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AIDS expert's death spurs cure quest

MELBOURNE: Scientists yesterday vowed to press ahead with their quest for a cure for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), despite losing a veteran colleague and suffering a setback in research.

Addressing a symposium on the search for a cure, Nobel prize winner Françoise Barre-Sinoussi said the death of Joep Lange, a frontline scientist in the 33-year war on AIDS, was a major setback.

"He was firmly believing that a cure for HIV was possible, as we all do," she said of the Dutchman, who was on the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 that went down over Ukraine.

"I am convinced that he, like the other members of the HIV community that were in that plane, would have encouraged us to go on." Barre-Sinoussi, who co-discovered the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS.

He launched the cure campaign several years ago amid scepticism by some that the goal could ever be attainable. Despite this, optimism had grown and cure scientists were confident they knew a lot more about HIV.

The six-day International AIDS Conference here, which starts today, will hear more tomorrow about the "kick-and-kill" strand in cure research. The objective is to pinpoint these reservoirs, flush out the virus with powerful drugs and then destroy it.

But a strategy that sparked hopes of a cure — delivering a powerful dose of drugs at the earliest stage of infection — had been dealt a blow.



Joep Lange was a frontline scientist in the 33-year war on AIDS

The hopes centred on an American infant, known anonymously as "the Mississippi Baby", who was born with HIV. She was given drugs immediately at birth and the treatment continued for 18 months, when physicians lost track of her.

Five months later, doctors found no sign of the virus. In the run-up to the AIDS conference, it was discovered that after the child had lived 27 months without HIV and drugs, the virus had bounced back.

Jack Whitescarver, director of the Office for AIDS Research at the US National Institutes of Health, said "this really demonstrates that we are still in the early days" of research.

"We will continue to make cure research a high priority and use this information to move the scientific agenda forward." **AFP**