

# Researchers to import Zika virus for research and development of vaccine

June 2 2016, by Tina Shelton

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Dr. Vivek Nerurkar in his laboratory in Kakaako. Credit: University of Hawaii at Manoa

The Hawai'i State Board of Agriculture has voted to approve an application by the University of Hawai'i to import live Zika virus so

research into finding a vaccine can get under way in Honolulu.

The birth of two infants on O‘ahu five months ago, in December 2015, to mothers infected with the Zika [virus](#) illustrated how little is understood about Zika, and sparked a sense of urgency among those who want to study and combat the virus. Of the two babies born in Honolulu—one born to a woman who was infected in American Samoa and the other to a woman infected in Brazil—only one infant had microcephalus, a condition that stunts the growth of the head, leaving inadequate room for the brain to fully development causing impairment to the child.

"What causes the virus in the mothers to cripple one baby and not the other?" asked Dr. Vivek Nerurkar, Chair of the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) Department of Tropical Medicine, Medical Microbiology and Pharmacology. "That is one of the mysteries we need to solve."

Nerurkar expressed appreciation to the Board of Agriculture and others who have supported the effort to enable Zika virus research.

"I really thank the Department of Agriculture Board, the Chair, and the community at the University and JABSOM who helped us get through this process, including the important support of State House Health Committee Chair Representative Della Au Belatti and State Representative Richard Creagan, MD," said Nerurkar.

Nerurkar first applied for the state permit to import Zika virus in 2009, after an outbreak of Zika virus in Yap and French Polynesia, both relatively close to Hawai'i.

"Hawai'i is an international stop and people and diseases can come here from all over the world," said Nerurkar.

Last March, U.S. Representative Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawai'i) convened a roundtable discussion at the John A. Burns School of Medicine with leading local, national and international experts to discuss both Dengue and the then emerging threat from the Zika virus, helping to reinvigorate the effort to fight both viruses.

This month, in the medical journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, Nerurkar and his UH colleagues reported on the 2015 case of microcephaly related to Zika. It was the first academic article about a Zika-related microcephaly case in the United States.

Nerurkar and colleagues have applied for several grants through the National Institutes of Health and other agencies to begin their research in earnest. He expects to obtain the Zika virus sample within the next month or so. The sample will be kept in a highly secure laboratory and researchers will follow strictly enforced methods to ensure its safety as well as their own.

"We have a large department here at the Tropical Medicine, Medical Microbiology and Pharmacology, with a lot of scientists and physicians who we work with in the community and at the Kapi'olani Medical Center," said Nerurkar. "Together we form a very good team and we have in-depth expertise of working with infectious diseases. I think this is a tremendous asset for the State of Hawai'i. Our faculty, experts in virology and vaccines, also have a proven track record of collaboration with other institutions on the U.S. mainland. I believe strongly in collaborations and in hoping that these collaborations will lead to new vaccines."

Provided by University of Hawaii at Manoa

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