

AIDS scientists at Malaysia meet express hopes for cure

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AIDS scientists expressed optimism over their search for a cure for the disease Saturday ahead of a major conference in Kuala Lumpur, with more funding and research breakthroughs boosting their hopes.

Thousands of delegates will attend the four-day International AIDS Society (IAS) Conference which starts on Sunday in the Malaysian capital, the first time the bi-annual meeting will be held in Asia.

Sharon Lewin from Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, said funding for cure research had gone from millions to tens of millions of dollars per year.

"I think we are a long way off, but what has changed in the last three years is a realisation, that there needs to be a commitment (to this)," she told AFP in a telephone interview.

"In 2010, at that time, very few people really believed it was possible... Between that time and now, there has been a major shift. There's evidence that things have really been moving."

Deborah Persaud of the US Johns Hopkins Children's Center in Baltimore, Maryland, said the case of the "Mississippi baby" that her team worked on presented a "ray of hope".

The baby, born in the US state of Mississippi, was apparently cleared of the virus after being given aggressive anti-retroviral treatment within 30

hours of her birth. She is now almost three years old.

"There needs to be a lot of work done... We have to replicate the case; we need to understand the case," she told reporters ahead of the conference.

"The key thing for us that we should focus on is to do what we know how to do—and that is identify kids who are infected and treat them early."

Children below the age of 15 make up 10 percent, or 3.3 million, of the estimated 34 million people infected with HIV worldwide. In total, the [global pandemic](#) has claimed 30 million lives.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is expected to release new [medical guidelines](#) at the conference Sunday, which could make more people infected with HIV eligible to receive drugs.

Last month, scientists meeting in Paris to mark the 30th anniversary of the discovery of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, said they have high hopes for a treatment that will be given at an early stage of infection.

But they said people with a long-running, untreated infection and a compromised immune system may never benefit from an envisioned "functional cure"—through which a person would retain traces of the virus but no symptoms.

About 1.8 million people die every year from AIDS, a disease in which the immune system is destroyed, with sufferers exposed to pneumonia, TB and other illnesses.

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