

A vaccine against Aids. Good news from Thailand

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Four thousand cases of new infection, every year. Twenty years after the health emergency, there are still many victims of the HIV virus. The reduced interest in a problem that is far from resolved, is partly to blame.

Of course, the scientific community has provided a significant response, by creating retroviral drugs that, despite not eradicating the virus, do contain it, and thereby ensure a longer life. But, now, most efforts concentrate on finding a vaccine that immunises the population, like the vaccines for polio and smallpox.

This morning, at Insubria University, four of the world's leading experts on the HIV virus, gave a lecture to doctoral and undergraduate students. "Their research aims to understand where the virus is located, and how it manages to escape immune and pharmacological defences. However, the scientific community is looking for a vaccine, which would be the definitive answer to the disease," explained Roberto Accolla, a professor of general pathology at Insubria University.

One month ago, a team of American and Thai researchers published the results of an experiment that, for the first time, has given clear, positive signs. "The vaccine was tested on the Thai population, who are considered to be at high risk," Prof. Accolla explained. "They were healthy people. After some time, it was found that the percentage of vaccinated people who were still alive was 26% greater than a similar sample who had not received the vaccine."

This is a concrete result that we have been waiting for for years, given that all previous results had failed. "The scientific community is proceeding by trial and error. Thus, the result from Thailand is considered a decisive step forward in understanding where to go next."

The people present at today's meeting were Prof. Giuseppe Pantaleo, from the University Hospital, in Lausanne (whose work is funded also by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), Prof. Luigi Buonaguro, from the Tumour Institute, in Naples, Prof. Guido Poli, from the "San Raffaele" Scientific Institute, in Milan, and Prof. Adriano Lazzarin, from "San Raffaele" Hospital, in Milan.

In autumn, a visit by Prof. Robert Gallo is expected. Prof. Gallo, who, together with Luc Montagnier, discovered the HIV virus, is coming to Insubria University for another day to focus on AIDS, a topic that is not followed very much, but that still involves the international scientific community.

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