THC in Pot Affects Monkey SIV; Half-Baked HIV Reports Follow

February 21, 2014 By Benjamin Ryan

A study showing that a component of marijuana modulates the disease progression of the simian version of HIV in the guts of monkeys has led to a rash of hyperbolic and highly inaccurate reporting of the research in the popular press. Publishing their findings in AIDS Research and Human Retroviruses, investigators from Louisiana State University (LSU) and the Tulane Primate Center gave twice-daily injections of delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC, the main psychoactive element of marijuana and one of more than 60 cannabinoids in the drug) to four rhesus macaque monkeys and gave a placebo to another four monkeys during a 17-month period. Then they infected the primates with SIV, HIV's simian cousin.

Analyzing the differences in duodenal, or gut, tissue between the two groups of monkeys about five months after they were infected with SIV, the investigators found that the THC-treated macaques had a higher level of CD8 central memory T cells and a higher level of a specific kind of CD4 cells that scientists believe may be summoned to restore CD4s killed by the virus, as well as an increase in the expression of certain cytokines that indicate a less inflammatory state.

Ultimately, the findings identify potential mechanisms that THC affects and that can in turn alter the course of SIV disease.

To read the reports in various online new sources, however, much greater scientific leaps had been made.

The study's lead author, Patricia Molina, MD, PhD, a professor at the LSU Health Sciences Center, New Orleans, expressed in a email to POZ/AIDSMeds her "frustration with the liberal, inaccurate, and wrong approach that the journalists have taken to interpreting our results."

The Daily Beast ran a headline that touted, "Weed Could Block H.I.V.'s Spread. No, Seriously." And yet, as the article itself pointed out, the study was not conducted on marijuana, but on one of its ingredients. Furthermore, the study did not cover, nor did it make any projections about, THC's ability to impede, much less outright block, the spread of HIV from person to person. ThinkProgress, meanwhile, put it rather more equivocally, if still inaccurately: "Marijuana May Help Stop The Spread of HIV." The Guardian Liberty Voice went the furthest, with its headline: "HIV Infections Cured With Cannabis a Real Possibility." The study was not concerned with a potential cure, nor even a systemic examination of THC's effects on SIV throughout the monkeys' bodies,

but only analyzed the effects of the drug in the gut region.

To read these three particular reports (there are others) in chronological order, it would appear that Liberty Voice and ThinkProgress each essentially copied the reporting, much of it erroneous, in The Daily Beast. ThinkProgress even lifted a clause of telling similarity out of The Daily Beast, which wrote: “Mirroring other studies that link marijuana to HIV, the study illustrates…” ThinkProgress parroted, “This isn’t the first study to report a correlation between cannabis and HIV.” The study did not “link marijuana to HIV.” Rather, it examined a link between THC (which is a cannabinoid, not cannabis itself) treatment and changes in HIV disease progression—an important distinction. Previous studies have looked at whether medical marijuana helped battle symptoms such as nausea, pain and appetite loss among people with HIV.

All three stories mistakenly reported that the macaques were already SIV positive when they received the 17 months of THC, although in fact the primates were not infected until after the end of the THC treatment.

Perhaps most outlandishly, The Daily Beast stated, “In 2011 alone, 636,048 people died from AIDS.” That figure, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, represents the total number of people throughout the entire HIV epidemic in the United States who have received an AIDS diagnosis and who have since died. An estimated 15,529 people with an AIDS diagnosis died in 2010.

In addition, both The Daily Beast and Liberty Voice mistakenly called SIV “RIV.” And Liberty Voice reported that “hundreds of researchers have reported that THC was able to pierce the RIV virus in monkeys.” There were not hundreds of researchers working on this paper, nor did they discover that THC pierced “RIV.” Additionally, “RIV virus” is redundant, since the “V” stands for “virus.” (ThinkProgress also referred to the “HIV virus.”)

Each of the news reports did drive home an important consideration: The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration classifies marijuana as a Schedule I drug—the same as heroin and LSD—which hinders research into the potential benefits of THC and pot.

Other inaccurate reports can be found in the Huffington Post, High Times, The Fix and Queerty.

To read a press release on the study, click here.

To read the study, click here.

To read the Daily Beast story, click here.

To read the ThinkProgress story, click here.

To read the Liberty Voice story, click here.

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