

Accelerating HIV Vaccine Development and Delivery New report calls for Canadian HIV vaccine plan by 2003



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MONTREAL – Canada needs a formal HIV vaccine plan and should substantially increase its investment in HIV vaccine research and development, in Canada and internationally. In a new report released today, *HIV Vaccines in Canada: Legal and Ethical Issues*, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network concludes that acceleration of HIV vaccine research and development is critical to bringing the AIDS epidemic under control in Canada and internationally. Stronger political commitment is required to ensure Canada plays a leading role in global efforts to develop and deliver a vaccine.

“The best long-term hope for controlling AIDS is the development and widespread distribution of a safe, effective, and affordable preventive vaccine. It is critical that Canada commit greater resources toward achieving this goal. This would best be accomplished by putting in place a formal Canadian HIV Vaccine Plan over the next year, addressing both the development of vaccines and the delivery of an eventual vaccine,” says Ralf Jürgens, Executive Director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network.

Current prevention efforts have slowed the spread of HIV but have not stopped it. The number of new cases of HIV infection in Canada remains unacceptably high – about 4,000 Canadians contract the virus every year. Existing prevention efforts need to be stepped up, but Canada also needs to substantially increase its investment in HIV vaccine development.

“Up to now, work on HIV vaccines in Canada has been fairly limited. No funds have been specifically earmarked for HIV vaccine research. No Phase I/II human trials of HIV vaccines have taken place in Canada. No work has been done to plan for the delivery of an eventual HIV vaccine. This means that even if a vaccine became available, we would have no plan to deliver it to Canadians. Canada can and should do more,” Jürgens adds.

“There is a clear need for the Federal government to become much more proactive. For the last ten years, the government has administered the HIV/AIDS epidemic, rather than fighting it. Federal funding for AIDS has not increased since the early 90s, and was already inadequate then. One crucial element that is missing in the current Federal AIDS Strategy is a Canadian HIV Vaccine Plan,” says Paul Lapierre, Executive Director of the Canadian AIDS Society.

“Conducting more research on HIV vaccines in Canada would benefit not only Canadians but also people in countries where AIDS is overwhelming health-care systems and national economies,” says Jürgens. “An acceleration of vaccine research and delivery will complement other prevention and research efforts, advancing basic science, contributing to community development, and offering opportunities to treat other diseases and health conditions. Ultimately, this will contribute to alleviating the serious threat that HIV/AIDS now poses to human health, economic development and political security.”

The report on *HIV Vaccines in Canada: Legal and Ethical Issues* recommends that a Canadian HIV Vaccine Plan be coordinated by Health Canada in consultation with the provinces and territories, the pharmaceutical industry, researchers, and HIV/AIDS community organizations. The plan would lead to a sustained program of HIV vaccine research in Canada, focused on areas where Canada has experience and expertise. With the participation of HIV/AIDS community organizations, the plan would also mobilize public opinion and support for HIV vaccine development and delivery, and increase funding for international HIV vaccine efforts through Canadian participation in global coordination of HIV vaccine development efforts.

“As one of the richest nations in the world, Canada has a moral obligation to contribute generously to the international effort and play a leading role to ensure global coordination of HIV vaccine development and delivery,” says Jürgens. “Failure to intensify efforts could be considered a violation of the rights to life and health proclaimed in international human rights covenants to which Canada is a signatory.”

In addition to calling for the creation of a Canadian HIV Vaccine Plan, the Legal Network’s report provides a summary of the major legal and ethical issues related to the development and delivery of an HIV vaccine in Canada, including basic information on vaccines and clinical trials, a brief summary of the current state of HIV vaccine research globally and in Canada, and a description of the AIDSVAX® trial now underway in Canada and other countries. Additional recommendations include ensuring that all populations with significant HIV infection rates are involved in human testing of candidate HIV vaccines; that communities are involved in the design and implementation of HIV vaccine trials being conducted in their midst; that consent obtained for participation in an HIV vaccine trial is truly informed, meaning that all reasonable steps must be taken to ensure that potential participants understand the nature, benefits, and risks of taking part in a trial; that trial organizers provide high-quality preventive counselling to all participants in an HIV vaccine trial; that trial organizers ensure high-quality care and treatment is provided to participants who become HIV-infected during the course of the trial; that the federal government establish a no-fault vaccine-related injury-insurance program covering all experimental and licensed vaccines (both HIV-related and other); and that trial organizers work with insurance companies to minimize the risks of discrimination for participants in an HIV vaccine trial.

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The 50-page report on *HIV Vaccines in Canada: Legal and Ethical Issues – An Overview* and the accompanying series of info sheets are available on the web site of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network at <http://www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/issues/vaccines.htm>. An in-depth examination of the legal and ethical issues is provided in a separate 400-page report, *HIV/AIDS and Vaccines: Legal and Ethical Issues: A Background Paper*, prepared by the Network in conjunction with the Centre for Bioethics of the Clinical Research Institute of Montréal, and authored by David Thompson.

About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network is a national organization engaged in education, legal and ethical analysis, and policy development, with over 250 organizational and individual members across Canada. In April 2002, the Legal Network hosted an International Expert Meeting in Montréal on “HIV Vaccines for Developing Countries – Advancing Research and Access.” On 5 July 2002 in Barcelona, Spain, the Legal Network and the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) will co-host “Putting Third First: Vaccines, Access to Treatment & the Law,” a satellite meeting to the XIV International AIDS Conference, in collaboration with the AIDS Law Project, South Africa, and the Lawyers Collective HIV/AIDS Unit (India). Information about our activities and copies of our publications are available at www.aidslaw.ca.