

VGTI awarded \$25 million for HIV research; institute calls it boon for Port St. Lucie area

By Jonathan Mattise

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PORT ST. LUCIE — Vaccine & Gene Therapy Institute of Florida will receive federal grants totaling \$25 million to team up with the University of California, San Francisco, to research where and how HIV hides inside cells.

Bolstering VGTI's resources for its HIV/AIDS research, the \$5 million annual grants over five years will fuel studies to find treatments targeting HIV's hiding spots within cells, also called HIV reservoirs, without upsetting the immune system.

From the institute's standpoint, receiving a sizeable federal grant in tight economic times is a positive sign for local research and related businesses, Sekaly said.

"This is going to be the foundation of something very important," Sekaly said. "Because money attracts money, and when you see such a big investment by the federal government in an institute, it's going to attract other people to come, it's going to attract other funding."

Behind the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases dollars, VGTI and UCSF will also have a team of scientists on board from nationwide universities, research institutes, and foundations. And from the for-profit sector, Merck Research Labs will team up to help produce any possible vaccinations or other drugs that spring forth from the research.

"What we are able to do with this consortium, is almost assemble a dream team of immunologists, biologists, clinicians, all folks from one approach that involve multiple expertises," said Dr. Rafick-Pierre Sekaly, VGTI co-director and scientific director.

The study will look beyond HIV's hiding places in blood cells to see what other critical internal components are supporting the hidden virus, Sekaly said.

"We know that there is a very small proportion of the cells that circulate in the blood," Sekaly said. "We want to go into other organs, other tissues, and see in which compartment the cells hide."

Researchers will also test out different vaccines, antibodies and other treatments to see what's most effective in eliminating HIV in its hiding spots, Sekaly said.

The initiative, which is part of the Martin Delaney Collaboratory focusing on public-private HIV research partnerships, is the latest, largest step in ramping up HIV/AIDS efforts at VGTI.

In May, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation handed VGTI a \$100,000 grant to study ways to target and eliminate HIV-infected cells.

Florida Atlantic University also recently signed on with VGTI to join in on the research and use some VGTI scientists to double as faculty. That includes teaming up on HIV/AIDS projects.

And along with its counterpart researchers at VGTI at the Oregon Health and Science University, the Port St. Lucie scientists could be ready to test a human HIV vaccine here within three years. OHSU researchers already have had success on the West Coast vaccinating monkeys infected with the primate version of HIV.

"The challenge we're facing, in terms of getting an HIV cure, is a very very important problem that has huge implications," Sekaly said. "Because it's a huge problem, you have to understand there's not someone that'll do it on his own. You really need a group effort."



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