Misleading News Reports Suggest HIV Cure Is Near

May 9, 2013 By Benjamin Ryan

Numerous news outlets have inaccurately reported that Danish researchers are, according to one publication, “within months” of finding a cure for HIV. These reports concern ongoing, and as-yet-unpublished, research of histone deacetylase (HDAC) inhibitors conducted by a Danish research team. Scientists around the world are studying HDAC inhibitors as a means to flush HIV from the viral reservoir, where it hides from antiretrovirals even during successful therapy.

HDAC inhibitors are drugs historically used for psychiatric or neurologic purposes, including as mood stabilizers and anti-seizure drugs. More recently, they’ve been researched as cancer-fighting agents and now as part of HIV cure research.

In their attempt at a cure, the Danish researchers and other non-Danish collaborators are in the middle of a Phase I human trial involving 15 participants.

One of the research team’s leaders, Ole Søgaard, MD, a senior researcher at the Aarhus University Hospital in Denmark, said in an email to POZ, “No, I would not say that we are on the brink of an HIV cure, and I can say for sure that I never said that we were. It would have been great if the story had been angled in a less sensational way.”

The blame for sparking the inaccurate perception, which is making its way through other global media and the social media sphere, is a misleading, or perhaps inflammatory, headline in the United Kingdom’s The Telegraph from April 17 that reads, “Scientists on brink of HIV cure.”

The article goes on to qualify this statement through a quote from Søgaard, who said that he felt confident about HDAC inhibitors’ abilities to activate HIV from the reservoir, but stated that questions remain about the body’s ability to kill flushed virus.

Søgaard, who says the Telegraph story had additional errors beyond the misleading headline, qualifies his team’s work as “a very interesting trial, which I hope will help inform HIV researchers how to get closer to a cure for HIV. The trial is still ongoing. However, we will present the first data from the trial at the [International AIDS Society] pre-symposium meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in late June.”

The Telegraph has since revised the article and the Aarhus University Hospital has issued a

correction, in which they wrote, “The authors [of the Telegraph story] state that they regret if anyone got the impression from reading the article that there may be a cure for HIV in the immediate future. Like many others, the researchers believe that a cure for HIV is an achievable goal, but most likely it will take many years, numerous basic science discoveries, and several [Phase I and II] trials before a HIV cure may actually be reached.”

To read a Treatment Action Group report on recent strategies for flushing HIV reservoirs, including information on the Danish study, click here.

To read the revised Telegraph story, click here.

To read the Aarhus University Hospital correction, click here.

To read an Aarhus University Hospital story on their cure research, click here.

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