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HIV cure hopes dashed for 2 patients

WASHINGTON: The latest hopes of curing AIDS were dashed on Friday when American researchers said HIV returned in two men who briefly eradicated the virus after bone marrow transplants for cancer.

Experts described the discovery as a "disappointment", but said it offers important new clues in the hunt for the human immunodeficiency virus's elusive hiding places in the body.

Only one person is believed to have been cured of HIV. American Timothy Brown, who suffered from leukemia, received a bone marrow transplant from a rare donor who was resistant to HIV, and has shown no sign of the virus for six years.

"The return of detectable levels of HIV in our patients is disappointing, but scientifically significant," said Dr Timothy Heinrich, a physician-researcher in the Division of Infectious Diseases at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

"Through this research, we have discovered the HIV reservoir is

deeper and more persistent than previously known."

Dr Heinrich first shared the news with fellow researchers at an international AIDS conference in Miami, Florida, on Thursday.

Both HIV-positive men received bone marrow transplants as treatment for a kind of blood cancer known as Hodgkin's lymphoma, one in 2008 and the other in 2010.

About eight months after their operations, HIV was no longer detectable. The patients stayed on antiretroviral therapy even after their HIV was undetectable, and eventually decided to cease taking the drugs earlier this year.

In July, doctors announced early, encouraging results: one patient appeared to still be HIV-free after being off the drugs for seven weeks and the other for 15 weeks.

But signs of HIV soon returned. They were found in the first patient 12 weeks after stopping therapy and in the second patient after 32 weeks.

"Both patients have resumed ther-

apy and are currently doing well," Heinrich said, adding that the patients did not wish to be identified in the media.

He said it was important to share the results, with fellow researchers, because they signal "that there may be an important long-lived HIV reservoir outside the blood compartment".

"We have demonstrated HIV can be reduced to undetectable levels by very sensitive research assays and the virus persists."

Prior to the viral rebound, one of the patients had only about 1,000 cells in his body left with traces of HIV and the other had just 100, according to the Foundation for AIDS Research, amfAR, which funded the study.

Unlike Brown, these patients' bone marrow transplants did not come from donors that carried a genetic resistance to HIV by lacking a CCR5 receptor, so they were not afforded protection against the virus by that mutation. **AFP**