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A cure for AIDS in sight

HIV discoverer optimistic of breakthrough

WASHINGTON: The Nobel laureate who helped to discover HIV says a cure for AIDS is in sight following recent discoveries, in an interview ahead of a global conference on the disease here.

Francoise Barre-Sinoussi, who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2008 as part of a team that discovered the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which causes AIDS, said scientific research was zeroing in on a cure for the illness.

She cited a patient in Berlin who appears to have been cured through a bone marrow transplant, "which proves that finding a way of eliminating the virus from the body is something that is realistic."

Other sources of optimism are the small minority of patients – less than 0.3% – who exhibit no symptoms of the virus without ever receiving treatment; and a small group in France who received antiretroviral drugs and now live without treatment or symptoms, Barre-Sinoussi said.

"There is hope ... but don't ask me for a date because we do not know."

She also said that it would be possible "in principle" to eliminate the AIDS pandemic by 2050, if barriers to drug access could be eliminated.

The main barriers there were not scientific but political, economic and social, she said: the problem was lack of access to testing and drugs in poor and rural areas, as well as the stigma around the virus, which undermines early detection and treatment.

There is hope ... but don't ask me for a date because we don't know.

– FRANCOISE BARRE-SINOUSSI

Some 25,000 people, including celebrities, scientists and HIV sufferers are expected in the US capital tomorrow to call for a jumpstart in the global response to the three-decade AIDS epidemic.

Held every two years, the International AIDS Conference returns to the United States for the first time since 1990, after being kept away by laws that barred people with HIV from travelling to the country.

The US ban was formally lifted in 2009, and researchers have described fresh optimism in the fight against AIDS on several fronts ahead of the six-day conference that runs through July 27.

Deaths and infections are down in the parts of the world most ravaged by the disease, while the number of people on treatment has risen 20% from 2010 to 2011, reaching eight million people in needy countries.

However this is only about half the people who should be on treatment worldwide, suggesting much more remains to be done.

Eastern Europe and central Asia are experiencing worsening epidemics, while the United States has been unable to curb the rate of new infections in recent years despite a host of new research advances. — AFP