



Philanthropy News

DEVELOPER ROBERT WENNETT HOPES TO CATALYZE SUPPORT FOR POTENT HIV ANTIBODY THERAPY WITH GIFT TO ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY

March 30, 2021—Miami developer and philanthropist **Robert S. Wennett** pledged a \$1.25 million gift to The Rockefeller University to advance the development of immunologist Michel Nussenzweig's **potent antibody therapy for the treatment of HIV infection**. The gift, in part, supports the creation of a cell line, the first step in a multi-step process for manufacturing and testing a clinical-grade immunotherapy that can be given to patients.

"Michel's science inspires me," said Robert Wennett. "I hope my gift inspires others to support this truly promising therapy. Community is how we survived the onset of AIDS in the 1980s. It would be great if, as a community, we can now help to eradicate the threat of HIV."

In recent years, Michel Nussenzweig pioneered a robust method to isolate and clone antibodies from people who have developed the rare ability to fight off HIV infection. These broadly neutralizing anti-HIV antibodies are naturally occurring immune system proteins that have been characterized by the Nussenzweig lab and engineered to increase their efficacy. They have been shown to effectively suppress HIV levels without the use of other drugs. In January 2020, the Nussenzweig lab's portfolio of anti-HIV antibodies was licensed to Gilead Sciences for commercial development.

The funding provided by Robert Wennett is helping the Nussenzweig research group create a new, optimized anti-HIV antibody. This antibody will be bispecific, meaning that it will be able to bind simultaneously to two distinct sites on the virus. Mr. Wennett's gift also supports the work of a postdoctoral scientist who is developing methods for measuring the reservoir of HIV that can silently and persistently infect human cells. The ability to accurately assess the presence of latent HIV is key to gauging the ability of antibody therapies to wipe out an HIV infection.

"Thanks to engaged and committed donors like Robert Wennett, Michel has the resources to refine his potent HIV immunotherapy—work that also informs his group's research on other viruses including Zika and hepatitis B," said Rockefeller University President Richard P. Lifton. "Last spring, in collaboration with virologists at Rockefeller, Michel quickly launched studies into the virus that causes COVID-19. Within less than a year, his lab produced an antibody therapy that was recently licensed by Bristol Myers Squibb."

"I'm energized by the success we have had creating antibody therapy for HIV infection and COVID-19," said Michel Nussenzweig. "I am grateful for the support of Robert Wennett. Robert really understands the promise of this approach, not just for HIV but for emerging viral threats."

"I would love to see an entire center at Rockefeller devoted to global infectious disease research. It would be the kind of resource we desperately needed when AIDS first appeared," Mr. Wennett noted.

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