

'Berlin Man,' doctor convinced HIV cure is real

12 September 2012, by Jim Salter

(AP)—More than five years after a radical treatment, a San Francisco man and his German doctor are convinced that he remains the first person cured of infection with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Timothy Ray Brown, who is known as "The Berlin Patient" because of where he was treated, and Dr. Gero Hutter made their first joint appearance in the U.S. on Wednesday when Hutter spoke at a symposium on [gene therapy](#) at Washington University in St. Louis. Scientists are studying whether gene therapy can be used to rid the body of HIV.

Brown, 46, was diagnosed with HIV in 1995. In 2006, he also developed leukemia while living in Germany. Hutter performed a [blood stem cell transplant](#) using a donor with a rare [gene mutation](#) that provides natural resistance to HIV. Hutter said that resistance transferred to Brown.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Brown said he feels great, has not needed [HIV medication](#) since the 2007 surgery, and is now active in a foundation named for him that seeks a cure for HIV.

Hutter said enough time has passed to say without hesitation that Brown is cured, citing the same five-year standard after which some [cancer patients](#) are said to be cured.

Brown, who now lives in San Francisco, grew up in Seattle and moved to Germany in 1993. After the HIV diagnosis he started on medication to prevent him from developing full-blown AIDS.

He was attending a wedding in New York in 2006 when he became unusually tired. An avid cyclist, within weeks he could barely ride the bike and eventually was diagnosed with leukemia.

Brown underwent chemotherapy but needed a

[blood stem cell transplant](#) and turned to Hutter, a blood specialist at Heidelberg University.

Hutter suggested they seek a donor with a certain cell feature that gives them [natural resistance to HIV infection](#). Only about 1 percent of the northern [European population](#) has this feature. Hutter theorized that a transplant from such a donor could make the recipient resistant to HIV.

Hutter said no one apparently had tried this, and his idea received mixed reaction from other doctors. "Some were very excited, but many were skeptical," he said.

But within weeks, Hutter said, tests showed promise that Brown was cured. His case was described in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2009.

"I don't know if I really believed it was cured" until the journal publication, Brown said.

Earlier this year, doctors in California found traces of HIV in Brown's tissue, leading to speculation that the disease had returned. But Hutter said the traces are remnants of the disease that can't replicate or cause a recurrence of the disease.

The symposium in St. Louis was hosted by the university's Biologic Therapeutics Center, which seeks to advance the use of gene therapy. Speakers said gene therapy has helped treat cancer, hemophilia and other diseases.

So far, Brown is the only person believed to have been cured of HIV. Hutter began procedures in 2008 with 12 other people who had both HIV and cancer, but some were too sick to undergo treatment, and others couldn't find matching donors or ran into other roadblocks.

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