

The ABC of a dreadful disease

The government needs to increase public awareness on the issue of HIV Aids, and focus on the basic formula proposed here

Health
14-17-04
News

Cutting edge

I Hassan

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Europe, India, by contrast, is under threat by HIV-1 sub-type C. In Africa, where some two-thirds of those with HIV now live (about 25 million people) and where there were a million new infectious in 2003 alone, the situation is more diverse. The continent's southern and eastern regions face a predominantly HIV-1 sub-type C epidemic. Central Africa seems a highly mixed picture - HIV-1 sub-types A, D, F, G, H, J & K. There are also over a dozen virus variants, called 'circulating recombinant forms', whose genomes have a structure that lies in between those known sub-types. They also contribute to the difficulty of developing a one-size-fits-all vaccine. At present, scientists do not know if each sub-type and variant will need its own specific vaccine or not.

Worse still, a sub-type of the virus does not stay the same, as HIV is continually evolving. The ingenuity of the adapting virus to prevailing pressures in its environments — such as the existence of a vaccine that triggers an attempt by the human body to eradicate it - owes itself to an enzyme called 'reverse transcription'. This enzyme is essential for viral replication but it makes mistakes as

takes, together with an extremely high rate of virus production, help HIV to produce an enormous family of genetically varied offsprings. From all this it is obvious that it is not just one vaccine is required but thousands. That is an impossible task.

That being the case, unless we devise some other 'vaccine' to counter the onslaught of HIV, the scenario before us is that of doomsday. The only other 'vaccine' available to us is to defeat the virus by using our intelligence. And the first step in this strategy is to inform and teach the populace what HIV is, how it spreads and how it can be avoided.

AIDS is caused by a virus, HIV, that did not exist until about 20 years ago. Once it made its sudden appearance, it spread like wild fire particularly in sub-Sahara, Africa and other countries in America, Europe, Thailand, India and elsewhere.

Most humans have an acquired immunity against disease so that when infected, the body's in-built immunity fights the invader and gets rid of it. But when a new invader appears which the body's defences don't know, then there is nothing that can be done and the new invader wins hands down. HIV lowers the body's resistance to all diseases previously encountered. If an Aids-affected person (whose body's defence system has been destroyed) gets pneumonia or typhoid, the new infection will triumph, as the patient's immune system will have been rendered inactive.

or AIDS is prevention. The most common mode of being infected is through sexual activity. And the only 'vaccine' against AIDS is what I call A B C!

I shall explain. HIV enters the human body through the slightest break in the skin from where the virus will circulate and multiply. In sexual activity, minor lesions occur normally. A partner infected with HIV will transmit the virus to the other so the only vaccine against Aids is Abstinence. Ideally, the best protection is to abstain from all sexual activity. Since it is not possible to be a Roman Catholic priest or a Brahmachari, the next best thing is to limit oneself to one partner. This is the B factor (Be faithful) of the ABC formula. If either of these two factors is not practiced, the only way one can protect oneself is to use a condom - C. Neither party can be infected. It is like going into battle with armour on.

It is this last lesson that must be taught assiduously. The recent government advertisement avoids mentioning it and instead advises using a new blade! If one is using one's own shaving unit then using the same blade cannot cause infection. The only time it is necessary to avoid a razor is with a barber. In fact, it is best not to go to a barber because his scissors, blades and other instruments are not sterilised. But above all, let's keep in mind the A B C (Abstain, Be faithful, and use a Condom) formula. Failing that, over a period of time, HIV will have

Health

The placebo effect

Dawn
7/11/05

IT had to come sooner or later — the government is thinking of banning placebos, the drug that 50 per cent of the people take if they become part of a medical study.

In a far-reaching trial, it was found that people over 85 who took placebos instead of arthritis drugs had four times the chance of having acid stomach.

Until recently, doctors gave placebo prescriptions indiscriminately without worry about the long-term results. It was not illegal, and rarely caused nausea, cramps or dizziness.

Some people don't know what a placebo is. It looks exactly like a real drug, but does not contain an active drug ingredient. If taken, you could have what we in the medical world call the "placebo effect." People believe

they have taken a real pill, and they swear they have been cured.

The most famous illustration of the "effect" occurred recently, when a group of depressed people were told they were taking an antidepressant. Fifty per cent didn't know they were taking a placebo. They recovered as quickly as the 50 per cent who were taking the real thing. But then the people conducting the experiment made the mistake of telling them they had taken placebos. As soon as the placebo-takers found this out, they went back into their depressions.

The placebo study came about when a stomach doctor at Johns Hopkins noticed that more people over 85 had indigestion problems. The senior citizen volunteers said they had all taken placebos at one time or another. The doctor didn't tell them that

half of the people would have a sugar pill slipped into their oatmeal. The 85-year-olds complained that when they jogged, did heavy lifting or drove more than 90 mph, they belched.

The doctor concluded that placebos were the fly in the ointment. Despite its questionable effect, as soon as the results were put on television, the price of placebos went through the roof. People sold Pfizer and Merck to buy placebos. Placebos, like flu shots, were hard to get. A black market for them sprang up. Even worse, kids started taking them because they were told placebos could get you high. They could become addictive with long-term use.

Studies have shown that people will lie and steal to satisfy their craving. Some will order placebos from Web sites.

As doctors have said, "The

new study is a wakeup call."

One doctor added, "Everything that happens in this country is a wakeup call."

When reporters asked him what he meant, he replied, "I have no idea, but I hope to get a grant from NIH for saying it."

What can you do to safeguard your placebos? Keep them out of the hands of children.

If you are on Medicare, get them from your local drugstore. If you are not on Medicare, drive up to Canada and buy them for half the price.

Take placebos with meals, and don't chew them.

Until we have further data, the FDA will still let you take placebos, as long as it contains this warning on the bottle: "Do not take if you are pregnant or are taking steroids. It is later than you think."

—Dawn/Tribune Media Services