Gallo Meeting a Mecca for AIDS Researchers

Bob Gallo's lab meeting, once an annual review for some 20 researchers, has been transformed into an international conference that attracts hundreds

DURING THE LAST FULL WEEK of August, as hoards of people abandoned their work in favor of more pleasant surroundings, Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute came to Bethesda for Bob Gallo's "lab meeting." Often portrayed as Gallo's chief rival in the war on AIDS, Montagnier could have stayed in Paris. But for six intense days and nights, Bethesda was the place to be. Similarly, Hans Wigzell of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Richard Lerner of the Research Institute of Scripps Clinic in La Jolla, and Jaap Goudsmit of the Academic Medical Center in Amsterdam forfeited prime vacation time to attend what many describe as the most important yearly meeting on AIDS research.

Gallo's meeting has become something of a phenomenon—a small lab meeting turned international event. In a scientific arena marked by competition and conflict, much of it centering on Gallo himself, this wide-ranging gathering is testimony to the fact that, despite the competition, AIDS research is a shared enterprise.

"This meeting is alive; it pulses." "It's the best meeting of the year." "It's a science mixer." More than 500 scientists flocked to this year's meeting of the Laboratory of Tumor Cell Biology of the National Cancer Institute (NCI). One reason, of course, is Gallo—the driving force behind the meeting and a man whose ideas and collaborations influence much of AIDS research.

Another reason is the openness of the meeting. Here, as they do at other small, focused meetings such as Gordon conferences, researchers report their most preliminary data, speculate freely about what they might do next, and often develop new collaborations. As Susan Okie of the *Washington Post* recently noted, Gallo's meeting has become a kind of "invisible college" for AIDS researchers. Not all prominent AIDS researchers were invited and not all AIDS research is characterized by openness and trust. Still, the Gallo lab meeting stands in sharp contrast to public perception that AIDS research is a cut-throat business typified by scientists jealously hiding their ideas and data from one another.

The evolution of the meeting was slow, says Gallo, diagramming in the air how the number of people increased gradually over the years. "But then [his finger shoots up on the air-graph] it had an acute onset."

Gallo started the annual lab meetings in the early 1970s before he and his colleagues identified the first-known human retrovirus, HTLV-I, which causes adult T cell leukemia. Twenty or so people from the NCI lab participated. The meetings were for "taking stock" of things, says Gallo, and were often held at state parks. "We got thrown out of one park and told never to come back because we made too much noise."

By the mid-1970s the meetings were stimulated by the groups's identification of interleukin-2, a growth factor for T lymphocytes. Collaborators from other labs "in the neighborhood" attended, including William Blattner and Samuel Broder, both of NCI. By 1981 the field of retrovirology had come into its own and the meeting hosted 80 or 90 participants, including some from Boston, Philadelphia, and North Carolina. AIDS was newly recognized as a disease but no one knew what caused it.

Deborah Barnes

Robert Gallo. *The annual lab meeting started small, but had "an acute onset" with AIDS.*

"With the leukemia viruses [HTLV-I and HTLV-II] and AIDS coming on the scene, more collaborators were there," says Gallo. "We formed an ad hoc group late in 1982 to find the cause of AIDS." The ad hoc group included some of Gallo's retrovirology collaborators and also some new people—Anthony Fauci, now the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), Robert Redfield and Donald Burke of Walter Reed Army Hospital, and James Curran of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, for example. By early 1984, when HIV was clearly identified as the cause of AIDS, the number of people collaborating with the Gallo lab had mushroomed and most of them came to his annual lab meeting.

AIDS was not the only topic this year. Other research interests—Kaposi's sarcoma (a skin tumor seen in some AIDS patients), the retroviruses HTLV-I and HTLV-II, and HBLV (a DNA-containing human herpes virus that infects B lymphocytes)—also shared the spotlight.

Nevertheless, the dominant scientific theme was AIDS. This year, special lectures by scientists in fields seemingly unrelated to AIDS further galvanized futuristic thinking.

For instance, Lerner of the Scripps Clinic proposed that catalytic antibodies might someday be used to disrupt critical proteins of the AIDS virus. French Anderson of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute described how gene transfer might be used as a therapy for cancer and proposed that a similar strategy might someday be used as a treatment for people infected with the AIDS virus. Jonathan Gershoni of the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel, explained how molecular decoys can fool potent neurotoxins into binding to the wrong molecule instead of attacking the receptor for acetylcholine (the major nerve-to-muscle transmitter) and causing muscle paralysis. Gallo thinks the molecular decoy approach might have some potential as a strategy for AIDS therapy, so he has invited Gershoni to do a sabbatical at NCI.

In terms of AIDS research, "This is the best meeting," says Peter Biberfeld of the Karolinska Institute. Was it better than the AIDS meeting in Stockholm just 2 months ago? "Oh, sure." Why? A smile. "That's like asking me to point out the most beautiful woman on the street and then asking me why she is the most beautiful." After a few moments of concentration he decides it's because most of the best people in the field are there and they are presenting the newest research—much of it unpublished. But most important, he says, are the discussions.

■ DEBORAH M. BARNES