

ECHO has put contraception back on the agenda. It has reinforced the fact that women are exposed to high levels of sexually transmitted infections

HELEN REES
Professor and Executive Director of Wits RHI

OPINION

Good news for women using Depo

No link to higher HIV infection rates for women on contraceptive – study

IDA JOOSTE and NTOMBOZUKO KRAAI

WHEN the results of a \$50 million four-country clinical trial are released, expect the science community to sit up and take notice. In HIV and family planning circles, there had been almost 30 years of uncertainty over whether the most widely used contraceptive in Africa would make it more likely for women to become HIV infected – or not. Only a randomised clinical trial could clear up the uncertainty, because only this form of research is designed to answer this question about DMPA (Depo-Provera, which is a three-month hormonal contraceptive injection) and any of the other contraceptives in the study for that matter.

Leading up to the results announcement, there was a sense of impatience to finally hear whether the link with HIV some studies suggested points to something definitive or whether other factors may have been responsible for higher rates of HIV in women using “Depo”, as it is widely known.

The ECHO study set out to find out. Almost 8 000 women who were sexually active, but did not want to fall pregnant, were randomly assigned one of three contraceptive methods: Depo, an upper-arm implant (also hormone based) or a copper device inserted in the uterus.

The results were announced at the 9th South African Aids conference in Durban on Thursday: the trial found no significant difference in the rates of HIV infection among the three groups.

“Good news, I now feel confident to go back on Depo”, said Lungi Langa, Isolezwe’s health journalist attending the symposium. And within seconds of saying that, Langa realised that was only part of the story.

“For a moment we almost exhaled in a sigh of relief,” said Jacque Wambui, an HIV prevention advocate based in Kenya, who is on the Global Community Advisory Group (GCAG) to share stakeholders’ concerns, “but the relief is short-lived

because the trial was a window into so many things we have to address.”

“ECHO is about everything that comes after the results. And that’s a lot,” said Yvette Raphael, who is also on the GCAG group. “We are using the results to re-energise HIV prevention. We must now ensure that women are in the centre of anything to do with their bodies. The craziness that treats women like programmes must stop.

“At the moment at public health facilities, there’s one place for family planning and there’s another for HIV prevention and care. They must have a wide range of

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HEALTH JOURNALIST

contraception options to choose from. We must ensure that this unacceptable high rate of HIV infections comes down. Our marching orders are clear.”

“They are right,” said Professor Helen Rees, executive director of Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute and a member of the ECHO management committee that led the study.

“ECHO has put contraception back on the agenda. It has reinforced the fact that women are exposed to high levels of sexually transmitted infections. In the study period, almost 4% of the participants became HIV infected across all of the study arms. We now know this has nothing to do with any of the contraceptive methods, but it is valuable data to take us out of the lull around HIV.”
It’s a sharp nudge to work harder to

protect women from HIV infection.

Discussing ECHO results, we concluded that the only good news is that we have evidence. The rest of the news will still unfold. The World Health Organisation has committed to fast-tracking new guidance on contraception.

At the conference, deputy director general at the Department of Health Dr Yogan Pillay faced pressure about South Africa’s poor performance in rolling out PrEP, the once-a-day pill that prevents HIV infection. This is a most urgent story.

“Journalists and advocates, you are the watchdogs,” said Thandekile Essien, who oversees good participatory practice in trials at Wits RHI. “That PrEP is not more widely used is a crying shame. You cannot stop writing and talking about it. We can prevent HIV.”

For women in the trial countries and everywhere where there is inequality, the story is just starting. Group members and family planning and HIV advocates have had their ears to the ground since the start of the ECHO study in December 2018 and kept hearing that women want to be able to choose what method they use.

Ahead of results a call for accountability and action on the ECHO trial was released that made it clear: regardless of the results, ECHO presents a moment to change the narrative.

Putting aside the excitement she had about Depo, journalist Langa has started mapping out the stories that should follow. Stories that push for the marriage between family planning and HIV services. Stories that work towards HIV prevention. Stories that take ECHO out of science publications into the bedroom.

It must be good news for women. This week. And for the rest of their lives.

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ALARMING HIV INFECTION RATE

Statistics show 1200 girls between the ages of 15 and 24 are infected with HIV every week in South Africa. According to the Higher Education and Training HIV/Aids Programme (HEAIDS), although the infection rate had dropped from 2000 per week three years ago, the figures still remained unacceptably high. | IOL

HEALTH



CHAIRPERSON of the Aids Conference in 2019 Professor Refilwe Phaswana-Mafuya. | ZANELE ZULU African News Agency (ANA)

Youth bolstered in HIV fight

OLIVER METH

THE eThekweni Declaration adopted at the 9th South African Aids Conference this week has put the youth at the centre of its fight against the epidemic.

The four-day conference held in Durban ended on Friday and a number of commitments were agreed to by the government, scientists and civil society.

Among the resolutions adopted that formed the eThekweni Declaration included developing programmes to encourage the active participation of youth in the HIV response, investment in research, addressing inequalities particularly gender-based and empowering young women and girls.

According to Doctors Without Borders, incidences of HIV have decreased among women aged 15 to 29 from 2.9% to 1.2%, in the Eshowe district, the highest in the province, but the national figure remained high and pointed to the continued risk faced by adolescent girls and young women.

Deputy President David Mabuza, who also serves as South African National AIDS Council chairperson accepted the declaration handed

CONFERENCE FACTS

- It was also confirmed at the conference that:
- ◆ Progress towards the 2030 global epidemic control targets was not adequate.
 - ◆ Key population and vulnerable groups remain underdiagnosed and undertreated with higher mortality and morbidity rates.
 - ◆ The health system was overburdened resulting in service delivery challenges.

over to him at the closing plenary.

“There is again a need to revive the sense of urgency, political will, compassion, transparency and accountability towards reinvigoration of the HIV response,” read the declaration.

Conference chairperson Professor Refilwe Phaswana-Mafuya said the Fourth Industrial Revolution and innovative interventions needed to be embraced in the process as a means of stopping the spread of HIV.

Phaswana-Mafuya said “instead of

having young people at a physical location, you can virtually connect with them. This is one of the pivotal innovations that could help given the magnitude of the epidemic among youth which is rising”.

“We want to strengthen political will, we want to remove any sense of complacency, that might be there, we want to strengthen our health information system and put young people at the centre of the epidemic and reduce the number of new infections,” added Phaswana-Mafuya.

It was confirmed at the conference, that about 7.9 million people in South Africa were living with HIV and more than 4.4 million were on treatment.

Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa’s Professor Salim Abdool Karim added that the fight against the epidemic was far from done as more than 5 000 new infections were contracted around the world daily.

During the closing plenary session, Mabuza reiterated government’s commitment in the fight against HIV.

He said “as government we are ready and willing to hold hands with you, walk every mile with you until our total victory over HIV”.