

LOCAL

LOCAL VIDEO SERIES EDUCATES ON HIV CLINICAL TRIALS



Two clinical trials that hope to cure HIV have been awarded \$23 million.

As part of an initiative to enroll people living with HIV in the upcoming trials, West Philadelphia-based bioresearch organization Wistar Institute has released four educational videos about participation in this type of study.

The short flicks, created in partnership with Philadelphia FIGHT Community Health Centers, the BEAT-HIV Community Advisory Board and University of Pennsylvania's Center for AIDS Research, feature HIV clinicians, researchers, patients and advocates seeking a cure. All those in the videos live in the City of Brotherly Love, causing the educational campaign to be dubbed the "Philadelphia Story."

"The hope was that these videos, created by the community and spoken largely by community members, would demystify the research effort and present a narrative that would be accessible and acceptable to our community," said Dr. Luis Montaner, director of Wistar's HIV-1 Immunopathogenesis Laboratory. "Not being talked down to, but from people that could be role models."

The first video, “Game Changers,” takes viewers on a 10-minute journey describing the “who” and “what” behind an HIV-cure study. Community members, HIV providers, case managers and researchers explain to potential participants what to expect.

Andrea Harrington, a community activist who has previously participated in a cure study, shared how it impacted her.

“I had to take 12 pills, three times a day,” Harrington said in the video. “At the present, I take one pill a day, but in order to get there, there had to be some studies.”

The second flick, “The Top 10,” reviews the main items people should consider and discuss with their healthcare providers if considering joining a cure study. The series’ third iteration, “The Art of A.T.I.” informs viewers about analytical treatment interruption, or stopping current HIV therapy methods during the study, and why it is part of the research trials.

The final video, “Time. Commitment.” summarizes the other videos, while chronicling the experiences of researchers and people who have participated previously.

To Grace Williams, a previous participant and community activist, the right candidate will commit to doctor’s appointments and keep a positive attitude, adding that the person must also be passionate about finding a cure.

The videos were made as part of Wistar’s participation in the BEAT-HIV Delaney Collaboratory, an international consortium of more than 80 HIV researchers from academic, government, nonprofit and other sectors that are working toward an HIV cure.

In July 2016, the Wistar Institute received the nearly \$23 million Martin Delaney Collaboratories for HIV Cure Research grant via the National Institutes of Health. The five-year award funds the upcoming trials and community engagement efforts, Montaner said. The video topics were decided with the help of a community advisory board.

Montaner said a typical trial at the institution costs roughly \$6 million and stressed the potential for discovery in the upcoming trials, which will start by September. Both trials will take place in Philadelphia.

The first trial will combine two neutralizing antibodies with interferons — proteins that signal nearby cells to strengthen their anti-viral properties, Montaner told PGN. “It would be the first time that a combined immunotherapy strategy is being tested in humans,” he added.

The second study builds on gene-therapy work used in identifying a cure for cancer. Cells are removed from a person, modified by adding a receptor that seeks out and kills the HIV virus and then released back into the body, Montaner said. Researchers will try to make the modified cells impervious to infection. “The hypothesis goes that if you add a cell that can kill and not get infected, the cell will expand and exert control of the virus over a lifetime,” Montaner explained.



Each trial is a combination of previous smaller tests and hypotheses, Montaner said, making the upcoming studies a “do or die” point for the research: “Both trials are trying to determine, if you do these combination approaches, what else beyond antiretroviral therapy can you achieve?”

“Whatever happens, we’re going to advance because either we will learn that if it’s not having the effect we intended, we need to prioritize other strategies,” Montaner said, “or that this is indeed getting us to a state of remission and longterm control, without any subsequent intervention.”

Almost 37 million people were living with HIV across the world as of 2017, according to public health organization UNAIDS.

Philadelphia’s push for a cure has put the city on the map as a hub of HIV cure-directed research, Montaner said.

In July, a team of scientists at Temple University — in partnership with colleagues at the University of Nebraska Medical Center — announced they had removed HIV from living mice for the first time ever. Those researchers are expecting to begin clinical trials for humans by summer 2020.

Those interested in participating or learning more about the trials can visit beat-hiv.org.

