

## **Creams, Sex and AIDS:**

HIV Microbicides, a new strategy for prevention.

A Multiple-Approach Symposium and Reception Targeting the HIV Community,  
Family Planning Networks, Gay Men Groups, Healthcare Providers, HIV  
Policymakers and Media in Spain.

**Organised by Creación Positiva and gTt,  
with the support of the Global Campaign for Microbicides.**

Hotel Best Western Cortezo  
November, 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004.  
Madrid (Spain).

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004, a Symposium was organised in Madrid parallel to the Spanish National AIDS Congress, to develop awareness and give visibility to microbicides. This event, the first one of its kind ever organised in Spain, was set up by Creación Positiva and gTt, the Global Campaign for Microbicides' partners in Spain, with the sponsorship of GCM.

The symposium was attended by approximately 60 participants, mainly from Spanish NGOs and CBOs, Family Planning networks, Gay Men groups and Health Care providers. It was opened by **Lourdes Chamorro**, Secretary for the National AIDS Plan at the Ministry of Health and Consumption, **Jorge del Romero**, Director of the Sandoval Centre<sup>1</sup> in Madrid, **Concha Colomo**, from the Montesa Centre<sup>1</sup> also in Madrid, and **Dr. Robin Shattock**, from the Medical School of St. George Hospital in London.

### **OPENING REMARKS**

**Lourdes Chamorro** spoke of microbicides as an area of high priority for health research. She attributed the failure of the female condom to the lack of discussion within civil society prior to its introduction, and suggested that this was why microbicides needed to be discussed in advance of a product if it is to succeed. She also pointed out the bi-directional protection of microbicides and that this is not just something for women. She also mentioned the importance of rectal microbicides and of coordination between vaccine and microbicide scientists, and how the EU's 7<sup>th</sup> Research Framework would be a critical opportunity. She also stressed the importance of Spain becoming involved in the EDCTP.

**Jorge del Romero** spoke from his experience of running services for people living with HIV in Madrid. He described how he and others had recently campaigned for the removal of N-9 from condoms and this experience made him cautious about microbicides. He urged researchers to be careful in selecting candidates to take forward. He emphasised that condoms are still the best method of protection and that microbicides would not be as effective as microbicides. In the case of condom

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<sup>1</sup> Both the Sandoval and Montesa Centres are public centres for STI management, the first one depending on Madrid's regional authorities and the second one on Madrid's town council.

failure, a microbicide would be useful as a back-up. In trials it would be unethical to advise women not to use condoms. A harm reduction approach is needed. Finally, STIs like gonorrhoea and syphilis and Hep A have caused problems in Spain and a microbicide could assist with this important prevention task<sup>2</sup>.

**Concha Colomo** addressed the gender dynamics of HIV transmission with experience of providing services to HIV positive women in Madrid. She explained that globally heterosexual transmission is the main method of infection and that women are now 50% of those living with HIV. The male condom is not always easy to use with intimate partners. We need something women can directly control. Feminists reacted to the female condom with concern because they felt that women were once again being asked to bear the responsibility. However, women want to be in control. We need more research and microbicides must be developed as soon as possible as another weapon in the fight against AIDS.

**Robin Shattock** gave an excellent overview of the field and demonstrated his ability as an advocate as much as a scientist. Microbicides are achievable within a relatively short time-scale, unlike vaccines unfortunately. We are in one of the most exciting periods of research because new mechanisms are being discovered and going into large-scale trials. There are significant numbers of compounds, more than we have capacity to develop. Clinical trials are very expensive – 1 trial can cost \$40-60 million, and involve 12,000 women. The funding for microbicides compared to vaccines is still very small.

Four trials are now beginning. Whatever the results we will need to continue research into the long-term. There will be set-backs and disappointments – there is no quick solution. We will also need a variety of different mechanisms, not just gels, but microbicides for all situations. People must be able to enjoy using these products. Robin had just returned from visiting the MDP sites in Africa and reported that 60% of the women in the Phase II trial said that sex was more enjoyable with the microbicide.

