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AIDS AWARENESS MONTH

Researchers At CUMC Probe AIDS

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From prevention to treatment, scientists at the Columbia University Medical Center have made strides in many areas of HIV/AIDS research.

CUMC focuses on scientific research, health and medical education, and patient care. In 2007, it spent around \$584.8 million studying subjects from HIV transmission to the effects of combining various AIDS treatment drugs. Even as AIDS infection rates rise worldwide, doctors are gaining ground in fighting back.

The Center's long-term battle against AIDS starts with individual patients. The Mailman School of Public Health's Division of Infectious Diseases, directed by Scott Hammer, provides not only medical care, but also prevention services for local residents prone to infection.

"We are very supportive of the Center for Disease Control's efforts to expand HIV testing so people can know their status in order to protect themselves and their partners," Hammer said. "It is only on the basis of this concern for the health and well-being of the community that a clinical research program can be built."

CUMC has also worked closely with the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies and the Center for AIDS Research to further its goals in both medical and public health research. One HCCBS study examined anal sex practices among South Africans while another looked into prevention plans for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases for couples who take drugs. CAR has also researched the effectiveness and safety of alternative therapies and is currently developing methods for reducing diarrhea in HIV patients using acupuncture and moxibustion.

Already, research has led to progress. Columbia scientists have recently made several discoveries likely to impact HIV prevention, the quality of AIDS treatment, and access to patient care. Over the last three years, professor Salim Abdool Karim, director of the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa, has conducted a trial for a new therapy that mixed HIV/AIDS medication with tuberculosis treatments to evaluate the effect on mortality rates.

"The overall finding of the trial was that mortality among TB-HIV co-infected patients can be reduced by a remarkable 55 percent if anti-retroviral therapy is provided with TB treatment," Karim said. "This study provides the first clinical trial data to guide the timing of the initiation of anti-retroviral therapy in TB-HIV co-infected patients."

Two additional HIV/AIDS studies were recently conducted at the Mailman School. One found that there is no discrepancy in rates of HIV infection and mortality between babies who are abruptly detached from breast milk at age two and babies who are breastfed later in infancy. The other determined that the anti-HIV drug nevirapine can be used alone or with the drug zidovudine during the first 14 weeks of life to lower the risk of infection from breastfeeding.

All these milestones are fueled by sizeable quantities of cash. Last year, Hammer and Wafaa El-Sadr, director of the International Center for AIDS Care and Treatment Programs, received two seven-year grants totaling \$5 million to continue experimenting with methods other than vaccination, and to inform New Yorkers about the latest drugs and vaccines now in clinical tri-

als. Columbia's contributions to AIDS research have changed drastically since the epidemic began because of increased funding, and will continue to expand with advancements in medicine and technology.

"With the advances made in anti-retroviral drugs, we are looking for ways to deliver on the goal of providing infected persons with normal or near-normal life spans," Hammer said. "We are trying to continue to understand the disease at a much more sophisticated level to be able to develop even better therapies in the future. We are also trying harder than ever to unlock the secrets that will lead to the development of a safe and effective preventive HIV vaccine."

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This article is the second part of a seven-part series to commemorate AIDS Awareness Month, which will include a story in the *Eye* magazine.