Piece of Mind

The NIH banks on HIVers' brains

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Researchers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) put their heads together and decided to do for HIV what they do for diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's: A "brain bank" bulging with medullas of deceased PWAs. Facilitated by a $6 million grant from the NIH to three New York City hospitals, the Manhattan HIV Brain Bank will distribute tissue samples to approved researchers nationwide. They will glom the gray matter for "hidden" HIV and look at effects that protease inhibitors may have on the central nervous system.

"It's about time," said Susan Morgello, MD, the project's principle investigator. "The HIV neuroscience community has been hampered by inadequate specimens. Brain tissue is crucial to understanding the virus' neurological effects, such as dementia." Potential brain donors (PWAs with CD4 counts below 50) will be recruited through their primary physicians, given basic neurological exams every three months and psychological exams every six months. Also, as part of the study, nurses will make house calls for medical and social support.

"Post-mortem donation is the most precious thing you can do with your body when you're no longer inhabiting it," said Morgello, who hopes to recruit 90 noodles a year. "But it's a tough sell. People get turned off for religious reasons—they want to be intact for the hereafter."

Will Mahlon Johnson, MD—a neuroscientist at Nashville's Vanderbilt University Medical Center who says he got HIV while dissecting the brain of a PWA—donate his brain to the cause? "I hope I'll never have to, but if I get run over by a bus or something, they can have it," he said. "It's definitely a worthy topic of study. Brain infections are the big fear now that people with HIV are living longer. I wouldn't be surprised if they find that the central nervous system is a reservoir untouched by the new drugs."

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