

UCSD School of Medicine and Partners to Establish Cross-Border HIV/AIDS Training Program

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A program to improve the binational response to HIV/AIDS prevention in northwestern Mexico and surrounding regions, led by Steffanie Strathdee, Ph.D., Professor and Chief, Division of International Health and Cross Cultural Medicine, Department of Family and Preventive Medicine at University of California, San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine, has been selected for funding by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The project, "A Cross-Border HIV/AIDS Prevention Training Program in the Northwest Mexican Border Region," was selected to receive approximately \$500,000 over three-years through a USAID U.S.-Mexico Training, Internships, Exchanges and Scholarships (TIES) grant. The objective is to strengthen the capacity of Mexican public health practitioners, outreach workers and policy makers to prevent and manage HIV/AIDS and co-occurring epidemics, such as tuberculosis and to translate ongoing research into policy and practice.

The training program, which is through the USAID Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation in Development (ALO), is a four-way partnership among the UCSD School of Medicine and San Diego State University (SDSU) School of Public Health in the U.S., and Universidad Autonoma de Baja California (UABC) and El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) in Mexico.

"We are very pleased that USAID has funded and recognized the importance of these kinds of public health programs," said UCSD Chancellor Marye Anne Fox. "Intractable diseases like HIV/AIDS do not recognize boundaries, so it is only through international, collaborative partnerships like this that we can tackle serious diseases on a global scale."

While participating faculty from the four institutions have a history of working together and are involved in joint HIV/AIDS research, the establishment of this four-way partnership is unprecedented and unique according to Strathdee, who also holds the Harold Simon Endowed Chair in International Health at UCSD. The program is consistent with the USAID Mexico country plan and the goal of Mexico's National HIV Prevention Control Program to contain HIV/AIDS and mitigate its impact on health in the border region with a focus on high risk and vulnerable

populations, she said. Since recent studies have suggested that the prevalence of HIV infection among high risk populations in Tijuana is on the rise, this binational program is especially timely.

The program aims to create a binational infrastructure for training Mexican citizens in HIV/AIDS prevention and program evaluation. Strathdee and colleagues anticipate the training program will offer HIV/AIDS Prevention 'Diplomados' (Certificates) to at least 200 students over the three year-period funded by the grant, providing an important skills base in HIV prevention and research. The second aim is to facilitate educational opportunities at the Master's level for Mexican citizens in Tijuana in HIV/AIDS prevention, program evaluation, and policy making. The scholarships will support degree programs for 7-10 Master's students in Tijuana who plan to continue a career in HIV/AIDS as a public health practitioner or researcher.

Another objective is to create sustainable mechanisms for undergraduates, graduate and medical students in Tijuana and San Diego to gain hands-on experience in HIV/AIDS prevention activities in Baja California, through internships with local non-profit organizations on both sides of the border. With assistance from the UCSD Extension, the program will develop web-based course material that will help ensure the sustainability of the program for years to come.

Tijuana is the largest city in Baja California with an estimated 1.8 million residents. The Tijuana-San Diego international border is the busiest in the world, with nearly 42 million border crossings per year. The frequent border crossings may facilitate the spread of infectious diseases between the two cities. Although academic institutions from San Diego and Tijuana are engaged in several HIV/AIDS research studies, joint academic training programs have not been well developed. This program addresses the urgent need to develop interventions to reduce the ongoing spread of HIV and to link HIV-positive persons to medical care, said Strathdee.

Participating faculty, in addition to principal investigator Strathdee, include Tom Patterson, Ph.D., UCSD professor-in-residence of psychiatry who currently leads a multicenter behavioral intervention study in four Mexican border cities, including Tijuana, together with coinvestigators from UABC; Allen McCutchan, M.D., M.Sc., UCSD infectious disease specialist and director and founder of the California Collaborative Treatment Group, which coordinates the efforts of five universities in clinical studies of AIDS, and Co-Director of the HIV Neurobehavioral Research Center (HNRC) at UCSD; Stephanie Brodine, M.D., M.P.H., San Diego State University professor and chief of epidemiology and program director of the joint SDSU/UCSD doctoral program; Adriana Vargas, M.D., Dean of Medicine at UABC in Tijuana; Rafael Laniado-Laborin, M.D., professor in the UABC School of Medicine and a clinical researcher with expertise in the clinical management of HIV and tuberculosis infections; and Gudelia Rangel, Ph.D., M.P.H., epidemiologist and director of the Department of Population Studies at COLEF.

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