

Aids expert fears financial crisis to worsen mother-child infections

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The economic crisis could put babies at greater risk of contracting the Aids virus from their mothers.

Private donations, the primary funding source for projects to stop mother-child HIV transmission in the mainland, might fall next year, Aids expert David Ho Dai-i, the creator of "cocktail therapy" that combines several Aids-treatment drugs, said yesterday.

Pregnant HIV-positive mothers must take special pills before giving birth to stop them transmitting the virus to their babies. Newborn babies also require medication to prevent them from becoming infected, all of which requires private funding.

Statistics show three out of every 1,000 pregnant mothers in Yunnan (雲南) are infected with HIV. Since 2005, Tsinghua University and Yunnan authorities have worked with more than 200 such mothers, of whom fewer than 2 per cent gave birth to HIV-positive babies, a dramatic fall from the normal mother-

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David Ho of Tsinghua University's Comprehensive Aids Research Centre

child transmission rate of 30 to 40 per cent, said Dr Ho, director of the university's Comprehensive Aids Research Centre.

Dr Ho, who will receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Hong Kong today, said he was worried the Yunnan project might be hampered by the downturn. "Next year we may feel the impact of the economic crisis" on donations.

But, he said, research in the United States had not been affected by the downturn so far. Various foundations continued to support research on vaccines and he said he expected

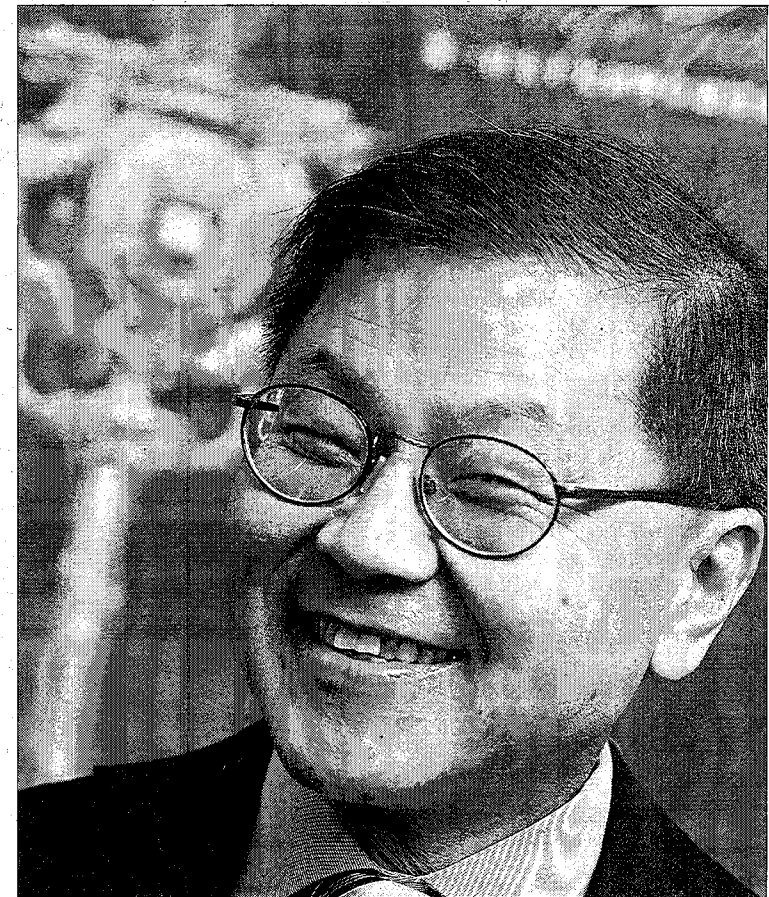
president-elect Barack Obama to continue government support.

Still, Dr Ho said he expected it would be many years before a successful vaccine was developed. "Despite years of hard work, the field as a whole has failed so far."

Researchers faced two big obstacles in developing an Aids vaccine, he said. First, the human immunodeficiency virus changes a lot, thus any vaccine must target multiple viruses. Second, the virus has a protective shield that stops antibodies in a vaccine binding with it, an essential step in development of immunity in an individual.

For years, scientists have been searching for a way to penetrate the virus' shield. A relatively new alternative was to locate another target in human cells to which antibodies could bind, Dr Ho said.

Since 1998 the number of HIV infections in Hong Kong has risen to 3,822. "In Hong Kong, awareness levels are still high," said Dr Ho. But fighting Aids on the mainland required more resources, he said.



David Ho, who receives an honorary doctorate today. Photo: Oliver Tsang