

## Herpes medication does not reduce HIV transmission

An article published in the June 2009 edition of the SACEMA Quarterly reported on the positive association between genital herpes (most often caused by Herpes Simplex Virus type 2 (HSV-2)) and HIV acquisition (1). It has been argued that HSV-2 could have a major role in fuelling the spread of HIV and that significant numbers of HIV infections could potentially be averted if HSV-2 could either be prevented or suppressed. However, more evidence has become available that current treatment of HSV-2 does not reduce the risk of HIV transmission. A randomized, placebo-controlled trial of a drug widely used as a safe and effective treatment to suppress HSV-2 (acyclovir) has been conducted in 3,408 African couples. In all couples only one of the partners was seropositive for HIV-1 and that partner also had HSV-2. The study took place at 14 sites in seven countries in eastern and southern Africa (Botswana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia). Researcher Guy De Bruyn who was part of the study team indicated to SACEMA that “the ‘Partners in Prevention’ trial was the largest discordant couples study undertaken up till now”. The study found that

daily acyclovir therapy reduced the occurrence of genital ulcers due to HSV-2 (by 73%). Furthermore, acyclovir reduced the average amount of HIV in the blood (by 40%), which is in agreement with results of earlier trials. Although the modest reduction in HIV viral load decreased HIV disease progression, a finding similar to that of prior trials, it did not reduce the risk of transmission of HIV-1. De Bruyn further said that “future interventions will need to provide greater reductions of HIV viral load if they are to have a transmission benefit”.

### Reference list

1. Tarnaud C, Lissouba P, Auvert B. Transmission probability of HIV and Herpes Simplex Virus. SACEMA Quarterly, issue June 2009. [[http://www.sacemaquarterly.com/magazines.php?page=detailview&p\\_id=11&d\\_id=24](http://www.sacemaquarterly.com/magazines.php?page=detailview&p_id=11&d_id=24)] Accessed February 25, 2010.
2. Celum C, Wald A, Lingappa JR, et al. Acyclovir and transmission of HIV-1 from persons infected with HIV-1 and HSV-2. *N Engl J Med.* 2010;362(5):427-39.