Science is not the only hurdle. Access and affordability are also challenges and the community can raise these issues with policymakers. There is still very little research into how positive women could use a microbicide especially if they wanted to become pregnant. Also people are not so happy talking about a rectal microbicide. Political and social action is required alongside the scientific action. Be active with your government and the EU to ask them what they are doing to support microbicides research, challenge the pharmaceutical companies and also the scientists to make sure they do a good job!

## **PRESENTATIONS**

“Microbicides: possibilities and limitations”,

by **María José Vázquez** of **Creación Positiva**.

María José gave an overview on the possibilities and limitations of microbicides from a scientific point of view. María José started describing the different steps of HIV transmission in a very accessible way in order for the audience to understand how a

microbicide would work to stop the infection from occurring. She made a clear distinction between vaginal and rectal anatomies and natural defences, depicting how both mucous environments differed and why the rectal one was so much more vulnerable to infections. She continued with a description of the different body defence mechanisms, such as physiological defences (in vaginal environment only) and immunological defences (for both vaginal and rectal environments). There are several ways of impeding infection from taking place and María José offered an overview on every one of them: agents which could create a barrier; agents to maintain vaginal mucous integrity; to eliminate virus and bacteria; entry inhibitors; replication inhibitors; and possible combinations of these potential agents. Concerning this last possibility María José insisted on the challenges that would exist in terms of possible side effects and toxicities, the sharing of intellectual property rights, regulatory and approbatory impediments, etc. She then pursued with acceptability issues and what should be worked on in order to make sure that if a product proves efficient and is approved it will be widely accepted and used. Amongst other things María José insisted on the benefits and the impact microbicides' use could have on women but also their partners and men who have sex with men. She concluded her intervention with an overview on the investigation (the different phases in microbicide clinical trials, scientific challenges, regulatory requirements for approval, and the current pipeline).

“How do microbicides relate to prevention”,  
by **María Luisa García** of **Creación Positiva**.

María Luisa started her presentation with a quite provocative series of pictures which opened her discourse on sexuality and the fact that the important thing is not how we define ourselves sexually or what we do, but how we do it. She then addressed the social and sexual rights context surrounding microbicides. In that sense, and as Luisa declared: “Talking about microbicides is talking about sexual rights.” She continued with an exposition of the UNAIDS principles on sexual and reproductive health, with a special emphasis on the “right to receive clear, appropriate and scientific information on sexuality”, and to benefit from different “options with a minimal risk”. She posited microbicides as something which will enhance women’s ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights, but not necessarily empower women overnight. In that line of thinking, she insisted on the fact that men need to be involved with women in microbicides advocacy, in order not to put all the burden of its use on women and to facilitate acceptability amongst men. She explored how microbicides might be integrated into existing prevention efforts and the need to employ a harm reduction framework. In order to explain partial efficacy, she presented a prevention formula in which the efficacy of the prevention tool is not the sole element but the consistency of its use and its availability and coverage play as much importance. She used the modelling by the London School to show that condom migration need not be a problem, and what the public health impact might be.

“NGOs involvement in microbicide advocacy and preparedness”,  
by **Marion Zibelli**, of **Grupo de Trabajo sobre Tratamientos del VIH (gTt)**  
Marion offered an overview of the advocacy work done by both Creación Positiva and gTt in Spain in order to develop awareness on microbicides against HIV and prepare for their introduction. Her intervention started with a presentation of who would be the beneficiary populations for these products, not only in developing countries but also in Spain: adults and adolescents in general (both female and male),

and MSM, gay and lesbians, serodiscordant couples, and sex workers in particular. The main purpose of this introduction being to show that, with microbicides as with any other prevention tools, both partners are protected independently of whom initiates their use, and this is why we have to work together to support microbicides. Marion explained how her organisation was involved in microbicide advocacy and made some suggestions on how to join microbicide advocacy in Spain. First she invited people to get information in Spanish and offered different possible sources, including the Global Campaign for Microbicides. She encouraged people to participate to possible local event such as workshops, symposiums, seminars and conferences. For Marion the following steps would consist in transferring the information obtained to other constituencies through the creation and publication of new informative material or the adaptation of existing ones, and the organisation or announcement of events. Marion particularly invited NGOs and CBOs working with a gender perspective, gays and lesbians, young people, but also development NGOs, family planning and sex workers, to join microbicides advocacy, co-sign material and co-organise events. Marion also emphasized on the need to collaborate with other parties involved in microbicide R&D and eventually their introduction in Spain, such as governments, public institutions, MPs, scientific community, press in order to obtain political support for R&D and social studies, and eventually economical aid for existing efforts. Finally she insisted on the need to pursue efforts after the introduction of microbicides in order to continue informing, advocating, lobbying and promoting social studies for microbicides.

