

Biographical note

Physician, laboratory scientist, clinical researcher, and community activist Joseph A. Sonnabend was born in South Africa on January 6, 1933.

Sonnabend received his MBBCh from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 1956 and trained in the United Kingdom. Specializing in infectious diseases, Sonnabend became a Member of the Royal College of Physicians (MRCP) of Edinburgh in 1961. In 1963, he joined the scientific staff at the National Institute for Medical Research in London, where he was the last scientist to work with Alick Isaacs, one of the discoverers of interferon, on interferon research.

In the early 1970s, Sonnabend permanently moved to New York City, where he worked as an associate professor of microbiology at the Mt Sinai School of Medicine and later as associate professor of medicine at Downstate Medical Center of the State University of New York in Brooklyn. In 1977, he began working for the Bureau of Venereal Disease Control for New York City's Department of Health.

During this time Sonnabend also volunteered at the Gay Men's Health Project, a clinic specializing in venereal diseases affecting gay men. Around 1978, Sonnabend began practicing private medicine for the first time when he opened a practice in Greenwich Village specializing in infectious and sexually transmitted diseases.

Sonnabend's background as a microbiologist, virologist, and infectious disease specialist uniquely prepared him for the pandemic to which he would devote his life. His practice in Greenwich Village consisted primarily of gay men and he soon saw compromised immunity in his patients; Dr. Sonnabend was one of the first physicians to recognize that something out of the ordinary was

affecting his patients. Having had the majority of his professional training and experience situated in the scientific laboratory, Sonnabend was in the unique position to be both treating patients and conducting research. Calling upon his fellow scientists, Sonnabend soon created a network of experts to run tests on the samples he would send them. Independent of government agencies, his urgent inquiry into the new illness saw him freeze his patients' samples in his practice's refrigerator and ship them overnight. Sonnabend paid for his investigations out of his own pocket and soon ran out of money. Turning to an old interferon colleague, Dr. Mathilde Krim, with interesting research ideas, Sonnabend and Krim founded the AIDS Medical Foundation in April 1983 to raise private funds to support research on AIDS. The AIDS Medical Foundation was to become the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amFAR) when it joined a Los Angeles based organization. This was the first of three community AIDS organizations that Sonnabend would found within four years. He went on to co-found both the Community Research Initiative and the PWA (People with AIDS) Health Group in 1987. As a pioneer in community-based research with experience in both the scientific laboratory and the examining room, he was able to bridge the gap between two traditionally separate fields to bring his experience directly to the community. Sonnabend brought a “do it yourself” attitude to his fight against AIDS.

He was the founding editor of AIDS Research, the first scientific journal devoted to AIDS and now called AIDS Research and Human Retroviruses.

In addition to co-founding these three highly respected organizations, Sonnabend also served on the boards of other organizations and was actively involved in the AIDS community. Along with Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz, Sonnabend is credited with creating safe sex as we know it today.

Vilified by members of the gay community upon its release in 1983, *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* provided the first safe sex guidelines and spawned prevention education.

Sonnabend was also greatly concerned with the ethical issues raised by this new illness. In 1983, Sonnabend and his co-authors won the Nellie Westerman Prize for Research in Ethics awarded by the American Federation for Clinical Research for their article “Confidentiality, Informed Consent and Untoward Social Consequences in Research on a 'New Killer Disease' (AIDS)” in *Clinical Research*. Due to his background as a virologist and infectious disease expert specializing in sexually transmitted diseases, Sonnabend developed a theory early in the pandemic that proposed a multifactorial model for AIDS. The model theorized that AIDS in gay men was caused by repeated exposure to specific factors, notably Epstein-Barr virus, cytomegalovirus, and semen. Published in 1984, the model went against the popular theory that a single, new infectious agent was the cause of AIDS. After the identification of the retrovirus that would come to be known as HIV, Sonnabend stood by his argument that multiple factors cause AIDS; he continued to question the role of HIV in AIDS until the late 1990s. This stance caused him to be labeled a dissident, which subsequently effected his research funding and publication acceptance. This dissident status was later compounded by his questioning the toxicity of early AZT therapy. Although labeled a dissident and relegated for years to the periphery, Sonnabend's devotion to his patients and his fight against AIDS continued undiminished. He retired in 2005 and returned to London. On World AIDS Day (Dec 1st) of that year he was honored for his outstanding leadership with a Red Ribbon Leadership Award from the National HIV/AIDS Partnership (NHAP). Similarly, he was one of the first individuals to

be honored by amfAR as one of their Award of Courage Honorees in the award's inaugural year, 2000. Sources: American Foundation for AIDS Research. "Joseph Sonnabend, M.D." Award of Courage Honorees,