Memo for the Millennium

October 1, 1999 By Mike Barr

1. DEMAND THAT RESEARCH DEVOTE increased attention to the preservation or renewal of the immune system's CD4 cells, lessening its focus on the suppression of HIV in the blood.

2. DENY ACCELERATED APPROVAL to future "me too" antiretrovirals. Treatment advocates might even consider a news ban on all such drugs. If they add nothing to the arsenal of current therapies, there's nothing newsworthy.

3. FOCUS ON IDENTIFYING CELLULAR FACTORS in the body responsible for either stimulating or suppressing the development of an effective immune response. We can then boost the "good" factors or block the "bad" ones.

4. GIVE STUDY-SECTION ADMINISTRATORS at the National Institutes of Health the authority to award money for research projects that fall outside the mainstream—ideas not in vogue but ones that these leaders, with their years of experience, think may work.

5. AUTHORIZE THE NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE to do the expensive, time-consuming research to identify lead compounds that might work against a given target. Then provide economic incentives to the drug companies to pursue these leads. In essence, pay them to do what they should be doing anyway.

6. FUND TARGETED GRANTS TO DEVELOP NEW DRUGS that destroy HIV-infected cells, as opposed to simply stopping HIV replication. One example is Lucky Chemical's modified nonnucleoside compound, which binds to HIV's reverse transcriptase, then releases a cell-killing substance.

7. ENCOURAGE ACTIVIST GROUPS TO REGAIN their objectivity when pharmaceutical companies bankroll trips to meet with them. Industry should seek community input to hear differences and challenges, not merely acquiescence and imprimaturs.

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