How to Treat “Untreatable” HIV

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From last winter’s media frenzy, you’d think the New York City man infected with the highly resistant, very aggressive strain of HIV—dubbed the “supervirus”—had run out of treatment hopes before he’d begun. But a careful reading of his test results—especially his resistance profile—revealed to his savvy Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center (ADARC) doctors that even a supervirus has weaknesses that current HIV meds can exploit.

CD4 Count: 39
Below 200—an AIDS diagnosis. Given the short time he’s been infected, such quick progression requires immediate treatment.

Viral Load: 280,000
High—might need meds even if he had more CD4s.

Viral Fitness (Replication Capacity): 165%
Resistance usually makes HIV less fit. A replication capacity (RC) 65% greater than nonresistant, wild-type HIV bucks the trend.

Resistance Profile—22 mutations:

Nukes: Broad resistance, but some sensitivity to a few.
The mutations cause much nuke resistance, but it’s not all or nothing. Docs chose Viread and Videx, to which he had some sensitivity.

Non-Nukes: No K103N mutation; resistant to Viramune and Rescriptor; partially sensitive to Sustiva.
The lack of K103N, which causes cross-resistance to the entire class, is a break. The docs chose Sustiva.

Protease Inhibitors (PIs): Resistance to all.
The many PI mutations suggest that the entire powerful class is lost to him, because PI cross-resistance is so common. But as Cal Cohen, MD, of the Community Research Initiative of New England, says, both tipranavir and TMC 114, experimental PIs with unique resistance profiles, may serve should this combo tank.

Entry Inhibitors (EIs): No resistance.

The sole approved EI, Fuzeon, isn't widely used, so it's no surprise that he has no resistance. The docs fingered Fuzeon as the combo cornerstone. It seems potent against resistant HIV when teamed with another active drug—in this case, Sustiva.

Prognosis: After two months, the nukes-plus-Sustiva-and-Fuzeon combo was showing considerable, if incomplete, control of the virus. While the man remains seriously ill, he has grounds for hope. POZ wishes him success and hopes he has found the support and empowerment available in the AIDS community—far from the doom-and-gloom headlines and hype.

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