

Will microbicides feel good as well as preventing HIV? Maximising pleasure and prevention

Sara J. Whitehead⁽¹⁾, Anne Philpott⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾Thailand MOPH – U.S. CDC Collaboration, Bangkok, Thailand; ⁽²⁾The Pleasure Project, London, UK & Delhi, India

Safer sex and pleasure

- Effective microbicides will have a public health impact only if they are widely and consistently used by women at risk of sexually transmitted HIV
- Public health campaigns have tended to focus on the negative consequences of unsafe sex, at the expense of other important factors that motivate sexual behaviour
- Pleasure and even sex itself have tended to be absent from much of the dialogue surrounding prevention of HIV and STIs
- However WHO and World Association of Sexual Health recognise pleasure as a core element of sexual health [1]
- Pleasure, for at least one partner, is one of the main reason people have sex, and interference with pleasure is one of the main reasons people choose not to use condoms [2,3]



What do we know about lubricants and pleasure?

- Current generation of microbicides in clinical trials are gel formulations that provide vaginal lubrication
- There is considerable variability across cultures and individuals in preferences for lubrication during sex [4]
- Marketing sexual lubricants with condoms has been an effective way to increase safer sex [5]
- Sexual lubricants are widely reported and marketed solely as pleasure enhancing products
- Often a lack of any lubricant means that local inappropriate products are used; cooking oil, egg white, saliva.
- Other vaginal inserted products (female condoms and diaphragms) have had enhanced uptake when marketed and promoted as to increase sexual pleasure [6]

Objectives

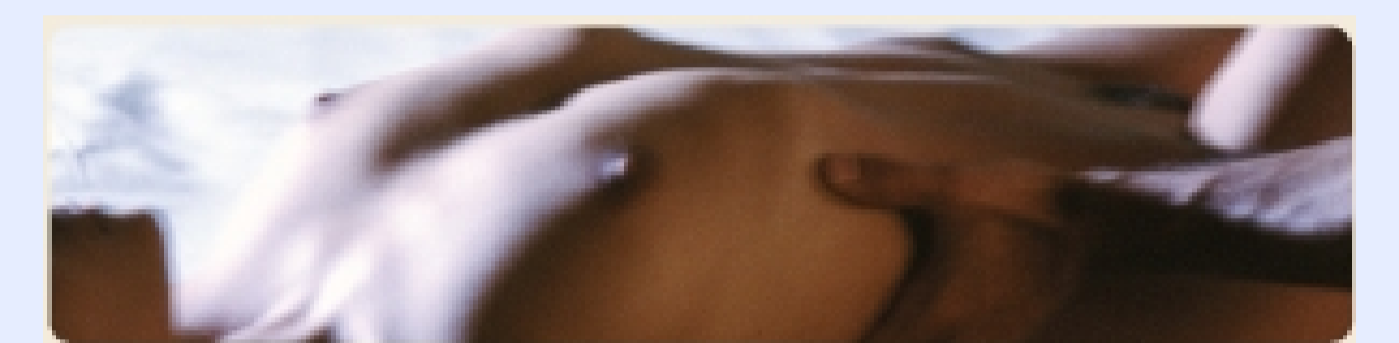
- Summarize current literature on microbicides and sexual pleasure
- Identify priorities for clinical and post-marketing research on
 - Pleasure-specific aspects of microbicide acceptability
 - Potential to use promotion of sexual pleasure as a social marketing tool for microbicides

Methods

- 1) Review of primary studies of microbicide literature and pleasure
 - Search PubMed for “microbicide” AND [“acceptability” OR “pleasure”]
 - To capture more recent unpublished studies:
 - Hand search of abstracts from Microbicides 2004, Microbicides 2006, IAS 2004 and IAS 2006
 - Excluded
 - Studies including only sexually abstinent participants
 - Multiple publications from same trial
 - publication with most comprehensive acceptability data selected
- 2) Review of general literature on barrier methods, contraceptive methods, and sexual pleasure

Do microbicides interfere with sexual pleasure?

