



**Australian Microbicides Symposium**  
*May 10, 2007*  
*University of Sydney*

**Summary of Outcomes**

Co-sponsored by:



The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA) would like to thank the cosponsoring organizations for making this important symposium possible. In addition, we would like to acknowledge and thank the facilitators, panel presenters and event organizers.

## List of Presenters

Christina Richards	Australian Reproductive Health Alliance
Andrew Grulich	NCHECR
John Kaldor	NCHECR
Tony Cunningham	Westmead Millennium Institute
Louise Causer	NCHECR
Ian Ramshaw	Australian National University
Mike Kennedy	Victorian AIDS Council
Jeremy Paull	Starpharma
Gilda Tachedjian	Burnet Institute
Bridget Haire	AFAO
Susan Chong	Global Campaign for Microbicides

PowerPoint presentations of each speaker are available. Please feel free to contact us to obtain a copy.

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*Our mission is to promote public support for enhance reproductive and sexual health in Australia and internationally, and to promote the advancement of the status of women and girls.*

Report prepared by John Andru  
May 2007

## **Objectives**

In late 2006, the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA) decided to take up the issue of microbicides as part of its advocacy activities after being contacted by a Canadian member of the Global Campaign for Microbicides. In January 2007, it was decided that the first step would be to host the first Australian Symposium for all individuals and organizations with a vested interest in microbicides. The objectives of the symposium were to:

- To assess level of support (both financial and in principle) for an Australian campaign for microbicides
- Discuss strategies on how to initiate and sustain a national campaign for microbicides and form a steering committee to carry the campaign forward
- Establish a database of interested parties
- Recruit members and member organizations to the campaign
- Educate and inform all symposium participants on the potential and importance of microbicides, and share information on the most recent developments in microbicides research
- Prepare a “Case for Australia” document as a stand-alone advocacy tool, as part of the Symposium Summary to be prepared post-event
- Discuss specifically ways in which to use the International AIDS Society (IAS) 2007 Conference in Sydney to leverage the cause of microbicides

## **Australian Symposium on Microbicides**

On May 10, 2007, the first Australian Symposium on Microbicides was held at the University of Sydney. There were 52 participants in attendance with representatives from government, community, industry, and research.

The first part of the day was spent on educating participants on what microbicides are and to share the most recent developments in research both within Australia and globally. Microbicides were presented as a potential new development on the horizon within the overall toolbox for HIV prevention. It was emphasized that microbicides were not a magic bullet but could be a very promising development especially with respect to female-controlled prevention, and to be used in conjunction with other HIV prevention strategies e.g. condoms.

A presentation was made on the status of microbicides R&D around the world and issues surrounding clinical trials. Australian researchers and scientists also presented their most recent findings, notably Starpharma’s VivaGel, natural microbicides, and other research on dendrimers as they relate to HIV transmission. In light of these presentations, there is no doubt that Australia’s research community has tremendous potential in contributing to global efforts to develop an effective microbicide. As part of the panel on this section, a presentation was also made on the importance of community involvement, particularly in the development and execution of clinical trials. There was also a presentation on the importance and status of rectal microbicides.

A member of the steering committee for the Global Campaign for Microbicides presented information on the various international bodies and institutions involved with microbicides i.e. GCM, IPM, etc. She also outlined the successes and activities of other regional advocacy efforts, which included case studies from Canada and the UK.

The remainder of the afternoon was broken up into two sections. The participants were divided into groups with approximately ten participants each. The groups had been assigned in advance to maximize cross-sector representation in each group. This worked exceptionally well in allowing everyone to speak and share their perspectives and concerns, and to allow people to engage with people outside of their sector that they might not normally be in contact with.

The following questions were posed to the participants:

- 1) What are your concerns and expectations with respect to microbicides?
- 2) What are the barriers and incentives to organizations or individuals actively supporting development of, and advocacy for, microbicides?
- 3) What can be done to ensure that microbicides is included in long term HIV and STI prevention plans?
- 4) What role could you and/or your organization play in moving the microbicides agenda forward?
- 5) What opportunities are there to raise the profile of microbicides within Australia?

Each group was asked to elect a representative to report back on the last three questions when the participants were re-assembled for the final session.

### **Agreed Priorities (from Breakout Groups)**

The following section summarizes the discussion and points made in the final report back section of the symposium involving all participants.

1) Many participants recognized that more advocacy around microbicides was needed. One participant called for the hiring of an advocate (secretariat) who could coordinate materials. It was agreed that an inquiry be made as to whether the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) was currently funding any microbicide R&D and if not, it was important to approach the Health Minister, Department of Health & Ageing, NHMRC, and other policy makers including the Ministerial Advisory Committee on AIDS, Sexual Health and Hepatitis. The NHMRC could play an important role in raising awareness and stimulating interest in microbicides if it were to allocate grant money to this particular field.

2) Scientists and researchers also pointed out the importance of further research in related fields such as HIV transmission and female physiology.

3) More social research was also needed to better understand the acceptability of microbicides, particularly in different social contexts.

4) It was important for researchers to begin sourcing money from within Australia for research given the fact that current funding for microbicide R&D was coming from outside Australia.

5) Participants pointed out the importance of multi-disciplinary approach to advocating for microbicides and securing funding for R&D, identifying successful initiatives in the past e.g. Chlamydia, HPV (cervical cancer) vaccine, when scientists, social researchers, and community groups had come together and been able to obtain funding to accomplish a number of inter-connected objectives. This collaborative approach had worked well in the past and should be explored again with respect to microbicides.

