HPTN: Wafaa El-Sadr, MD

HIV Prevention Trials Network (HPTN) Principal Investigator Dr. Wafaa El-Sadr is an HIV research pioneer renowned for her ground breaking work in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB) and her tireless commitment to underserved and key populations both in the U.S. and around the world.

Recipient of the 2011 Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) Citation Award, and a 2008 MacArthur Foundation “genius award” Fellow, Dr. Wafaa El-Sadr has been tackling the HIV epidemic from the very beginning. Coming from a family of doctors in Cairo, Egypt Dr. El-Sadr was naturally drawn to medicine and to public health in particular. When she first arrived in the U.S. in 1976 she fully expected to return to Egypt but she was a young infectious disease specialist just as the first AIDS cases were identified in San Francisco and New York.

“There was so much we didn’t understand then and the challenges were enormous, but I wanted to take care of people with HIV and try to better understand this then mysterious illness,” says Dr. El-Sadr. Little did she know that the onset of HIV would change the trajectory of her life and career. “It has been a remarkable journey thru years of the worst epidemic of our generation, from the horrible first years of just death and destruction and suffering, to where we are today where we have lots of optimism.”

Early in the HIV epidemic Dr. El-Sadr recalls a prevailing perception that women and people of color were too difficult to recruit and maintain in research studies. This attitude hindered access to the populations most in need to studies that offered opportunities for accessing new interventions. “I knew it was going to be a challenge but I believed then, and I believe now, that people who are affected by HIV must be part of the research process from design of studies to their implementation in order find answers to important scientific questions. Establishing a vibrant community advisory group is fundamental to building an atmosphere of trust and to help people better understand our research goals and why their participation is critical to our success.”

Dr. El-Sadr has led investigations of preventive measures, such as early trials of anti-microbial gels that may inhibit HIV transmission, as well as leading a large study, HPTN 065, which is evaluating a multi-dimensional approach to prevention in communities in the U.S. focusing on expanding HIV testing, linking those who are positive to HIV care and then ensuring that those who need treatment receive it.

Along with her duties as a member of the executive committee at the HPTN, Dr. El-Sadr is a professor of epidemiology and medicine at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health and College of Physicians and Surgeons. She is a leading academic who was among the first to incorporate treatment and research at the same site, push for community partnership in clinical
trials, and integrate care for HIV and TB. Dr. El-Sadr also established and directs ICAP, a large Center at the Mailman School of Public Health that is supporting HIV and related programs in global health in 20 countries in sub Saharan Africa and Central Asia. To date, more than a million persons living with HIV have received services through ICAP support.

“We’ve made enormous progress in thirty years,” says Dr. El-Sadr. “But there is much more that needs to be done. We are on the brink of realizing a great dream—the dream of an AIDS free generation.”