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HIV vaccine development: Is a moral wrong occurring?

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Given the extent of the HIV epidemic, the potential benefit of, and moral reason for, HIV vaccine development is enormous, especially if we have greater reason to benefit the worst off. These are reasons to provide this benefit as soon as possible. Impediments to successful vaccine development come at the cost of preventing or delaying these benefits, allowing the harm of HIV infection to persist, and perhaps increase. Impediments range from lack of political, social, ethical, and financial support to inefficient organisation of global HIV research efforts, pursuit of ineffective research programs, and failure to pursue more effective options. Competing values may explain or justify some impediments, however, the immense moral value of an effective vaccine remains. Some impediments impose the moral opportunity cost of foregone counterfactual benefits. As an example of this, Marc Van Regenmortel has argued that structure-based reverse vaccinology is an ineffective research program for HIV vaccine development, and that other methods should be used instead. Where researchers and funders are devoting scarce resources to ineffective research programmes when those resources could be used more effectively to pursue the good via other means, moral opportunity cost accrues, which may constitute a moral failure, or wrong. This also reveals HIV vaccine development as freighted with empirical, scientific, philosophical and applied ethical considerations. The more those working in HIV vaccinology are able and willing to consider and discuss their work in all these terms, the more likely the great good that vaccinology is capable of achieving can be realised.

Biography

Mike King received a PhD in animal science, focusing on nutrition and immunology, in 2004. Since that time, he has worked academically in bioethics, and received a Postgraduate Diploma in Politics in 2010. He is a lecturer at the Bioethics Centre at the University of Otago, New Zealand's oldest university. He has published over 20 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters spanning the biosciences and bioethics. His research in bioethics focuses on the ethics of technologies such as cognitive enhancement, and the ethics of research in the biosciences.

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