25 Years Later, HIV/AIDS Still an Epidemic

BY LORINDA BULLOCK

WASHINGTON — The two researchers credited with discovering HIV in 1984, Dr. Robert C. Gallo and Dr. Luc A. Montagnier, came together in a "Global Call to Action" to remind the world on the 25th anniversary of their discovery that HIV/AIDS remains one of the largest global health threats.

Despite advances in treatment that allow people with the virus to live longer, "we are still facing an epidemic. There is no cure, no vaccine. The virus is spreading in developing countries," Dr. Montagnier, president of the World Foundation for AIDS Research and Prevention, reminded the public at a media gathering. He stressed that education about HIV/AIDS prevention remains paramount—comparing the disease with the 2009-H1N1 flu that has dominated recent media coverage. "It is transmissible, not contagious like the 'swine flu,' " he said.

Dr. Gallo, director of the Institute of Human Virology at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, said the 25th anniversary "is a good time for a reminder. It's not to make criticisms but to make suggestions" about the enormity of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that continues to ravage the globe. The rate is particularly high not only in Africa but also in the United States, where blacks and Hispanics are infected in large numbers.

The groundbreaking researchers published articles in the May 4, 1984, edition of Science that led to the development of the HIV blood test, diagnostic use of which helped to control the pandemic.

Jeffrey S. Crowley, director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, said that the Obama Administration is working to lower rates of infection, to improve care for people living with the disease, and to find ways to address the health disparities in target populations.

"The president wants to continue America's commitment to the HIV/AIDS epidemic global leadership … but he also wants us to solve the domestic HIV/AIDS epidemic," he added.

Mr. Crowley said Americans should not think that HIV/AIDS infection rates have slowed, considering the more than 56,000 new infections being reported in the United States each year.

Key goals of the "Global Call to Action" include:

► Greater investment in medical infrastructure and educational outreach programs in the most-affected U.S. communities.

► Development of HIV/AIDS treatment and control programs with institutions in developing countries. For example, programs that promote better nutrition, which contributes to a healthy immune system, can help reduce transmission rates and improve the quality of life for infected patients, Dr. Montagnier said.

► Cultivation of young scientists in the field of human virology. "We see less, particularly from the United States. Surely MD's are not going into research like they did when I was a young man," Dr. Gallo said. More researchers in this field are coming from Eastern Europe, China, and India, he said.

► Enhancement of HIV/AIDS education and prevention, especially in highly affected countries.

► Commitment to the prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission.

► Support for cutting-edge research for vaccines. Dr. Gallo said he believed that "a more major vaccine effort could have been initiated earlier," but he noted that the National Institutes of Health, the Gates Foundation, and others currently are working very hard in vaccine development to make up for lost time.

Although some research out of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, has been promising, involving the removal of a special receptor with HIV cells and infusing stem cells back together, he noted that such ongoing research is "immensely expensive."

Better therapies would be those that mitigate side effects and treatment resistance, he said, urging pharmaceutical companies to invest in vaccine research.

"We are not dead in AIDS research. There are still new discoveries to be made," Dr. Montagnier said. ■