

Global Campaign News - Issue #105

Welcome to the 105th issue of Global Campaign News! The Global Campaign News is a forum for international exchange on women's HIV prevention options activities which aims to build a more informed and integrated movement for microbicides, PrEP and other user-initiated HIV prevention tools with a focus on women.

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Women and Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis

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Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is the practice of using treatment medications to prevent infection and is currently used to ward off many illnesses including malaria, rabies and some forms of pneumonia. In the context of HIV and AIDS, two antiretroviral drugs -- tenofovir (also called Viread) and tenofovir plus emtricitabine (also called Truvada) are being tested in seven current and planned PrEP trials.

There will soon be more people enrolled in PrEP trials than in HIV vaccine and microbicide trials combined. Four large-scale, phase III effectiveness trials of one or both of these drugs are underway in the US, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Initial results from these are expected in 2009 and the other three effectiveness trials will launch in the near future in southern and eastern Africa.

These trials are all based on the assumption that PrEP will only be accessed by prescription and that people will get HIV testing regularly to make sure they are HIV negative before receiving PrEP. As a part of its newly expanded mission to undertake advocacy on new prevention options, specifically as they will affect women, GCM is working with the PrEP Committee of the Prevention Research Advocacy Working Group (PRAWG) convened by the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP) in the US. In that capacity, GCM's Marc-André LeBlanc is contributing to the development of a draft "Call to Action: US Prevention Advocates Mobilizing to Shape the Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) Research Agenda", which will be released later in 2009, and the "Frequently Asked Questions about Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)", released by the PrEP Committee in 2008 and available on GCM's website at <http://www.global-campaign.org/clientfiles/PrEP.FAQ.final.pdf>

GCM has also begun its own exploration of the potential implications that PrEP (if proven effective) could have on women's lives. GCM staffer Pauline Irungu recently convened a lunchtime women's focus group discussion on PrEP at the Kenya HIV Prevention Research Meeting held Mombasa on December 15. The group's eight participants were civil society representatives attending the larger meeting whom Pauline invited to express their concerns and perspectives about PrEP.

As expected, women's second-class status in Kenya and their consequent difficulty with negotiating for safer sex was the first issue raised. One participant from Nyanza singled out rural and poor women as being the least empowered in this regard. Fear of gender-based violence; women's vulnerability when they are first in the family to test HIV positive (usually during routine HIV testing in maternal child health clinics (MCH); and fear of abandonment were other expected concerns.

Participants expressed optimism that new HIV prevention options such as PrEP might help change this reality. They cautioned, however, that when contraception was introduced in Kenya, men resisted

its use by their wives even as the women embraced it. If PrEP is found to work, they suggested that both women and men be involved in the process of its introduction to prevent a lack of knowledge among men that could trigger suspicion and resistance to it's.

Participants also raised concerns about PrEP's potential accessibility and affordability, especially if it is only available by prescription and in urban areas. Finally, they expressed concern about the possibility that PrEP could lead to the development of drug-resistant HIV if used by people who have unknowingly seroconverted. In a country with limited access to second line treatment alternatives, this issue must be addressed before introduction.

This was the first of a series of such discussions that GCM will organize in various countries as a part of our new "What Does it Mean for Women?" series that will result in reports examining the gender implications of key developments in HIV prevention research. Our first such report on the implications of PrEP for women will be published in late 2009.

GCM Reports from the screening of "In Women's Hands" in Bangalore India

On 10th December, 2008, GCM hosted a film screening and panel discussion in Bangalore, India jointly with SAMRAKSHA, a local NGO working on reproductive and sexual health and HIV/AIDS. The panel included Dr Jayashree Ramakrishna (NIMHANS), Pushpalatha.R (Swathi Mahila Sangha), Dr Reynold Washington (Karnataka Health Promotion Trust) and Asha Ramaiah (Indian Network of Positive People) and was moderated by Nandinee Bandyopadhyay from GCM.

After the screening of "In Women's Hands", panelists opened the discussion explaining that microbicide acceptability varies widely within as well as amongst groups and one cannot assume that any constituency is homogenous. The sex worker community, for example, includes younger and older, as well as inexperienced and experienced sex workers. Most studies enrol sex workers who have been in the profession for at least one year and tend to show high rates of condom use with clients. But condom negotiation is generally more difficult for sex workers who have been working for less than a year, are very young or are doing business covertly. Microbicides, therefore, might be of greater interest for some sex workers than others.

Dr Reynold Washington, who worked on the Cellulose Sulfate (CS) trials in India, provided a snapshot of the site's trial closure and the community's reactions towards it. Despite initial enthusiasm and interest in the new product, he reported that the community also harboured concerns – especially regarding pelvic examinations; the risk of seroconversion; and the fear of testing HIV positive during screening. Interestingly though, many participants were reluctant to return the product when the trial was closed down because the gel made sex more pleasurable for them. When provided with KY jelly instead, they did not find it as easy to use because no applicator was included.

