Mobilising aroun

Positively Women sent five delegates to the microbicides conference held in London, 28-31 March 2004. In the article below, Angelina notes that the key to success will be to build support within communities for the use and understanding of microbicides; women must mobilise around microbicides by participating in research, having their voices heard and by demanding microbicides and other female controlled methods of STD prevention.

Introduction to microbicides

What are they?

Microbicides (pronounced mikrobisidz) are products designed to help prevent the sexual transmission of HIV and other STDs when applied topically (that is to the vagina or rectum). Microbicides are still being developed so they are not available for use just yet. A microbicide could be produced in many forms, including as a gel, cream, pessary, film, or as a sponge or ring that releases the active ingredient over time.

Some ideal characteristics of a microbicide

Ideally, a microbicide would be:

- Active against a range of sexually transmitted pathogens (agents that cause infection);
- Not irritating to mucosal surfaces (vaginal/anal);
- Available in both spermicidal and non-spermicidal formulations;
- Effective over long periods;
- Acceptable to potential users (smell, colour, taste, easy to carry around);
- Stable at high temperatures.

How would they work?

Scientists have been working to develop microbicides that would combat STIs in one or more of the following ways:

- Kill or immobilise STI pathogens;
- Form a barrier between the pathogen and vaginal or rectal tissue;
- Block early steps in infectious processes;
- Prevent the pathogen from replicating once it has entered cells;
- Boost the vagina's own defence system.

What's special about microbicides?

- They can be controlled by either partner (especially important for women unable to negotiate safer sex for whatever reason);
- They could protect both partners;
- Some may prevent pregnancy;
- Most would eventually be available over the counter;
- They would be cheap (therefore accessible to all – an advantage in view of the high cost of antiretrovirals and the resultant slow availability for those who need them in resource poor settings);
- Some may boost vagina's natural defence system;
- Provide lubrication that would be protective and add to sexual pleasure (in some communities).

A microbicide would not necessarily protect against all STIs. Condom use is still the preferred option for protection against STIs. However, microbicides would be important for those who cannot or will not use condoms, for example women whose partners refuse condom use. Data from some of the studies presented showed that condom use in long term relationships was very low. Some factors influencing this included the need to have children, 'trust' and people wanting the pleasure of having sex skin to skin.

Why do we need microbicides?

The introduction of a microbicide could have a major public health impact. A microbicide that is 60 per cent effective (none will be 100 per cent effective), introduced into 73 low-income countries, could avert 2.5 million HIV infections over three years in women, men and infants. This would decrease the incidence rate of HIV with subsequent productivity benefits and large savings in healthcare costs.

- Microbicides would prevent infection and re-infection of women and their partners.
- Microbicides can be used covertly – in secret – important especially for women who are unable to negotiate safe sex. Women can take control of their vulnerability.
- Microbicides provides hope for the future of our daughters!

How soon could microbicides be available?

No one is quite certain. Each product must undergo rigorous testing in both laboratory and human clinical trials. There are many trials currently going on all at various stages. Many predict a product will probably be available by the year 2010.

d Microbicides

Key issues in microbicide research

Ethical issues in clinical trials

The big question in microbicide research is what happens to people who become infected during trials. Should HAART be provided to them? There were varied views on this. For example, Brazil felt that yes, treatment should be provided to people who get infected during trials. Thailand felt that it depended on the host country. Uganda on the other hand felt that they should only be given what is available in the community; otherwise if people were given what they would normally not be able to access, it would lead to local inequalities. Ultimately, should the World Health Organisation or the local communities where trials are being conducted decide what happens to people who get infected during trials?

As microbicides provide the opportunity for women to take control of their bodies in relation to the prevention of STIs, and the current microbicides on trial are for women and will be female controlled, there are key ethical issues affecting women in the clinical trials. The debate around women's autonomy and informed consent in Microbicide Clinical Trials (MCTS) centres on the issue of enrolling women without their partner's consent. Some men were reluctant to let their women join the trials because they felt there was nothing for them, they were worried about the safety of their penises, pregnancy and others wondered whether their wives/partners were having multiple partners hence their involvement in the research.

Because of these difficulties, many researchers question whether the involvement of male partners is necessary. There were two main points of view on this. The first is that these clinical trials can be an opportunity to increase women's autonomy so it is better to proceed without the involvement of the partner. On the other hand however, ignoring cultural norms and gender roles can compromise the accomplishment of trials. Where partners are involved, there is the possibility of improved community participation and the decreased risk of social harm including HIV testing, reduction in domestic violence, less stigma and ostracisation of trial participants.

Mobilisation for microbicides

A theme that emerged throughout the conference was that an effective and accessible microbicide would indeed be very welcome globally. But in order for such a product to be developed, a lot of research still needs to be done. Research, which cannot be done without the approval and involvement of the community. But in order for the communities to get actively involved, they need to be well informed. It was also important to train community advocates to mobilise the community. It is important for women to mobilise around microbicides in order:

- To build support for a microbicide. Women in communities need to be mobilised to demand microbicides and other female controlled methods;
- To participate fully and meaningfully in the process of microbicide research and development;
- To facilitate the quick roll out of a microbicide when it becomes available by ensuring that women are well informed and know their rights.

Conclusion

The development of successful microbicide agents is extremely important to women generally but even more so to women living with HIV. This is because inequalities between women and men lie at the heart of the HIV and AIDS epidemic as well as the spread of other sexually transmitted infections and other life-threatening illnesses like TB and malaria. Realities such as gender violence, lack of property rights for women, unequal burdens of caring for the sick, unequal access to treatment, and unequal access to appropriate prevention information all mean that women are at a greater risk of getting HIV and generally feel the impact of the epidemic more acutely. Development of successful microbicide agents will go a long way in addressing some of these gender inequalities that make it difficult to put effective prevention programmes into place.

Angelina

For more information, please contact: The Global Campaign for Microbicides on info@global-campaign.org or website on www.global-campaign.org

More on microbicides, including rectal microbicides in a later edition

Women can mobilise around microbicides by:

- actively participating in research and development, and not just as trial participants;
- understanding the complexities of microbicides;
- being heard – the realities of women's lives should be heard!