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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

June 17, 2002

The Honorable James A. Traficant, Jr.
House of Representatives

Subject: *Origin of the AIDS Virus*

Dear Mr. Traficant:

In response to your request to review an individual's allegations that the National Cancer Institute's Special Virus Cancer Program (SVCP) created the AIDS virus, we obtained information on (1) the overall stated purposes and outcomes of SVCP, (2) scientific assessments of the origins of the AIDS virus (HIV-1) and any possible evidence regarding the origins of the AIDS virus at SVCP, and (3) the outcome of recent litigation regarding the origins of the AIDS virus. On June 13, 2002, we briefed your staff on the results of our analysis. The enclosed slides formed the basis of the briefing we presented.

To address our objectives, we consulted experts on HIV/AIDS and on SVCP, reviewed SVCP progress reports and summaries as well as documents that allege SVCP created the AIDS virus. In addition, we obtained information on recent litigation involving the individual's allegations. In summary, we did not find evidence to support the allegation that SVCP created the AIDS virus. Comments from the National Cancer Institute on a draft of the briefing slides concluded that they are historically and scientifically accurate.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Acting Director of the National Cancer Institute. We will also make copies available to others on request. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>. Please contact me at (202) 512-7119 if you have any questions. The major contributor to this report was Lawrence S. Solomon.

Sincerely yours,

Janet Heinrich
Director, Health Care—Public Health Issues

Enclosure

Origin of the AIDS Virus

Briefing for
the Office of the Honorable James A. Traficant, Jr.,
House of Representatives

By the U.S. General Accounting Office
June 13, 2002

Background

- An individual has alleged that the visna virus, which caused illness and death in Icelandic sheep, was used by the National Cancer Institute's (NCI) Special Virus Cancer Program (SVCP) to develop HIV-1, the virus that has caused the global AIDS pandemic.
- This individual cited a SVCP research program flowchart as evidence that HIV-1 was developed intentionally in its laboratories.

Objectives

- Identify overall stated purposes and outcomes of SVCP.
- Describe scientific assessments of the origins of the AIDS virus and any possible evidence regarding the origin of the AIDS virus at SVCP.
- Describe outcome of recent litigation involving the individual's allegations of federal government involvement in the origins of the AIDS virus.

Methodology

To address our objectives, we:

- Consulted experts on HIV/AIDS and on SVCP. They have expertise in genetics, cell biology, viral oncology, biochemistry, internal medicine, epidemiology, public health, and dentistry. Some of these experts are cited by the individual as supporters of the allegation that SVCP created the AIDS virus.

Methodology (continued)

- Reviewed SVCP progress reports and summaries issued between 1967 and 1984.
- Reviewed documents that allege SVCP created the AIDS virus.
- Obtained information on recent litigation addressing the individual's allegations.
- Performed our work from January through May 2002 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Purpose of SVCP

- NCI directed SVCP within the intramural laboratories from 1964 to 1980. After 1980, the work of SVCP was incorporated into NCI's broader National Cancer Plan.
- Purpose was to find viruses in human cancer cells, relate them to specific cancers (leukemia, etc.), and develop means to block their effects and reduce cancer growth.

Purpose of SVCP (continued)

- In 1972, SVCP developed a flowchart depicting research program to investigate viral oncology (the study of how viruses cause cancer).
- Outcome of SVCP did not lead to discovery of viruses in human cancer cells, but did result in several advances in molecular biology.

Scientific Assessment on the Origins of the AIDS Virus

- The first scientific evidence of HIV-1 predates the 1964 commencement of SVCP.
- HIV-1 was found in blood samples of an African man who died in 1959. (*Zhu, Tuofu et al. "An African HIV-1 Sequence from 1959 and Implications for the Origin of the Epidemic," Nature 391, no. 6667 (1998): 594-97.*)
- HIV-1 was likely transferred to humans before 1955 from a subspecies of chimpanzees infected with simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV). (*Korber, Bette et al. "Timing the Ancestor of the HIV-1 Pandemic Strains," Science 288, no. 5472 (2000): 1789-96.*)

Scientific Assessment on the Origins of the AIDS Virus (continued)

- Historical analyses of virus development have demonstrated that while the visna virus and HIV-1 shared some common origins thousands of years ago, mutations of key genes over time have resulted in a wide divergence of these two viruses.
- These analyses have also demonstrated that the laboratory combination of the visna virus and HIV-1 was highly improbable.

Scientific Assessment on the Origins of the AIDS Virus (continued)

- Therefore, there is no evidence that SVCP created the AIDS virus.

Recent Litigation Involving Allegations Concerning the Origins of the AIDS Virus

- U.S. District Court (Northern District of Ohio) issued order September 16, 1999, dismissing allegations that the federal government developed agent that subsequently became known as AIDS.
- U.S. Court of Appeals (Sixth Circuit) affirmed the U.S. District Court order November 7, 2000. The Court of Appeals referred to the allegations as having “no basis in law or in fact.”

Recent Litigation Involving Allegations Concerning the Origins of the AIDS Virus (continued)

- U.S. Supreme Court denied petition to review the case June 4, 2001.

[*Graves v. Cohen*, No. 98-02209 (N.D. Ohio Sept. 16, 1999), *aff'd* 238 F. 3d 421, 2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 29203 (6th Cir. Nov. 7, 2000), *cert. denied sub nom. Graves v. Rumsfeld*, 532 U.S. 1072 (2001).]

Comments from NCI

- We received oral comments from NCI on a draft of this briefing. The comments stated that the information contained in this briefing is historically and scientifically accurate.

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