

At the Nexus of Substance Abuse and HIV

UC San Diego Researcher Wins Major Award to Study New Treatments and Preventions

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Dan Werb, PhD, an internationally noted epidemiologist at University of California, San Diego School of Medicine, has been named one of four inaugural recipients of the Avenir Award, a prestigious \$1.5 million research grant from the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse, part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).



Daniel Werb, PhD

The award recognizes high impact research on HIV and substance abuse, and emerging leaders in the field. Werb's work as a visiting scholar in the Division of Global Public Health and elsewhere – he is also the new director of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICSDP) in Toronto – has focused on how drug policy reforms in places like Tijuana, Mexico impact risk behaviors and access to addiction treatment among

people who inject drugs.

At UC San Diego, Werb will use his Avenir funding on a new project called PRIMER: Preventing Injecting by Modifying Existing Responses. PRIMER will attempt to control the spread of addiction by harnessing existing public health interventions, such as testing new ways to prevent injection drug use through methadone maintenance therapy and supervised injection sites. The PRIMER project will be international in scope, with researchers involved in San Diego and Tijuana; Vancouver, Canada; and Paris, Marseille and Bordeaux, France.

“For too long, the goals of preventing addiction have seemed at odds with efforts to treat this condition,” said Werb, who joined the global public health faculty at UC San Diego School of

Medicine in 2013. “It is my hope that over the coming years we will demonstrate that treating the harms of addiction is, in fact, not only compatible with prevention aims but is actually an effective way of preventing the spread of addiction across populations.

“Through PRIMER, I believe we will be able to identify ways to prevent the spread of addiction. And through the ICSDP, we will be able to take this evidence and support governments to develop more effective policy responses to addictions.”

Steffanie Strathdee, PhD, associate dean of global health sciences at UC San Diego School of Medicine and a member of the ICSDP scientific advisory board, agreed, “Dan’s prevention and policy work has had an outsized impact on the scientific understanding of the intersecting epidemics of drug addiction and HIV/AIDS. As principal investigator of the PRIMER study and director of ICSDP, he has a real opportunity to transform our society’s approach to preventing the dual harms of addictions and HIV.”

The other three inaugural Avenir Award recipients for HIV/AIDS research are Alejandro B. Balazs, PhD, at Harvard Medical School; Brandon D.L. Marshall, PhD, Brown University; and Christina S. Meade, PhD, Duke University.

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