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ANTI-HIV BREAKTHROUGH ANNOUNCED

Vaginal gel that protects women from AIDS hailed as milestone

VIENNA: Campaigners in the fight against AIDS responded with a rousing cheer — leavened also with scientific caution — to test results, announced yesterday, of a vaginal gel designed to protect women from HIV.

The prototype, in the second stage of a three-phase trial, reduced the risk of infection by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) by 39 per cent overall, but by 54 per cent among women who used it consistently.

Leading figures in the 29-year war on AIDS said the announcement was heart-warming news, especially for African women exposed to HIV through sex with a partner who refuses to wear a condom.

"We are giving hope to women. For the first time we have seen results for a woman-initiated and -controlled HIV prevention option," said Michel Sidibe, executive director of the UN agency UNAIDS.

"If confirmed, a microbicide will be a powerful option for the prevention revolution and help us to break the trajectory of the AIDS epidemic."

The study "marks a significant milestone both for the microbicide research field and HIV prevention as a whole," said Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the US National Institutes of Health.

World Health Organisation (WHO) Director General Margaret Chan said she welcomed the findings.

"All new advances in HIV prevention, particularly for women, are exciting," she said in a press release.

If, in further research, the South African data are validated, and the gel is proven to be safe and effective, "WHO will work with countries and partners to accelerate access to these products," she said.

More than 33 million people today are infected by HIV. More than two-thirds live in sub-Saharan Africa, where

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60 percent of new infections occur among women and girls.

The gel that was tested contains a one-per cent formulation of tenofovir.

It is a frontline component in the "cocktail" of antiretroviral drugs that disrupt HIV reproduction in immune cells.

In addition to being effective, the formula was also found to be safe and there was no indication that it boosted

the risk of viral resistance to tenofovir, the researchers said.

The study, led by the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA), was published in the journal *Science* on the second day of the International AIDS Conference here.

Nearly 20 years of research have gone into HIV microbicides, but this

is the first test to produce such positive results.

"For the first time, the HIV prevention research community has evidence that ARVs (antiretrovirals) topically applied to the vaginal mucosa can offer protection against HIV and potentially other pathogens," said IPM chief executive Zeda Rosenberg.

The data amounted to "a landmark in HIV prevention." — AFP

An address book and a photo of TV personality Lucille Ball, part of the 'Lucille Ball Memorabilia from The Estate of Gary Mortonwill' collection

A Jetsons 'Rosie the Robot' maquette

A man looks at a Bruce Lee jumpsuit from his final film 'The Game of Death', valued at RM193,000

GOING.. GOING... GONE: Heritage Auction Galleries in Beverly Hills auctioned off sci-fi, music and entertainment memorabilia last Friday. It was an incredible chance for movie buffs to own their own rare piece of film heritage. — AFPpic

A T-800 arm from the original 'Terminator' movie valued at RM48,000