

tional Assembly.
The long-stalled law aims to regulate international adoptions. Detractors of the current system say it operates as a lucrative busi-

gites to induce the parents to sell their child's natural adoption follows 1 adoptions to t after widespre

July 10 - Aug 12 2002: 5.
July 4 - 17 2003: 5

elsewhere [take another chance] in Cambodia where the rules are more easily bent," the report said. The body within MoSALVY

he said, explaining that those codes contain provisions for trafficking and adoption, but contradict UNICEF's draft adoption law.

AIDS drug trial gets green light from ethics board

BY MICHAEL COREN

The country's ethics board has approved the first trial of an HIV-prevention drug, likely clearing the way for the study to begin before the end of the year.

Julian Elliott, an advisor at the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STIs (NCHADS), said the trial would test the effectiveness of tenofovir, an anti-retroviral drug (ARV), to prevent HIV infections among up to 800 sex workers recruited for the study.

He said participants would receive a daily dose of either the drug or a placebo and a "standard prevention package" includ-

ing counseling, condoms and STD screening. Anyone who contracts the virus during the trial will also receive long-term ARV treatment.

"There is an ethical responsibility to see that people infected during the study have access to adequate care and treatment," he said.

The study, conducted in partnership with University of California San Francisco in the US and the University of New South Wales in Australia, is developing informed consent procedures and recruiting volunteers. It will take at least two years before any results are published.

The largely unsuccessful global effort to prevent HIV infec-

tion has to date employed mainly vaccines, microbicides and medications. But tenofovir, part of a new class of drugs, is among the most promising possibilities.

The drug, manufactured by pharmaceutical firm Gilead, is affordable and widely available in combination drug therapy.

This study, along with three others set to start in Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon, will be the first to evaluate the drug for HIV prevention. Studies found it to be highly effective in animals, but have not confirmed that result in humans.

Cambodia has one of the highest HIV infection rates in Asia with 157,000 infected people. Al-

though prevalence rates have dropped from a high of 3.3 percent in 1998 to 2.6 percent, the disease has spread to a wider cross-section of society.

"The epidemic has evolved," said Kim Green, an AIDS specialist with CARE Cambodia. "Now the men who have been more sexually active are transmitting it to their wives and, through them, more children."

For most, the health care response has been inadequate. Fewer than 1,000 of an estimated 10,000 AIDS patients here receive

ARV treatment, said Jennifer Hines, medical director at the Center of Hope hospital.

"The problem is quite huge compared to what we're doing now," she said.

If tenofovir is proven effective, it could be a major boon to the country, said Dr Ly Ponh Sun, an NCHADS official and one of the principal investigators of the study.

"Condoms were proven long ago to be effective," he said. "But this will fill in the gap [in prevention] and provide more options to people, especially women."



<Above> Phnom Penh Post July 4 -17 2003 p5

nounced water releases from the first of the Yali Falls series of dams, built by Electricity of Vietnam. Since the Yali Falls 720MW dam began generating in 2000, Sesan

north-east Cambodia. The MRC, responding to questions, said the government had said "there have been

years ago has

MARCH 26 - APR 8 2004: 4

of the Mekong, at Dachaoshan and Manwan in the southwestern province of Yunnan, and has plans to build at least six more.

Cambodia dam will come from the World Bank or Asian Development Bank, which are both longtime proponents of large hydro development in the Mekong basin.

Sex workers threaten to block Bill Gates HIV study

BY EMILY WATT

A study to test a possible HIV prevention medicine is raising concerns among Cambodian sex workers, who say the program poses risks to their health and offers no compensation.

The research, funded by Microsoft mogul Bill Gates, will test the drug tenofovir as a potential protection against HIV. The possibility of finding a pill that can safely prevent HIV infection is causing a ripple among the international community as currently no HIV prevention medicine exists.

The Ministry of Health's National Centre for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STIs (NCHADS) is recruiting 960 sex workers to take part in the one-year study. Researchers say testing is due to begin in May.

Sihanoukville

Cambodia has the highest prevalence of HIV infection in Southeast Asia. Five out of every 100 sex workers in Cambodia are infected with HIV annually, the center's research revealed.

But the prostitutes' collective, Women's Network for Unity (WNU), is concerned there is no protection for participants who may suffer side-effects from taking the medication.