- In many studies, only “negative” questions are reported, e.g. Does gel application interfere with foreplay, is the product messy?
- Despite this, in all but 2 studies there were few or no participants (women or men) reporting a negative impact of microbicide use on sexual pleasure
- Two studies using candidate products reported up to a third of participants experienced decreased pleasure
 - Excess wetness/lubrication
 - Leakage of product (reported in studies with twice daily gel application)
- In areas where “dry sex” is a norm, some participants in studies of hypothetical microbicide use expressed concerns about excess lubrication; however, this was not a prominent concern in surrogate or candidate product trials in these areas



Review of primary microbicide acceptability literature

Characteristics of studies reviewed

Characteristic	Number (%)
Total	85 (100)
Type of product	
Hypothetical	34 (40)
Surrogate ¹	20 (23)
Candidate ²	31 (36)
Population	
Women only	50 (59)
Heterosexual men	9 (10)
Heterosexual women and men ³	21 (25)
MSM	5 (6)
Methods	
Quantitative methods only	45 (53)
Qualitative +/- quantitative methods	40 (47)
Addressed sexual pleasure	38 (45)

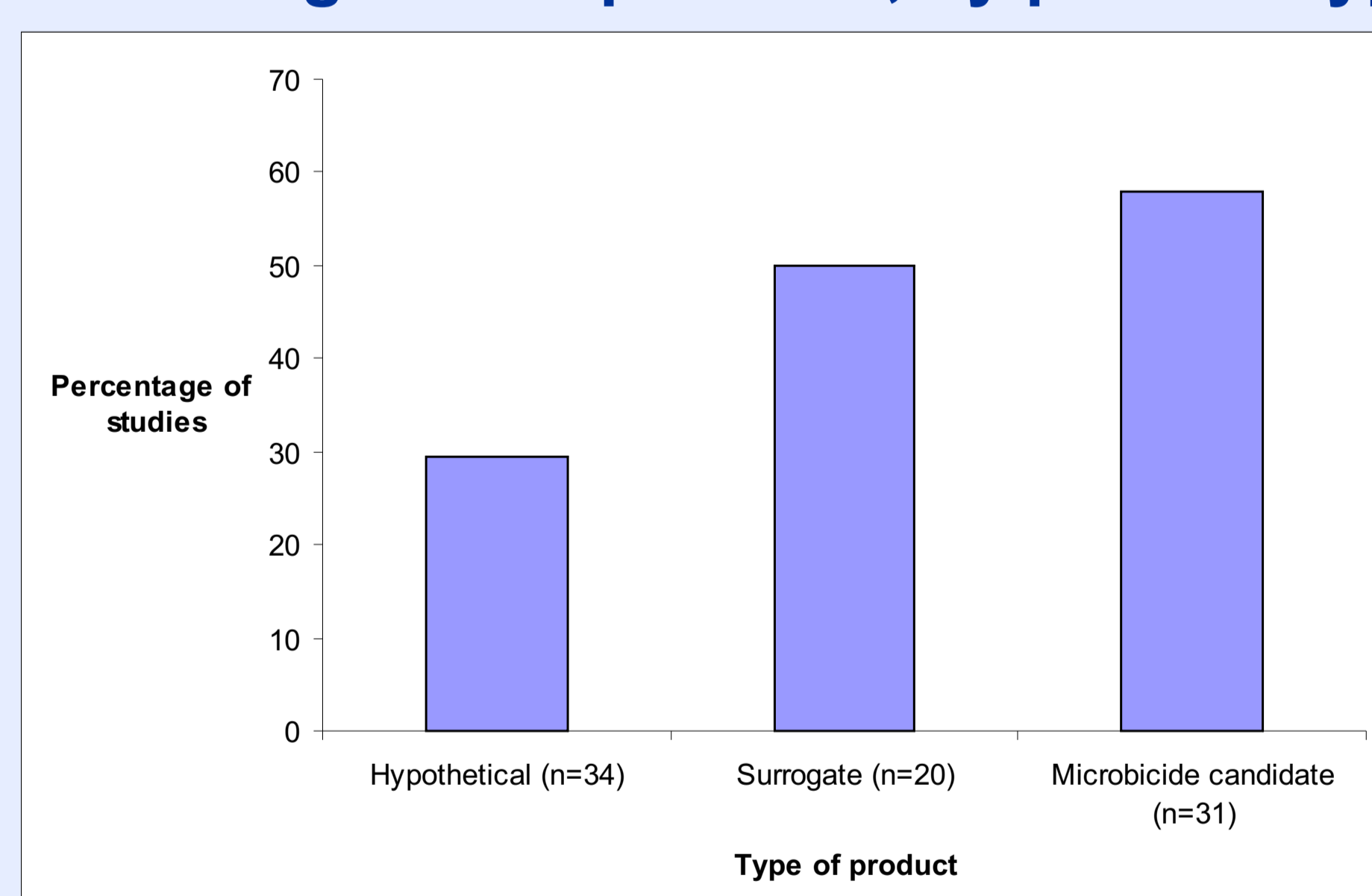
¹Surrogate products were either commercially marketed lubricants, or placebo gels used during microbicide preparatory trials

