

NEW YORKER

NEWYORKER.COM

December 18, 2001

The Editor
The New Yorker
4 Times Square
New York, NY 10036-6592

Dear Editor:

Michael Specter astutely sees "the plight of women" as the most discouraging obstacle to fighting the AIDS epidemic in India (*India's Plague*, December 17). What's even more discouraging is the lack of will anywhere to produce a new prevention option for women. That's why women are mobilizing worldwide to put pressure on their governments and the pharmaceutical industry to act now to save women's lives.

Scientists tell us that within five years, given adequate funding from the private and public sector, they could produce an inexpensive, effective microbicide—a substance that a woman could apply vaginally before sex to protect herself and her partner from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Studies in over 20 countries, including India, suggest that women would welcome and use such a product.

The only prevention strategies available to women—20 years into the epidemic— are condoms and mutual monogamy, both dependent on the cooperation of a male partner. These strategies are failing Indian women. A study of 400 women at a clinic in Pune, India, showed that 91% had never had sex with anyone but their husbands, yet 14% were infected with HIV (*JAMA*, 278:1997).

Specter rightly concludes that India needs to focus more on prevention. When the head of the giant pharmaceutical company Cipla responds that expensive drug treatment is key and asks, "What else do we have to offer?", one has to answer: Use your scientific and financial resources to make microbicide research and development an immediate priority.

Sincerely Yours,

Lori Heise
Director
Global Campaign for Microbicides
1800 K Street NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20006
202-822-0033