



National Institute on Drug Abuse
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NIDA Announces Recipients of New Avant-Garde Award for Innovative HIV/AIDS Research

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health, today announced the first three recipients of its new Avant-Garde Award. This award is intended to stimulate high-impact research that may lead to groundbreaking opportunities for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS in drug abusers. Award recipients will receive \$500,000 per year for five years to support their research.

NIDA's HIV/AIDS Research Program supports an innovative and multidisciplinary HIV/AIDS research portfolio that addresses the role of drug use and its related behaviors in the evolving dynamics of HIV/AIDS epidemiology, natural history/pathogenesis, treatment, and prevention.

The three awardees will undertake diverse approaches in their research on HIV--one scientist will investigate HIV's ability to hijack key proteins involved in the regulation of host cell gene expression; another researcher proposes to develop agents that can effectively block the spread of the HIV virus within the body; and the third will evaluate the effectiveness of expanded access to highly active antiretroviral therapy in decreasing new cases of HIV infection among injection drug users.

The Avant-Garde Awards are modeled after the NIH Pioneer Awards, which are granted to scientists of exceptional creativity who propose pioneering and possibly transformative approaches to major challenges in biomedical and behavioral research. "It is our hope that by supporting investigators who look differently at the challenge of HIV/AIDS, we will discover new approaches to the prevention and treatment of this devastating disease," said NIH Director Elias Zerhouni.

“We are excited by the innovative approaches proposed by our award recipients,” said NIDA Director Nora D. Volkow, who announced the awards. “They are investigators who are willing to step into un-traveled scientific territory, and we want to support their vision.”

The Avant-Garde Awardees were selected from 52 applicants whose applications reflected diverse scientific disciplines and approaches to HIV/AIDS research. The Avant-Garde Awards were granted to the following researchers:

Awardee: Ileana Cristea, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Molecular Biology at Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., is a young investigator of exceptional talent and promise whose research creatively applies technology to address significant biological issues. She developed methodology that allows tracking of protein localization and elucidation of interacting partners. Dr. Cristea applied this technology first to study the virus-host interactions for Sindbis fever (caused by a mosquito-borne virus) and has extended this technology to the study of other virus host interactions, including human cytomegalovirus and HIV.

Project: Proteomic tools to uncover the role of chromatin remodeling in HIV-1 infection

The HIV virus contains relatively little genetic information. Therefore, it usurps many of the host’s cellular machinery for its own purposes. This study focuses on HIV’s ability to hijack key proteins involved in the regulation of gene expression. A strength of this proposal is its unique ability to perform a comprehensive screen of interactions between viral and host proteins.

Awardee: Jerome Groopman, M.D., professor of medicine, Dina and Raphael Recanati Chair at the Harvard Medical School and Chief, Division of Experimental Medicine at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Dr. Groopman's research focuses on basic mechanisms of hematopoiesis, cancer, and HIV/AIDS. He is a renowned translational physician-scientist whose research provided key information on hematological abnormalities in AIDS patients early-on in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Dr. Groopman studied how HIV elicits immune responses suppressive of marrow stem cell replication and maturation and also conducted the first clinical trials demonstrating that colony stimulating factors could restore cell number and function.

Project: Inhibition of HIV at the Immune Synapse Utilizing Novel Ligands and Receptors

Cells of the immune system form complexes (the immune synapse) that are very efficient at passing HIV to uninfected cells. This study seeks to develop agents that will block virus propagation from the immune synapse. This project has the potential to develop new therapeutics that block movement of HIV infected cells throughout the lymphatic system.

Awardee: Julio Montaner, M.D., professor of medicine at the University of British Columbia and Head, Division of AIDS Canada, Director, British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, Providence Health Care, adjunct professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego, studies the role of HAART (Highly Active Antiretroviral Treatment) as HIV prevention at a population level. Dr. Montaner, who was recently elected president of the International AIDS Society, is a highly regarded HIV/AIDS clinician who performed pioneering work on the development of HAART therapy. Dr. Montaner is now directing more of his research focus on HIV prevention.

Project: Seek and Treat for Optimal Outcomes and Prevention in HIV & AIDS in IDUs

Preliminary evidence suggests that expanded HAART coverage among injection drug users will decrease new HIV infections within the population, including but not restricted to injection drug users. This project will test the existing evidence. If successful, this effort could lead to decreased sickness, death and hospital utilization by injection drug users. Its results could have dramatic consequences for the control of the HIV epidemic around the world.

For further information about the Avant-Garde Award, please visit the NIDA Avant-Garde Award Web site at <http://www.nida.nih.gov/about/organization/arp/AVGP.htm> Information about the FY09 Avant-Garde award will be posted on this site soon.

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NIDA, part of NIH, supports most of the world's research on the health aspects of drug abuse and addiction, and carries out a variety of programs to inform policy and improve practice. Fact sheets on the health effects of drugs of abuse and information on NIDA research and other activities can be found on the NIDA home page at <http://www.drugabuse.gov>

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) - The Nation's Medical Research Agency - includes 27 Institutes and Centers and is a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is the primary Federal agency for conducting and supporting basic, clinical and translational medical research, and it investigates the causes, treatments, and cures for both common and rare diseases. For more information about NIH and its programs, visit www.nih.gov.