Another topic raised was the urgent need to involve men in the research for a vaginal microbicide. Introduction of new contraceptive technologies in the past has put additional responsibilities on women in the name of empowerment. Participants agreed that the microbicides field should refrain from reinforcing gender based stereotypes by putting the onus of HIV prevention on women only. One participant went so far as to argue that asking women to use microbicides secretly might actually disempower them.

Ultimately, participants agreed that a combination prevention approach would be optimal and that increased efforts and investment are needed to develop new prevention options like microbicides. They also concurred that clear messages about these prevention options -- tailored to a wide range of constituencies -- would be essential. In her concluding remarks, Sanghamitra (SAMRAKSHA) pointed out that the rise in HIV infection rates among women underscores the need for an effective microbicide. GCM thanks all who attended and in particular SAMRAKSHA and the panelists.

To learn more about the film 'In Womens Hands' or request a copy, please go to <http://www.global-campaign.org/film.htm>

In the eyes of the GCM - The 15th ICASA Conference held in Senegal Dakar 3- 7 Dec 2008 Africa



The theme for the International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA) was “Africa’s Response: Face the facts.” Africa’s leading forum for the discussion of developments and trends in the HIV field, the 2006 ICASA attracted almost 5,000 activists, policy makers, researchers, academics, clinicians, advocates and donors – most of them from Africa. As international experts evaluated the current state of the epidemic, prevention was very much at the fore with emphasis on the many vulnerable groups that continue to emerge.

Although behavior change and vaccine research and advocacy were featured, the conference highlighted the need for a stronger voice for microbicides and other prevention options for women. GCM staffer Samu Dube was present to highlight our commitment and work in this area.

The vulnerability of young women and girls, the need for leadership and the importance of understanding communities, know your epidemic and advocacy for prevention were recurring topics. A report presented by the Reproductive Health and Research Unit of the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa (RHURU) and UNAIDS on young women and girls called for stronger male involvement in the design of prevention strategies and messages targeted to men; as well as expanded access to high quality, integrated SRH and HIV services*.

In other notable speeches, Dr Peter Piot, the outgoing UNAIDS executive director, and former heads of states called for greater political involvement in the fight against HIV. Milly Katana from Alliance Uganda pointed out that “[G]rassroots involvement is a prerequisite to ensure that technologies move off the ground”. She cited the success of PMTCT programs in Uganda that have engaged “Mamas Clubs” as an example of this. The importance of honestly analysing the epidemic – and explicitly accepting the growing population of MSM at risk in Africa -- was emphasized by Dr. Luo from the University of Zambia.

In the HIV prevention sessions, presenters emphasized:

- The need to pay attention to basic research and what is being done to feed the pipeline
- Advocacy for more resources for prevention research, especially from African governments. Even small African government contributions can leverage more interest and support from others.
- The need to work across silos given the limited resources and bring a holistic vision to the field.

Sessions on the involvement of youth in programme design and implementation; using economics to advocate for prevention programmes; the potential and possibilities of male circumcision also added to the value of the conference. For more information, please see Dr. Dube’s report on www.global-campaign.org

* For more information on this report, see http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/Resources/FeatureStories/archive/2008/20081203_RSTS_A.asp.

GCM Reaches out to Medical Students in South Africa Africa



Seven junior doctors and thirteen medical students attended a workshop on microbicides and HIV prevention technologies for women held by GCM during the International Federation for Medical Students Association (IFMSA) Regional Congress in Durban last month. By introducing the basics of microbicides and advocacy, the workshop promoted discussion of the ethics of clinical trials and acceptability of the products if successful.

Workshop facilitator Samu Dube noted that 'Whilst obtaining information on issues such as microbicides and PREP is a starting step, it is necessary to take this information further for advocacy purposes. This is especially important for groups of people whose professional standing leans mainly on curative medicine. Shifting such paradigms needs a positioning that displays clearly to health care workers, and indeed medical students, that they too could be advocates.'

Dube opened the session with a call to action focusing on the ability of medical students to use their position as newcomers in the health field strategically. She demonstrated the Provus Model¹ to orient students in the basics of beginning advocacy -- selecting a clear advocacy ask; using research or available data to solidify the advocacy ask; identifying target audiences; packaging the message; identifying and building partnerships and coalitions; and making presentations to various audiences. The workshop also showcased the materials developed by GCM (all available at www.global-campaign.org) and explained the capacity building and collaboration systems that GCM uses to support new advocates in the field.

'There remains much untapped potential in health care workers as advocates, especially in the African region', Dube observed. 'Hopefully, this workshop and other similar platforms will provide GCM with the opportunity to expand advocacy efforts in Africa by building partnerships.' GCM thanks the medical students and doctors who took part in the session.

¹ The Provus Discrepancy Evaluation Model is primarily a problem-solving set of procedures that seeks to identify weaknesses and take corrective actions