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AZT: Third World women to benefit

A quick treatment that could cut in

half the number of HIV-infected

infants born in developing countries

may be more difficult and expensive

than initially suggested,

say US health officials.

First, doctors must diagnose the

2 million HIV-infected women

who will get pregnant each year in

developing countries - nations

that now have little testing for the

Aids virus, the officials say. Then,

they must keep the healthy babies

from being infected by breastfeeding,

Last month, scientists discovered

that three to four weeks of

AZT therapy· during the end of

pregnancy cut in half the number

of infected babies born to HIV-infected

mothers.

AZT maker Glaxo Wellcome

reacted by slashing the drug's

price for developing countries, to

between US$50 to US$150 per

woman. The 26-week AZT therapy

given to US women costs

US$800 to US$1,000.

Still, "there are some really

major challenges in turning this

into a reality for the hundreds of

thousands· of children who are infected

every year ," said

Nils Daulaire of the U.S. Agency

for International Development,

(USAID) which spends US$120 million on Aids programmes

worldwide. The U.N Programme

on HIV/Aids has called international

experts to Geneva on Monday

to plan how to get short AZT

therapy to developing countries.

Aids testing is largely unknown

in these regions. USAID has begun

HIV counselling and testing

programmes in 14 developing

countries, at a cost of US$25 per

person. The question is how to

find an estimated 2 million HIV infected

pregnant women each

year at a more affordable price,

Daulaire said Friday.

Then comes the AZT. Even at

US$50 to U5$150, that's "several

times the amount normally

spent on all prenatal obstetric

care" in developing countries,

Daulaire said.

Finally, doctors must keep protecting

the healthy infants: If their

HIV-infected mothers breastfeed

one in six of the babies will catch

the virus that way, he said.

Health experts for years have

tried to increase breastfeeding ill

developing countries because mothers' milk is such good nutrition.

Given that, doctors must figure out how to curb nursing by HIV-infected mothers without

hanging that bigger message, he

said.

-AP