

Aids breakthrough hailed

DAILY NEWS / 30 NOVEMBER 2018, 1:30PM / ANELISA KUBHEKA



Professor Salim Abdool Karim at the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa in Durban, which is testing a method to prevent HIV infection in young women. Motshwari Mofokeng African News Agency (ANA)

Durban- Ahead of World Aids Day, a Durban research facility has announced a major breakthrough in preventing new infections, which is just months away from human trials.

The Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA (Caprisa) has done trials on animals using a matchstick-sized implant containing Tenofovir Alafenamide (Taff), a more potent version of the ARV drug Tenofovir.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim, of Caprisa's scientific advisory board, said they had previously showed that the drug protected women from being infected with HIV if used in a gel form.

However, the gel was difficult to use and women did not like using it.

And although Tenofovir was available in a World Health Organisation-recommended tablet, it was difficult for young women to take them every day.

"We have found that not many women are keen on doing this. We are working on something completely new now. We are taking Tenofovir Elafenamide and putting this in an implant. We took the idea from the contraceptive implant.

"We tested it in dogs and mice and it looks like it works, so next year we are going to start testing in humans.

“Once we have seen that it’s safe and we can use it, we want to see if it can prevent HIV in humans,” he said.

Karim said this would be effective in young women who were HIV-negative because they were at higher risk of infection. The implant would be placed in an arm and prevent HIV for a year before having to be replaced.

Karim said at the end of 2017 it was estimated that there were close to 37million people living with HIV globally, and it was estimated that nearly a million people had died of Aids last year.

Karim said while major strides had been made with ARVs, there were still 5 000 new infections every day, around the world. “That’s how severe the epidemic is. It translates to about 1.8million new infections in a year. Africa accounts for 70% of the global HIV epidemic, and South Africa accounts for about 18-19%. One out of five people living with HIV in the world live here in South Africa.”

Karim said the highest rates of HIV were still in young women between the ages of 15 and 24.

“What is concerning is that young boys in the same age range have very little HIV. Two years ago when we described the cycle of HIV transmission, we said that young girls are mostly being infected by men in their late 20s and 30s,” he said.

The Treatment Action Campaign’s Patrick Mdlletshe hailed Caprisa’s innovation.

“We have learnt from previous research that we can’t treat our way out of HIV - prevention is key. Previous research also showed that young people don’t use condoms. This was apparent from the infection and pregnancy rates. There are 2 350 new infections in South Africa every month - and KwaZulu-Natal is leading the pack,” he said.