

StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Microbicides

Hoping for an anti-AIDS shield

Who has time to wait for an AIDS vaccine? Not a young bride on the outskirts of Bombay. Long before that saving grace finds its way to her neighborhood, HIV will cast a shadow over her life. Even if she realizes that every sexual encounter with her much-older husband puts her in peril, she likely won't dare ask that he use a condom. Women the world over know what such a request can bring: insulting accusations, brutal beatings, ejection into the street.

This is why President Bush's touted "ABC" policy — which promotes abstinence, being faithful and using condoms as safeguards against AIDS — won't work for everybody. It's just plain useless for faithful but powerless women with cavorting husbands. Even if educated about self-protection, they're virtually helpless. So they will remain — until they secure social equality or until science hands them a secret weapon.

The latter holds more promise than the former — at least in the short term. What poor women need is some sort of "viral shield" they can use without their husband's knowledge.

And as luck would have it, that's just what researchers are rushing to develop. Right now half a dozen so-called "microbicides" are being tested to see whether they might be helpful to vulnerable women. The idea is to use known antiviral drugs in gels, creams or foams that can be used intravaginally — offering women a new line of defense when insisting on safe sex isn't possible. What's more, antimicrobials are likely not just to protect noninfected women, but also to help women who *are* infected from passing on HIV to

their partners.

It's a good deal all around and, if proven effective, could dramatically curb transmission — especially among the young, married women who now make up the group most susceptible to HIV infections. The availability of microbicides could enable such women to take charge of their health without risking spousal wrath. Microbicides could very well become the next best thing to a vaccine.

Emphasis must be placed on *could* — for the full promise of microbicides can only be fulfilled by intensive research and testing. But while the National Institutes of Health budget for HIV vaccine research will exceed half a billion dollars in the next fiscal year, the amount dedicated for microbicide development languishes at just \$68 million.

That's not enough. Designing a topical virus-killer, most experts say, will cost at least \$100 million annually for the next seven to 10 years.

This is where the International Partnership for Microbicides comes in. The nonprofit mobilizer has gathered a coalition of foundations, firms and governments to collaborate in the quest.

The payoff is worth the investment, and the United States should boost its commitment to this mission. As Dr. Zeda Rosenberg, the partnership's CEO, said at this summer's International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, even a partially effective microbicide could avert 2.5 million HIV infections over the next three years.

A medicine that can ward off so much disaster may not count as a silver bullet, but it certainly qualifies as a sterling shield. It's a goal well worth the effort — and whatever cash is required.

The face of AIDS