WNU is demanding insurance to cover possible side-effects from the drug for up to 30 years after the study is completed. "If the drug manufacturer doesn't give us insurance... we won't agree to take the drug," a WNU spokesperson said.

WNU is holding a conference on March 29 to discuss whether they should take part. Over 1000 sex workers and representatives from women's rights NGOs are

expected to attend. "If they insure us for 20 to 30 years, we will be happy," the spokesperson said.

NCHADS said there is no funding to provide insurance.

Tenofovir is already used around the world as an approved treatment for HIV. Known rates of side-effects are comparatively low, and are mostly digestive complaints — nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

But the effectiveness and side-effects of taking the drug as a prophylaxis are unknown and two similar studies are planned in Africa and in America to evaluate this.

NCHADS researcher Vonthanak Saphonn said Cambodia was selected as a location for the research due to the prevalence of HIV infection. "We really need to get this study done," he said. "Sex workers

are the most vulnerable group."

Saphonn said although there was no health insurance available, participants would be closely monitored and provided with free health care during the study. The compensation package was based on models from international studies.

Saphonn emphasised that women had a choice whether or not to participate. "The basic principle for this research is informed consent," he said.

He acknowledged that the side effects of taking the drug as a prevention, rather than a treatment, were unknown, but said he hoped they would be similar. "We don't expect to see any more [side effects] than what we have seen in HIV-infected patients."

The Minister of Women's Affairs, Mu Sochua, supported the WNU's demands for insurance. "It's totally fair. If there's a 0.0001

percent risk, it's still a risk. Whoever takes part in this experiment has to be given a guarantee."

But a medical researcher working in Cambodia said it was not normal practice to provide insurance in a clinical trial, as drugs are not insured until they are approved. "That's the whole point of a clinical trial — to see if there's any side effects or not," he said.

The WNU spokesperson is adamant that insurance be supplied and said if no resolution was reached on March 29 the collective would encourage all sex workers not to take part in the study. "Our network is strong. If we tell the sex workers not to take part, they will not take the drug."

Unless an agreement is reached, Cambodian sex workers may soon have a message for Bill Gates: "This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down."

<above> Phnom Penh Post March 26 -April 8, 2004 p4

Sex Workers Leery About HIV Trial

By JENNIFER COLLINS
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Cambodian sex workers and health officials on Monday expressed skepticism over the ethics of a \$1 million HIV study, funded by the US National Institute of Health and computer tycoon Bill Gate's charity foundation.

During a news conference at the offices of the NGO Oxfam Hong Kong, a panel of sex workers said they would refuse to participate in the study—designed to test whether the anti-retroviral drug tenofovir can prevent contraction of HIV—if they didn't receive some health guarantees.

"If you guarantee the impact for a long time, we will participate," said Sou Sothea Vy, 64, representative of the Women's Network for Unity, a sex worker union that has demanded health insurance for participants for up to 20 to 30 years after the study ends. "If you do not, we oppose. We absolutely oppose," Sou Sothea Vy said.

The study, which is expected to begin within the next two months, aims to recruit 960 sex workers in Phnom Penh.

Though researchers said the sex workers would receive counseling and a full explanation of the study, some argue that Cambodians are being exploited.

Continued on page 2



HIV...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

"They look for the vulnerable country to do the study in," Dr Sin Somuny, executive director of Medicam, a consortium of health organizations, said last week. "The structure of the system is weak..." he said. "It's easy for them to...conduct this kind of study."

He cited the lack of long-term insurance for the participants as an example of exploitation.

"They risk their life...and the company in the future gets a huge benefit," he said, calling on the country's leaders to look more closely at the study. "Why do you risk your people's lives without maximizing the benefit for the people in the future?"

Medical researchers who participated in the news conference said long-term insurance should be provided, but they could offer no assurance that it would.

"I don't know how feasible it is for 20 or 30 years," said Margery Lazarus, a medical anthropologist conducting preparatory research for the sex worker study.

Tenofovir—manufactured by the US pharmaceutical Gilead Sciences Inc—has not been clinically tested on HIV-negative patients yet, said Kimberly Page Shafer, the study's principal investigator from the University of California in San Francisco.

