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► **COVER:** 'Swallowing it whole' by Nicola Hawes, inspired by the Review on p835.



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It is a truth universally acknowledged that the human papillomavirus (HPV) causes cervical cancer. Yet such a statement would have ruffled more than a few feathers in the 1970s when the prevailing belief was that this sexually transmitted gynaecological malignancy was the work of the herpes virus. It took 10 years of work by Harald zur Hausen, viewed by his peers at the time as quite the renegade scientist, to convince the scientific community otherwise by showing that HPV DNA could be isolated from cervical cancer biopsy samples. Given that HPV has since been implicated in cancers of the anus, mouth, penis and vulva, zur Hausen's initial discovery had greater ramifications for public health than he could possibly have imagined.

Last week, the Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden bestowed on zur Hausen the ultimate accolade for his efforts by awarding him the 2008 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. In their statement, the Nobel Assembly acknowledged that zur Hausen's work had led not only to the "characterisation of the natural history of HPV infection" but also, and perhaps more significantly, to "the development of prophylactic vaccines against HPV acquisition". These recently developed vaccines have been championed as a prime example of cancer prevention and should significantly reduce the incidence of HPV-associated tumours worldwide, despite the controversy the vaccines have caused among religious groups who argue that their use encourages promiscuity.

Luc Montagnier and Françoise Barre-Sinoussi also shared the prize for their discovery of HIV as the cause of AIDS. In choosing zur Hausen, Montagnier and Barre-Sinoussi, the Nobel committee have given recognition to the basic research findings that are crucial for the development of effective disease treatments.

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