



**PRESS RELEASE
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**Researchers from Université de Montréal
and the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
make a major strategic breakthrough in controlling the AIDS virus**

**Dr. Rafick-Pierre Sékaly and his team succeed in preventing
the HIV virus from making immune system cells dysfunctional**

Montreal, August 21, 2006 – A team of researchers from the Université de Montréal and the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal (CHUM) have announced an important breakthrough in fighting the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). For the first time, scientists have identified a defect in the immune response to HIV and found a way to correct the flaw. Dr. Rafick-Pierre Sékaly, an eminent researcher in cell biology, immunology, and virology, has confirmed the identification of a new therapeutic target (the PD-1 protein) that restores the function of the T cells whose role is to eliminate cells infected with the virus. This constitutes a major breakthrough, opening new prospects for the development of therapeutic strategies for controlling HIV infection. The research findings appear in today's issue of the journal *Nature Medicine*.

Dr. Sékaly explained that "immune system cells made non-functional by HIV can be identified by the presence of a protein that is significantly overexpressed when infected by the virus." In fact, high levels of the protein are associated with a more serious dysfunction. "The most important discovery made in this study arises from the fact that by stimulating this protein, we succeeded in preventing the virus from making immune system cells dysfunctional," he added.

The findings were simultaneously reproduced by two other laboratories – the labs headed by Dr. Bruce Walker at Harvard and Dr. Richard Koup at the NIH. "It's a rare occurrence for three teams to work together on attacking a major problem. Up until now, the virus has been more or less invincible. By combining our efforts, we found the missing link that may enable us to defeat the virus," noted Dr. Sékaly. Discussions with partners are also underway to translate these research findings into clinical trials, which could start during the coming year.

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Thanks to the joint efforts of the Université de Montréal, the CHUM Research Centre, Génome Québec, Genome Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the NIH, and the Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec (FRSQ), Quebec continues to show great leadership in the life sciences.

Paul L'Archevêque and Martin Godbout, the presidents of Génome Québec and Genome Canada respectively, saluted the vision of the research team and the importance for Quebec and Canada of continuing to invest in genomics research. "The \$14 million invested in this project certainly played a role in accelerating the researchers' work, and in helping Montreal to remain competitive on the international scene," noted the agency heads, adding that Dr. Sékaly's team was the first in the world to present the findings of this major study.

"The results of Dr. Sekaly's study represent an important step in the development of a new therapeutic approach in the fight against HIV," said Dr. Alan Bernstein, CIHR President. "This study is a compelling example of the excellence of Canadian health researchers and of Canada's contribution to the world's response to the HIV-AIDS pandemic."

"This important discovery is a powerful example of what can be achieved through partnership," added Dr. Eliot Phillipson, President and CEO of the Canada Foundation for Innovation. "Canada is proud to have researchers of Dr. Sékaly's calibre keeping our country at the forefront of the global fight against HIV-AIDS."

Dr. Mark Wainberg, Co-Director of the FRSQ-AIDS and infectious diseases Network and Co-Chair of the 16th World AIDS Conference held in Toronto last week, congratulated Dr. Sékaly and his team: "This scientific breakthrough is a giant step in the fight against AIDS. It is particularly interesting to see that some of the best research teams are working together to stop this terrible curse."

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