

France's Nobel winner for co-discovery of HIV virus dies

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French scientist Luc Montagnier speaks during an interview on June 5, 2006 in Paris. French researcher Luc Montagnier, who won the Nobel Prize in 2008 for discovering HIV and has more recently spread false claims about the coronavirus, has died on Tuesday Feb.10, 2022 at age 89, according to the city hall of Neuilly-sur-Seine. Credit: AP Photo/Jacques Brinon, File

French scientist Luc Montagnier, who won the Nobel prize for medicine for his co-discovery of the HIV virus that causes AIDS, has died aged 89, the mayor of the Paris suburb where he was hospitalised said Thursday.

Montagnier died on Tuesday in the American Hospital in Neuilly-sur-Seine northwest of the centre of Paris, its mayor Jean-Christophe Fromantin told AFP. Fromantin said he was in possession of the death certificate.

President Emmanuel Macron praised his "major contribution" to the fight against HIV/AIDS, "which remains one of the greatest medical and scientific challenges of the 21st century", and sent his condolences to Montagnier's family.

Montagnier shared the 2008 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with his colleague Françoise Barré-Sinoussi for their "discovery of human immunodeficiency virus" (HIV), which causes AIDS.

But he was sidelined by the scientific community in later years as he took up positions judged to be increasingly outlandish, notably against vaccines.

His pariah status increased during the COVID-19 pandemic when he claimed the virus was laboratory-made and that vaccines were responsible for the appearance of variants.

Reports of Montagnier's death had been circulating online over the previous 24 hours, but AFP was not immediately able to get confirmation.

The unusual lack of information surrounding such a well-known figure appeared to be a reflection of Montagnier's recent standing in the

scientific community.

A former star among French researchers, he had lost their support over the past decade over positions they felt they could not share.

'Decisive role'

"Today we praise the decisive role of Luc Montagnier in the joint discovery of HIV," said the anti-AIDS association Aides.

"This was a fundamental step forward, but one which was sadly followed by several years during which he drifted away from science, a fact we cannot conceal," it said.

Montagnier made his key HIV discovery in the early 1980s when AIDS cases began to soar and infected people had little chance of survival.

His findings laid the groundwork for AIDS treatments, launched 15 years later, that would allow patients to live near-normal lives despite the illness.

The discovery was followed by a long dispute between Montagnier and the team of US researcher Robert Gallo over whose role had been more important. Eventually they agreed that the Frenchman had isolated the virus, while the American had established its direct link to AIDS.

Further controversies followed when Montagnier began to defend theories that were discredited in the scientific community, such as the "water memory" theory which plays a role in homeopathic treatments.

His positions against COVID vaccinations, while raising his public profile during the pandemic, also found very little backing among scientists.

Initial tributes came from marginal political and scientific figures with anti-vaccination positions.

They included far-right politician Florian Philippot who launched weekly anti-vax protests across France.

"He was dragged through the mud although he was right about COVID," Philippot said about Montagnier on Twitter.

Prominent virologist Didier Raoult, himself sidelined among researchers for his views on COVID treatments, praised Montagnier's "originality" and "independence".

The only immediate reaction from President Emmanuel Macron's government came from research minister Frederique Vidal, who said that she felt "emotional" and offered her condolences to Montaigne's family, but made no mention of his recent scientific positions.

Luc Montagnier: HIV discoverer who ended a pariah

French researcher Luc Montagnier, who has died at 89, shared the Nobel medicine prize for his vital early discoveries on AIDS, but was later dismissed by the scientific community for his increasingly outlandish theories, notably on COVID-19.

Montagnier and Françoise Barre-Sinoussi shared the Nobel in 2008 for their work at the Pasteur Institute in Paris in isolating the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Their achievement sped the way to HIV tests and antiretroviral drugs that keep the deadly pathogen at bay.

Bitter rivalry

AIDS—acquired immune deficiency syndrome—first came to public notice in 1981, when US doctors noted an unusual cluster of deaths among young gay men in California and New York.

Montagnier had a bitter rivalry with US scientist Robert Gallo in his ground-breaking work in identifying HIV at the virology department he created in Paris in 1972.

Both are co-credited with discovering that HIV causes AIDS, and their rival claims led for several years to a legal and even diplomatic dispute between France and the United States.

Montagnier's work started in January 1983, when tissue samples arrived at the Pasteur Institute from a patient with a disease that mysteriously wrecked the immune system.

He later recalled the "sense of isolation" as the team battled to make this vital connection.

"The results we had were very good but they were not accepted by the rest of the scientific community for at least another year, until Robert Gallo confirmed our results in the US," he said.

The Nobel jury made no mention of Gallo in its citation.

In 1986 Montagnier shared the Lasker Award—the US equivalent of the Nobel—with Gallo and Myron Essex.

In 2011, to mark 30 years since the appearance of AIDS, Montagnier warned of the spiralling costs of treating the 33 million then stricken with HIV.

"Treatment cuts transmission, that's clear, but it doesn't eradicate it, and we can't treat all the millions of people," he told AFP.

Controversial ideas

Montagnier was born on August 8, 1932 at Chabris in the Indre region of central France.

After heading Pasteur's AIDS department from 1991 to 1997, and then teaching at Queens College in New York, Montagnier gradually drifted to the scientific fringes, stirring controversy after controversy.

He repeatedly suggested that autism is caused by infection and set up much-criticised experiments to prove it, claiming antibiotics could cure the condition.

He stunned many of his peers when he talked of the purported ability of water to retain a memory of substances.

And he believed that anyone with a good immune system could fight off HIV with the right diet.

Montagnier supported theories that DNA left an electromagnetic trace in water that could be used to diagnose AIDS and Lyme's Disease, and championed the therapeutic qualities of fermented papaya for Parkinson's Disease.

'Slow scientific shipwreck'

He repeatedly took up positions against vaccines, earning a stinging reprimand in 2017 from 106 members of the Academies of Sciences and Medicines.

The French daily Le Figaro described his journey from leading researcher to crank as a "slow scientific shipwreck".

During the COVID pandemic he stood out again, stating that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was laboratory-made and that vaccines were responsible for the appearance of variants.

These theories, rejected by virologists and epidemiologists, made him even more into a pariah among his peers, but a hero to French anti-vaxxers.

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