

Discovering the causes of cancer and the means of prevention

James Goedert, Clinical Epidemiologist on Infections and Cancer, Retires from NCI



James Goedert

In June 2016, James J. Goedert, M.D., senior investigator in the Infections and Immunoepidemiology Branch (IIB), and a leading expert in the epidemiology of infection-associated malignancies, retired after 36 years with NCI. Over the span of his career, Dr. Goedert has focused on critical, emergent public health concerns with high visibility and immediate impact.

In the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, Dr. Goedert identified major modes of HIV transmission and described the natural history of infection across different groups in the U.S. In his study of HIV/AIDS in patients with hemophilia, he demonstrated that a much larger than expected proportion of HIV-infected persons would go on to develop AIDS, a finding with broad implications for public health prevention and clinical practice. His study of twins born to HIV-infected women showed that the virus was most often transmitted during labor and delivery, rather than earlier in gestation, and with vaginal rather than cesarean delivery. He discovered that breast cancer risk was significantly reduced for women with HIV/AIDS, especially those with HIV that used a particularly chemokine receptor, CXCR4, on both blood and breast cells. His studies of Kaposi sarcoma revealed the surprising finding that this malignancy was much more common in non-smokers than in smokers.

In more recent years, Dr. Goedert has expanded his research to include studies of the human microbiome as it relates to cancer. Along with collaborators, he has been working toward the goal of establishing a bank of prospectively collected fecal specimens,

suitable for microbiome and other assays. This work has the potential for novel, high-impact discoveries on the role of the microbiome in carcinogenesis and opportunities for prevention.

In recognition of his outstanding research, Dr. Goedert has received numerous awards, including the International AIDS Society's International LIFE Prize for his study of twins born to HIV-1-infected mothers and the Outstanding Service Medal from the U.S. Public Health Service.

Dr. Goedert was appointed Chief of the AIDS and Cancer Section of the Viral Epidemiology Branch (now IIB) in 1992, and served as Chief of the Branch from 1995 to 2008. In May 2016, he summarized his career and addressed important questions for future generations of scientists with a seminar titled "3.6 decades of epidemiologic research on extraordinary cancer events: Unresolved clues for the next generations."

Long-time colleague and friend Mitchell Gail, M.D., Ph.D., introduced Dr. Goedert at the seminar with this tribute: "Jim is an exceptional leader. Many ideas that he has worked on, like evaluating the reliability of microbiome assays, have evolved into major areas of research for the Division."

Dr. Goedert concluded his remarks: "Working in DCEG to reduce and perhaps prevent the suffering of people with HIV/AIDS and cancer has been an honor and a privilege. My hope and expectation are that others will pick up where I am leaving off."