

World leader in HIV vaccine development to set up shop in Port St. Lucie

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Photo of Rafick-Pierre Sekaly,
courtesy of VGTI Florida

PORT ST. LUCIE — St. Lucie County, which has some of the highest HIV-infection rates in Florida, is about to become home to one of the world's leading HIV-vaccine research teams.

The Oregon Health & Science University's Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute has recruited Rafick-Pierre Sekaly from the University of Montreal to set up shop in its planned East Coast Campus. Until that facility opens at the Florida Center for Innovation in Tradition, Sekaly and his 30-scientist team will work from the third-floor of Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies' \$40 million building opening Saturday.

Meanwhile, another HIV researcher who serves on Torrey Pines' Board of Trustees — Robin Offord, who works at the University of Geneva in Switzerland — is looking for financial support from the Treasure Coast for clinical trials of an HIV prevention treatment.

Local HIV prevention activists say the presence in Port St. Lucie of top-level HIV research raises awareness about the disease and could give HIV/AIDS patients hope for the improved treatments. St. Lucie County's infection rates, especially for women, are among the highest in the state, and one in every 35 black women is infected.

"Being a part of research is, for us, vital," said Dawn Jones, the St. Lucie County and regional director for HIV/AIDS services for the Department of Health. "Who knows? This could open up a whole new avenue of opportunities for us."

The recruitment of such top-notch researchers also helps solidify the Treasure Coast's efforts to become a science and research hub. In addition to VGTI and Torrey Pines, the Florida Center for Innovation at Tradition is expected to eventually house a 400,000-square-foot life sciences complex by California-based Mann Research Center and a teaching hospital by Martin Memorial Health Systems.

"It's a very positive thing, we can interact scientifically and share costs, that's always beneficial," Houghten said. "Certainly the economy is changing a bit, but the main thing is it gets things started and things are moving forward."

Considered one of the world's top human immunologists, Sekaly is expected to work on HIV and cancer vaccines as well as vaccines and therapeutics to protect vulnerable elderly populations. Sekaly couldn't speak Thursday about the move because he was in seminars all day, however, he said in a statement he was excited to interact with the growing scientific community in Port St. Lucie and Florida.

"We anticipate that his work in infectious disease and cancer will accelerate the production of therapies for the citizens of Florida, the U.S. in general, and the world as a whole," Jay Nelson, director of VGTI at OHSU in Portland, stated in a release.

THE OREGON HEALTH & SCIENCE UNIVERSITY

- Largest employer in Portland, with 12,400 employees
- More than 4,100 research projects are currently underway
- In 2007, external funding for research was \$307 million, 75 percent from the federal government. Much of operational funds come from National Institutes of Health research grants.
- Public company has created 32 spin-off companies.
- Founded the Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute in 2001, with a goal to establish a team to research AIDS, infectious diseases of the elderly and other viral diseases

THE OHSU's VACCINE AND GENE THERAPY INSTITUTE

- Announced plans last year for an East Coast Campus in Florida after landing a \$60 million incentive package from the state
- As part of the deal with Florida, VGTI Florida must employ 200 people within 10 years.
- VGTI Florida's prime mission is to develop vaccines for the elderly and for infectious diseases such as West Nile.
- Port St. Lucie committed \$53 million in infrastructure at the Florida Center for Innovation at Tradition that will help VGTI with its new building, expected to start going up in a couple of months.

About Rafick-Pierre Sékaly

- Serves in several prominent scientific posts, including: director of the Laboratory of Microbiology and Immunology for the University of Montreal Hospital Centre's Research Centre; scientific director of the National Laboratory of Immune Monitoring at the University of Montreal; and director of INSERM Unit 743 in Human Immunology, a unit of the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, France's major funding organization
- Holds more than 100 patents
- Expected to bring about 30 scientists to work on HIV and cancer vaccines, as well as vaccines and therapeutics for the aged population

About Robin Offord

- Serves as a trustee for Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies and has spent nearly 20 years studying HIV prevention
- Trying to raise \$4 million to start clinical trials of an HIV prevention treatment, proven in primates, that could be manufactured cheaply and applied vaginally as a part of daily hygieneP
- The treatment works by shutting down the molecule HIV uses to infect a person's immune system.