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Government's share to fight AIDS exceeds need

Dr. Richard Darling, DDS

Special to The Desert Sun
July 8, 2005

In response to my call, on behalf of The FAIR Foundation, for our government's National Institutes of Health (NIH) to allocate disease research funds in a more fair and equitable manner, Larry Gibson ("Campaign against AIDS: Action creates results," June 14) calls us whiners and Ron Siegel ("HIV/AIDS funding: Don't rob from one," June 15) implies AIDS deserves its exorbitant funding because it is contagious and killing millions in Africa.

What is The FAIR Foundation and who are the people that Larry Gibson refers to? FAIR is an apolitical, tax-exempt group that in three short years has gained thousands of members and supporters in all 50 states who believe it is neither fair nor equitable that the NIH is spending \$3,084 on each AIDS patient versus the following per patient: diabetic, \$56; Alzheimer's, \$144; prostate disease, \$136; cardiovascular disease, \$40; Parkinson's, \$154, and only \$5 on each COPD patient. In addition, billions more are also raised and spent on AIDS research by the pharmaceutical companies and private groups (e.g. Hollywood, amfAR, etc.).

We are led by a 27-member board of directors, including many physicians and disease advocates such as the following:

Leonard J. Morse, M.D., is commissioner of Public Health, Worcester, Mass., and chair emeritus of the American Medical Association's Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs (the agency sets the ethical and legal affairs for all physicians). Dr. Morse is also past president of the Massachusetts Medical Society and he is the recipient of the 2004 AMA's "Pride in the Profession" award for exemplary work in underserved areas.

Okechukwu Ojogho, M.D., is the director of the Transplantation Institute at Loma Linda University Medical Center.

Waldo Concepcion, M.D., is clinical associate professor of surgery and associate chief, Division of Transplantation at Stanford University School of Medicine.

Donald Hillebrand, M.D., is the medical director of Liver Transplantation at Scripps Green Hospital in La Jolla.

Ray Hill has been Houston's leading gay activist and one of our country's most vocal HIV/AIDS advocates. Ray has switched his focus from HIV/AIDS to hepatitis C (HCV) because there are four to five times as many HCV patients as HIV/AIDS patients in the United States, and more AIDS patients are now dying of liver failure with HCV as one of the main causes than they are of

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the opportunistic infections that used to kill them. Why? Because of the 82 drugs available for AIDS patients (79 in development) versus five for hepatitis C.

Ray joins with us in stating that the NIH spending \$25 on each HCV patient is too small and the \$3,084 per AIDS patient is now excessive.

In regards to AIDS being contagious, if one is to use that argument, one must use it uniformly. Influenza is also infectious and it kills twice as many Americans as AIDS every year now, yet the NIH is spending only \$119 million on the flu versus almost \$3 billion on AIDS. Hepatitis C is also communicable and kills almost as many as AIDS now.

Furthermore, we don't believe it is fair to discriminate against patients with diseases like breast cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes and heart disease because they cannot transmit their disease to others. The NIH funding emphasis based on whether a disease is "infectious" is excessive.

Regarding Africa, what are the solutions for Africa? Not more research. The solutions are the same that have dropped California's death rate in newly infected AIDS patients 97 percent to 250 (as of May 31); namely, preventive education, the excellent drugs that have already been developed and harm reduction policies (clean syringes).

We applaud the AIDS researchers and activists for their great success. They did suffer abhorrent discrimination from "an often uncaring system" as Mr. Gibson states. We hope they will now speak out against the discrimination in funding that is falling upon all non-AIDS diseases. It wasn't fair then and it isn't fair now.

Dr. Richard Darling, DDS, is President and CEO of The FAIR Foundation

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