The drug has been known to produce gas, nausea, vomiting and some kidney and liver dysfunction in HIV-positive patients—but little is known about its effect on HIV-negative patients, Page Shafer said at the news conference.

Similar studies are being conducted in Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon, she said.

In Phnom Penh, the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and Sexually Transmitted Infections will provide participants

with medical care during the one-year trial and a checkup one month after the study is over, Page Shafer said. If the study is successful, participants will be given tenofovir for the following two years.

"What good is that to me?" sex worker Chuon Neth, 26, said at the conference, adding she could jeopardize her health by participating.

Despite 100 percent condom-use campaigns, 20 Cambodian women still contract HIV everyday, according to a National Aids Authority study released last year.

Though participants will be counseled to use condoms at all times during sex, people don't use condoms properly all the time, Page Shafer conceded.

That has led some observers to wonder if the study will endanger the participants, who—as vendors of sex—are already at a high risk for contracting the disease.

Sharon...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

Court ended an eight-month legal battle and ordered Gilad Sharon to comply with a lower ruling that he hand over the material.

Gilad Sharon's lawyer, Micha Fettman, said his client would comply, but suggested it might take time to obtain the documents. He said Gilad Sharon would have to get the documents requested by the court from third parties.

At issue in the "Greek Island Affair" is an attempt by real estate developer David Appel to promote a tourism project on a Greek island in 1999, at a time when Sharon was foreign minister. Appel hired Gilad Sharon as an adviser and allegedly paid him hundreds of thousands of dollars.

At the time, investigators were wiretapping Appel, the Haaretz daily said Monday. According to one tape, Appel told the elder

Eng Veng Eang, project manager for HIV/AIDS at the Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia, said last week that many sex workers believe they only need one method of contraception to prevent HIV contraction—and many do not use condoms with their "sweethearts."

"They believe: If they use drugs, they think the drugs can prevent HIV," she said.

And even if the risks are properly explained, sex workers will struggle to understand it fully, said Chhu Bun Eng, director of the NGO Cambodian Women for Peace and Development, which runs peer-education programs for sex workers.

"The sex workers, if they do not understand, they will not know how to ask," she said last week. "They don't know about their rights."

Lazarus, however, dismissed the argument.

Sharon in one conversation that "your son is going to earn a lot of money," the Haaretz daily reported Monday.

At a later point in the conversation, Sharon said: "The island is in our hands."

Haaretz said Sharon's statement was one of the pieces of evidence that persuaded state attorney Edna Arbel to recommend an indictment.

Miriam Rosenthal, a former senior official in the prosecutor's office, said she considers Sharon's response incriminating. "If you take the connotation of the remarks 'the island is in our hands,' this is almost equivalent to a confession," Rosenthal told Israel Army Radio. "Something here doesn't look good."

However, the attorney general, Meni Mazuz, considers the case "problematic" because of the lack of conclusive evidence that Sharon accepted a bribe, the Yediot Ahronot newspaper re-

"Making blanket statements that [sex workers] cannot possibly understand is patronizing," she said.

Mu Sochua, minister of Women's Affairs, said Thursday that the study jabs at an easily exploitable subgroup by focusing on sex workers, when an AIDS census revealed housewives were the fastest growing group of people contracting HIV in 2002.

"Maybe it is easier for the commercial sex workers to participate in the study," she said, adding the sex workers do not have to get permission from their husbands to take part.

But Page Shafer rejected the criticism and said such studies concentrate on countries in Africa and Asia because the HIV contraction is more frequent.

"Do I think Cambodian women are more exploitable? No," she said. "I'm doing this because I care."

ported Monday. Mazuz plans to consult with other jurists before making a final decision, media reports said.

Opposition lawmakers have called on Sharon to resign in light of the state attorney's recommendation. Infrastructure Minister Josef Paritzky said Sunday that Sharon must resign if an indictment is issued, or his Shinui Party will withdraw from the coalition.

In a second corruption case, police are investigating a \$1.5 million loan from a South African businessman to Sharon's two sons, Gilad and Omri, used to cover illegal contributions to his 1999 election campaign.

The developments in the case come as Sharon is formulating a plan to withdraw from much of Gaza and a few West Bank settlements. Analysts have said that, in light of the suspicions, Sharon may speed up the implementation of the plan since it is widely supported by the public.



