

UCLA Owes an Apology and a Retraction for Dangerous and Stigmatizing Press Release re NNRTI Study
Thu 2/18/2010 12:44 PM

Dear Mr. Tate, Mr. Rivero, Ms. Blower, Mr. Kahn & Mr. Okano et al:

I am writing to express my dismay at the lack of response to both my own and Michael Petrelis' letters, sent on Friday 12, 2010, in which we expressed dissatisfaction with the questionable conclusions relating to the NNRTI study, the ill-considered, simple, flippant, and unprofessional quotes, and the total lack of regard to the tone of the conclusions and the inaccuracies they imply. (See <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/study-predicts-hiv-drug-resistance-152122.aspx>)

In an email response to Michael's letter on February 12, 2010, Dale Triber Tate, Executive Director, UCLA Health Sciences Communications and Government Relations acknowledged Michael's "serious issues" with the January 22, 2010 press release, but deflected accountability from Enrique Rivero whose name appeared on the official UCLA press release, and placed the accountability firmly in the hands of the researchers, who remained as stunningly silent as they were loud upon the issuance of the release and its publication in the journal *Science*.

Outlining their communications procedure, Mr. Tate stated the following: "A researcher calls our office to let us know that a study is being published in a journal and he/she would like a press release drafted. After receiving a copy of the study, the assigned public information officer – in this case Enrique Rivero – drafts a press release. The press release is then sent to all of the authors of the study, and if they are at multiple institutions, those as well. Each of those authors make his/her edits and additions. Once all of the authors have agreed on a final version, it is posted. The research is done by the researchers, and it is their right to characterize it, describe it as they see it. We only step in if we discover a factual mistake. There are times when we disagree with the tone or language provided by the scientist and we convey and explain those views. But the researcher is the ultimate arbiter of what is contained in the press release that is distributed."

While Michael Petrelis directed his ire at Mr. Rivero, in my letter, I specifically included the unfortunately quoted Justin Okano, hoping he would have either the courage of his convictions in defending his comments, or the common decency to issue an apology. I further suggested UCLA and anyone associated with the Semel Institute ensure that researchers stick to statistics, and leave media communications related to these kinds of studies to the professionals. I wondered aloud how that quote could pass muster in an official UCLA press release, suggesting UCLA has some urgent, time-sensitive work to do. Stat.

While I hate the thought of these one dimensional extrapolations from this not-news study gaining any more traction than deserved in this carnation, the damage has already been done. Dr. Grant Colfax, San Francisco's HIV prevention chief, told us at a recent community event (sponsored in part by UCSF, and as a result of the MRSA mess from two years ago), that HIV drug resistance is not a public health crisis, and that this model revealed nothing new.

The alarmist conclusion in the article that appeared in the journal *Science*, heralding this wave of self congratulatory press communications, "Consequently, currently circulating NNRTI-resistant strains in San Francisco pose a great and immediate threat to global public health," is dangerous, misleading and designed to do little more than perpetuate the relevance of the researchers by demonizing the very subjects they relied upon to conduct their studies. Gay men.

The notion that this would have implications for treatment *anywhere* in the United States, let alone third world or developing countries is absurd at best, and has the potential to inject uncertainty into critical prevention methodologies and inspire hate legislation aimed at gays and people with HIV/AIDS like we are seeing in Uganda. It is dangerous, callous and inexcusable.

The characterization of these findings by all concerned represents a sharp slap in the face to patients, study participants, and donors (the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA).

Despite a letter urging a dialog from Supervisor Bevan Dufty, and direct outreach by Michael Petrelis and myself, all we have received from UCLA is a cursory explanation of an antiquated and inadequate communications structure. While Mr. Tate acknowledges only stepping in when they discover a "factual mistake," his explanation above directly implicates everyone. The researchers responsible for their quotes, and the tone of the press release, initially drafted by Mr. Rivero using loaded language such as "waves" and a "surge" of HIV drug resistant strains that "will emerge over the next five years in San Francisco due to transmission from untreated individuals." If Mr. Rivero wrote the original draft, and published the final one with his name on it, who then is accountable?

This is *not* how the narrative is shaped any longer. My original recommendation has now escalated into a demand.

UCLA needs to issue an apology and a retraction. Stat.

I strongly recommend UCLA exercise the necessary caution not to repeat the ridiculous quote, and learn from the speed and attention exercised by UCSF in response to the MRSA fallout, and from their genuine engagement with communities upon whose support, cooperation and collaboration they rely to conduct such studies. UCSF, to their great credit, did not sweep things under the rug. At the time, we met with no less than Barbara French, the Associate Vice Chancellor, University Relations at UCSF; Kieran Flaherty, Director of State Government Relations; Shane Showdon, Director of LGBT Resources; Aimee Levine, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs, Beth Mooney, assistant to Ms. French and Dr. Chip Chambers, a researcher and co-author of the study.

Your move UCLA. We're all watching.

Sincerely,
Clinton Fein

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