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## **The battle to build defences against growing threat of viral epidemics**

Global warming and expanding international travel are combining to pose an increasing threat of viral epidemics sweeping the world, according to an acclaimed researcher of infectious diseases.

Professor Rolf Hilgenfeld, who helped to build defences against the HIV virus and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, has also emphasised the need to develop drugs to fight viral outbreaks.

A keynote speaker at the ComBio 2006 biological science conference in Brisbane, Professor Hilgenfeld said: "Only the global HIV and influenza epidemics, and the threat of the SARS coronavirus, have specifically contributed to the development of anti-viral drugs.

"We are on constant alert to the need to discover new drug targets against viruses, particularly those with high mutation rates and the chemical intelligence to bypass the immune system.

"The SARS outbreak dramatically demonstrated the high cost of an epidemic caused by an emerging virus.

Professor Hilgenfeld, who is based at the University of Luebeck in Germany, is at the forefront of global efforts to develop new drugs against viruses.

There are 100 million cases of influenza each year and 300 million sufferers of dengue fever, with an estimated 150 million people infected with hepatitis C.

Professor Hilgenfeld is one of the leaders of the International Consortium on Anti Virals (ICAV), a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to discover and develop new therapeutic interventions for viral infections.

"Currently every country in the world is at risk," he said.

"Global warming alone is posing a serious threat with the proliferation of mosquitoes carrying dengue fever and malaria.

"The chikungunya virus, which first emerged in 1952 and was thought to have been eradicated in the 1960s, has recently re-emerged on the Indian Ocean island of La Reunion, on the Indian continent and Mozambique with crippling and painful effects.

"By linking scientists and others from universities, institutes, hospitals and industry from around the world, ICAV will not only facilitate knowledge transfer and the effective use of limited resources and global expertise, but also accelerate the development and delivery of drugs that target viral diseases," he said."

ComBio 2006 conference, which is a joint meeting of the Australian Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, the New Zealand Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, the Australian Physiological Society, the Australia and New Zealand Society for Cell and Developmental Biology, the Australian Society of Plant Scientists and the New Zealand Society of Plant Physiologists.

**FOR INTERVIEW:**

**Professor Rolf Hilgenfeld** is available for interview. To arrange, please contact **Trevor Gill**, Conference Media Relations, on **0418 821948**