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Major step seen in quest for anti-HIV vaginal gel

VIENNA: Scientists on Monday reported a major stride towards a vaginal gel that can thwart HIV, a goal that would be of huge benefit to African women bearing the brunt of the AIDS pandemic.

A prototype cream tested in South Africa curbed the risk of infection by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) by 39 percent overall, but by 54 percent among those women who used it most consistently, they said.

The study coincided with the six-day 18th International AIDS Conference in Vienna, where leading campaigners responded with cheers leavened with some caution.

A wider trial has to be completed to scrutinise the gel for safety and efficacy, and several important questions must be answered.

Even so, this is a bright ray of hope, the scientists said.

"Without this gel, we may see 10 women becoming infected in a year.

With this gel, we would see only six women becoming infected," said Salim Abdool Karim, one of the two leading co-researchers, in a teleconference with reporters.

Leading figures in the fight against AIDS applauded loudly, but also sounded a note of prudence.

"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 World Health Organisation (WHO) chief Margaret Chan vowed the UN agency would work hard to speed up access to the product, once it is proven to be safe and effective.

Twenty-five million people have been slain by AIDS today and more than 33 million others today are

infected by HIV, which causes the disease.

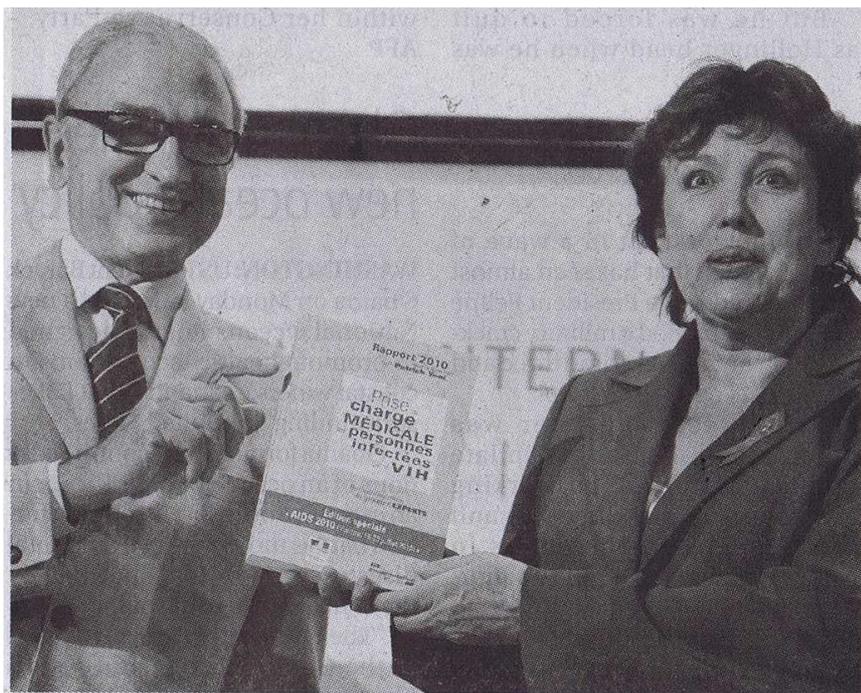
More than two-thirds of these live in sub-Saharan Africa, where 60 percent of new infections occur among women and girls.

One of the big vectors of transmission is through coercive intercourse by an infected partner who is unwilling to wear a condom.

The gel that was tested contains a one-percent formulation of tenofovir. It is a frontline component in the "cocktail" of antiretroviral drugs that disrupt HIV reproduction in immune cells.

Previous microbicides that have been tested have not contained an antiretroviral, and have had either a very low level of protection or even boosted the risk of infection.

Over nearly three years, the gel was tested among 445 HIV-negative women, while 444 counterparts received a harmless lookalike called a placebo. - AFP



DR. Patrick Yeni presents his book with French Health minister Roselyne Bachelot-Narquin during a press conference in Vienna, as part of the 18th International AIDS Conference. PHOTO:AFP