

EXPERTS URGE SHIFT IN HIV TREATMENT AT GLOBAL SUMMIT



VANCOUVER: (Left-right) Michel Sidibe of UN AIDS, Julio Montaner of the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV and Chris Beyrer, President, International AIDS Society address the media at a press conference in Vancouver, Canada. —AFP

VANCOUVER: AIDS researchers released a call to action Sunday for a worldwide shift in HIV treatment, to providing medication immediately after diagnosis instead of first watching for signs of illness to appear. "Immediate antiretroviral (ARV) treatment more than doubles an individual's prospects of staying healthy and surviving," said the Vancouver Consensus, a statement signed by leading AIDS scientists and officials at the opening of the International AIDS Society (IAS) conference, in this western Canadian city.

Scientists said new research to be presented at the conference shows immediate treatment prevents infected people from passing on the infection, while other reports showcase that preventive therapy "can effectively protect people at risk of infection through prophylactic use," said the statement, signed by heads of the International AIDS society, UNAIDS and funding agencies. The last global AIDS meeting in Vancouver, in 1996, marked a breakthrough: research showing that triple-combination antiretroviral treatment worked.

The findings meant that instead of an

HIV diagnosis being an almost-certain death sentence, it became possible for an infected person to live a normal life while on treatment. "Vancouver is going to make history again," said conference co-chair and researcher Julio Montaner. "Because prevention will be definitely established at this conference as the new standard of care." Other research will show it is possible to decrease HIV transmission rates by 95 percent. "We now have the opportunity of ending the pandemic," said Montaner, challenging politicians to support treatment.

"Leaders of the world, you're either with us or against us. We know the evidence. It's up to you as to whether you will be counted as doing the right thing." He read out a letter to the conference from the Vatican promoting treatment and prevention. "If the pope gets it, everybody else should," Montaner told a news conference prior to the conference opening Sunday night. Michel Sidibe of UNAIDS said investments in HIV diagnosis and treatment pay off, and noted the world had beat its goal of having 15 million of the world's 35 million people diagnosed with HIV in treatment by 2015. —AFP

GLOBAL CONFERENCE PUSHES PLAIN CIGARETTE PACKAGING

MINISTERS AIM TO STUB OUT HIGH SMOKING RATES

PARIS: Ministers from 10 countries gathered in Paris yesterday to launch a common drive to introduce plain cigarette packaging with the aim of stubbing out high smoking rates among young people. Representatives from nations as far afield as New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and Uruguay issued a joint statement saying that "significant scientific proof justified ... plain cigarette packaging".

The ministers said plain packaging had been shown to "reduce the attractiveness of the product for consumers, especially amongst women and young people" as well as increase the effectiveness of health warnings on packets. Hosting the conference, French Health Minister Marisol Touraine said the aim was "a world without tobacco"

and that "the generation that is born today should be a generation without tobacco".

She told French radio that smoking killed 78,000 people each year in France and that eight million smokers worldwide would die each year by 2030 if nothing were done. According to the World Health Organization, one person currently dies every six seconds due to tobacco-nearly six million people each year. "My target, with plain packaging, is not long-term smokers but preventing young people from starting to smoke and for these people the plain packaging has an impact," said the minister. Several countries have recently passed legislation to introduce plain cigarette packaging-laws that have met with fierce opposition from the powerful tobacco lobby.

Australia was the first to introduce plain packaging legislation in 2012 with Ireland, France and Britain following shortly afterwards. In Australia, some studies have shown that the rate of young smokers has dropped following the introduction of plain packaging. The tobacco industry counters that high tobacco excise duty is the reason for the decline. Britain and France are poised to introduce plain packaging from next year. France has one of the highest rates of under-16 smokers in Europe and, in addition to the plain packaging measures, Touraine also announced last year that smoking would be banned in playgrounds and in cars with passengers under 12. Tobaccoists in France staged protests in several regions against the measures. —AFP



SPACE: Photo shows an artist's impression of Rosetta's lander Philae (back view) on the surface of comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko. Philae has fallen "silent" on the surface of a comet zipping towards the Sun, said ground controllers on July 19, 2015 who fear it may have shifted out of radio reach. —AFP

COMET PROBE PHILAE 'SILENT', GROUND CONTROL CONCERNED

PARIS: Europe's comet-riding robot lab Philae has fallen "silent", said ground controllers yesterday who feared it may have shifted on the rough, alien surface, out of radio range. The latest data suggested the probe, perched on a comet streaking towards the Sun, may no longer be in line of contact with its orbiting mothership, Rosetta, which relays its messages to Earth, they said. "In the telemetry received, we have observed signs that Philae could have moved and that its antennas are thus perhaps more concealed or their orientation might have changed," said project leader Stephan Ulamec of the German Aerospace Center (DLR). The washing machine-sized lander may have been dislodged by the gas and dust blasting from Comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko as it draws ever closer to the Sun.

