

“Manhattan Project on HIV”

Clinical trials of a therapeutic vaccine are slated for 2025.

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As the founder and sole owner of software company InterSystems, Phillip “Terry” Ragon is worth about \$3.1 billion, according to Forbes. Now, he is applying his successful long-term approach to business toward a new challenge: curing HIV.

Ragon and his wife, Susan, have donated about \$400 million to HIV cure research. What makes the billionaire businessman think his Ragon Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, will see more success than HIV researchers across the globe have experienced during the past four decades? To date, no HIV vaccine has made it beyond Phase III trials, and a cure has been elusive.

Ragon is funding riskier, earlier- stage research, he tells Forbes, instead of putting the money in projects deemed not only important but also more likely to succeed.

“We started to evolve this whole idea of a Manhattan Project on HIV,” Ragon said, referencing the program responsible for the development of the first atomic bomb during World War II. “If you tried to do the Manhattan Project back during World War I, you would have failed because we didn’t know about quantum mechanics. If you waited until World War III, you’d have been too late.”

The HIV cure research team at the Ragon Institute is inspired by “elite controllers,” folks who are living with HIV but show no symptoms of illness despite not taking HIV meds; in fact, they control the virus naturally and don’t have a detectable viral load.

Bruce Walker, the founding director of the Ragon Institute, says researchers are trying to replicate the powerful immune systems of elite controllers. “If we could achieve that state in people who are infected,” Walker tells Forbes, the results could lead to a “functional cure.”

For this HIV cure project, Ragon scientists have teamed up with researchers at the Gates

Foundation, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative and the Italian drug developer ReiThera, according to Forbes. Next year, they plan to start Phase I clinical trials of a T-cell-based vaccine that they hope will replicate the immune system of elite controllers.

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