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Ambitious AIDS grants deepen rift between researchers

One year after the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) launched a project to tackle the obstacles in developing an HIV vaccine, the AIDS community is sorely split between those involved in the multimillion-dollar initiative—and everybody else.

The Center for HIV/AIDS Vaccine Immunology (CHAVI), a worldwide consortium of researchers, debuted with \$14.9 million in its first year, and is slated to receive up to \$48 million each year for six more years. Scientists participating in CHAVI also won 3 out of 16 international grants awarded in July by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Right from its inception, CHAVI raised hackles. Afraid that it would siphon away resources from diminishing funding pools, researchers criticized the agency's decision to pour so much cash into just one project (*Nat. Med.* **11**, 587–588; 2005). Although CHAVI was intended to unite the best scientific minds, the bitter competition leading to its launch left the field divided along sharp lines.

A year into the project, those lines have only grown sharper.

In theory, CHAVI would foster global collaborations, but some say it has instead made the initiative chaotic and difficult to manage. There is also much confusion and resentment among researchers as to whether CHAVI represents a new source of funding, and how its leaders choose their collaborators.

"If there was plenty of money to go around there wouldn't be a need for such scrutiny," says Ronald Desrosiers, an HIV vaccine expert at Harvard University. "But all this money in one pot while everything else is being tightened and squeezed makes for an even more difficult situation for others in the field."

Led by Barton Haynes, an immunologist at Duke University, CHAVI is steered by six scientific leaders and several others who manage teams that will delve into areas such as viral biology, immunology and genomics.

Haynes says CHAVI has spent its first year establishing clinical trial sites in Africa, the UK and the US, and clarifying its scientific goals and protocols. It has also ironed out intellectual property issues, established new

databases and developed biological assays to analyze different components of the immune system.

Haynes says his team is trying to overcome immense logistical challenges, including communicating with dozens of collaborators in different time zones. "The first year has been intense but enjoyable and gratifying," he says.

The consortium's immediate priority is to scour the planet for samples of 'acute infection' from individuals who have just been infected with HIV. When HIV first enters the body, the immune system takes about a month to mount a defense, which then inexplicably changes the nature of the virus. Understanding how the virus behaves in its first weeks inside the body—and what genes are at play—may be crucial for developing a vaccine.

Acute infection samples are difficult to find, so CHAVI is asking researchers around the world to contribute existing samples from their own collections. The consortium in June launched EuroCHAVI, which will draw on 600 acute infection samples in Europe and Australia.

But some say it is unclear whether CHAVI is inviting people to formally collaborate or to simply fork over materials they have spent precious time and money trying to collect. Others say that they have tried to communicate with CHAVI's leaders repeatedly about collaborations or funding but have not received clear answers.

The situation has inflamed many scientists—but their anger is directed less at CHAVI than

at the NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). Several top scientists declined to speak on record but uniformly condemned the agency for polarizing the field by playing favorites with some researchers while blatantly alienating others.

It doesn't help that the Gates Foundation on 18 July gave three CHAVI scientists, including Haynes, additional grants totaling \$64.5 million.

"We are essentially building a two-class system," says Mario Stevenson, an HIV researcher at the University of Massachusetts in Worcester. "There are the well-funded groups and then everyone else who is spending all their time chasing scraps off the table."

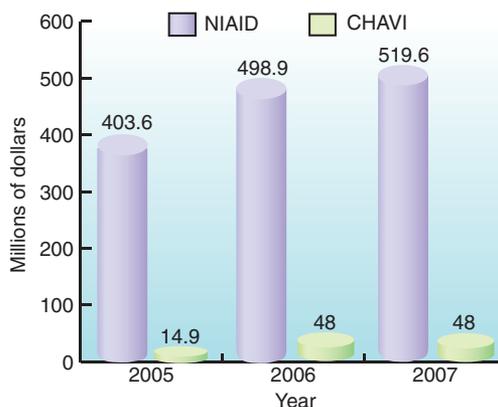
Stuart Shapiro, NIAID's scientific coordinator for CHAVI, says NIAID does not intend to alienate anyone and that the sheer urgency of CHAVI's mission has forced the consortium to remain as focused as possible. He says that CHAVI's funds won't take away from the RO1 funding pool, which supports grants to individual scientists.

Rather, he says, CHAVI's endowment comes from a special supplement from the US Congress and may also draw on restructured NIH programs. CHAVI received \$48 million for its second year and is guaranteed funding of \$48 million for 2007.

The consortium's leaders work closely with NIAID's program staff, via weekly conference calls, video conferences and dozens of emails and phone conversations every day, says Shapiro. Every study CHAVI chooses must pass a conventional peer review process at the NIAID and be approved by an external advisory group of around 25 scientists. Once approved, projects must meet preassigned milestones and pass periodic evaluations.

CHAVI will eventually involve many scientists, but it will not act as a traditional funding entity for individuals, Shapiro says. "CHAVI is a big science project for asking big science questions, the sorts of questions that can't be answered by investigators with R01 funding," he says. "So researchers participating in CHAVI must accept being a small part of a big machine."

Paroma Basu, Madison



Money matters: CHAVI is set to win up to \$48 million for each of the next six years.