The Slippery Ethics of Third World Drug Trials

By KEVIN DOYLE
AND KUCH NAREN
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Seated at a rickety food and drinks stall at the edge of a strip of wooden houses near Phnom Penh's railway station, Sithi Ratana, 21, speaks with a certain authority about HIV and AIDS.

A beer girl by night and a HIV/AIDS educator to local sex workers by day, Sithi Ratana is primary health care in its truest sense in this squatter village.

Sithi Ratana also knows more than most of her peers about the first clinical trials of the HIV drug tenofovir, a once-a-day tablet that

will be tested in Cambodia to determine whether it can protect people from contracting the killer virus.

She has attended at least two meetings on the drug trials with staff from the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and Sexually Transmitted Infections, but what she knew was at best wrong, and at worst dangerous.

Searching through her house, Sithi Ratana retrieved some jotted notes and explained the tests.

Some 960 sex workers who are free of HIV are needed to participate in the voluntary drug trials. With HIV infection rates at

almost 30 percent for Cambodian sex workers, they have been judged an excellent test group for the study.

The only real drawback to the trials was the slim chance of some side-effects: Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and possibly liver and kidney damage, she said.

Sithi Ratana seemed well informed until she began to explain that condoms could prevent liver and kidney problems and that a cure for AIDS had already been found.

"If [the volunteers] use condoms during the trials they would

Continued on page 2

Drug...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

not get kidney and liver damage," she said.

More importantly, she said that sex workers in another country had proven that after taking the drug they "could become free of AIDS."

Her confusion exemplified concern expressed last month by Dr Sin Somuny, executive director of the medical NGO Medicam, who warned that gaining the "informed consent" of

sex workers, a vulnerable and generally poorly educated group, may prove a considerable challenge for researchers.

He is not alone in his concerns. The Women's Network for Unity, a sex workers' union that claims 5,000 members, has been lobbying to boycott the tests, scheduled to start in July, until researchers agree to provide 30-year health insurance coverage against possible side effects.

The sex workers claim the trials do not balance the potential threat to their health with the benefits to the medical world and, no less, the multibillion-dollar pharmaceutical industry.

Tenofovir is currently used in combination with other antiretroviral drugs as a treatment for those already infected with HIV. Tests on long tailed macaques in 1995 showed tenofovir, when administered to the monkeys before their exposure to the simian variant of HIV, could prevent the disease from taking hold.

The US National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases has allocated some \$1.7 million for the University of California-San Francisco to take part in the

Cambodia trials.

Through his Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Microsoft tycoon Bill Gates has given \$6.5 million for planned tests in four African countries and for the tests in Cambodia. The money was disbursed through the Family Health International NGO for the research in Cambodia to be conducted by the University of New South Wales, Australia.

With around 45 million people infected worldwide with HIV and some 5 million new HIV cases in 2002 alone, a pill that could protect

against the virus would likely have world-changing consequences.

But sex workers want to know what they will get in return for their role in possibly making medical history.

"Cambodian women are not ...monkeys," said Network secretariat member Sou Sotheavy to enthusiastic applause at a meeting last month of some 120 sex workers in Phnom Penh to voice their resistance to the trials.

"I do not pressure or oppose you joining the trial. We just ask for a 20- to 30-year health guarantee," said Sou Sotheavy, a transgender 64-year-old who likes to be called she.

Cheers greeted another woman who remarked that the pill was "only tested on monkeys before Cambodians."

Taking the controversy in stride is the trial's principle investigator, Dr Kimberly Page Shafer, associate professor at the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, University of California-San Francisco.

"I'm not surprised but I think it is one sex worker group and there are many in Cambodia," said Dr Page Shafer, who stressed that the tests met the most rigorous regu-

latory standards.

"It is important to print that we will provide medical care for participants in this trial," she said. But providing a 30-year health plan would probably be unethical, she added.

"Medical ethicists, in fact, will point out that offering a 30-year safety policy can be construed as undue inducement to participate in a trial," she said.

Participants are guaranteed regular medical checks, and if harmed, they will be referred to local services or organizations that will provide care.

Those who contract HIV will be given free treatment.

Hardly a promising offer, critics claim, given the quality of medical care available in Cambodia.

