Devil’s in the Data

Embarassment of riches at drug confab

May 1, 1997 By Walter Armstrong and Ronnilyn Pustil

There was high drama this winter at the once-dull Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections. Primed by protease promises, 2,500 researchers, activists, drug execs and journalists crammed into the Washington, DC meeting. But an equal number were shut out because of caps on attendance, and about 100 pissed-off PWAs and a snarling star scientist or two were turned away at the gate. Inside, other star scientists were spotted with burly bodyguards, and bomb threats were reported. Researchers spoke of first-ever plunges in hospitalization and death rates of PWAs in many cities. Welcome to the Age of Protease.

The confab was long on scientific data but short on practical application. Heads spun at the stats from studies comparing antiviral-drug combinations, but questions of drug management--when to start, say, or with which combo--hung in the air. In a prickly presentation, Dutch researcher Dr. Joep Lange cut to the chase: Lambasting bureaucratic regulations, drug-company greed and researcher stupidity, he demanded studies that test the *best* drug options rather than those favored by manufacturers. Next up? “The meeting made it clear we need to evaluate whether d4T should replace AZT as the standard treatment,” said activist Richard Jefferys.

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