Media Jumps the HIV Cure Gun Yet Again

June 24, 2016 By Benjamin Ryan

A slew of media outlets erroneously reported that scientists might be just three years away from developing a cure for HIV. This false claim traces to an article published on April 1 in the United Kingdom's The Telegraph concerning researchers who succeeded in using CRISPR/Cas9 gene editing to remove HIV's genetic code from infected immune cells in a laboratory setting, doing so without apparently harming the cells' ability to function.

"We have made no claim that our technology will cure HIV in three years," counters Kamel Khalili, PhD, director of the Center for Neurovirology and Comprehensive NeuroAIDS Center at Temple University and the lead author of the study. "We hope to begin initial clinical trials within the next three years. This will depend on our results from animal studies for safety and efficacy and the availability of funding."

Khalili says researchers will give the gene-editing treatment for "some period of time" to HIV-positive people who are on antiretroviral (ARV) treatment. Then, after taking the participants off their ARVs, the scientists will determine whether the gene therapy has prevented the virus from rebounding.

On April 6, after considerable resistance, The Telegraph finally conceded its error and revised the erroneous article.

Later in April, another team of researchers found that HIV has the capacity to develop resistance to the CRISPR/Cas9 gene-editing attack. Scientists from this and other similar studies believe that, just as with combination ARV treatment, a multipronged gene-editing treatment—one that knocks out several fundamental HIV genes at the same time—may be necessary to prevent such mutations that confer viral resistance.

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