In the US Food and Drug Administration's approval

of tenofovir, whose trade name is Viread, in 2001, it was noted that lactic acidosis and hepatomegaly with steatosis—severe liver enlargement and excess fat in the liver—are severe and possibly fatal conditions.

Those conditions are not generally considered a side effect of tenofovir, although they have been associated with other antiretroviral agents, said John Kaldor, professor of epidemiology at the University of New South Wales, Australia.

Also defending tenofovir's safety record, Page Shafer made it clear that she didn't believe the network was the sole driving force behind the insurance demands and implied that one should look to Oxfam Hong Kong, which supports the Network, for answers.

Rosanna Barbero, coordinator of Oxfam Hong Kong, however, denied her organization was

behind the sex workers' demands.

If medical trials are conducted in the West there are ways to seek redress, Barbero said. "But in Cambodia, we know that these mechanisms are not there."

Another ethical minefield is the issue of HIV and those who believe the trial implicitly rests on the volunteers being exposed to the virus at some stage during the yearlong study.

"What is the use of the test when we participate with condoms?" asked Keo Tha, 40, also a member of the Network's secretariat.

Keo Tha said she believed researchers were trying to profit from the vulnerability and naivete of some prostitutes, who may not always be able to convince their clients to use a condom.

And when reports circulate that a drug is being tested that might prevent HIV infection, sex workers might find it even more difficult to convince their partners to use condoms.

Page Shafer denies this: "All the women will be informed that the efficacy of this drug is unknown, and it is especially important to be protected against HIV."

If tenofovir proves successful, Cambodian volunteers will receive a free two-year supply of the pills and Cambodia will be able to purchase the pill at reduced prices, putting the daily dose at around \$1.

Though a bargain compared to the developed world, the cost may still be out of the reach for many Cambodians, where more than 40 percent of the population lives on less than \$1 per day.

As Oxfam's Barbero said: "They can't even afford paracetamol now."

"I do not pressure or oppose you joining the trial. We just ask for a 20- to 30-year health guarantee."

—SOU SOTHEAVY,
WOMEN'S NETWORK
FOR UNITY

"It is important to print that we will provide medical care for participants in this trial."

—DR KIMBERLY PAGE
SHAFFER,
CENTER FOR AIDS
PREVENTION STUDIES

NATIONAL

Researchers Threaten to Bypass Sex Union

BY KUCH NAREN
AND JENNIFER COLLINS
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Leaders of a sex workers union, opposing a clinical trial of a drug that may prevent HIV contraction, said Thursday they believe their group may be bypassed by researchers who are recruiting participants for the study's start within two months.

"If we do not agree, they will go to meet directly with the girls [sex workers] and not talk to us," claimed Sou Sothea Vy, a 64-year-old transgendered Women's Network for Unity representative.

Four other sex workers, who attended a private meeting on Thursday with the representatives of the study, also said researchers told them they would find participants elsewhere if the union of 3,000 members did not

support the study.

The \$1 million study is funded by the US National Institute of Health and computer tycoon Bill Gates' aid foundation. It will operate through the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

Kimberly Page Shafer, primary researcher for the study, would not comment Thursday on the union's claim that they would be bypassed. Repeated calls to other researchers went unanswered.

The trial involving 960 female sex workers will test whether tenofovir, a drug already used as a life-extending AIDS drug and manufactured by the US pharmaceutical Gilead Sciences Inc, can prevent HIV contraction.

Sou Sothea Vy said researchers tried with "sweet words" to garner the union's support Thursday, but

the union would not rescind their demands made at a press conference Monday for 20 to 30 years of medical insurance coverage against the possibility of harm inflicted by the drug.

Sex workers are now asking for \$10 compensation, instead of \$3, for every month they participate in the study, Sou Sothea Vy said.

After the meeting Thursday, a Toul Kok district sex worker Soma Younong, 35, said researchers tested the drug on monkeys.

"Why do they need to test the drugs on sex workers in Cambodia? Does it mean that our lives are so cheap—not even as valuable as a monkey's?" she said.

The researchers paid each of the sex workers \$5 for their attendance and "to take motos," said Ngay Srah, 23, a sex worker.

