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\$100m gift bolsters AIDS fight

The Boston Globe

Businessman will start institute to find vaccine



Dr. Bruce Walker (left) led Susan and Terrence Ragon through a Massachusetts General Hospital lab yesterday. (Globe Staff Photo / Pat Greenhouse)

By Stephen Smith
Globe Staff / February 4, 2009

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The hunt for an AIDS vaccine, a scientific quest that has stumped infectious disease researchers for two decades, is receiving a \$100 million boost from a Massachusetts technology magnate, whose gift will create a Boston institute fusing the expertise of doctors, engineers, and biologists.

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Stunned by scenes of desperation he witnessed in HIV-ravaged South Africa, Phillip Terrence Ragon is spending a considerable chunk of his fortune to accelerate research for a vaccine that would slow the relentless spread of the virus that causes AIDS and now infects more than 33 million people worldwide.

The money, \$10 million a year for the next decade, will go to Massachusetts General Hospital but be shared with other research powerhouses, including Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. An announcement of the gift, the largest in Mass. General's history, is expected this morning from Ragon, 59, the founder and sole owner of InterSystems, a Cambridge company that provides database software to hospitals and other industries.

The AIDS vaccine research center is modeled on the Broad Institute in Cambridge, which explores the frontiers of genetic science, and, much like the Broad, will foster collaborations among specialists who do not usually spend much time talking to one another.

By doing that - and by freeing scientists from the onerous pursuit of federal grants - Ragon, known as "Terry," said in an interview that he hopes to provide researchers the running room to chase concepts that might be dismissed by more risk-averse donors.

"You might say back in Newton's time, you could be a solo physicist conducting research," said Ragon, who has an undergraduate degree in physics from MIT. "But today, you need projects where large groups of people come together to focus on advancing the state of science."

Since the dawn of the AIDS epidemic more than a quarter of a century ago, the formulation of a vaccine has loomed as the single greatest goal, and proved the most daunting failure, of HIV scientists.

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