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Honoree: HIV still holds key secrets

AIDS researcher among 5 to be recognized at Steve Chase awards gala

*Bruce Fessier
The Desert Sun*

Scientists can't predict when they'll create an HIV/AIDS vaccine, says the federal government's top official on infectious diseases, because they are still trying to discover why the body's immune system doesn't defend against the HIV virus.

But they have found effective treatments for HIV/AIDS, said Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and chief of its Laboratory of Immunoregulation.

"One of the greatest success stories in the link between biomedical research and its application is the development of 30 drugs — 24 individual drugs and six combinations of drugs — that have been very successful in treating HIV," said Fauci, who will be honored Saturday at the 15th Annual Steve Chase Humanitarian Awards Gala.

"For the most part, we can adequately treat people who have access to the drugs. One of the real issues is getting access to the people who need it the most."

One of Fauci's proudest achievements, he said in a telephone interview last week, is the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which he devised and implemented for former President George W. Bush. He won the Presidential Medal of Freedom last year for his plan to treat, care and prevent the spread of HIV around the world.

"That is probably the highest point of the Bush legacy," Fauci said. "Even though there are a lot of criticisms about the administration for a variety of things, this is one of the very good things that was done during the Bush years. I think PEPFAR stands out as one of the most important global health contributions our country has ever made."

The Bureau of Public Affairs for the State Department calls it "the largest commitment by any nation to combat a single disease in history."

Fauci's institute has a \$4.6 billion budget to respond to such infectious maladies as transplantation allergy, asthma, malaria and tuberculosis. But its holy grail, he said, is finding an AIDS vaccine.

"We know the origin of HIV," he said. "It originated in a chimpanzee, probably centuries ago, and jumped species probably decades ago. What we don't know is how we can induce with a vaccine an immune response that would be protective like any other vaccine."

Fauci spends much of his time studying the pathogenic mechanisms of HIV. He's basically seeking, he said, "a scientific matrix on which others will build in developing vaccines."

He recently co-wrote a paper for the New England Journal of Medicine describing a combination vaccine undergoing a large-scale clinical trial in Thailand (where there is an abundance of HIV volunteers) to induce T cells and antibodies to fight the HIV virus. Results are expected by the end of this year, but Fauci is reticent to predict success.

"It's still in the phase of not really knowing if it's going to work," he said. "We've had so many failures that we're getting back to the discovery phase of trying to figure out, with smaller studies, why we're not getting the proper immune response.

"If this were just a developmental task, it would be almost like engineering. I could tell you in three to five years we're going to have a vaccine. But, when we're in the discovery phase and we still don't know the answers to certain critical questions, it's virtually impossible to put a time frame on when we're going to develop a vaccine."

Fauci has researched AIDS and other infectious diseases for every president since Ronald Reagan.

He devised PEPFAR after Bush sent him and Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson to Africa in the summer of 2002 to report on the AIDS pandemic.

"I came back with a plan that we could really do something if we had the proper amount of resources," he said. "So the president sent me back and said, 'Put together a comprehensive plan for prevention, treatment and care of HIV. Don't worry about the cost. I want it to be transforming.' And that's what I did."

Fauci proposed a \$15 billion five-year plan to treat 2 million people, prevent 7 million infections and care for 10 million people in southern Africa and the Caribbean.

Bush announced it in his 2003 State of the Union address. His 1,600-person institute staff then began a program to distribute drugs and condoms, do circumcisions and train others to prevent and treat people with HIV.

The program also led to a friendship with U2's Bono.

"He came to my house," Fauci said. "We discussed it and we supported each other on that. He is very supportive of what the president did."

It's apparent, however, that \$15 billion over five years won't put a dent in the worldwide HIV/AIDS pandemic. Congress reauthorized PEPFAR for \$48 billion last year and Fauci is optimistic of getting President Obama's support.

"He's saying the right things," Fauci said. "He's talking about increasing funding for biomedical research and he has a respect for science. We're looking forward to working for him."

The Desert AIDS Project will present Fauci with its Science and Medicine Award at its benefit at the Palm Springs Convention Center. The Steve Chase Humanitarian Awards also will honor five other AIDS activists, including Palm Springs resident Barry Manilow.

DAP Executive Director David Brinkman said it's fitting to honor Fauci at a benefit celebrating the DAP's 25th anniversary since he was fighting HIV/AIDS when the DAP was getting started.

"Dr. Fauci's commitment will continue to be an inspiration to us as we embark upon our second quarter-century," he said in announcing Fauci's honor.

But, with 2.7 million new HIV infections around the world each year, including 56,300 new cases annually in the United States, Fauci says, "It's very difficult to spend a lot of time in self-congratulation. (We) still have a lot more work to do."

Additional Facts

Coming tomorrow in Health

Chase honoree Barry Manilow of Palm Springs discusses personal efforts in fight against AIDS.

What: The 15th annual Steve Chase Humanitarian Awards, raising funds for the Desert AIDS Project,

in its 25th year of providing services to desert HIV/AIDS patients and their families

Where: The Palm Springs Convention Center, 277 N. Avenida Caballeros, Palm Springs

When: Saturday, 5 p.m., cocktails and silent auction, 8 p.m. dinner, awards and entertainment

The honorees: Dr. Anthony Fauci, Science and Medicine Award; Barry Manilow, Silver Anniversary Community Service Award; Bebe Neuwirth, Arts and Activism Award; Kristin Chenoweth, Arts and Activism Award; Bill Jones, Partners for Life Award; Harriet Goldberg, 100 Women Award

Entertainer: Singer-actress Diahann Carroll with the Pat Rizzo Orchestra

Hostesses: Morgan Fairchild, Linda Gray and Donna Mills

Presenters: Kevin Bass, Regan Hofmann, Dick Taylor, Susan Unger, Daniel Warn and B.D. Wong

Tickets: \$425

Information: 323-2118 Ext. 266