Cambodia Daily April 2, 2004 p 13

Trial of Possible AIDS Vaccine Delayed Again

BY JENNIFER COLLINS
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Controversial trials in Cambodia of a drug that researchers say could guard against AIDS/HIV have been delayed again, researchers said Wednesday.

The trial, originally scheduled to begin April, could be delayed until at least the end of July and possibly even longer as researchers say they await the arrival of US evaluators who will assess progress on the \$1.7 million project, funded in part by the US National Institute of Health and Microsoft mogul Bill Gates' charity foundation.

"I don't know if it's possible to have [preparations] done by that time," said Saphonn Vonthanak, deputy director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS Dermatology and Sexually Transmitted Infections.

"It really depends on the [evaluators] when we can start this study," said Saphonn Vonthanak, co-investigator of the study, charged with implementing the yearlong clinical trial of the anti-retroviral drug tenofovir on 960 female sex workers.

But Keo Tha, a representative of a sex workers' union which has called for a boycott of the trials, dismissed NCHADS' reasons for the delay as "an excuse."

"I think that it is [delayed] because there are not enough sex workers participation in the study," she said Wednesday.

The Women's Network for Unity has called for the boycott unless trial participants are guaranteed medical insurance to cover possible complications for 30 or 40 years after the test.

Saphonn Vonthanak, however, said he believes NCHADS will be

able to recruit enough participants.

"I am still very optimistic if our team...explains enough to the commercial sex workers...we will get support from them," he said.

Khol Vohith, NCHADS community education coordinator, said Monday that researchers are awaiting approval from Westat, a US health survey company contracted to evaluate the tenofovir trial.

Westat reviewed the trial in May and will return in July, Khol Vohith said.

A separate study of an AIDS vaccine in Thailand has been delayed for more than a year because it could not gather enough participants, Thailand's English-language newspaper The Nation reported Wednesday. (Additional reporting by Kuch Naren)

Cambodia Daily 24 June 2004 p 11

NATIONAL Cambodian Prostitutes Steal Show in Thailand

By JENNIFER COLLINS
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Cambodian sex workers participated in a rollicking demonstration at Bangkok's AIDS Conference on Tuesday, bringing global attention to their demands for long-term medical insurance for their participation in an HIV prophylactic drug trial set to start in Cambodia next month.

Some 30 sex workers barged

on stage during a session on antiviral drugs carrying placards reading "Stop the Trial Now," according to a Reuters report.

The sex workers called for the protection of participants in clinical trials of the drug tenofovir, which is used as an antiretroviral to treat HIV-positive patients but has not been tested on HIV-negative patients.

The trial organizers have pro-

mised medical care for the trial's participants—960 female sex workers in Cambodia—during the study and for the following few years, but has not committed to long-term medical insurance.

The trial will be operated through the government's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and Sexually Transmitted Infections. (Additional reporting by Kuch Naren)



Sex workers stand firm on Bill Gates drug trial

BY SAM RITH

The Cambodian prostitutes' collective, Women's Network for Unity (WNU), is holding out for a 30-to-40 year guarantee against negative side-effects for the 960 participants in a proposed field trial of the HIV protection drug, Tenofovir.

At a media conference on Tuesday, June 15, the organization said it had not received any response to its previous demand.

The trial, funded by Microsoft mogul Bill Gates, hopes to find answers to whether or not the drug can prevent HIV infection.

At the Ministry of Health's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and Sexually Transmitted Infections (NCHADS), which is responsible for the project, research officer Khol Vohith said that although the center could only guarantee free health care during the duration of the year-long trial, he believed that other organizations would step in after that.

But a spokesman for WNU doubted that there would be any such help available. "There are 18 to 20 women being raped every day, but it is very difficult to find help for them," he said.

WNU director Keo Tha claimed that some organizations had already tried to persuade sex workers to take part in the trial. The name of the drug had not been mentioned, only that it would protect them from getting HIV.

Vohith denied that any NCHADS staff had been talking to sex workers about the trial. However, he said trained staff in NCHADS uniforms would start informing participants within five months.

Participants in the project must understand how the drug works, Vohith said. "If they still do not understand it after we have ex-

plained it many times, we will not take that person into the trial. Anyway, the person must volunteer, without any pressure from other organizations or people."

