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Leading NGO Calls for greater Microbicide Research to Protect Women from HIV

Leading up to World AIDS Day, (December 1), the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance (ARHA), is calling for increased funding for microbicide research in order to counter the growing feminisation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in our region.

Microbicides are a range of antiretroviral compounds which can prevent the sexual transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when applied topically —by the woman— as a gel, cream, suppository, film, or as a sponge or ring that releases the active ingredient over time.

Christina Richards, CEO of ARHA said, “Microbicide research and development is severely under-funded compared to other HIV research and development efforts. Most efforts are being focused towards vaccine and anti-retroviral treatments. The International Partnership for Microbicides has estimated that investment will need to dramatically increase from the 2004 level of US\$140 million to US\$280 million per year for the next five to ten years in order to significantly accelerate the research and development of microbicides.

“Women and girls in developing countries, including in our region, are being let down by current HIV research and development efforts which tend to ignore the major issues behind the increasing feminisation of the pandemic: heterosexual sex, mother to child transmission and violence.

“Similarly the prevailing ABC (abstinence, be faithful and use condoms) approach is inappropriate in many countries due to women and girls lacking the social and economic power to negotiate relationships or to insist on condom use.

“Microbicides will give women the ability to lower the risk of infection resulting in more power over their lives,” Ms Richards added.

The potential benefits for young women, especially in Africa and the Pacific where they account for 60% of new infections, are invaluable.

A mathematical model of the potential impact of an effective microbicide shows that if even a small proportion of women in lower income countries used a 60% efficacious microbicide in half the sexual encounters where condoms are not used, *2.5 million HIV infections could be averted over 3 years.*

For more information please call Julia Dean ARHA Communications on (02) 6282 8922 or 0400 480 205 or Christina Richards CEO ARHA on (02) 6282 8922 or 0427 884 479

There are currently six large scale trials in operation, all of which are taking place in Africa, with two also running in India and one in the United States. The current trial in South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda and Cameroon has received a high level of interest and participation due to the involvement of communities in the design and recruitment of women for the trial from the outset.

For more information please go to: www.ipm-microbicides.org