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Treatment developed In the UK aimed at reversing the early

Symptoms of Aids. In the nine years since Aids was first identified, the pharmaceutical industry has developed some 55 drugs for the deadly disease. But, despite the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on research, only one drug treatment, .AZT (Azidothymidine), has been licensed for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and it costs each patient at least $3,400 (Sh71,400) a year. The rest are still in various phases of testing. Once licensed, medical researchers said they will probably be taken in conjunction. With AZT, in the sort of drug "cocktails" now used to treat cancer. Consequently Wellcome PLC, the company that makes AZT, is at the centre of a social and medical controversy. Aids-victims picket Wellcome in protest at the. High price of the drug, and doctor’s worry about the serious side effects that it can cause. Industry analysts expect the British pharmaceutical' giant to remain at the eye of the storm for the next three to four years, as no drug treatment now being tested appears to be as effective against Aids as AZT, trade named Retrovir.

Retrovir only delays the progress of Aids in the body, and patients in the acute stages of the disease cannot take it for more than 18 months without developing acute anaemia.

Studies released in August showed that AZT was much less toxic for people who were infected with the Aids virus but had not yet developed symptoms, making the drug more tolerable for a larger group of people. But recently, Wellcome scientists found that certain strains of HIV, the virus that causes Aids, are becoming resistant to AZT, and rats exposed to high dosages of the drug developed vaginal cancer.

No drug under development holds out the promise of a cure, and medical experts say it will be 10 years before a vaccine is developed. In the meantime, Aids sufferers can expect more expensive drugs, all with their own set of side effects, and the prospect of a

Lifelong drug maintenance progamme that will keep them alive but not healthy. "Retrovir is fairly secure as the "gold standard" for Aids drugs for the next four to five years,"

said Mr. Erling Refsum, who follows the drug industry for Nomura Research. "There will be a lot of drugs coming through that will challenge it, but all will be compared to AZT, and effectiveness will always be more important than price. “Few observers expect any Aids treatment to be cheaper than AZT. Wellcome cut 'the price from $8,000 to $6,400 last September, and earlier this month the US Government approved a lower dosage, effectively cutting the cost of treatment to $3,400 a year.

Development costs are high for any drug, but Aids presents a particularly difficult target because it destroys the body's entire immune system. Victims can contract everything from the rarest forms of cancer to pneumonia. In addition, the spread of the disease is nowhere near the magnitude of such killers as cancer and heart disease. The World Health Organization estimates that five to 10 million people may be infected with the HIV virus worldwide. However, only some 600,000 full-blown aids victims have been identified, about half of whom have died, so the base of users for any Aids drug – other than a vaccine - is small. "The pricing of other drugs will be similar to AZT," said Mr Andrew Porter, a drug industry analyst with Nikko Securities Co in London. "It costs more than $100 million to develop a drug and companies .have to recoup that investment. “Aids drugs under development generally fall into three categories: .Antivirals, like Retrovir, which interfere with the biological processes that allow the Aids virus to replicate~ in the body. Immune stimulators, which act to boost the body's natural

Immune system, so that it can protect the body from the many diseases that result from the virus. .Vaccines which block the virus from either progressing in the body or, ideally, from entering the body' at all. The next drug to win a licence is expected to be DDI (Dicleoxyinosine), trade named Videx, and made by the US drug company Bristol-Myers Co. Like Retrovir, DOl is an antiviral and highly toxic. Although Videx has undergone no clinical trials, in September the United States approved the drug only for Aids patients who are seriously ill and unable to tolerate Retrovir. Aids researchers said that ideally, AZT and DOl should be used in rotation to mini miser their respell toxicities Hoffman la Roche GS of Zealand has a similar drug in clinical trials, DDC (Dideoxycytidine), and there have been promising' reports on a compound drug called Carbonic, under development by Glaxo Holdings PLC of Britain. The immune stimulator that has shown the most promise is Imuthiol, the trade name for Diethyldithiocarbauiate, made by France's Rhone-Poulenc. The drug has long been used in France to treat cancer and a similar drug, Ant abuse, is sold in the United States for the treatment of alcoholism.

French researchers said in October, 1988, that Imuthiol curbed symptoms of Aids in patients who carry the HIV virus but have not yet developed the disease. . But their study came under attack for using too small a pie of patients and lasting only weeks. The medical community is now awaiting the results of an extensive clinical trial of Imuthiol recently completed in the United States. There are only a handful of vaccines being tested, and they only block the virus once it enters the body. In December, US researchers

reported the development of the first vaccine that actually protected monkeys from getting the virus. The researchers said in a report: "Our success is unambiguous proof that a vaccine for Aids is possible." Their research points to the direction for development of a human vaccine. But medical. Experts almost universally agree that such a vaccine is some 10 years away. (Reuters)