

UC San Diego Receives Funding to Expand Global Scope of Research into HIV Prevention

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Julio Montaner, M.D., an adjunct professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, is one of only three first-time recipients of the inaugural Avant-Garde Award from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health.

Intended to stimulate innovative, high-impact research, the Avant-Garde Awards –\$500,000 per year for five years – are for groundbreaking work that may lead to innovations in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS in drug users. The Avant-Garde Awards are modeled after the NIH Pioneer Awards, which are granted to scientists of exceptional creativity who propose pioneering and possibly transformative approaches to major challenges in biomedical and behavioral research.

Montaner – director of the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) at Providence Health Care and the University of British Columbia, and President of the International AIDS Society – will coordinate research being done in Canada with HIV researchers based at UC San Diego. The Avant-Garde award will be used to evaluate of the effectiveness of expanded access to highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) by injection drug users in order to lower the number of new cases of HIV infection in this high-risk group.

Montaner's project, called *STOP HIV/AIDS*, aims to aggressively fight the spread of HIV through the treatment of these patients in British Columbia, which affords researchers a unique opportunity to gauge the program's success because injection drugs users can be enrolled in and tracked through Canada's national Health Care System.

His studies will complement the global efforts in HIV-related research already underway at UC San Diego's HIV Neurobehavioral Research Center, headed by professor of psychiatry Igor Grant, M.D., as well as work to prevent the spread of HIV infection among injection drug users in Mexico and other countries, led by Steffanie Strathdee, Ph.D., Chief of the Division of International Health and Cross-Cultural and Thomas L. Patterson, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry at UC San Diego School of Medicine, who is co-principal investigator on this grant.

“This project will expand the global scope of the research being done at UC San Diego to halt the spread of this devastating disease,” said Grant. UC San Diego already has HIV studies being conducted in China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Romania and Bolivia, along with pilot studies in South Africa.

“I am honored to have been chosen for this prestigious award. NIDA should be commended for their leadership in supporting progressive research in the fight against HIV/AIDS in this highly vulnerable, but often neglected, population,” said Montaner.

HAART has led to a dramatic decrease in morbidity and mortality among individuals infected with HIV, and international guidelines widely recommend that HAART be used before overt immune deficiency is apparent. HAART decreases the levels of HIV in blood, which in turn can decrease the risk of HIV transmission.

The *STOP HIV/AIDS* proposal will recruit HIV infected individuals who are medically eligible for antiretroviral therapy based on current guidelines, but who are currently not accessing therapy or are unaware of their HIV infection status. The durability of the effect of HAART expansion on HIV incidence will be further evaluated over a six year period.

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Media Contact: Debra Kain, 619-543-6163, ddkain@ucsd.edu

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