²Microbicide candidate products in either safety or efficacy trials

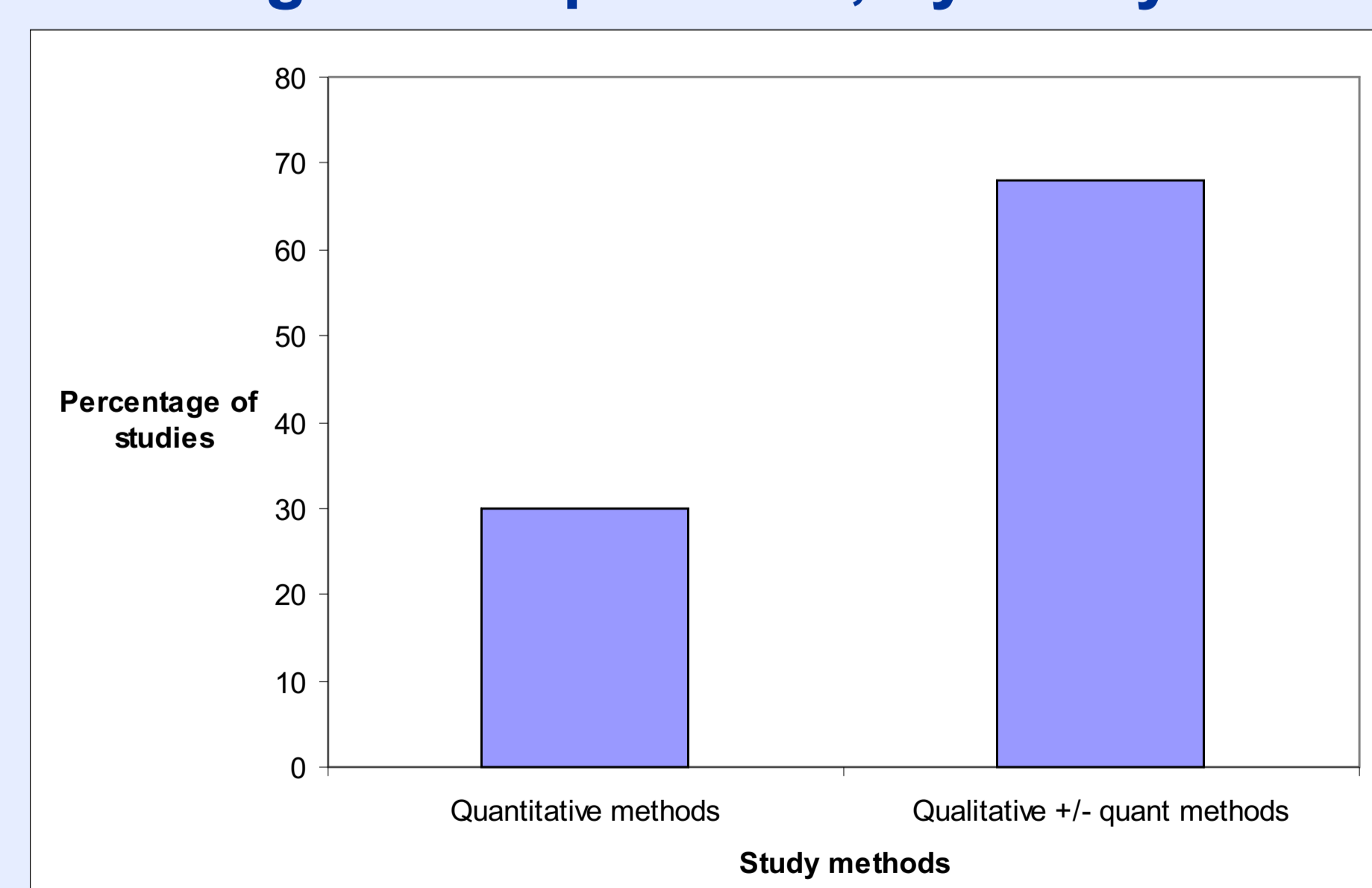
³Some of these studies enrolled couples, while others enrolled women and men separately

