

**Newsmaker Interviews: Mark Wainberg, Ph.D.  
XVI International AIDS Conference  
August 13, 2006**

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**JACKIE JUDD:** Dr. Wainberg, thank you for joining us.

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** Thank you for having me.

**JACKIE JUDD:** What do you expect the scientific highlights of this conference to be?

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** I think it's going to be a fabulous scientific conference. We really have an extremely high critical mass of great papers in all of the major spheres of activity. I think this is going to be a memorable conference from the scientific standpoint.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Is there one headline in particular that you particularly expect?

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** Well, honestly, I think some of the new clinical trial data and late breaker sessions are just amazing. The data on the new integrase drugs, for example, are just wonderful and I think they give new hope to patients that we're going to have a new class of drug very, very shortly that will, I think, do much better in therapy than anything we have so far.

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**JACKIE JUDD:** Explain simply, if you can, what integrase drugs are, and the stage at which the research is at the moment.

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** Well, there are a few companies that have integrase inhibitors that are now in clinical trials. In the virus life cycle, there are three enzymes that are unique to HIV that it requires in order to maintain its ability to replicate. Two of them, two of these enzymes, have already been developed as targets in therapy. They are reverse transcriptase and protease. We've always known, at least for some time, that the virus also has an integrase enzyme, the role of which is to allow the viral DNA that has been copied from viral RNA by reverse transcriptase to now get integrated into a host cell. Once that happens, we know that a host cell is infected for life, and this is what gives us the huge problem of reservoirs in HIV infection.

So now, really, what we have a chance to accomplish is to block this third target in the HIV life cycle through the use of this new family of drugs.

So, two of the drugs that have come forward thus far have been in clinical trials. We're going to hear data presented and see data presented at this conference in regard to these two drugs that are being brought forward by Merck and

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by Gilead, but there are other companies that also have integrase inhibitors that are now being developed.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Would you describe yourself as cautiously optimistic about the potential for this new class of drugs?

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** I'm definitely cautiously optimistic. I think maybe I would almost remove cautiously.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Really?

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** Yeah, I mean, the clinical data thus far looks extremely encouraging. We're going to hear data this week suggesting that the drops in viral load that you get when you use an integrase inhibitor may take place faster than with other families of drugs.

So, I think we need to keep our eyes open and be optimistic, but it would very much surprise me if at least one member of the integrase family of compounds did not get approved in the United States sometime during 2007, perhaps the end of 2007.

**JACKIE JUDD:** There was a dust-up today, an article in the *Toronto Mail*, quoting Robert Gallo, who is one of the leading lights of HIV/AIDS research. He is not coming here.

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He's saying that there is not enough serious science that goes on here. And you are quoted in the article as saying, "Is this the best basic science conference in the world? No, it's not, but the conference has a place. It tries to be all things to all people, which is a noble initiative." Give me a little context for that.

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** I think the reporter who interviewed me took me completely out of context. He began the interview by asking me on a scale of one to 10, how would you rate this conference in terms of basic science compared with other conferences that you go to? And I said, "Nine." So I gave it a very high rating. The science at this meeting is excellent. I said, "Nine," and I guess he took that to mean well, then, something else must have a 10, and therefore, it's not the best. But the way he wrote the story, he made it come across as though we don't have high-level scientists at this meeting, which is complete nonsense.

The other point that we should make is that Dr. Gallo is not here, and he sort of implies in the article that he chose not to come. I guess that's true, but he wasn't invited. We know for a fact that he very much wanted to be invited, but he wanted to be a plenary speaker, and unfortunately the conference cannot accommodate every single person out there who wants to be a plenary speaker. Dr. Gallo has been a plenary

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speaker at an International AIDS Conference on numerous occasions, and it's a bit disingenuous, I think, for him to give in the interview in the manner that he did.

**JACKIE JUDD:** This kind of controversy seems to be part and parcel of these conferences.

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** Well, the other word that Gallo uses in his statement is that there's a circus-like atmosphere here. That's also just not really relevant. Of course, there are demonstrations at all of these conferences, reflecting, I suppose, the fact that there are 25,000 people here. But the point that I did make in the article that I don't think the reporter stressed well enough is that it's the critical mass of reporters who come here because of all the celebrities, and all of the politicians who are, in fact, making important decisions about providing drugs to Africa. The message about providing drugs to Africa, and, indeed, the message about what people should be doing to not get infected by HIV are vitally important. How could anybody downplay the importance of those messages when HIV is the most important killer that we confront on this planet?

**JACKIE JUDD:** One word that I keep hearing from other conference leaders in Toronto is accountability. There seems

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to be a greater determination this year, at least, in the rhetoric that the leaders go from here with some accountability of what they've announced, what they've promised, etc. Do you sense that as well?

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** I think absolutely. People come to this meeting because they want to identify with the global epidemic, and it's not possible for everybody to get on a plane and go to Kenya, Nairobi, or Tanzania or South Africa and have impact. But when they come here, they're showing that they identify with the international dimension of HIV, and that's extremely important. This conference gives people that opportunity, and it's also a first-rate scientific conference.

**JACKIE JUDD:** A final question. Our host country obviously is Canada. I know that you are terribly disappointed that the prime minister has chosen not to come to the conference, but putting that aside, if you can give us a brief overview of the state of the epidemic in Canada.

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** The state of the epidemic in Canada is probably not dissimilar to that in the U.S. The statistics that were released a couple of weeks ago by the federal government indicate that we now have about 58,000 people living with HIV in this country. That's an increase

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from about 52,000 about four years ago, so we have an increase. The rate of increase seems to be steady. It's not going down, so somehow our messages in regard to safe sex are not penetrating into vulnerable populations within Canada that ought to be getting those messages and doing something about self protection.

The other thing is that we're not, thankfully, losing people to the epidemic in Canada now. We're doing very well in relative terms with our drugs, so it's the exception and not the rule. When somebody in Canada now dies of HIV, which means we have people getting infected all the time, but the numbers go up because we're not losing people.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Okay, thank you very much, Dr. Wainberg and good luck this week.

**MARK WAINBERG, Ph.D.:** Thank you.

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