



The Star - Disappointment in trials another lesson

Science is often defined as a search for truth. This means that while the recently announced results of the Phase III Carraguard microbicide trial could be seen as a setback, we see it as a normal part of the research process.

While the product did not live up to the potential indicated by initial research, we accept this as part of the scientific quest to find solutions for disease.

We should realize that solutions in the human health field are generally found after, and because of, countless unsuccessful experiments. As Thomas Edison said: "If I find 10 000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward".

Failures in research are not always visible, but due to the ethical guidelines on clinical trials, such failures are publicised in the public interest. Our determination to win the fight against AIDS will necessarily mean that there will be disappointment following unsuccessful trials.

But at the same time, following Edison's philosophy, we should applaud the scientists who have worked with such dedication and skill to find solutions for the pandemic. The volunteers who participated in the clinical trials should be honoured for their courage in joining in the pursuit of solutions. It is vital that South African researchers should be encouraged to continue their quest.

The development of new HIV prevention technologies is one of our best hopes for turning the tide against AIDS.

Our government is investing in research into microbicides, AIDS vaccines and other options, in co-operation with a range of partners. We are confident that trial sponsors, researchers and volunteers will help lead us to the discovery of effective new technologies.

Microbicides have a growing profile as a potential weapon against AIDS, particularly since it has been shown that women are more vulnerable to HIV infection.

Although microbicides research looks extremely promising, there are some very real scientific and logistical challenges. One of these is ensuring the availability of new microbicide candidates; the second is clinical trial capacity. The continued development of microbicide products requires a



TRIAL AND ERROR: A microbicide gel is seen in this picture. The successfully conducted recent Carraguard microbicide trial showed that carraguard is not effective in preventing HIV infection

steady stream of new candidates. A significant increase in public and private investment is needed to build on recent advances in the field.

Cited barriers to private sector investment include scientific uncertainty, perceptions of limited market and profit potential, competing demands for resources, regulatory uncertainty, and safety and liability concerns. Public sector leadership and innovative public-private partnerships like the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative therefore remains essential.

Regarding clinical trial capacity, buildings, equipment and staff will be needed for new trial sites so that the large scale studies required can be conducted. Developing microbicides takes a long time, partly because of the meticulous safety and efficacy testing that any drug must undergo before receiving approval from the authorities.

Meanwhile, we are cautiously optimistic about important work undertaken by the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa into the third-generation microbicide gel containing the antiretroviral Tenofovir.

Much has been learned, and the scientists have shown that that are not prepared to compromise on the safety of trial participants. Our government will therefore continue to invest in these trials, as microbicides may still prove to have the ability to protect the lives of millions, as well as benefiting the South African pharmaceutical industry.

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