- Virtually all microbicide acceptability studies to date address physical attributes of the product (e.g. viscosity, leakiness, smell, taste)
- 45% include specific evaluation of sexual pleasure
 - Lubrication (how much, positive or negative for self and/or partner)
 - Timing of use in relation to sex
 - Sensation during sex

Proportion of microbicide acceptability studies addressing sexual pleasure, by product type



Proportion of microbicide acceptability studies addressing sexual pleasure, by study methods



- Studies later in the product cycle (e.g. candidate product trials vs. studies of hypothetical microbicide use) were more likely to address sexual pleasure
- Studies including qualitative methods were more likely to address pleasure
- There was no difference in attention to pleasure by population studied (data not shown)

Do microbicides enhance sexual pleasure?

- In most reviewed studies that addressed positive aspects of pleasure, participants reported increased sexual pleasure with product use
- In trials where it was possible to quantify:
 - 25-94% of women reported increased pleasure
 - 40-80% of men reported increased pleasure
- It was rarely specified how microbicide use enhanced pleasure; when specified, enhancement was attributed to
 - Lubricating quality of gel
 - Sense of feeling “protected” and therefore relaxed
- In 4 studies, participants reported more frequent sex during the trial
 - Attributed to enhanced enjoyment of sex
- Even in areas where “dry sex” is a norm
 - Few (7-13%) women reported using drying agents
 - Majority of participants reported enhanced pleasure with gel use
- Both CONRAD and FHI reported that during the close-out of cellulose sulfate trials, women requested lubricant in exchange for study product or were reluctant to return unused product because they “found gel “very pleasant” and conveyed that it enhanced their sexual experience.” [7]

Priorities for research (I): Clinical Trials

- How does microbicide use affect the experience of sexual enjoyment
 - For women and men
 - With vaginal and anal sex
 - In different social/cultural settings
 - With different types of partnerships (e.g. stable, casual, commercial)
- How do formulation factors affect a product?
- What negotiating strategies for product use have women applied with partners during trials; do these include reference to sexual pleasure?

Priorities for research (II): Post-Marketing

- Evaluation of microbicide social marketing strategies that highlight the products'
 - Advertising messages
 - Packaging
 - Peer and health worker teaching
- How effectively do these strategies increase initial uptake?
- How effectively do these strategies increase sustained use?
- In what specific social contexts is it acceptable/not acceptable to highlight the pleasure-enhancing properties of microbicide products?
- In what specific social contexts and types of partnerships are these strategies effective?
- Are there adverse effects of these strategies?

Limitations

- Heterogeneity of products evaluated
- Variation in study design that affect perceptions of pleasure
 - Use of condoms recommended/required for participation
 - Scheduled vs. pre-coital use of product
- Most published studies to date relatively small
- Pleasure was often an incidental outcome of studies, not main line of enquiry
- No consideration of newer generation products formulated with vaginal rings or other methods
- Clinical trial setting does not reflect “real world” decisions and communications among couples

Conclusion

- In many contexts, topical microbicides enhance sexual pleasure for users, both women and men
- Specific attention to sexual pleasure is still lacking in many microbicide acceptability studies, and when included it is often in form of sex-negative questions
- The current generation of microbicide gel formulations are lubricants; the personal lubricant industry may offer good examples of marketing strategies
- Shifting focus from fear and disease to promotion of sexual enjoyment might substantially increase microbicide uptake
- Within clinical trials, research could focus on how gel use affects participants' experience of sex in particular contexts
- Once microbicides are marketed, planned evaluations should be conducted of social marketing strategies for microbicides as pleasure enhancers

References

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