

and methods that can be used by both men and women, including preventative drugs.

It has been a long, difficult slog to get any of these methods into effective field trials, making the recent negative results doubly disappointing. In January, two trials of the microbicide cellulose sulphate were stopped when an interim analysis suggested that the product might make women more vulnerable to HIV. The product was the third microbicide to fail in efficacy studies and the second that seemed to increase the risk of HIV. And on 12 July, a team of researchers in South Africa, the United States and Zimbabwe reported that latex diaphragms used with condoms did not protect more women from HIV than condom use alone. On 25 July, investigators of the failed cellulose sulphate trials are expected to unveil their final data analysis at the IAS meeting — a step that will very probably spell the end for that particular product.

Looking forward, there is tension in the field over how best to conduct the next microbicide trials (see *Nature* 448, 110–111; 2007). The danger is that further bad news will see funders lose their appetite for research on female-initiated prevention methods, so there is tremendous pressure to avoid more failures. This field has always been a difficult sell for policy-makers in any case: as long-time advocate Lori Heise of the Global Campaign for Microbicides says, it's about “women, vaginas and sexuality” — not topics that government officials especially want to air in public.

But developing and testing such measures will take a long time. There is no HIV vaccine in sight, either, but researchers seldom consider abandoning the quest for one. Product development is even more difficult than usual for female-initiated prevention methods, because

testing them requires dealing with issues related to intimacy, cultural expectations and interpersonal relationships. It is hard for researchers to navigate these types of issues. Some see a more thorough investigation of all the circumstances surrounding a proposed intervention as a way around this. In a declaration circulating ahead of the Sydney meeting, which begins on 22 July, hundreds of scientists are calling for 10% of all HIV programme funds to be dedicated to such approaches.

But there is already a paucity of funding for proven prevention methods, according to a June report by the Global HIV Prevention Working Group. And a study released last week found that large-scale prevention programmes are the most cost-effective (E. Marseille *et al.* *BMC Health Services Res.* 7, 108; 2007). It is clear that more resources should be directed at delivering the methods that work and at improving communication with the communities involved, to ensure both that existing prevention methods are used and that future trials will be conducted in optimal circumstances.

Dedicated researchers already know this. The principal investigators for a trial of a new microbicide gel containing the antiretroviral drug tenofovir, for instance, had extensive discussions with women before setting the dosing schedule for their drug. Such preparation is just as important as continued support for the search for good, female-initiated HIV prevention methods. With dedicated work on both fronts, researchers and advocates can be confident of finding the solutions that will control the pandemic and help women stay healthy. ■

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Dedicated to science

Hands off the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology.

What's in a name? That's one of the questions political leaders have to consider when they allocate titles to, and divisions between, government departments. The process is echoed when parliaments or other representative bodies set up committees to keep an eye on the activities of those departments.

Every nation has its own approach to this, and some parliaments, including those of France and Germany, struggle to exercise much oversight at all. The UK House of Commons and the US House of Representatives have each, in very different circumstances, evolved committees that look expressly at science and technology questions. These committees perform a valuable role. By virtue of their very names, as well as their briefs, their remit centres on scientific and technological facts. Their staff and their members tend, on the whole, to be interested in such facts. These days, with the ‘reality-based community’ under steady attack from those who prefer to base their positions on dogma rather than on hard information, that's a rare blessing.

It is true that other committees, which sometimes have more heft, also consider issues related to science and technology. The

Committee on Energy and Commerce in the House of Representatives and the Defence Committee at Westminster, for example, are both highly influential. There is an argument that discourse on scientific questions is best conducted where it matters most. But the reality in these more heavily politicized surroundings is that such discourse often does not take place at all.

It has been reported that the British government would like to wind up the Select Committee on Science and Technology and place its responsibilities in a new committee with a wider remit, dealing also with education and innovation, in line with an ongoing reorganization of the government's own departments (see page 236). This plan is doubly troubling because in Britain, where parliamentary committees are young and not especially powerful, the executive branch of the government can dictate the committee portfolios. Gordon Brown, the new prime minister, can informally tell the Leader of the House what is to be done, and it will happen.

It just seems too convenient that the science and technology select committee sometimes sheds light on inconvenient truths (such as the technical feasibility of politically attractive schemes for identity cards). There is no requirement — procedural, constitutional or in terms of precedent — for select committees to map directly on to particular government departments. If Brown wants intelligent and proactive oversight by parliament, as he has professed to do in his first few days in office, he should leave the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology well alone. ■