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August 23, 1985

Dr. Harold Varmus
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Department of Microbiology
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Parnassus Ave. & Third Ave.
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Dear Harold,

A quick response to your latest mailing:

I am in full agreement with your position. As I stated previously, I would favor any name that does not impose (or give the appearance of imposing) taxonomic preconceptions on the nomenclature. Additionally, a chosen name should be easy to say and to remember and, to the greatest extent possible, politically acceptable. Thus I remain strongly opposed to all pseudo-systematic names (usually recognizable by the presence of appended numbers), and rank the rest only be relatively trivial criteria. The long-awaited nucleotide sequence of visna virus (Sonigo, et al., Cell 42:369, 1985) makes it still more apparent that the HTLV designation will be inconsistent with whatever taxonomy is finally arrived at. (Whether AIDS viruses are to be grouped as lentiviruses is an issue for another time.)

Regarding the issue of priority, there is ample precedent for altering the original nomenclature either for reasons of taxonomic accuracy (Pasturella is now Yersinia) or communication (genes originally called src are now mos, abl, ras, etc.). In the present instance, priority is so confused that it does not provide clear guidance anyway.

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The issue of common usage is a more difficult one. The vast majority of AIDS virus papers published to date have, indeed used the designation HTLV-III. However, almost all of these were the product of only a few laboratories. Presumably as time goes on, a greater diversity of workers with different ideas as to the nomenclature will enter this area, and this problem may thus be somewhat less difficult than it might at present seem.

I hope these additional thoughts are of some value.

See you soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'John M. Coffin', written over the word 'Sincerely,'.

John M. Coffin, Ph.D.