

African women have high hopes in new anti-HIV gel

By Sola Ogundipe

NIGERIAN women and their counterparts in other African countries have applauded the promise of *Tenofovir*, an anti-retroviral drug contained in a microbicide gel reputed to help protect women who can't negotiate safe sex with their partners against HIV infection.

This development has arisen even as it has been noted that up to 80 percent of women who use the vaginal gel containing the drug can get up to 40 per cent protection from proper and regular use of the microbicide, which is hoped to ultimately afford many women in developing countries in particular have the ability to protect themselves from getting HIV.

In recent studies, scientists announced the outcome of a study of the gel containing *Tenofovir*, demonstrated that it can protect women from acquiring HIV infection by about 39 per cent.

Optimism about the long-term effectiveness of the microbicide in Africa arises from results of a study conducted by the Family Health International (FHI) involving heterosexual women

from Ghana, Cameroon, and Nigeria with multiple sex partners, showed. According to the study, "because the women were at high risk of being infected with HIV, they were also the most likely to benefit from *tenofovir* if it can be shown to safely and effectively prevent HIV."

Generally, researchers say antiretroviral drugs, when adapted for microbicides, could prevent, not just treat infection. It is widely acknowledged that ARVs are

effective against HIV infection. Microbicides, on their own, prevent infection in the first place.

The expectation now is that the demonstrated safety and effectiveness profile of *tenofovir* for preventing HIV, should spearhead an affordable cost to HIV prevention programmes in resource-poor countries.

While women continue to bear the brunt of HIV infection as many are not able to negotiate safe sex. The out-

come of the study has been hailed as a tool that will give hope to many women who don't have a say on whether or not their partners use protection during intercourse. But other concerns are being raised such as the need for dialogue of moral regeneration.

Results of another microbicide study in Vulindlela in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands, in which more than 800 women participated showed that the *tenofovir* gel protected almost 40 per cent of the women.

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