“Who is Who in microbicide R&D and advocacy”,

by **Rebekah Webb**, of the **Global Campaign for Microbicides**

Rebekah offered an overview of the different entities involved in the R&D and advocacy for microbicides, and on how Spanish NGOs and community networks could join forces with the Global Campaign to raise microbicide awareness and help increase the interest in microbicide research in Spain and in the EU. She explained that there were basically two branches in the Who is Who in this field, one essentially centred on R&D such as MDP or HPTN, and another one on advocacy, such as Global Campaign and Alliance for Microbicide Development, IPM being involved in both arms. Rebekah briefly presented the mission, activities and mode of functioning of these particular entities and mostly developed on the Global Campaign, with a special emphasis on the objectives of the Campaign and its role as the “civil society arm” of the global microbicides movement. She expanded on how Global Campaign empowers civil society and on issues the organisation is working on, including ethics, community involvement at trial sites, country preparedness, capacity building in advocacy, media, science and ethics, and monitoring public sector investments. Global Campaign also works in close collaboration with the other entities and the scientific community involved in microbicide development and advocacy. Rebekah then introduced the audience with the European partners of Global Campaign, including gTt and Creación Positiva, but also insisted on the fact that partners were found in countries where clinical trials are taking place such as Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, India and Thailand. The last part of her presentation was focused on the possible resources available for microbicide activists and some examples of actions and documents supporting microbicides globally, including the Dublin declaration and the Global Campaign worldwide petition for microbicides.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion that followed the presentation essentially focused on issues such as the impact on current prevention programs in Spain, as well as gender issues and access to microbicides once developed. One participant from the audience asked whether Global Campaign supported the use of the condom, to which Rebekah answered that the organisation strongly advocated for both male and female condoms. Concerns were expressed on the link between microbicides and gender issues. It was made clear that microbicides would not empower women overnight, but they would make negotiation of safe sex easier and enable women to exert their rights more easily. It was pointed out that gender-based violence was a major factor in increasing women's risk and had to be addressed.

It was also emphasised that, above all in developing countries, microbicides could also be an important delivery mechanism for an HIV vaccine.

Asked about the reasons why Global Campaign was not present in Eastern Europe, Rebekah explained that advocacy for microbicides was under-resourced, and this was why the organisation was not active in Eastern Europe yet, although they would like to pursue this on the limited resources available.

Some participants asked for more clarification on partial efficacy and ethical issues, and one participant wanted to know more about preparation to access, above all in the developing world.

## **EVALUATION AND COMMENTS**

During the reception that followed, all presenters and participants, shared their impressions on the symposium. Generally it was perceived as an instructive and necessary event. Everyone agreed on the fact that, given that the arrival of microbicides might be sooner than expected, all parties interested needed to get involved before their introduction in order not to repeat the same mistakes as with the female condom for instance.

One participant from a development NGO called Global SIDA declared afterwards: "the symposium was very interesting and very relevant. Despite the fact that the central theme of the National AIDS Congress this year was Women and HIV, my impression was that it had been poorly addressed and I applaud you for the initiative of organising a parallel meeting on this issue. I knew about microbicides as a new preventive technology, especially for women, but I did not know about research and development questions, and access issues are still very concerning to me."

Many participants expressed that they were nicely surprised by how rigorous but still accessible the scientific presentation was, which they expected to be too complex and too hard to understand. Overall the attendants were satisfied with the presentations which were considered as clear and complete, with practical and useful advice. Some admitted that they understood the content and now knew where to find more information and resources, but were still not sure of what to do next.

Altogether some unanswered questions remain to be explored in depth, which suggest that in Spain efforts need to be pursued and follow-ups organised.

Our colleague and friend journalist Emilio de Benito from El País, the most read newspaper in Spain, who joined us at the reception, suggested that a media strategy could be set up in this country in favour of microbicides and that he would be willing to offer his help if necessary.