

NATIONAL NOTES

by David Prybylo
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Interferon Gamma found useful in treating HIV-related infections

WASHINGTON, DC—Interferon gamma helped non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections in patients who did not respond to conventional therapies, according to research reported in the May 12 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* by scientists from the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

"This research effort adds to our understanding of mycobacterial infections, which have become increasingly important as more and more individuals suffer the immunosuppression of HIV disease," says Anthony S. Fauci, M.D., director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). "It is an important step in our search for new therapies against these serious mycobacterial diseases."

Mycobacteria are a diverse family of disease-causing organisms including some that cause tuberculosis. Non-tuberculous mycobacteria occur in the environment and usually affect only people with impaired immune systems. They can cause serious, often life-threatening diseases such as disseminated *Mycobacterium avium complex* (MAC), which affects up to 40 percent of people infected with HIV.

The study reported by Steven M. Holland, M.D., of the Laboratory of Host Defenses, NIAID, and colleagues, involved seven patients who were not HIV infected and had severe non-tuberculous mycobacterial infection of at least two organ systems. Six of the patients had MAC.

The patients had received the maximum tolerated conventional treatment for at least four months and had become drug-resistant before enrolling in the current study. Treated with interferon gamma, all patients rapidly improved and many of their symptoms abated.

"Laboratory and animal studies have suggested that interferon gamma, a protein normally secreted by the immune system's T cells, plays an important role in containing and clearing mycobacterial infections in the body," says Dr. Holland. "We also noted that patients in this study produced smaller amounts of this protein than healthy people. Once we added interferon gamma to their therapy we saw dramatic improvement with few side effects, which leads us to conclude that the protein may someday be used in the treatment of other mycobacterial infections, including tuberculosis."

Investigators injected interferon gamma under the skin three times weekly for several months in addition to providing the standard antimycobacterial drugs.

This study builds on other interferon gamma research by the same team of NIAID investigators, led by John I. Gallin, M.D., director of the Warren Grant Magnuson Clinical Center and NIH associate director for clinical research. Previously, researchers found that interferon gamma could be successfully used to manage a disorder called chronic granulomatous disease or CGD. CGD is a group of rare, life-threatening diseases caused by an inherited defect in any one of several genes. "These findings have important implications for using interferon gamma

and related immune-boosting proteins in the management of infectious diseases," says Dr. Gallin.

Physicians also use interferon gamma to treat leprosy, a mycobacterial disease that affects the skin, peripheral nerves and upper airways.

DOD to stop demanding repayment from ousted gay servicemembers

WASHINGTON, DC—After concerted efforts by Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) and Representative Gerry Studds (D-MA), the Department of Defense (DOD) has issued a new policy on recoupment, ending the practice of requiring servicemembers to repay scholarship monies, bonuses and special pay if they are discharged for saying they are gay.

"This is a small, but significant step forward," said C. Dixon Osburn, an executive director of SLDN. "Servicemembers who are involuntarily thrown out of the military because of the gay ban will not be required to repay scholarship monies and enlistment bonuses if they have been discharged only for saying they are gay."

The new recoupment policy came after Studds pressed for clarification of the case of Eric Fenner, 24 of Washington, DC, who was discharged from the Navy last year after serving only half of his six-year enlistment. Since leaving the Navy last year, the Navy has repeatedly demanded that Fenner repay his enlistment bonus. Eventually, he received a notice from the Internal Revenue Service, stating it had applied his federal tax refund to satisfy a portion of this "debt." In addition, Fenner received a demand for repayment from a collection agency for the remaining balance plus a substantial collection fee.

In a letter to Studds, Deputy Secretary of Defense John Deutch said the decision to try to make Fenner repay his enlistment bonus was a "misinterpretation of recoupment policies at the time of his separation in March 1993. Mr. Fenner will be permitted to keep the unearned portion of his enlistment bonus. We have taken action to effect this, and to ensure future interpretations of recoupment policy are correct."

Studds noted that others forced to leave the service are rarely required to repay the unearned portions of their scholarships or enlistment bonuses. Even the cadets recently expelled from the U.S. Naval Academy for cheating were told they would not be required to reimburse the government for the educations they had received.

Michelle Benecke, also an executive director of SLDN, was cautious in her appraisal of the new policy. "The new recoupment policy still permits the military to seek repayment of scholarship and bonus monies from servicemembers who are discharged for homosexual acts, including private, consensual sexual activity. The problem is that the military selectively targets gay people for discharge, even though 80%-90% of heterosexuals engage in sexual activity that is in violation of military regulations. In fact, SLDN knows of no cases where the military has discharged heterosexuals for consensual sexual activity in violation of military regula-

tions and then demanded repayment of scholarships and bonus monies.

Osburn agreed. "It is ironic that the Pentagon will not seek recoupment for the Naval Academy midshipmen who were discharged for cheating on a final exam last year, but will seek recoupment from gay servicemembers who, in response to a direct question by a commander or investigator, honestly reveal their sexual relationships," he said.

AIDS experts issue vaccine testing recommendations

WASHINGTON, DC—The search for a preventive HIV vaccine may depend as much upon the implementation of extensive social and behavioral research, social safeguards and collaboration among government agencies as it does on scientific breakthrough, a Washington conference concluded.

"The testing of an HIV vaccine presents unprecedented challenges, and will test our will, our creativity and our ability to reach across our differences toward a common goal," said conference organizer Derek Hodel. Hodel is the treatment issues director of AIDS Action Council.

The May 9-10 conference, sponsored by the Washington-based AIDS Action, drew nearly 300 participants and issued a 40 page report—*HIV Preventive Vaccines: Social, Ethical and Political Considerations for Domestic Efficacy Trials*—with over 50 recommendations.

"For communities at greatest risk of contracting HIV, we are as desperate for a vaccine as we are for a cure," says Hodel. "Our recommendations will provide the foundation for a successful partnership among government, industry, academia and the commu-

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