

# AIDS forum ends with calls for action

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) - An international AIDS conference ended Wednesday with impassioned appeals to political and pharmaceutical industry leaders to fund development of a virus-killing gel to protect women from the disease and so save millions of lives.

Peter Piot, head of UNAIDS, said he was deeply disappointed that research into microbicides - or vaginal gels - was so slow.

"I don't know of any other technology which would make such a difference to this pandemic as microbicides," he said in a message to 1,000 scientists and researchers at the conference.

He said safe and effective

microbicides could be ready in 5-7 years, with only minimal additional funding, and thus turn the dream of saving millions of lives into reality.

Nearly 40 million people worldwide are infected with the AIDS virus, 25 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa. Last year alone, there were an estimated 6 million new infections. In the hard hit African countries women account for nearly 60 percent of infections. Most are infected through heterosexual intercourse.

"Life expectancy in some of the countries we are coming from is half of what it was 15 years ago," said World Health Organization assistant

director-general Joy Phumaphi.

"Our children will not forget our failures because they are not only paying for them now, they will continue to pay for them for many generations," said Phumaphi, a former health minister from Botswana, where nearly 37 percent of the adult population has the virus.

UNAIDS and the World Health Organization have long promoted microbicides as a potentially valuable weapon in the fight against the epidemic, not least because it allows women to protect themselves without having to rely on partners who refuse to wear a condom or be faithful.

Yet despite this, research has proceeded slowly.

In a video message to the conference, Piot said he was "deeply disappointed" at the slow progress, partly because of lack of funding. He said investment in microbicide

development should be doubled - and even then it would still only reach about US\$150 million (euro121 million) per year.

"Given that investment in the AIDS response has risen to billions annually, this surely should be possible," he said.

Microbicides can take the form of a gel, cream, sponge or ring that releases an ingredient that can kill or deactivate HIV during intercourse.

There are currently five different products being tested on 12,000 women in South Africa alone - and thousands of women in other African nations.

Dozens of agents that could interrupt HIV transmission have so far been identified. There are also hopes that the microbicides could be used to prevent other sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

One of the products, cel-

lulose sulphate, has the potential to be a contraceptive and shield against HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. It is currently being tested for its efficacy in Nigeria, India, South Africa, Uganda and Benin, having undergone safety trials in the United States.

Henry L. Gabelnick, executive director of the U.S.-based reproductive health organization CONRAD, said there had been no problems in the trials so far.

"We're doing fine," he told The Associated Press.

Sumen Govender, clinical trials manager for the New York-based Population Council, said South African trials of another microbicide, Carragard, which coats the vaginal cells and prevents the virus from entering, should be complete by March. Final availability would depend on the speed of government approval, he said.

Much of the funding for

the research comes from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the U.S. government.

The state of the ongoing research and latest scientific developments were the focus of the conference, which is held every two years. The next one will be held in New Delhi in 2008.

WHO's Phumaphi criticized big drug companies for showing no interest in the product despite the huge potential to save lives.

"I would like to convince the pharmaceutical industry to invest in this product, which has the potential to double or triple the population protected," she said.

Trying to dismiss fears that microbicides would mainly be used in developing countries and therefore offer only low profit margins, Phumaphi cited their potential for use in contraception in wealthy countries. "There is a global demand," she said.

## Suit

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ing White voters in Mississippi.

Justice Department spokesman Eric Holland would not comment on the case, but provided stacks of documents, including the consent decree signed by Mickens, Noxubee County's chief elections officer.

Brown, a former tax preparer, served 21 months in prison in the 1990s on a felony conviction of preparing fraudulent federal income-tax returns. He retained his right to vote. The same federal judge who handled his earlier trial is now overseeing the Justice Department case.

"This case is real simple," Brown said, stretching back in a maroon chair during an interview in Mickens' office, where voter-registration records are kept. "Find me one White person that was discriminated against."

The main White person who makes the claim is Ricky Walker, the county prosecuting attorney who believes Brown recruited an opponent for him simply because he's White, an action Walker called "racist."

Walker said that when he qualified to run again in 2003, Brown brought in a Black lawyer from another part of the state to run against him.

A circuit judge found that the lawyer, Winston James Thompson III, had not established residency, and Thompson was not allowed on the ballot.

"I think he just wanted to have a person in that office that he had some control over, a Black person," Walker said.

Brown, chairman of the Noxubee County Democratic Party since 2000, said Thompson recruited himself.

Brown's defense attorney, prominent Black Republican Wilbur Colom, disagrees with Brown's political views but defends his right to speak.

"I think Ike does play race politics," Colom said. "He is a Black political leader who fights the fight like we were still in the 1970s. He doesn't recognize the progress that we have made."

