

Arizona Health Leaders Gather in Tucson to Discuss New Methods for Protecting Women from HIV

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Tucson, AZ (October 12, 2005) – HIV/AIDS service providers, scientists, medical experts, health activists and policy makers from across Arizona met today with one of the world’s leading HIV/AIDS researchers to discuss new strategies to halt the growing AIDS epidemic in women. Women account for nearly half the 40 million people living with HIV worldwide – in sub-Saharan Africa, 57 percent of adults infected with HIV are women – and researchers are working to develop anti-HIV gels or intravaginal rings, called microbicides, to allow women to protect themselves from infection.

In addition to posing a major threat to women in developing countries, HIV rates among women in the United States have also risen at an alarming rate. In the U.S., women account for 26 percent of AIDS cases, more than triple the rate from 20 years ago. The situation for young women is even more dire: girls now account for 57 percent of new HIV infections among youth aged 13 to 19.

The event was co-sponsored by leaders in the HIV/AIDS community in Southern Arizona – the Arizona AIDS Policy Alliance, El Rio Community Health Center/Special Immunology Associates, the Southwest Institute for Research on Women and the Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation – and featured Dr. Zeda Rosenberg, Chief Executive Officer of the International Partnership for Microbicides (IPM), an international public-private partnership partly funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates and Rockefeller Foundations and the U.S. government, that is working to develop safe and effective microbicides.

“Arizonans have an important role in advocating for further U.S. support to help protect women around the world from HIV,” said Dr. Zeda Rosenberg. “HIV infection rates among women have risen dramatically in recent years. Developing an effective microbicide whose use could be initiated by women is a crucial step in combating the AIDS epidemic.”

The event, “Microbicides to Prevent HIV and AIDS: The Status of Science and Clinical Trials,” marked the first time Arizona AIDS leaders have come together to discuss the feminization of the global AIDS epidemic and the importance of finding new prevention methods like microbicides to reduce the spread of HIV among women and girls. Microbicides are products such as gels, creams or intravaginal rings that could be applied topically, reducing transmission of HIV during sexual intercourse. There are currently five microbicides in large-scale efficacy trials, and a microbicide could be available for women in as soon as five to seven years.

“The science on microbicides is moving ahead rapidly, and we need to push for more support of this exciting research,” said Dr. Sally Stevens, Executive Director of the Southwest Institute for Research on Women. “Today’s discussion really raised the issue of how the AIDS epidemic is disproportionately affecting women around the world.”

In addition to discussing the science of microbicides, participants also discussed the recent introduction of the “Microbicide Development Act of 2005” in the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill, which is co-sponsored by U.S. Representative Raul M. Grijalva from Arizona’s 7th district, would establish a Microbicide Research and Development Unit at the National Institutes of Health and strengthen microbicide activity at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The other U.S. Representative from Tucson, Jim Kolbe, from the 8th district, holds an important leadership seat on the House Appropriations Committee and has championed this issue for several years, especially supporting efforts at USAID to develop safe, effective and affordable microbicides for women in the developing world.

About IPM

IPM seeks to deliver a safe and effective microbicide for women in developing countries as soon as possible. IPM identifies the most promising technologies and invests its resources to help develop them into usable products. Given current scientific advancements and the identification of a number of potential microbicidal agents, an effective microbicide could be developed by the end of the decade. IPM is a co-convenor of the UNAIDS Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, and is led by Chief Executive Officer Dr. Zeda Rosenberg, who is a Harvard-trained microbiologist and public health advocate.

Donors to IPM include the governments of Canada, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States as well as the European Commission, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the World Bank and the United Nations.

For more information, please visit IPM’s website: <http://www.ipm-microbicides.org>

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