NIH Awards Nearly $150M to Collaborative HIV Cure Research

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The search for an HIV cure just got a huge boost from the National Institutes of Health. The NIH awarded a total of nearly $150 million to six research collaborations—each will receive around $5 million for the next five years—according to an NIH release.

The funding arrives as part of the Martin Delaney Collaboratory: Towards an HIV-1 Cure program and is supported by many divisions of the NIH, including the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

The recipients, as described in the NIH release, include:

George Washington University, Washington, D.C.
Project Title: BELIEVE: Bench to Bed Enhanced Lymphoctye Infusions to Engineer Viral Eradication
Award: $5,715,517

University of California, San Francisco
Project Title: Delaney AIDS Research Enterprise to Cure HIV
Award: $5,547,114

Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Seattle
Project Title: defeatHIV: Cell and Gene Therapy for HIV Cure
Award: $4,714,991

Wistar Institute, Philadelphia
Project Title: BEAT-HIV: Delaney Collaboratory to Cure HIV-1 Infection by Combination Immunotherapy
Award: $4,589,036

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston
Project Title: Combined Immunologic Approaches to Cure HIV-1

Award: $4,630,463

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
Project Title: Collaboratory of AIDS Researchers for Eradication (CARE)
Award: $4,592,950

The projects being funded will look at new cure strategies including immunotherapy, gene modification and therapeutic vaccines. A cure has been elusive in part because the virus is able to insert its genetic material into immune cells that live a long time. As it hides out in these reservoirs, it is safe and hidden from current HIV medications, which target HIV only when it is actively replicating.

“The lifelong stigma, economic burden on society, strain on healthcare resources, and sheer toll on human life across the globe makes finding a cure a top priority,” said Luis J. Montaner, DVM, a co-principal investigator, in a press release from the Wistar Institute. “Together we’re building on our teams’ extensive established efforts to move forward and make those next transformative steps that will bring us closer to an HIV cure.”

Scientists at Wistar describe “three research pillars,” or distinct areas of study, in their BEAT-HIV Delaney project, which received the NIH funding:

- Study where and how HIV hides so that they can better understand how to eradicate it.
- Boost the natural immune system using two immunotherapy strategies so that it can better target HIV on its own, resulting in less virus in the body.
- Grow and administer killer cells that can hunt down and kill HIV-infected cells.

The awards are named in honor of AIDS activist Martin Delaney, who died in 2009. To read more about him, read the POZ Exclusive “Martin Delaney: An AIDS Warrior Passes the Torch.”
