AIDS Cure Research: North Carolina Scientist Study Cancer Drug

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The search for an AIDS cure is about to take a new step as scientists begin human studies involving an existing but little-used cancer drug from Merck, reports Bloomberg News. David Margolis, MD, and his colleagues from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill hope the drug will take them further down the path of finally purging all HIV out of someone's body, ultimately achieving a cure.

The drug, called Zolinza (vorinostat), is part of a family of drugs known as histone deacetylase (HDAC) inhibitors. Previous research found that Zolinza was able to flush out HIV that typically sits latent in resting CD4 cells in the body, waiting to bring an infection roaring back to life if an HIV-positive person stops taking his or her antiretroviral (ARV) drugs.

Margolis and a top researcher at Merck, Daria Hazuda, PhD, concede that the drug might be too toxic to ever make it as an HIV therapy, but they hope that Margolis's proof-of-concept study will tell them whether they're on the right track.

"It's really all about trying to move the field ahead," Margolis told Bloomberg News. "We don't expect to cure anybody, but we expect to really show whether it can work the way we think it does in people—or not."

The report goes on to detail the promise of HDAC inhibitors and then looks at a number of companies, including Gilead and Tibotec as well as Merck, that have "cure" research programs.

"Everybody has now come to the conclusion that it's going to take a combination of different approaches," Hazuda said. "Because there are HDAC inhibitors that are already licensed to treat other diseases, they may provide at least an anchor upon which to build a first-generation regimen."

Some harbor lingering skepticism about ever eradicating HIV from the body, but Margolis remains undeterred.

"I'm 51," Margolis said. "I'm not doing this because I think that I can't succeed before I die."

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