The data also indicated one of Philae's two transmission units appeared not to be working properly, and a receiver was damaged, said a statement from the European Space Agency (ESA) which described the lander's status as "uncertain". "At the moment we have some concerns about this," DLR spokeswoman Manuela Braun told AFP. "We are trying to understand." Philae, which touched down on 67P on November 12 last year, went into hibernation three days later, and woke up again on June 13 for intermittent communications with Earth. It has since called home eight times, the last on July 9 when critical data was uploaded from Philae's prodding and probing of its alien home.

But since then, the robot probe has gone "back to silent mode," said the DLR statement. Efforts are being made to contact Philae, possibly by adjusting Rosetta's orbit to try and find a better connection.

But moving the lander itself is not an

option for now. "At the moment, we don't move it, because we don't want to irritate it," said Braun. "We want to understand the situation before changing anything which might result in a worse situation." There has been an added complication: Rosetta has had to be moved into a further orbit as its star-reading navigation system was being confused by the dust particles streaming out of the comet.

'Not given up'

Philae touched down on November 12 last year after a 10-year journey piggy-backing on Rosetta. The landing was bumpy-the tiny lab bounced several times on the craggy surface before ending up near a crater rim on uneven terrain, deprived of sunlight to replenish its battery. Philae had enough onboard power to send home data from about 60 hours of tests conducted with eight of its 10 instruments, before going into standby mode on November 15. But the lander's power pack is being recharged as 67P zips toward the Sun at nearly 34 kilometers per second.

Scientists had hoped for another opportunity to switch on Philae's instruments, including a drill for collecting a sub-surface sample. Comets are frozen balls of dust, ice and gas left over from the Solar System's formation some 4.6 billion years ago. Some experts believe they smashed into our infant planet, providing it with precious water and the chemical building blocks for life. ESA and the DLR stressed they have "not given up" on Philae. "There have been several times when we feared that the lander would not switch back on, but it has repeatedly taught us otherwise," said Ulamec. Comet 67P is approaching perihelion-its closest point to the Sun at about 186 million km (116 million miles) — on August 13.—AFP



MONTGOMERY: Tal Cohen (from left); his wife Giedre Cohen, 37, of Calabasas, Calif; Carrie Richardson, 34, and Mary Salter, of Montgomery, Ala chat during a break at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference in Washington. —AP

FAMILIES AFFECTED BY ALZHEIMER'S SEEK BETTER TREATMENT

WASHINGTON: Alzheimer's has ravaged generations of Dean DeMoe's family - his grandmother, father, siblings - all in their 40s and 50s. DeMoe himself inherited the culprit gene mutation and at 53, the North Dakota man volunteers for a drug study he hopes one day will end the family's burden. International scientists gathering in Washington for a conference this week express cautious optimism that they may finally be on the right track to fight Alzheimer's, a disease that already affects more than 5 million people in the United States and is expected to more than double by 2050 as the population ages.

Families like DeMoe's with the very rarest form of Alzheimer's, young and inherited, hold crucial clues to fighting this brain-destroying disease in everyone. On Saturday, researchers for the first time brought together dozens of these families - patients, patients-to-be and their healthy loved ones - from as far as Australia and Britain to meet face to face. They shared advice about when their children should undergo gene testing to learn their own fate, and they got an unusual opportunity to grill government and drug company officials about why it's taking so long to find a good treatment.

Downstream effects

"Finally, I got to talk to other people who are going through the same thing," said DeMoe, of Thompson, North Dakota, who with four other siblings inherited the family's bad gene. One sister was spared. His wife, Deb, said he experiences early memory changes known as mild cognitive impairment, but DeMoe still holds a job with an oil company and said, "I don't dwell on it." Families' first question: Why not try to fix the gene defect that causes this form of Alzheimer's instead of targeting its downstream effects? Why, asked others, can't desperate families get faster access to exper-

imental drugs, as AIDS patients once did?

