

Hope falters in quest for HIV vaccine - researcher

Brothers, Caroline

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LONDON, April 11 (Reuter) - A leading AIDS researcher has said scientists were losing hope that a vaccine against the killer virus would be developed soon and warned that infections worldwide were set to triple by the year 2000.

Peter Piot, director of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Aids research division, said scientists trying to develop a vaccine were growing disheartened.

"There is no doubt that the development of a safe and effective HIV vaccine is essential if we ever want to control this epidemic," Piot told a conference in Florence, Italy, on Sunday. The WHO made his paper available on Monday.

"Unfortunately, I see signs of discouragement among those working on vaccine development. They say the science is not there yet, and the politics are complicated," Piot said.

He said it was vital researchers redouble their efforts.

"Our historic responsibility is enormous. We must intensify and extend our efforts, especially in basic research and vaccine development," he said.

As he spoke, the head of France's AIDS vaccine research programme, mirroring results of other research groups, said vaccines developed in laboratory conditions had proved useless against "wild" strains encountered by HIV sufferers.

"We seemed to be doing so well in developing vaccines, but this has rocked us," professor Marc Girard was quoted as saying by British newspapers. "It has put us back years...I do not think we have much chance of having an effective version ready for global use this century."

More than 15 million people worldwide are affected by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus HIV, passed on through contact with infected blood or semen, and Piot warned that many more people, especially in Africa and Asia, will be struck by the pandemic in the next six years.

"The total figure of 15 million cumulative infections could almost triple by the year 2000," he said.

In Europe the number of infections increased by 11.6 percent from 1992 to 1993, while in the United States AIDS has become the leading cause of death among those aged between 25 and 44.

But top microbiologist Peter McDonald of Flinders University, Australia, said in London on Monday he was far more optimistic than many of his colleagues.

“I am certainly not as pessimistic as I was five years ago and I am very confident that within 12 months there will be a vaccine available for trial,” he said. “Today we do know the most likely type of immune response that will prevent infection with HIV.”

Piot said the WHO backed efforts to test vaccines in the developing world, adding it had agreed to initiate trials in Brazil, Rwanda, Thailand and Uganda.

“While encouraging the conduct of all phases of vaccine trials in industrialised countries, we consider it of paramount importance that the vaccine be tested in populations where they are most urgently needed and will be most used,” he said.

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