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UMd. Gets \$15 Million to Develop HIV Vaccine

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ANNAPOLIS, Md. - The University of Maryland is getting a \$15 million grant to develop a vaccine to protect against HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, state officials announced Tuesday.

The five-year grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been awarded to the University of Maryland School of Medicine's Institute of Human Virology, which was founded by Dr. Robert Gallo, who co-discovered HIV and developed the first HIV blood test.

"We have a vaccine candidate that we think is extra interesting and certainly unique in its properties," Gallo said at a news conference in Annapolis announcing the grant.

Gallo emphasized it will take years of research at the Baltimore-based institute to develop an effective vaccine. However, Gallo said early studies have shown promise to produce an immune system response to various HIV strains.

Developing a vaccine is a complex challenge, because of the genetic variation of HIV. The genetic variation is caused by the rapid mutation rate of the virus. The variation means that the virus can escape immune responses.

Gallo study at the institute has shown promise in addressing a long-bedeaving problem for researchers.

"We think it's on the way to solving one of the major problems of HIV - its variation," Gallo said.

The grant is part of the Gates Foundation's Collaboration for AIDS Vaccine Discovery, an international network of researchers focused on speeding up the pace of developing a safe vaccine. The effort started last year with \$287 million in grants.

The grant will support a public-private partnership between the Institute of Human Virology, a spin-off biotech company called Profectus BioSciences and Wyeth Pharmaceuticals. The vaccine technology has been licensed from UMBI by Wyeth through Profectus BioSciences. Profectus BioSciences was created in 2003 as a vehicle to develop and commercialize technology developed at the Institute of Human Virology.

Dave Wilkins, chief operating officer at the institute, said the first payment of the award, which will be about \$2.1 million, is expected to be available in two or three weeks. It will be used to pay salaries for about 10 to 15 scientists, supplies and equipment maintenance.

Gov. Martin O'Malley described the announcement as one of "very far-reaching and global importance."

"This grant reinforces what Marylanders have long known: that our state is a world leader in biotechnology, and more importantly, a leader in finding a vaccine that can help the thousands of people affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic," O'Malley said.

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