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EpiVax wins TB vaccine grant for HIV patients

Mass High Tech: The Journal of New England Technology - September 7, 2007 by [Ryan McBride](#) Mass High Tech
Tuberculosis is the leading cause of death in people infected with HIV, yet the existing vaccine for TB is not safe for those patients. A Rhode Island biotechnology firm aims to solve the problem with federal support.

The National Institutes of Health has awarded Providence, R.I.-based EpiVax Inc. a \$590,912 grant to develop a TB vaccine that works in HIV-positive tuberculosis patients.

The two-year grant renews the firm's eight-year effort to make the vaccine, according to company CEO Anne De Groot, who began to apply for federal dollars to support further study of her firm's TB vaccine in 2003. "I think it has everything to do with the limitation on NIH funding for important diseases like this," said De Groot.

The firm's efforts to develop a TB vaccine were first funded in 1999 with a \$900,000 grant from the Aeras Global TB Vaccine Foundation (then called the Sequella Global TB Foundation), of Rockville, Md. The funding expired in 2003, De Groot said.

With the NIH funds, she said, the firm will test various methods of delivering its TB vaccine in mice that are genetically modified to have human immune responses. Hardy Kornfeld, a pulmonologist and expert on TB at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, will oversee the experiments at his lab in Worcester.

EpiVax uses its own so-called immunoinformatics system to identify protein sequences in order to predict what portion of a protein will cause certain immune responses. The technology has already been used to generate a potential vaccine for TB.

De Groot said her company hopes to advance the vaccine for human use with the federal grant, and eventually partner with a major pharmaceutical firm to develop and market the treatment.

The World Health Organization reports that TB is a highly contagious disease that infects the lungs and killed 1.6 million people worldwide in 2005. The highest number of people with TB reside in Africa.

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