has "no personal involvement in this work, no favorite hypothesis...no grant," suggested two preeminent theories:

- "It could be something entering the human chain of transmission by accident, through homosexuals, from an animal reservoir so that it is totally new to the human species," Dr. Sabin said.

Much of the emphasis at the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control has been geared to looking for viruses that are "different," but none have been found, he added.

- It may not be a different virus. It may be one or two viruses working together that have changed in their capacity for producing long-lasting damage to these lymphocytes which protect our body against ordinary microbial infection," Dr. Sabin continued.



Consensus on AIDS Elusive

One thing clearly demonstrated by the wealth of research that has been conducted, particularly that of CDC, is that no such agent or agents are going to be identified easily, Dr. Sabin said.

He said scientists at the conference spent two days examining peculiarities of all of the viruses known to attack the human species.

The key, he added, may come to the researcher who demonstrates some virus produces damage to a subset of lymphocytes—the T-4 group—particularly affected by AIDS in a way different from any other virus.

"That would be the criterion that you had something, not just isolating another virus," he said.

NIAID director Dr. Richard M. Krause said some individual researchers working with a particular virus may favor that organism as the likely villain if they see it has "a certain favoritism of the lymphoid tissue," but researchers generally acknowledge the AIDS agent is yet unidentified.

National Institutes of Health director Dr. James Wyngaarden said six of the NIH institutes are conducting AIDS research in addition to "major (grants) efforts."

"These research efforts," he said, "together with strong epidemiologic efforts by the Centers for Disease Control, will be maintained in our quest to determine the cause or causes of AIDS, to develop diagnostic tests and treatments and, of course, to apply measures to prevent this lethal condition."

The Public Health Service, of which NIH is a part, has been criticized for failing to respond promptly when the AIDS phenomenon began because it largely was affecting homosexuals.

For example, a Democrat who chairs a key congressional health subcommittee, Rep. Henry A. Waxman, earlier, said the Reagan administration would have been more responsive had the victims been members of the American Legion.

Rep. Waxman represents west Los Angeles, a city with an unusually high rate of AIDS. Clusters of cases, whose demography has puzzled researchers, also include San Francisco and New York City.

After the NIH workshop, Dr. Wyngaarden met with reporters and defended the agency's response, noting that cases were being studied at the NIH hospital here even before the collection of symptoms had the name AIDS.

Dr. Krause of NIAID added that the agency will spend nearly \$8 million on AIDS this fiscal year, and he said funding has been appropriate.