R.I.P. French Virologist Luc Montagnier, Who Codiscovered HIV in 1983

Luc Montagnier shared a 2008 Nobel Prize for the HIV discovery, but his other views and research became controversial in later years.

February 11, 2022 By Trent Straube

Luc Montagnier, PhD, the French scientist who in 1983 codiscovered the virus that causes AIDS and then made more global headlines by publicly feuding with an American scientist over the HIV research, has died. He was 89.

As France 24 reports, in recent decades Montagnier lost much of his standing in the scientific community because of his controversial research and viewpoints. For example, he spoke out against COVID-19 vaccines.

Nonetheless, the consensus remains that his HIV-related research was a groundbreaking moment in AIDS history. In 2008, he and two other scientists shared the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. He and his colleague Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, PhD, shared half the prize for their HIV discovery, while the other half went to Harald zur Hausen, MD, DSc, a German virologist who discovered the human papilloma viruses (HPV) that cause cancer.

The New York Times, in its obituary for Montagnier, summaries the HIV discovery:

> The discovery of H.I.V. began in Paris on Jan. 3, 1983. That was the day that Dr. Montagnier (pronounced mon-tan-YAY), who directed the Viral Oncology Unit at the Pasteur Institute, received a piece of lymph node that had been removed from a 33-year-old man with AIDS.
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> Dr. Willy Rozenbaum, the patient's doctor, wanted the specimen to be examined by Dr. Montagnier, an expert in retroviruses. At that point, AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, had no known cause, no diagnostic tests and no effective treatments.... From this sample Dr. Montagnier's team spotted the culprit, a retrovirus that had never been seen before. They named it L.A.V., for lymphadenopathy associated virus.
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> The Pasteur scientists...reported their landmark finding in the May 20, 1983, issue of the journal Science, concluding that further studies were necessary to prove L.A.V. caused AIDS.

As the Times recounts and the entire world witnessed, a competing American researcher, Robert

Gallo, MD, published similar research in 1984, naming his virus HTLV-III. Controversy erupted over whether Gallo received his virus from Montagnier's lab, and Montagnier sued Gallo over the U.S. patent of the discovery. Eventually, the suit was settled out of court, and Gallo is today considered a codiscoverer of the virus that causes AIDS. In 1986, that virus officially became known worldwide as HIV, which stands for human immunodeficiency virus.

To learn more about the science and research behind HIV, click #Research. You'll find articles like "Why You Don't Need to Worry About the Newly Identified 'Highly Virulent' Strain of HIV" and "Can These Three Gene Therapies Get Us Closer to an HIV Cure?"

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