

Sample Article – African Diaspora

Campaigning for Microbicides

The issue: women need HIV-prevention tools

Growing HIV infection rates both globally and domestically point to the need for additional methods of protection against HIV and STIs. The rising numbers of women living with HIV in Europe, particularly among women from African communities, is an indication of the relationship between gender and vulnerability to HIV infection. Consistent condom use has been shown to be hard to achieve. Women need more HIV prevention tools.

Potential options: microbicides

Microbicides are a new type of product being developed that people could use vaginally or rectally to protect themselves from HIV and possibly other sexually transmitted infections. They could be produced in many forms, including gels, creams, suppositories, films, lubricants, or in the form of a sponge or a vaginal ring that slowly releases the active ingredient. Women need to have access to microbicides that can prevent pregnancy and microbicides that allow pregnancy. Contraceptive microbicides could provide both pregnancy and STI prevention to women wishing to meet both needs with one product. The candidates furthest advanced in trials right now are all non-contraceptive. But it is possible, if one of them proves effective, that a contraceptive component could be added. Microbicides would be important tools for people that are living with HIV because they could provide a level of protection in relationships, prevent HIV re-infection and reduce the risk of treatment resistance.

Microbicides could potentially work in a number of different ways. Some candidates might be broad spectrum (meaning they would work against other STIs as well as HIV), however current candidates are HIV specific and based on ARVs.

Microbicides would not replace existing HIV prevention efforts. Instead, they would complement them. Condoms must continue to be made widely available. But for some women, they will not be used because they prevent pregnancy or their partners refuse to use them. In these cases, women would have the option of microbicides.

Microbicides do NOT yet exist. Why not?

Microbicides are still being researched and developed. Lack of interest from large pharmaceutical companies means that progress has been slow despite the scientific potential. Scientists are currently testing many substances to see whether they help protect against HIV and/or other STIs, but no safe and effective microbicide is currently available to the public. However, scientists are seriously perusing over 50 product leads, including about a dozen that have proven safe and effective in animals and are now being tested in people. It is impossible to say how long it will take to find a microbicide that is both safe and effective. On average, new drug development takes over a decade from discovery in a research lab to availability on the market. Ninety percent of candidates that enter preclinical testing are rejected before they enter clinical trials. Only a few microbicide candidates are in the last stages of testing to determine whether they are effective (which can take up to 4 years). We do not know yet whether these candidates will work. If a trial shows that a microbicide does work, at least another two to four years will be required for individual countries to go through their own regulatory and manufacturing processes to make the microbicide available. Due to these individual country processes, it must be noted that a microbicide will not be available in all countries at the same time and not all people within a country will get it at the same time. It is likely to be made available to some women and not others during introduction and scale-u



Funding for every stage of microbicide research and development must be made a priority until a microbicide that is safe, effective and affordable exists. Several governments have committed funding towards this research, but it is only half the amount needed. We need this funding to be sustained over the long-term until microbicides become a reality.

Our role in all of this

As HIV advocates, we need to keep ourselves informed and updated about the research and development of microbicides, in order to monitor progress and to be clear about our advocacy messages. It is also important that we continue to debate the issues. When a partially effective microbicide becomes available, agencies will need to decide whether they should be introduced domestically. Such decision-making will require input from informed HIV advocates like ourselves. If you want to be able to use a microbicide when they become a reality, make sure your voice is heard!

For more information about the Global Campaign for Microbicides, please visit www.global-campaign.org.