6) Groups also looked at specifically what each of their organizations could contribute to the advancement of the microbicide cause. Most of it related to raising awareness among organization constituents and staff members. The most obvious contribution for scientists would be to continue the research work that they were already engaged with, bearing in mind the importance of keeping the community (including end users) involved. Examples included Family Planning NSW who had local expertise in acceptability trials and ASHM who could include microbicides as part of its accreditation for doctors.

7) Finally a number of upcoming events and meetings could provide a means for raising the profile of microbicides within Australia including the International AIDS Society conference (July 2007 in Sydney), APEC summits, and World AIDS Day. Media and publicity could also be coordinated in tandem with results from clinical trials as they are announced.

## **Outcomes**

The objectives laid out for the first symposium were reached to varying degrees. Please see comments below on how each objective was reached.

### *To assess level of support (both financial and in principle) for an Australian campaign for microbicides*

Due to time constraints, we were unable to explore in depth the scope of the steering committee or obtain commitments for funding future advocacy endeavours including a second symposium. The symposium did successfully begin the conversation on the importance of advocacy for microbicides within Australia. Participants were in consensus on the importance of more funding for microbicide R&D, and not simply product development but social science research on acceptability in the various cultural and societal contexts, in which microbicides would be used.

### *Discuss strategies on how to initiate and sustain a national campaign for microbicides and form a steering committee to carry the campaign forward*

Individuals representing fourteen organizations expressed interest in joining a steering committee that would lead and plan an Australian campaign for microbicides.

### *Establish a database of interested parties.*

A comprehensive database was established.

*Recruit members and member organizations to the campaign*

From scratch, ARHA assembled a database of interested individuals and organizations from all sectors. A number of individuals were unable to attend but have requested to be kept informed on the outcomes of this symposium.

*Educate and inform all symposium participants on the potential and importance of microbicides, and share information on the most recent developments in microbicides research.*

Many participants are already engaged in microbicide R&D. Feedback showed that most of them found the presentations an informative and useful learning experience. Given the diversity of sectors represented, participants had a unique opportunity to network, learn from, and hear different perspectives, particularly in the breakout groups.

*Prepare a “Case for Australia” document as a stand-alone advocacy tool, as part of the Symposium Summary to be prepared post-event*

A number of drafts on this subject have already been written but this document is still in progress and will be fine tuned once a steering committee has been formed.

*Discuss specifically ways in which to use the International AIDS Society (IAS) 2007 Conference in Sydney to leverage the cause of microbicides*

This will be deferred to the steering committee yet to be formed.

## **Participant Feedback**

Participants were asked to fill out an evaluation form at the end of the symposium and just over 50% of participants filled one out. A detailed breakdown of results can be found in an attached document. The participants gave good marks to the overall venue itself and found the information presented useful. Representatives from fourteen organisations indicated at least a partial interest in joining the steering committee. When asked which section people found most useful, there was an even spread between those who enjoyed the scientific presentations and those who appreciated the small group discussion. Participants agreed that the pre-selection of the groups was effective in creating groups with participants from different work and academic backgrounds. Participants would have liked to have more information presented on issues of acceptability, microbicides in social contexts, and more discussion on advocacy. Overall, participants were very satisfied with the symposium.

## **Challenges & Lessons Learned**

One of the biggest challenges was finding a date that worked well for everyone especially as we did not have a complete list of potential delegates at the start of the process. We are confident we have a comprehensive database to draw upon that will facilitate the coordination of any future symposiums.

Sourcing funds for the symposium proved to be quite challenging given that there was no precedent. Indeed, finding funds for future advocacy activities will continue to be the major issue for the microbicides campaign.

## **Recommendations**

### *Funding*

To move the microbicides agenda forward a Secretariat for an Australian Campaign for Microbicides would need to be established and funded. ARHA has already submitted a letter of inquiry to the Gates Foundation but will also begin discussion with potential domestic partners to fund the secretariat. It would be preferable to have Australian funding to promote the work of Australians on microbicides

### *Steering Committee*

Representatives from fourteen organisations expressed an interest in joining a steering committee to initiate and guide the Australian Campaign for Microbicides. This steering committee should be formed as soon as possible to begin discussions on how to leverage the upcoming International AIDS Society (IAS) conference in Sydney. International researchers and advocates will be gathering in Sydney in July to discuss a range of issues on HIV prevention including microbicides and this conference will provide a unique opportunity to network and raise the profile of microbicides within Australia. This cross-sectoral committee would then decide on the direction of the campaign. Opportunities exist to advocate for increasing funding for research, liaising with international bodies (e.g. GCM) and regional campaigns, educating stakeholders and policy makers through any number of means, and promoting the work of Australian researchers and scientists.

### *Advocacy Activities*

As Secretariat to the microbicides campaign, ARHA would coordinate the activities of the steering committee and would be responsible for taking up a range of activities including the creation of information, education, and communication materials. The Secretariat and the steering committee would also determine when and whether to hold another symposium on microbicides in the near future. ARHA could take advantage of meeting with international delegates attending the IAS conference.

### *Plans for Dissemination*

Minutes from the symposium will be posted on the ARHA website and a copy of the report will be sent to all participants and to individuals who were unable to attend but expressed an interest. The results of the first symposium and the activities of the Australian campaign could also be presented at the upcoming IAS conference through an external meeting or reception for all interested delegates.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Australia can and should take part in the global agenda for microbicides. While coordinated advocacy efforts for microbicides are in its infancy stage, Australia is well poised and interested to get involved. Australia has a very capable research community that is already involved in microbicide R&D and it has a vibrant AIDS sector that has been recognized for its efforts in HIV prevention domestically, and is reaching out across borders to help other countries with their own capacity building projects. Australia also has a unique opportunity to take an active leadership role in development in the Asia-Pacific region. What are now needed are resources, leadership and coordination to help take Australia's contribution to the next level.