Vohith said Cambodia was chosen for the test because it has the highest HIV infection rate in Southeast Asia. There will be similar tests in the African countries of Cameroon, Ghana and Nigeria.

Tenofovir is already being used throughout the world by patients infected by HIV. The known side-effects from that use include nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

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The Tenofovir trial controversy in Cambodia

Can a trial be considered ethical if there is no long-term post-trial care?

Kao Tha, Chuon Srey Net, Sou Sotheavy, Pick Sokchea and Chan Sopheak

The Women's Network for Unity (WNU) was established in June 2000 by a group of sex workers for sex workers. It provides a foundation for support and builds solidarity and self-empowerment among sex workers. Our network provides a space for women to come together, share ideas and discuss the collective challenges we face. We have over 5,000 members across Cambodia. WNU has been involved in some advocacy with the media and parliamentarians over the past few years on issues ranging from sex workers' right to work, trafficking, violence against women and changes to the Law on Prostitution.

The first ever Cambodian sex worker-planned and run press conference was held in Phnom Penh on March 29, 2004. The network expressed its opposition to an experiment which is recruiting healthy female sex workers to test an anti-HIV drug, Tenofovir DF, and find

out if it is safe to use on HIV-negative women and whether it would reduce the risk of HIV infection. Similar drug trials are starting soon in Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria and Malawi. These trials are conducted by researchers from the University of California, USA, and the

University of New South Wales in Australia. They are funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the American National Institute of Health. The researchers are looking for 960 Cambodian sex workers who are HIV-negative to take a pill once a day for one year in exchange for free medical services, counselling and \$3 per month. Testing is due to start in the summer of 2004.

The WNU is against the use of sex workers for experimentation in a poor country like Cambodia, especially when the drug has only been tested on healthy monkeys – never on healthy humans. Side-effects of the drug when given as AIDS treatment are diarrhoea, nausea, tendency to major liver and kidney



Many young women will still believe that they are safe from HIV infection as long as they are involved in the experiment
Photo: Ming Tse Chong

failure and 'brittle bone' disease (osteoporosis). According to WNU President Kao Tha, many sex workers worry about being the first healthy humans to test the drug and are worried about the side-effects of taking a drug for prevention purposes: "They said they don't want to try the drug because they are poor and they are sex workers... If they fall ill, who will look after their mothers, children, sisters or brothers? If the researchers are so sure that this drug is safe for HIV-negative women to take, in the short and long term, why won't they commit to insurance for us and our families? If we get sick or can't work it can be the difference between life and death for our families".

What WNU wants

The network wants insurance against possible side-effects of Tenofovir for 30 or more years and not just health care for the duration of the trial. When the researchers are finished and leave Cambodia who will take responsibility for sex workers and their families who may be suffering longer-term side-effects? WNU believes that all sex workers who participate in the trial have the right to ask questions and be fully informed about the risks and to demand better medical and financial protection. Must poor sex workers in Cambodia take the risk of taking Tenofovir,

withstand the side-effects, sacrifice health and income for \$3 month and no longer-term guarantees? If our members agree to take the risk, which may one day benefit people in richer countries and the drug company, then we deserve adequate protection for our future lives and our families. The high cost of this drug means

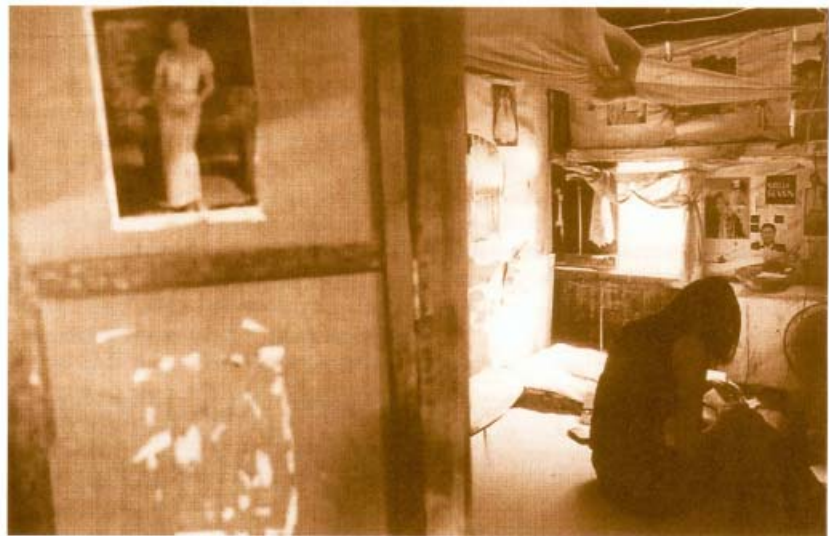
doms, many young women will still believe that they are safe from HIV infection as long as they are involved in the experiment. Condom use is working well amongst sex workers for HIV prevention – it is married women who have the highest increase in HIV infection in Cambodia and this is usually contracted from their husbands.

