

Giving pill selectively is OK: Docs

Some would prescribe HIV/Aids drug preventively to people at high risk

By MELODY ZACCHEUS

SOME doctors here say they would prescribe HIV/Aids treatment drug Truvada as preventive medication for individuals at high risk of exposure to the disease.

These people could be wives and partners of infected individuals, as well as sex workers who are at risk if their clients refuse to use condoms.

Though Truvada has not yet been approved for use here as a preventive drug for HIV, at least two doctors – general practitioner Tan Kok Kuan and Dr Koh Yin Ling, an infectious diseases consultant at Singapore General Hospital – say they would prescribe the drug “carefully” and “selectively” for that purpose.

Doctors are allowed to prescribe this off-label use of drugs at their discretion, based on their own clinical experience.

Dr Koh said: “We really have to be stringent in our selection, and ensure that the patient comes back for regular check-ups. We must also provide counselling to patients to whom we prescribe the drug.”

Truvada, used since 2004 to treat HIV, was approved on Ju-

ly 16 by the US Food & Drug Administration as a preventive drug. It has been available here since May as a treatment option.

It is not known whether the Ministry of Health (MOH) will clear it for preventive use.

An MOH spokesman said the most reliable preventive measures continue to be abstinence, being faithful, and correct and consistent use of condoms.

For Truvada to be effective as a preventive tool, it must be taken daily by healthy individuals before they are exposed to the disease. When used thus, it has been shown in clinical studies to reduce infections by up to 75 per cent.

But advocate groups here for the prevention of HIV/Aids say that allowing Truvada to be used in this way may promote a false sense of security.

They warn that using this drug should not mean giving up safe sex practices, including condom use.

Such practices have proven effective in preventing the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

A spokesman for SGRainbow, a non-profit social group for young gay and bisexual men here, warned that Truvada may create



Truvada (above) has been used since 2004 to treat HIV and was approved on July 16 this year by the US Food & Drug Administration as a preventive drug. It has been available here since May as a treatment option. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

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Experts say Truvada would be useful for specific groups of people, but that general HIV prevention should focus on educating people about safe sex.

Mr Bryan Choong, 35, centre manager at Oogachaga, a counselling organisation whose clients include gays and bisexuals, said: “Prevention through education and awareness is still cheaper

than treatment or medication-based prevention.”

Associate Professor Leo Yee Sin, the head and senior consultant of the Department of Infectious Diseases at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, said about 300 patients are now taking the pill as treatment for HIV.

She said: “It's commonly used in combination with another anti-HIV drug for the treatment of HIV infection.”

To ensure it is being used effectively, those on the drug should have repeated HIV testing while on it and be monitored for side effects, said a spokesman for Action

for Aids, a charity promoting Aids-related research here.

He also warned that Truvada does not protect the individual from STDs such as Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, syphilis and gonorrhoea, which only condom use can prevent.

Clinical studies in the US showed no decrease in condom use by test subjects.

In the US, the drug label is required to include instructions for counselling by the health-care provider.

At a cost of \$1,500 a month for 30 pills, Truvada is not cheap.

Assistant restaurant manager

A pill for HIV-free people at high risk

Who the drug is suitable for: Healthy individuals who are HIV-free but at high risk of exposure to the virus, such as heterosexual couples where one partner is infected, and men who have sex with men.

Price:

\$1,500 for 30 pills, or a month's dosage

How it works:

Two medications – 300 milligrams of tenofovir and 200 milligrams of emtricitabine – are used in combination to reduce the chance of HIV infection by blocking the action of reverse transcriptase, an HIV protein which replicates in host cells and infects the body.

The pill, which is available only by doctor's prescription, must be taken daily. Safe sex practices should not be abandoned as consumption alone may not prevent infection.

Side effects

Nausea, abdominal pain, loss of appetite and diarrhoea. Serious but rare side effects include kidney problems and bone loss.

Russell Headech, 23, an unmarried heterosexual, said he would not use it but opt for proven safe sex practices.

“Condoms should suffice. The drug is pricey and is just not worth it unless you have special circumstances and are at high risk of exposure,” he said.

Last year, 461 new cases of HIV infection were reported among residents here; 46 per cent of infections were acquired through heterosexual sexual transmission, and 42 per cent, via homosexual sexual transmission.

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