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LETTERS

AIDS Virus History

In the News & Comment article of 8 January about the investigation by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) of Robert Gallo (p. 168), Jon Cohen writes of a time, “when Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in Paris was first isolating the AIDS virus, which he called LAV.” This kind of statement prompts me to tell another side of the story about the circumstances that led to the discovery of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) 10 years ago in France.

I have been working on AIDS since the first case of the disease was diagnosed in France. Willy Rozenbaum entrusted David Klatzmann and me with the immunological study of that case in December 1981. In March 1982, I joined in the creation of a multidisciplinary study group on AIDS whose other members were E. Bouvet, J. B. Brunet, J. Chaperon, S. Kernbaum, Klatzmann, L. D. Lachiver, J. Leibovich, C. Mayaud, O. Picard, J. Revuz, Rozenbaum, J. Villalonga, and C. Weisselberg. None of us was from the Institut Pasteur. This group met regularly in the nephrology department of Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, where I was working. We set up the first French epidemiological, immunological, and virological studies of AIDS. The exchange of ideas that took place in this study group was essential for the discovery of the disease's causal virus.

We adopted the hypothesis that the disease was caused by a retrovirus and defined what we considered to be the most propitious experimental conditions for the isolation of this hypothetical virus. Our idea was that the virus would be isolated more easily from patients with an AIDS-associated syndrome (essentially a generalized lymphadenopathy) than from patients with AIDS itself. Because we thought it likely that lymph node hyperplasia was evidence of a localized immune response, which suggested the presence of the virus in the lymph nodes, we decided to search for the virus there, rather than in the peripheral blood of the patients. Rozenbaum and virologist Françoise Brun-Vezinet contacted Luc Montagnier's group at the Institut Pasteur and brought them a lymph node specimen. That it was not a mere blood sample attests to the study group's contribution to the isolation of the virus. Montagnier, Jean-Claude Chermann, and Françoise Barré-Sinoussi went on to successfully

isolate LAV, now known as HIV, early in 1983.

A second group then formed, the “hard core” members of which were Barré-Sinoussi, Chermann, and Montagnier from the Pasteur Institute; Brun-Vezinet, Klatzmann, C. Rouzioux, Rozenbaum, and me from different medical schools in Paris; and J. B. Brunet from the French Ministry of Health. The aim of our new group was to demonstrate the role played by the virus in AIDS and related diseases and to develop a test capable of detecting viral markers. Results relating to any part of our research were discussed by all of us in weekly meetings, when we took stock of our progress and made plans to determine future experiments. The active participation of each member in the work of the group as a whole was expressed in the collective signing of our publications of that period (1), irrespective of which part of our individual research projects they treated.

It therefore seems inappropriate to speak of “Montagnier . . . isolating the AIDS virus,” as the discovery and characterization of HIV were a collective endeavor. Had this notion been kept in mind during the last 10 years, many problems and controversies harmful to the scientific community and to public health might have been averted.

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