Don’t overlook condoms for HIV prevention
P J Feldblum, M J Welsh, M J Steiner

The attention of the international community is being diverted from the hard work of primary prevention

The 2002 international AIDS conference highlighted tremendous clamour for antiretroviral therapy, while little attention was paid to primary prevention by behavioural intervention. The international community seems diverted from the hard work of primary prevention, but progress on treatment access must not come at the expense of prevention by behaviour change, including condom promotion. Condoms are effective for HIV prevention. Targeted condom programmes can be extremely cost effective. The provision of condoms to those most in need remains hindered by multiple hurdles, including provider bias, ready physical access, and myth/rumour. Still, hopes for better access to HIV treatment in the future cannot divert us from the prevention needs of the present. We urge donors to do more now to learn how best to promote condoms as part of a package of comprehensive primary HIV prevention through behaviour change.

The number of condoms procured by leading donors has diminished over the past 5 years, and was no greater in 2000 than it was in 1990. About 3.5 million new HIV infections occurred worldwide in 2001. The number of HIV infected people in Africa has approximately doubled since 1996. How should we assign priorities in our response to the pandemic? At the 2002 international AIDS conference in Barcelona, the greatest clamour was for antiretroviral therapy (ART); the loudest advocacy was that lack of access to ART; the loudest clamour was for international AIDS conference in Barce-

...
condoms, ultimately resulting in low uptake and inconsistent use in many areas.2 The best way to attack these problems is still unclear, given conflicting research results from behavioural interventions5 that are in any event so intensive as to be irrelevant to the problems of developing countries.

CONCLUSIONS
Promoting condoms is undeniably difficult, yet hopes for better access to HIV treatment in the future cannot divert us from the prevention needs of the present. Vast numbers of adolescents and young adults enter the sexual and reproductive arena annually. Condoms are efficacious and, broadly speaking, currently available. We can and must make rapid progress on the fundamental necessity for making condoms readily available when and where people need them. Reaching men with effective condom promotion messages is key in communities where sexual decision making is in male hands. Dominated high risk groups must remain a key target in nascent, concentrated, or generalised epidemics, even as we make strides to eliminate barriers to use in the general population.

To strike a better balance between prevention and treatment, we urge donors to do more now to learn how best to promote condom use as part of a package of comprehensive primary HIV prevention through behaviour change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Partial support for this work was provided by Family Health International (FHI) with funds from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The views expressed in this article, however, do not necessarily reflect those of USAID. FHI is an international non-profit organisation that conducts research and provides technical assistance in health, family planning, STIs, and AIDS.

Sex Transm Infect 2003;79:268–269

Authors' affiliations
P J Feldblum, M J Welsh, M J Steiner, Family Health International, PO Box 13950, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709, USA.

Correspondence to: Paul Feldblum, Family Health International, PO Box 13950, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709, USA; pfeldblum@fhi.org

REFERENCES