But Colom criticizes the Justice Department for filing a complaint against a Black political consultant while ignoring similar behavior by White political operatives in Mississippi. "It has overtones of politics and that's the wrong road for the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department," the attorney said. "It's going to destroy their credibility the next time they ask Black people to listen to them."

Democratic state Rep. Reecy Dickson said Brown is a political celebrity who evokes strong reactions from friends and foes. Brown moved to Noxubee County in 1979 to work on Dickson's campaign for county superintendent of education and later helped her bid for the Legislature.

Asked if Brown is fair, she smiles slightly.

"The question comes down to: What is fair in politics?" Dickson said. "I heard someone say once, 'Fair died a long time ago.'"

Brown sees the Justice Department case as Whites dissatisfied with growing Black political power in east Mississippi - particularly his power. He said the lawsuit is a way to muddy his name. "It's all about voter suppression," he said.

## Your Horoscope Says... May 4-10

### ARIES

This is just the kind of time you like, so enjoy it. Family members are not busy. You can get into their heads and see what's going on. Open up your own head and let someone in. You are at your best, socially, so have some fun. A romantic bond becomes stronger.

Soul Affirmation: I love charming, positive head games.

Lucky Numbers: 33, 43, 52

### TAURUS

Spend some time thinking about mutual needs. Just because it's what you want, it may not be your lover's fond desire. Give a little to get something that you need right now - someone to be with. Save the self-importance for another week.

Soul Affirmation: I enlarge my happiness by forgetting about myself this week.

Lucky Numbers: 17, 29, 30

### GEMINI

Take the lead, especially in romantic matters. Throw modesty out the window. Be in shameless pursuit. You know that your need is great this week. Seek to satisfy it. Your lover might be surprised, but you can make the surprise a pleasant one.

Soul Affirmation: I hunt for love in all the right places.

Lucky Numbers: 29, 34, 51

### CANCER

Heads or tails! Go or stay! What to do? This week you'll find yourself pulled in two exactly opposite directions. There is no way to satisfy both pulls. Let your friends decide. Take whatever suggestion comes first.

Soul Affirmation: I let my friendships guide my way.

Lucky Numbers: 41, 47, 50

### LEO

Don't waste time thinking about the past. Sure, they were wrong, but what does it matter now? Enjoy the present. Find something good to do for the rest of the week. Avoid conflict. Nothing is so important that it needs to be resolved this week.

Soul Affirmation: This week I forgive myself for everything that has happened.

Lucky Numbers: 23, 28, 49

### VIRGO

Stop thinking about work. Sure, there are pressing matters, but they'll wait. Tap into the fun side of your personality. Get deep into that side and stay there. Don't keep pulling back to think about things that need to be fixed.

Soul Affirmation: I give my mind a big vacation this week.

Lucky Numbers: 30, 37, 42

### LIBRA

Let the pleasure principal win the battle with your sense of duty. Give yourself up to the sunshine, the fresh air, the outdoors. Stop talking and get moving. Your own motion will clear your mind of things that have been hanging on.

Soul Affirmation: I celebrate freedom of mind this week.

Lucky Numbers: 12, 38, 39

### SCORPIO

There are so many good things to do that the challenge will be in deciding what to do and what to not do. Great place to be. Count your blessings - all of them and flip a coin. What a time to be alive. Call someone. Let them decide what you should enjoy first.

Soul Affirmation: I know that my life is full of good things. I enjoy!

Lucky Numbers: 4, 29, 38

### SAGITTARIUS

Give yourself a chance to know yourself better. Let others reflect the beauty that is you, and that will give you added knowledge of yourself this week. Ask for opinions, and listen closely, making something good out of whatever is said.

Soul Affirmation: I spend the week celebrating me.

Lucky Numbers: 22, 27, 41

### CAPRICORN

You'll meet someone that you could come to adore. Make sure you've laid the groundwork because they might not be ready for all the adoration that you are ready to give. Make sure that you don't adore a bird in the bush while neglecting a bird in hand.

Soul Affirmation: I enjoy the act of adoring.

Lucky Numbers: 16, 23, 40

### AQUARIUS

Being an artist doesn't always mean painting a picture. This week apply your artistry to anything that you do. Look at life as an empty canvas upon which you have the skill to paint almost any wonderful thing that you want.

Soul Affirmation: My life itself is my greatest creation.

Lucky Numbers: 19, 20, 27

### PISCES

This week is better than last week for career goals. Think deeply about what you really want for a career. Clarity is easy to come by. Charm is an extremely effective tool for you this week. The smile is needed more than at any recent time.

Soul Affirmation: I keep my smile shining, especially at home.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 20, 30