

Microbicides development programme: placebo vaginal gel acceptability amongst women at high-risk of HIV in Mwanza, Tanzania

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Background: The Microbicides Development Programme (MDP) conducted a feasibility study in six sites including Mwanza in preparation for a Phase III clinical trial of vaginal microbicides for the prevention of HIV transmission. Methods: Fifty-nine women at high risk of HIV/STDs, who worked in bars, guesthouses and similar facilities, were enrolled in a 4-week pilot study in September 2004 to assess acceptability of gel and study procedures. Qualitative research was conducted at the end of the study to explore sexual behaviour and gel acceptability. This involved in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 58 women participants and 10 male partners and 3 focus group discussions (FGDs) with a selection of women participants and 1 with a selection of male partners. Results: Analysis of the IDIs and the FGDs revealed that the placebo gel was acceptable to all women and men who participated in the study. Fifty-four (93%) women liked the gel for its lubricant properties and enhancement of sexual pleasure. Four (7%) women reported that gel made sex "too wet" or "slippery", and that it reduced their sexual pleasure. No men reported this. All women found the gel applicator easy and convenient to use. No harmful effects were reported or associated with gel use, although there were a few reports of a "cold" or "sticky" feeling with initial application, which lessened with continued usage. Conclusions: The placebo gel was acceptable to the women participants and their male partners offering hope that an effective vaginal microbicide will be acceptable to women and their partners in Tanzania.