

"The Trials of St. Francis"

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VaxGen, a small biotechnology company based in San Francisco, is set to begin testing blood samples from patients who have been enrolled in a Phase III clinical trial of the company's experimental AIDS vaccine, called AIDSVax, that is the first vaccine to have been successful enough to merit Phase III testing. VaxGen founder Don Francis has been seeking an HIV vaccine since the mid-1980s, with both enthusiasm and skepticism from observers, who find Francis a very dedicated man but one whose confidence in the future of an HIV vaccine has certainly brought him some detractors. The vaccine gp 120 was originally created by Genentech, the world's biggest biotech company, and its development nearly died in the early 1990s following a controversial 1989 experiment that indicated gp120 could protect chimpanzees from developing HIV and unfounded rumors that early human trials involved several patients who were infected with HIV--an impossible development, because the vaccine lacks HIV DNA necessary for the virus' life. Furthermore, advocacy groups were worried that funding the vaccine would pull funding away from developing treatment drugs, which were at that point the focus of the AIDS treatment community--but Francis refused to let the project die, taking the medicine and forming VaxGen to ensure that it would at least have a chance of success. Part of the trouble is that gp120 prevents only one strain of the disease at a time; AIDS mutates so quickly that the VaxGen proposal to react to the development of further strains with additional vaccinations is passed off as impossible and foolhardy by skeptics. Naturally, Francis and his chief scientist, Phillip Berman, contend that the nay-sayers are those with a product of their own to promote, for which they would not receive funding if they were to agree that AIDSVax would work. The firm is facing increasing pressure, however, as more companies begin to focus on the prospect of an HIV vaccine, like Merck, which has had far more successful animal trials than gp120 ever had; but AIDSVax's real test will come in just a few weeks, when scientists at VaxGen begin looking through their blood samples to see if their project has any merit, and any hope for the future.