AIDS Group amfAR Awards Two Grants to Research COVID-19

Plus: Watch a video interview series exploring the intersections between HIV and COVID-19.

July 31, 2020 By Trent Straube

As COVID-19 spread across the globe earlier this year, amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research pivoted to launch an effort to fight the new pandemic. After two major fundraising efforts, the group this week announced its first round of grants in the amfAR Fund to Fight COVID-19.

Specifically, two grants worth a total of nearly $348,000 were awarded to a scientist studying antibody responses to COVID-19 and to another examining acute kidney injury that results from advanced COVID-19.

“We’ve always prided ourselves on our ability to quickly pivot to answer critical new scientific questions or respond to emerging opportunities in the field of HIV research,” said amfAR CEO Kevin Robert Frost, in a press release about the grants. “So we’re pleased to be able to apply that same grant-making speed and flexibility to COVID-19 and to lend our experience, expertise and resources to the effort to halt this deadly new pandemic.”

amfAR detailed the two grant research projects as follows:

> A common and often deadly consequence of advanced COVID-19 disease is acute kidney injury. Cells in the kidney express the ACE2 protein, which serves as a receptor for the virus and may underlie the kidney damage. Dr. Matthias Kretzler [MD] of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, was awarded $155,650 to use a clever technique to understand what happens in the kidney of those with COVID-19. Instead of risking the safety of patients already suffering the grueling consequences of the infection by taking kidney biopsies, he will study kidney cells that are excreted in the urine. Doing so will allow him to understand changes that occur in the kidney while the disease is getting worse and to understand the signs that indicate that patients are on the mend. By comparing patients receiving anti-inflammatory treatment to those who are not, he will develop a tool that can predict who would most benefit from this kind of treatment.
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> A second grant of $192,000 was awarded to Dr. Daniel Kaufmann [MD] of the University of Montreal, Quebec, Canada, for a study of antibody responses to COVID-19.This grant allows

amfAR to tap into the enormous investment made by the Quebec COVID-19 Biobank, established at the beginning of the pandemic to collect biological samples from patients admitted to the hospital. These banked samples, collected from the time of admission through several months of follow-up, will allow Dr. Kaufmann and his team to answer why some people develop antibodies and others do not, how we can predict whether those antibodies will protect against reinfection and how long the protection will last. The results will provide valuable information to inform the design of vaccines to protect people from acquiring SARS-CoV-2.

Money for the grants derived from two fundraising efforts. Earlier this month, an online auction with Christie's raised nearly $1.5 million. And in May, amfAR teamed with fashion leaders Carine Roitfeld and Derek Blasberg for a virtual runway show that brought in tens of thousands of dollars. For details and fabulous pictures, see "Watch Fashion Icons Film Their Own Runway Show to Fight HIV and COVID-19."

In other COVID-19 efforts, amfAR is posting a video series titled Intersections: HIV and COVID-19 featuring interviews with leading researchers. In the latest video, the eighth in the series, amfAR-funded HIV researcher Dan Barouch, MD, PhD, of Harvard Medical School and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, talks with Rowena Johnston, PhD, amfAR vice president and director of research, about his team's efforts to rapidly develop a vaccine against the coronavirus.

In related POZ articles, see "How DO COVID-19 Fears Affect People Living With HIV?" which features another amfAR video interview.

Keep in mind that novel coronavirus guidance and concerns for unique populations may vary. For example, see "UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus" and the similar article for people with cancer.

Go to poz.com/tag/coronavirus for our continuing coverage of COVID-19.

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