

Leading AIDS Researcher Will Start New Institute at Queens College

BY KIM STROSNIDER

QUEENS COLLEGE of the City University of New York announced last month that it had lured the French scientist who co-discovered the AIDS virus from his Paris laboratory to a new AIDS institute to be built on the campus.

The college said Luc Montagnier had agreed to assume a new endowed chair in molecular and cellular biology by October. Dr. Montagnier is expected to maintain an affiliation with the Pasteur Institute in Paris, where he is a professor of virology, but to make the new institute at Queens his base for research into the causes of AIDS and a possible cure.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Dr. Montagnier said the new institute would be affiliated with the World Foundation for AIDS Research and Prevention, which he directs. "New York is the center of this disease," he said. "There are already many skilled scientists working there and also so many patients. I am very glad that Queens College has allowed me to start this in New York, which has the highest incidence of AIDS in the United States."

Queens officials estimated that the research institute would cost \$30-million and

might be open by late 1999. They said they hoped that half the cost would be paid by the State of New York, with the other half coming from private and corporate donations, including gifts from pharmaceutical companies.

'A GREAT COUP'

Bernard Salick, a Queens alumnus and the founder of Salick Health Care Inc., a chain of health clinics, already has pledged \$3-million to endow the chair that Dr. Montagnier will hold and \$1.5-million toward the AIDS institute.

His \$4.5-million gift is the largest in the college's 60-year history.

"People think it's a great coup, a great step," said Allen Lee Sessoms, the college's president. "It demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief, this is a great institution."

Dr. Sessoms, a physicist and former diplomat who was named to the Queens presidency in 1995, has promised to raise the college's profile. He has riled some faculty members by insisting that private fund raising is critical to maintaining a strong institution.

In an interview, he said that Dr. Montagnier had been interested in establishing a research "beachhead" in the United States, and that the competition to recruit him was fierce. Dr. Sessoms said he believed that Dr. Montagnier had discussed starting such an institute with several other institutions in the United States.

Edmund Van Brunt, president of the board of the French Foundation for Medical Research and Education, a non-profit organization based in San Francisco, said he had helped arrange meetings between Dr. Montagnier and university officials in that area in February.

Among those with whom the researcher spoke, according to Dr. Van Brunt, were officials of Stanford University and of the University of California's campuses at Berkeley and San Francisco. Dr. Montagnier also spoke with officials of several medical centers in that area, according to Dr. Van Brunt. The talks, he said, "were exploratory in nature."

Dr. Montagnier's choice of Queens College was perfectly natural, Dr. Sessoms said. The two men had gotten to know each other in the late 1980s, during Dr. Ses-

soms's tenure as a diplomat in the science section of the U. S. Embassy in Paris. Their friendship grew at a time when Dr. Montagnier and Robert C. Gallo, an American researcher then with the National Institutes of Health, were vying to be recognized as the discoverer of H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS. Today, the two men are considered co-discoverers of the virus.

TOP FACILITIES NEARBY

"The fact that we trusted each other—it was more important than anything else," Dr. Sessoms said.

One other factor that probably influenced Dr. Montagnier's decision, according to Dr. Sessoms, was Queens's proximity to top research facilities, including the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center, which is affiliated with Rockefeller University, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Dr. Sessoms has begun discussing collaborative efforts with both institutions, he said, and may seek eventually to build ties between the research center at Queens and other institutions, including Columbia and Princeton Universities. ■