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To: Members of the Human Retrovirus Subcommittee

From: Harold Varmus *HV*

Bob Gallo and I have discussed by telephone the issues he raised in his letter of February 5, 1986, that was sent to all members of our subcommittee. Several points considered in our conversation are important to the process of reaching a consensus, and I believe it will be useful to describe them briefly, so that you will understand how I wish to respond to his letter.

Some of you may recall that the questionnaire distributed on August 19, 1985, offered an opportunity to register an opinion ("strongly favor", "favor", "no interest", "oppose", or "adamantly oppose") about the terms HTLV-III/LAV or LAV/HTLV-III, as well as about several other names. At the time I noted that we had not yet received a formal proposal for these terms, with a full accounting of how they should be used; but I also pointed out that some members and non-members had written or spoken to me on behalf of these names and that I therefore thought they should be considered with the other proposals.

The responses indicated that five members favored or strongly favored these names (though one of the five preferred two very different names); two had "no interest" (one commenting that he would consider them only if there were no other possible compromise); and six opposed or adamantly opposed them. (Written questionnaires were received from all but one member, who was polled by phone; my own opinions are also included.) Since other names were clearly more popular and thus more likely to attract a consensus, I have considered the combination names to be useful in the interim, but unlikely to resolve our difficulties.

I have suggested to Bob that if he believes that I am wrong about this, he should now present his case in greater detail to our membership, clarifying how he wishes to define each letter, how the name would be related to pre-existing names (HTLV-1 and -2), whether roman or arabic numbers would be used, and how related viruses (e.g. those from primates) would be named. If he decides to circulate such a proposal in the near future, I will ask for a very rapid response to it from everyone, to see whether it has wider appeal than the current nominee, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Although none of us wishes to make our proceedings more protracted than they have already been, I am agreeable to considering all motions from the floor in the hopes of achieving unity at the end.

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Bob's letter and our conversation raised a general point that I believe we should consider further in relation to HIV before we conclude our proceedings: Would the name present intractable difficulties if a subsequent virus isolate, clearly but moderately related to the AIDS virus (e.g. 30-50% nucleotide sequence homology) was found to lack any demonstrable capacity to produce immunodeficiency? The precedents in animal retrovirology would dictate the use of modified generic names (e.g. prefixes or subspecies numbers), but Bob raises the legitimate concern that the attribution of pathological potential to a non-pathogenic subspecies of a human agent could have unfortunate clinical implications. There are doubtless some reasonable solutions to this problem, and I would welcome your suggestions about them. However, I do not believe it will be necessary or proper for us to dictate such solutions in our final recommendations, since better answers may be obvious once any virus isolate of this type has been as fully characterized as the AIDS retrovirus has been. (I should point out in this regard that my concern is not expressly directed towards Max Essex's recent isolates, mentioned in Bob's letter, since I do not know the degree of genetic similarity between the AIDS retroviruses and the new isolates.)

Finally, I enclose another draft of my proposed letter about HIV, slightly reworded in response to comments kindly supplied by several of you. Please let me know if there are any further suggestions for change.

I hope to be in touch with the Subcommittee again in about two weeks. In the meantime, please contact me directly if you have further comments about these recent developments.