New studies provide hope in slowing spread of disease

Vaginal tract infection increased the risk

In the first study, comprising 9 HIV individuals, a genetic code of HIV from each of 1,089 HIV-positive people was analysed to better understand the role of HIV in a urban and rural community in South Africa.

It revealed a “cycle of HIV transmission” driven by high rates of new HIV infections in adolescents and young women from men on average eight years older.

Many of the men were also partners of young women who had HIV prevalence rates that exceeded 60%.

In a second study investigating the genetic code of vaginal bacteria of 116 South African women, those with an overgrowth of Prevotella melanogenica had an almost 11 times higher chance of acquiring HIV than those with low levels of an absence of this bacterium.

In the third study, an analysis of 3,336 genital bacteria from 688 women showed that the three out of five women who had a healthy lactobacillus-dominant vaginal tract had a lower rate of pre-exposure prophylaxis being effective in preventing HIV, while those who had lactobacillus dominance showed little benefit from the drug.

Follow-up laboratory studies showed that Gardnerella vaginalis, which predominates in the vaginal tract in lactobacillus levels, is an essential contributor to the development of vaginal disease.

Since the Prevotella and Gardnerella bacteria raise the vaginal pH, a readily available, quick, simple and cheap test can be used to ascertain which women require treatment for bacterial vaginosis, an imbalance in the vaginal bacteria, Capres said.

“Combining these interventions could have a significant impact on the spread of HIV in women,” she added.

Responding to the findings, the World Health Organisation director-general Dr Margaret Chan said young women in Africa had missed out with others had benefited from the global progress made against AIDS.

UNAIDS executive director Michel Sidibé said: “The new studies provide a way to HIV prevention that could help rectify this imbalance.”

The new evidence takes us a step closer to very high rates of HIV among young women and adolescents, the UNAIDS programme mid-term review report said.

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