

Draft Statement for Rep. Constance Morella

Women's Caucus Testimony before the Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education April 3, 2001

For over a decade, scientists have been working on a new category of products women could use to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, importantly including HIV. These products—"microbicides"—are compounds that kill or deactivate disease-causing microorganisms and can be formulated in different ways, such as creams, films, gels, or suppositories.

The need for such products is both clear and urgent: AIDS is rapidly becoming a "women's epidemic." In the United States, AIDS is the fourth leading cause of death among women aged 25-44, with women of color disproportionately affected. Worldwide, women constitute half of the over 15,000 people who become infected with HIV each day, infections transmitted to them largely through heterosexual intercourse with their primary partner.

Despite this great need, microbicide research and development have been inadequately financed and far slower than it should have been. The large pharmaceutical industry, seeing insufficient profit potential, has not chosen to invest in this field, so that progress has depended almost totally on the dedication of academic researchers and small biotechnology companies, in their turn almost totally dependent on federal support.

While it has been crucial to advancing the field, that support is no longer enough to keeping it moving with the volume and speed essential for actually getting microbicides through the development "pipeline" and into the hands of the millions who could benefit from them. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of AIDS Research has done crucial work in laying the groundwork for a government-wide plan for microbicide research and development. Still, less than 1% of the budget for AIDS-related research at the NIH is being spent on microbicides, and less than half that allocation goes directly to product development.

Microbicide research has reached a critical juncture, where clear emphasis and a significant funding increase could unblock a development pipeline in which over 50 potential microbicides are now trapped by lack of resources. Because that situation offers us an opportunity to make a real difference, I will soon introduce legislation to expand and intensify microbicide-focused activities at the NIH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The bill will authorize targeted funding, \$75 million for microbicide research and development for FY 2002. I would like to see the important work of the Office of AIDS Research quickly converted into a proactive, strategic plan for microbicide research and development that has the active involvement and support of NIH and institute leadership. I would also like to see the NIH take a leadership role in coordinating implementation of such a plan, through increased resources and staffing and designation of microbicides as a "Scientific Area of Focus." I urge the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education to support this effort through appropriations, and to actively embrace this area of research with the enthusiasm and speed it merits.

The natural engines that drive new drug development have failed in the case of microbicides. Thus, government must lead. With sufficient investment, a microbicide could be available within five years, to the very great benefit of the women of the world, their partners, and their children.