"It's time to ease our anguish," said Tal Cohen of Calabasas, California. At age 37, his wife, Giedre, already is in the mild-to-moderate stage of Alzheimer's. He emerged hopeful that researchers are considering creative ways to speed that access. "We don't have any more time to wait and see," he said. Alzheimer's usually strikes older adults, affecting about 1 in 9 people age 65 or over. Less than 1 percent of cases worldwide are the autosomal dominant form, caused by inheriting a gene with a particular mutation that triggers the disease well before the senior years.

Children of an affected parent have a 50 percent chance of inheriting their family's bad gene. But if they do, they almost always get sick about the same time their parent did. Many of these families are part of the Dominantly Inherited Alzheimer Network (DIAN) study that monitors the health of family gene carriers and their healthy relatives in several countries. Recently, it showed that silent changes in the brain can precede the first memory problems by 20 years.

High-risk people

Now scientists think the best hope against Alzheimer's is to treat high-risk people long before symptoms appear, aiming to at least stall the disease if not prevent it. On Sunday, researchers at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference reported possible new ways to predict who will get sick with the more common late-onset Alzheimer's - vital to testing such treatments - and a single test probably won't be enough, said Johns Hopkins University neuroscientist Marilyn Albert.

Tracking about 350 people starting in middle age, Albert's team found a combination of tests predicted development of mild cognitive impairment within five years. They include a spinal tap

to measure toxic levels of Alzheimer's hallmark amyloid and tau proteins; MRI scans to detect shrinking brain regions; and two standard memory assessments. The combination isn't ready for doctors' offices, but should help drug companies tell who to enroll in early-stage treatment studies, she said. Scientists at VU University Medical Center in Amsterdam found another protein, named neurogranin, in spinal fluid. It may signal that connections called synapses are dying, making it harder for brain cells to communicate.

Second DIAN study

Researchers at the University of Alberta, Canada, are beginning to hunt a saliva test for earlier markers of cognitive decline. But knowing who is destined for Alzheimer's and approximately when it will strike makes rare families such as DeMoe's especially critical for research. A second DIAN study now is testing whether either of two experimental drugs might give those gene carriers more symptom-free years by fighting buildup of sticky amyloid in the brain. That study soon will expand to test additional drugs. "The goal here really is to get drugs approved to help everyone," said Dr Randall Bateman of Washington University in St Louis, who oversees the DIAN drug study.

Dean DeMoe came to the meeting with his wife, healthy sister and two of his three children. He wishes researchers could have revealed if those drugs are working, but they won't know for several years. Meanwhile, his two oldest children, in their 20s, had gene testing as part of health-tracking research but chose not to be told the results until they are older or protective drugs come along. His teenager thinks she will make the same choice. DeMoe pins his hopes on the drug study. "It might not do good for me," he said, "but it's important for my family and for everyone." —AP

8,000 HIV PATIENTS AT RISK IN EAST UKRAINE

VANCOUVER: Some 8,000 people with HIV in war-torn eastern Ukraine face a critical shortage of medicine and their supply will run out in mid-August unless a blockade is lifted, a UN AIDS envoy has warned. Speaking to AFP ahead of the International AIDS Society (IAS) conference, which opened Sunday, Michel Kazatchkine called on key nations to intervene as soon as possible. "I am calling on the United States, Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia to do something," said Kazatchkine, the UN Secretary General's special envoy for AIDS in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

He said 8,000 patients are "caught in the political crossfire between the Ukrainian government and Russian-supported fighters" because they need both antiretroviral treatments and opioids, which are now blocked at border

check points. The looming crisis is centered in the mostly Russian-speaking Lugansk and Donetsk regions. The area once housed 25 percent of Ukraine's HIV-positive population, but thousands have ready fled, said Kazatchkine.

The 8,000 who remain are mainly injection drug users whose addictions are being treated with opioid substitution therapy (OST), and who are also taking antiretroviral drugs to keep their HIV infections under control. He said the treatments are already paid for and the aid group Doctors Without Borders has pledged to deliver and oversee treatment. But Ukraine will not allow the drugs to be shipped and argues the opioids require armed convoys, said Kazatchkine. Russia bans the use of opioids to help wean addicts off drug addiction. —AFP