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Emory steps up on AIDS vaccine trial

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by [Douglas Sams](#)

Staff writer

An Atlanta company spun out of Emory's nationally known AIDS Research Center is picking up speed in the race for a new vaccine that prevents the deadly disease.

GeoVax Labs Inc., whose vaccine was developed by noted Emory scientist Harriet Robinson, said human trials on its vaccine have proven so successful that the timetable to begin a more extensive second round of tests has been sped up by at least a year.

The company plans to begin Phase II clinical trials as early as the fourth quarter.

The GeoVax vaccine spurs the production of T-cells, which are the cells responsible for fighting off infection. But one of the most encouraging findings in the early trials has been the success of the vaccine even at low doses, said GeoVax CEO Don Hildebrand.

"We're very excited about the results we are seeing at one-tenth the normal dose," he said. "We were not expecting that. We were more concerned with safety at that level. Now we see the potential for even better immune responses at the stronger dosage."

The progress made by GeoVax Labs comes at a pivotal time in the battle against acquired immune deficiency syndrome and HIV, the virus that causes the disease.

Some 14,500 new HIV/AIDS cases are reported each day, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

But after years of research on the molecular mechanics of the disease, companies --including GeoVax -- are closing in on what has proven an elusive vaccine.

That effort is supported by the NIH, which has made a major push to develop inexpensive



Joann Vitelli

Dr. Harriet Robinson: "Ten years ago scientists wanted a vaccine by 2007 ... I feel that we will likely have one by 2017."

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vaccines that are simple to administer and effective against all forms of HIV.

Although several scientists in recent years have fallen on their sword after making predictions about a vaccine, there is a growing consensus among researchers that a major breakthrough is around the corner.

"Ten years ago scientists wanted a vaccine by 2007, and while we won't make that deadline, I feel that we will likely have one by 2017," said Robinson, GeoVax's chief scientific officer and director of microbiology and immunology at Emory's Yerkes Primate Center.

GeoVax trials have produced several important results, the company said, including:

- an acceptable safety profile in the low-dose trial begun in April, with no significant safety problems;
- no safety problems reported in an ongoing full-dose trial begun in September; and
- a small dose of the vaccine stimulated a potentially protective immune response in most recipients, meaning a full dose could stimulate an even stronger response.

The findings prompted GeoVax to start planning for its Phase II trial including more than 300 participants.

The promising results from this trial have resulted in preliminary plans to conduct human therapeutic studies utilizing GeoVax AIDS vaccines with the hope of extending the length and quality of life of people already infected with the AIDS virus.

These studies were conducted at Emory University and supported by funding from the NIH.

GeoVax retains close ties to the Emory Center for AIDS Research, a key component in the push for a vaccine.

The 11-year-old center's top priority has remained developing a vaccine that can stop the spread of a disease that affects nearly 40 million worldwide and about 30,000 in Georgia.

The vaccine center is one of 18 funded by the NIH, and its roughly 100 scientists attract more than \$59 million in research annually. Since 1996, the center's funding and staff have tripled, said Dr. James Curran, director of the Emory Center for AIDS Research and dean of the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory.

"There is nothing more important than the battle for a safe and effective vaccine," Curran said. "It's the one breakthrough that is needed in the fight against a disease that will kill millions."

GeoVax is not alone in the push for a new vaccine. Other companies, including powerhouse pharmaceutical companies Merck & Co. Inc. and Sanofi Aventis, are involved in NIH vaccine trials. However, GeoVax -- which has been working on the vaccine for about 15 years -- believes its product may eventually offer better protection than the vaccines being developed by its competitors.

"We'd certainly like to think that," Hildebrand said. "Time will tell, but we feel confident in our

product."

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