

For those who can't say no

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To the Bush government and backers of a Christian fundamentalist persuasion, the best way to preventing the spread of HIV/Aids is, in the words of a previous famous first lady, to "just say no". Don't have sex until you are married. Don't sleep with anybody but your partner. Don't inject drugs.

A number of people - to hazard a guess, the majority of the planet's population - don't find these things so easy. At the 16th international Aids conference in Toronto this week, hopes are pinned to scientific innovations that just might give human nature a hand.

Microbicides are among the front runners. These are gels or creams or barriers that a woman could use before she has sex and that kill the virus before it can infect her. The wonderful thing about microbicides is that they will give women an opportunity to protect themselves. For too many women in Africa, it's not a case of "just say no" - it's "can't say no". As a speaker here put it, they do not have control over their own bodies. Rape, violence and husbands who have got HIV from sex with prostitutes are their reality.

And microbicides are looking hopeful. A report launched here by the Global HIV Prevention Working Group, comprising an impressive array of the great and the good in HIV research, says there are now 28 candidate products in the pipeline - some more advanced than others. Gita Ramjee, who is running microbicide trials in Durban, South Africa, with funding from the Gates Foundation, says they will have the first results at the end of 2007. If things go well, the first product could be on the market in a few years.

When I visited Gita's projects last month, on a fact-finding tour with Bill Gates, she said several interesting things. One is that the women in the trials want their partners to know they are using a microbicide and that, anyway, the men can tell during sex. So much for women having a weapon against infection that they can keep secret from partners who insist there is no need because they do not have HIV - which is what many assume would be the chief benefit. But the other surprising thing was that both men and women found using the gel made sex more pleasurable. Men and women in the trials freely told me that themselves.

Now there's a thing: protection from HIV that can be marketed as a sex aid.

It's very unlikely microbicides will be 100% effective, but even partial protection will save lives. Vaccine research meanwhile is getting nowhere very fast. At this conference there is nothing new to report; just steady but slow and painstaking scientific effort to understand more about the virus and invent new ways to thwart it. But there is enthusiasm for the potential of circumcision to cut infection rates and also for the possibility of a preventive pill. Studies are being done on the use of tenofovir - a drug used to treat Aids - to stave off infection. Scientists have results that show it is safe and the side-effects are tolerable, though they have not yet fully established how effective it is. Maybe one day, alongside the contraceptive pill, we will have a once-a-day Aids prevention pill.