

The quest to end AIDS

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A researcher best known for his discovery that HIV is the retrovirus that causes AIDS, Dr. Robert Gallo came to the Tulane University uptown campus to deliver the keynote address for a Presidential Symposium, "Journey with Blood Cells and Viruses." Humans have a 25- to 30-year memory of epidemics, Gallo said. "In 1981, when AIDS was diagnosed, people had forgotten about the polio epidemic 30 years prior." (Photo from the University of Maryland Institute of Virology)

The Freeman Auditorium on the Tulane University uptown campus was packed to overflowing with young people ? current students and recent graduates ? who gathered to hear the nearly 78-year-old physician researcher tell the tale of his discovery that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is the cause of AIDS.

Dr. Robert Gallo paused as he spoke about vaccine development to explain who Albert Sabin was, saying, “Salk â?¡ Sabin,” because many in the audience on Thursday (March 12) had not been born when the polio vaccine was developed in the 1950s.

“Sabin said an HIV vaccine would not be doable,” Gallo said, pointing out that he and the many silver-haired researchers and clinicians in the two front rows would not agree. Director of the Institute of Human Virology in Baltimore and co-founder and scientific director of the Global Virus Network, Gallo vociferously is continuing the search for a vaccine that would prevent AIDS.

“For me, there's a better chance of eradicating the epidemic than there is for complete virological cure in a meaningful way,” Gallo said.

Previously at the National Cancer Institute for 30 years, Gallo explained how his involvement in the discovery of a retrovirus, the human T-lymphotrophic virus (HTLV), as the cause of a type of leukemia laid the groundwork for the HIV discovery. About 20 percent of human cancers are caused by viruses, he said.

“The labs that made the most progress â?¡ became involved almost whimsically,” noted Gallo, pointing out the restrictions on governmental research efforts.

The talk was the public keynote address for a three-day [Presidential Symposium](#) at Tulane March 11â?–13 that celebrated contributions to infectious disease research by faculty in the School of Medicine and School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, as part of this year's celebration of the 50th anniversary of the [Tulane National Primate Research Center](#).

Gallo concluded his remarks by stressing the importance of primate research centers.

“HIV vaccine research really is dead without them!”

“A vaccine against AIDS cannot be based on classical vaccinology because of its retrovirus nature ... like a diamond, a retrovirus is forever.”—Dr. Robert Gallo, HIV vaccine researcher