

Headline **HIVgel discovery lifts mood**
Date **21 Jul 2010**
MediaTitle **New Straits Times**
Section **World**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily**
Circ / Read **136,530 / 330,000**

Language **English**
Page No **26**
Article Size **257 cm²**
Color **One Spot Color**
ADValue **5,805**
PRValue **17,415**



HIV gel discovery lifts mood

VIENNA: A breakthrough test of a vaginal gel to protect women against HIV unleashed a wave of optimism at the world AIDS conference yesterday after two days of rows over funding.

Hearty applause broke out in the main hall of the congress centre here when delegates were told of the research unveiled in the United States journal *Science* the night before.

Organisers hastily set aside a huge room for a seminar to debate an announcement that some veterans described as nothing less than historic.

The prototype is the first vaginal gel to offer a strong degree of protection against the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), according to results from the second phase of a three-stage trial.

"We are all very excited by the results," Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), said.

"This is the first time that there has been an unequivocally significant demonstration of the ability to block (HIV) acquisition in women by a microbicide."

Questions remain about whether the protection is high enough or whether the formula should be fine-tuned, and how the product would be used in real life rather than in test

conditions.

But if these obstacles were overcome, a weapon of mighty proportions could emerge in the fight against AIDS, they said.

It would not only add to the tiny arsenal of options for preventing the spread of HIV, but it would also empower women, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, facing coercive sex from an infected partner who refuses to wear a condom.

"This is good news for women, good news for the field, and a good day for science," Yasmin Halima, director of the Global Campaign for Microbicides, said.

The US ambassador for AIDS, Eric Goosby, said the trial had been a "proof of concept" that the long and frustrating quest for a microbicide was viable.

"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.

The gel was tested under tight ethical guidelines among 889 women in urban and rural South Africa, who were HIV-free at the start of the project.

Half of the women received the cream — the first microbicide to contain an antiretroviral drug commonly used to treat HIV-infected people — while the others used a placebo, a harmless but non-active lookalike.

Thirty-eight women in the gel group became infected with HIV, compared with 60 in the placebo group.

In statistical terms, the gel reduced the risk of HIV infection by 39 per cent overall, but by 54 per cent among women who adhered to the instructions most consistently.

There was no increase in side effects, nor — among women who became infected with HIV — any sign they were more resistant to tenofovir as a result of the gel.

The implications for gay men, a group at risk for HIV, are unknown.

The microbicide was not tested in anal intercourse, where statistical studies suggest the infection risk can be 10 times higher than for vaginal sex, Ward Cates, president of research at Family Health International, a major US non-governmental organisation, said.

The 18th International AIDS Conference, a six-day event will end on Friday. — AFP

