

Zambian women demand for Dapivirine Vaginal Ring

ON July 20, 2022 the Ministry of Health issued a circular in which Permanent Secretary Jackson Kasonga announced that the Ministry shall not add the Dapivirine Vaginal Ring (DVR) as an HIV prevention tool for women.

According to Dr Kasonga, the Ministry of Health has been following keenly research on the DVR, a flexible vaginal ring loaded with an antiretroviral drug Dapivirine including the voluntary withdrawal of the ring's developer, the International

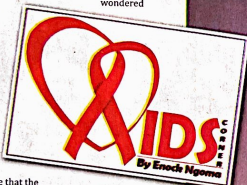
Partnerships for Microbicides (IPM) from the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) consideration. He adds that Zambia is alive to the ongoing studies on the DVR in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

"It is for this reason that I wish to advise that Zambia wishes to learn from the results from these countries, and will, therefore, not be adding the DVR to the HIV prevention tools at this stage," Dr Kasonga says in the notice addressed to all Ministry of Health partners and all Provincial Medical Officers.

He says "I wish to encourage our people to continue using already approved methods for HIV prevention, including pre-exposure

preventing tools against HIV and the DVR is one such choice.

Ms Banda also wondered



prophylaxis (PrEP). But HIV activist Kanyima Banda says

It is unfortunate that the Ministry of Health could take such a step.

Ms Banda was speaking during an HIV Prevention Stakeholder Engagement at Lusaka's Southern Sun Hotel on the same day that the circular on DVR was released. The engagement was graced by Dr Kasonga who represented Health Minister Sylvia Masebo.

Ms Banda said Zambian women must have a variety of choices on how to use of

whether Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that work with government in implementing HIV programmes and are major stakeholders were consulted before the decision was made.

Echoing these sentiments, another activist who spoke for "Treatment Advocacy and Literacy Campaign (TALC), Chuluya Kasanda wondered why the Ministry of Health wants to look out for research results from Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe instead of carrying out its own studies on the ring in Zambia.

"Women in Zambia want to have a choice and not limited tools for prevention and the DVR provides that choice.

In any case, only recently the Ministry announced that they had approved the ring and that the process of



current 11.1 per cent.

Kevin Mbwewe, a journalist under the Media Science Cafe (MESICA), says the move by government is shocking because only recently, Director of Infectious Diseases at the Ministry Professor Lloyo Mulenga made it clear that the government had approved the ring and that procurement of the same would start soon. And now why the sudden change, when women in Zambia have seen hope in the ring? Mr Mbwewe asks.

Julius Kabziza, an activist who operates from the community says the Ministry needs serious introspection on this matter as it might have taken a premature decision to respond like this.

And Prof Mulenga told the gathering that the reaction on the DVR is clear and the Ministry is still open for discussion.

"I see need a variety of options on HIV prevention especially for women. As government, this is not a final decision because we are still open for discussion," he said.

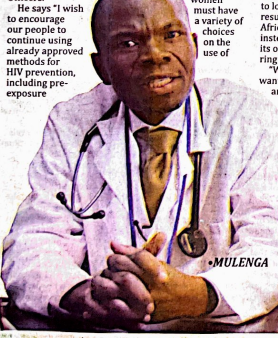
He agreed that CSOs and government should meet as soon as possible to discuss the issue of the DVR.

He said a number of issues are being considered including finding out why Zambia is recording increased numbers of new HIV infections.

Well, as I pen off, remember to read next week's column where details of the HIV Prevention Stakeholder Engagement will be shared.

It is my hope that the Ministry and the DVR will soon sit to amicably resolve the matter of the DVR.

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suddenly this new development. What about the new infections that we are experiencing?"

"Surely the government must rethink on this position otherwise we shall continue grappling with issues of teenage pregnancies and an increase in numbers of

new HIV infections," she says.

And Natasha Mwila, a 2022-2023 AWAC Fellow under TALC, says prevention of HIV is about choices and the ring is one such choice that is also being supported for the woman who in most cases has no ability

to negotiate on sex with their spouses.

Boyd Nyirenda, another HIV/AIDS activist, is worried that instead of increasing the prevention choices for women, authorities are reducing them and urged government to give the women of Zambia what

they want.

Mr Nyirenda says there is generally lack of information on female condoms but with right strategies on information dissemination and the DVR availability, the HIV prevalence in Zambia would reduce drastically to a single digit from the