**Aids conference ends with hope**

VANCOUVER, Friday

Aids researchers, activists, doctors,

condom and drug manufacturers

opened up the 11th International

on Aids yesterday amid

the next big target in Aids research.

The closure of the conference,

the most upbeat in years, was interrupted

by a polite protest from ACT

UP, chanting, "Where's

Dingwall?"

A man who is HIV positive took

the stage criticizing Canadian

Health Minister Mr David Dingwall

who had left the conference

with the flu, sending a sarcastic note and flowers.

The activist also had suntan oil

for Prime Minister Jean Chretien,

who is on vacation and did not attend.

Conference organizers tolerated

limited protests aimed at government

officials and drug companies,

which activists have accused of indifference

and greed.

Research news from the conference

was dominated by an obscure

new class of drugs called protease

inhibitors which bind to the human

immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that

causes Aids and prevent it from reproducing. These, used in various combinations,

have been shown to slash the

amount of HIV in the blood but

have only been tested in small

groups of people for no longer than

two years.

"We're seeing a very dramatic

anti-retroviral effect," said Dr David

Ho, director of the Aaron Diamond

Aids Research Center in New

York and one of the research stars

of this conference.

The next big target could be the

mechanism HIV virus uses to stick

to and penetrate the healthy cell.

said researcher Mr Nathanial Landau

of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in a study released yesterday.

Little has been known about how

HIV access healthy cells. and Mr

Landau found that it entered

through a gateway named chemokine

receptor 5, pointing to another

viable area of clinical research.

But, as was often pointed out in

the conference, developing nations

unwilling or unable to ensure safe

drinking water to their poorest residents

will never be able to afford

the new protease inhibitors that - at

their cheapest - run 4.800 dollars

annually.

And it is the developing world -especially Africa - that has been

hardest hit. Sub-Saharan Africa is

home to 68 percent of the 22 million

people who are HIV positive,

with other developing nations home

to another 22 percent.

News of a possible cure offers

little cheer in the developing world,

which has called for the development

of a vaccine. Researchers offered

little hope, saying that too little

was known about HIV and its

many subtypes to develop a vaccine

to protect against it.

Despite the optimism, the drumbeat

of the conference was the need

for prevention: condom use, fewer sexual partners and the development

of methods such as microbicides

that women can use without

their partners' knowledge.

"Will people everywhere be less

careful if they believe that the elusive

'cure' is just around the corner?"

said Mr David Cooper, president

of the International Aids

Society and a keynote speaker at

the Vancouver conference.

"Will governments seize on a

comfortable but mistaken presumption

of an imminent end to the epidemic

to go cold on continued

funding?" he said. The next conference

is in Geneva in 1998. (AFP)

**Doctors worry that**

**treatment could**

**backfire on society**

VANCOUVER, Friday

Drug ,treatments offering new hope in the fight against Aids could backfire horribly if they are used

improperly, creating fresh and dangerous

strains of the virus they were

meant to kill.

Participants at this week's l1th

International Conference on Aids

said the triple drug "cocktails" -

which can require patients to take

numerous pills several times a day -

may be both too expensive and too

complex for key Aids risk groups

such as drug abusers and homeless

people.

, "It goes without saying that if

you don't know where your next

meal is coming from, taking your

next pill becomes very secondary, "

said Dr Mervyn Silverman, former

head of the American Foundation

for Aids Research.

The new therapies, which in

some initial studies have cut HIV to

below detectable levels in patients'

blood, have created a mood of optimism

in Vancouver, with specialists

saying Aids may now be conpared a treatable disease.

But what frightens the medical

community now is that sporadic or

incomplete attempts at this kind of

drug therapy could quickly turn the

promise of the new "cocktails"

into a curse, creating a new version

of the Aids virus invulnerable to

treatment.

"Are we going to see the emergence

of a multi-drug resistant virus

and go back to where we were in

the 1980s where we had to just

wring our hands because we could

do nothing?" asked Dr Marcus Conant, head of the Conant Medical

Group, a private clinic for HIV

treatment in San Francisco.

"You take a group of people,

many of whom have never held

down a job, have probably never

finished school because they are

not compulsive enough to get up at

a certain time every morning and

you expect them to follow this kind

of complex drug regimen?" he

asked.

Even a short lapse in drug treatment

can allow the viral fire, which

can now be doused by drug treatment,

to rage anew, researchers say.

And the new versions of the virus

produced could mutate and become

invulnerable to multi-drug therapy.

This resistant strain is likely to be

transmissable from one HIV sufferer

to another - creating a new public

health nightmare.

There are studies which show

that HIV resistant to AZT, the main

drug so far perscribed for Aids, can

be passed between people and researchers

believe it is very likely

that a strain resistant to the new

therapy could be transmissable as

well.

Because the much-touted drug

cocktails, that involve AZT, the

drug 3TC and a protease inhibitor,

make sufferers feel better very

quickly, the less-disciplined are

likely to regard further treatment as

unnecessary .

"The anecdotal stories are incredible

(about the drugs' impact)-

people getting out of the grave and

working out," said Mr Silverman.

Some specialists say the new therapies

be accompanied. (Reuter)

**Researchers reveal key**

**HIV protein section**

WASHINGTON, Friday

researchers have revealed the

'egg-like" structure enclosing the

genetic material of the human immunodeficiency

virus (HIV), potentially an important step to developing

an Aids-fighting drug, the

journal *Science* reported yesterday.

"Any scientist who wants to develop

a new drug that interferes

with HIV needs to know what the

virus looks like, and we've provided the first look at one of HIV's

closely held secrets," Professor

Michael Summers, a biochemistry

professor at the University of

Maryland-Baltimore County, said

in a statement.

Capping six years of work, Prof

Summers and other researchers at

the University of Maryland-Baltimore

County and the University of Utah in the July 12 edition of the journal gave a detailed molecular

picture of a piece of the shell that

holds HIV-I enzymes needed for

the virus to infect and reproduce.

The structure of the protein that

binds with identical proteins to

make up the shell is unlike any others

previously seen, they said.

Called the p24 capsid protein, it

has a single, exposed loop that contains

an amino acid called Pr090

that binds to a protein called cyclophilin

A in a process that researchers

said appears to be necessary for

a viral particle to become infectious.

In an interview, Prof Summers

described the capsid protein as a

piece of a soccer ball that binds

with other identical pieces. Prof

Summers added that the researchers

were satisfied. (Reuter)