WNU plans to continue outreach activities to its members on this issue and have further meetings, workshops and press conferences to negotiate protection of our members' health and human rights. We welcome other sex workers from around the world to tell us of similar experiences and especially from those in Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria and Malawi to find out what is happening to the women there.

Womyn's Agenda for Change, a project of Oxfam Hong Kong, is providing a space for the Secretariat of the Women's Network for Unity to operate and is assisting them.

About the authors

Kao Tha, Chuon Srey Net, Sou Sotheavy, Pick Sokchea and Chan Sopheap belong to the Secretariat of the Women's Network for Unity.



Many sex workers are worried about being the first healthy humans to test the drug
Photo: Ming Tse Chong

that, even if it is successful in preventing HIV, Cambodian sex workers will never be able to afford it.

Increased risk-taking

WNU also warns that women involved in the trial will not know if they are taking the drug or a sugar placebo and may mistakenly think that condom use is not necessary – or they will take risks with clients to increase their income. We believe that even if experiment participants are given counselling and con-

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Researchers Threaten to Bypass Sex Union

By Kevin Stacey
and Jonathan Corliss
in Cambodia
Leaders of a sex workers union, opposing a clinical trial of a drug that can prevent HIV infection, said Tuesday they believe their group may be bypassed by researchers who are recruiting participants for the study's first phase in Cambodia.
"If we do not agree, they will go to meet directly with the [US] government and will skip us," claimed Soe Sreth Vay, a representative of the union's first phase for their representative.
Four other sex workers, who attended a private meeting on Thursday with the prominent leaders of the study, also said researchers had threatened to

bypass the study.
The \$1 million study is headed by the US National Institute of Health and requires sex workers to use condoms for 30 days. It will operate through the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and sexually Transmitted Diseases.
Kambally Phay Sreth, a union member for the study, said she considered Thursday an ultimatum's claim that they would be bypassed. She said she had received several calls to other researchers who were bypassed.
The trial involving 100 Cambodian sex workers will test whether a long-acting AIDS drug and manufactured by the US pharmaceutical giant Gilead Sciences Inc. can prevent HIV infections.
See Sreth Vay and researchers

for more would not contact their research center at a sex workers' meeting in Phnom Penh to discuss medical insurance coverage against the possibility of being infected by the drug.
Sex workers are also asking for 100 days of protection against HIV, for more research they participate in the study, Soe Sreth Vay said.
After the meeting Thursday, a Thai HIV activist sex worker Sreth Vay, 25, said researchers tested the drug on sex workers.
"Why do they need to see the drug on sex workers in Cambodia? Don't they mean that our bodies are clean – not even an 'infectious' or 'infectious'?" she said.
The researchers said each of the sex workers take their own

August 12, 2004

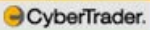


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Cambodia Orders Halt to Drug Testing

Cambodia Prime Minister Hun Sen Orders Halt to Plans for Human Trials of Anti-AIDS Drug

The Associated Press

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia Aug. 11, 2004— Cambodia's premier ordered a halt to plans for human trials of an anti-AIDS drug in his country that would have recruited hundreds of sex workers to determine if the medicine could prevent new HIV infections.

Health Minister Nuth Sokhom said he had been instructed by Prime Minister Hun Sen to stop the project to test the drug Tenofovir, also known as Viread DF, made by the California-based biotech company Gilead Sciences Inc.

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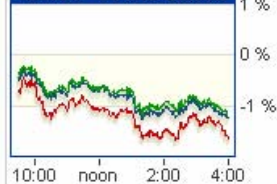
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