*Will Kenya gift the world the*

*first drug that kills Aids virus?*

**Elusive:**

A cure for

Aids has

eluded the

best scientific

minds ever

since HIV

was discovered

in 1984

The last thing I would have

expected is that a place associated

with apes would be

a centre of cutting edge medical

research, especially on HIV of all

things.

I wasn’t even familiar with the Institute

of Primate Research (IPR)

which – odder still – is an adjunct

not of some medical facility but of

the National Museums of Kenya,

which now falls under the Sports,

Arts and Culture ministry.

It is this IPR where the other day

I learned some very serious inroads

are being made against the virus that

causes Aids. Some background is in

order.

A cure for Aids has eluded the

best scientific minds ever since

HIV was identified in 1984. That

is despite billions upon billions of

dollars being spent by governments,

top-notch universities, research institutes,

pharmaceutical companies

and foundations to find a cure. An

Aids vaccine looks an even more

remote prospect.

According to Dr Peter Gichuhi

Mwethera, a reproductive health

specialist and lead researcher in the

IPR study, part of the problem is that

science has been focusing more on

understanding the HIV virus itself,

rather than just dealing with what

it does to the body.

Basically what the researchers

have done is to come up with a

microbicide called Unipron (a gel,

really) that kills the virus once it is

introduced inside a woman’s genital

system. I’ll spare you the technical

details of how it works, which a layman

will have trouble following. The

initial trials were done with baboons

because, I am told, they best approximate

the human physiology (did you

know baboons menstruate?). Those

initial trials have been completed and

found to yield good results.

All the Aids medication available

such as ARVs combats the virus

when it has already infected the

body. There is nothing in the world

so far that destroys the thing once

it has entered the bloodstream, or

which can remove it entirely from

the body.

There are scores of anti-HIV gels

that are being tested all over the

world. In Africa, Unipron is unique

because it is the only such product

that is on the threshold of getting

professional approval for clinical trials.

This is the most critical stage

in drug development; it involves

testing the product not on animals,

but on actual human beings. Only

after successfully passing through

clinical trials can a drug be licensed

for the market.

Could this be another Kemron

in the making, I wondered? There

are those who remember the “Aids

wonder drug” that was once peddled

at political rallies during Daniel

arap Moi’s time. The whole thing

ended up in confusion and embarrassment.

One of the researchers

behind Kemron later came up with

another anti-Aids “medication”

called Pearl Omega which turned

out to be a dodo, too. It reportedly

had side-stepped all known medical

research protocols.

Dr Mwethera is decidedly not

going that route. He is partnering

with the Aga Khan and the

Nairobi hospitals for clinical trials

once the ethics boards of the two

institutions grant the vital approval.

IPR’s overseer and director-general

of the National Museums of Kenya,

Dr Farah Idle, who is a pathologist,

described the anticipated trials as

“very promising”. Similar sentiments

were expressed by Unipron’s co-collaborator

at Aga Khan Hospital, Dr

Alfred Murage, a gynaecologist.

Two other related products that

originate from IPR research are

already past trials and are on the

market. One, Smugel, is a reproductive

lubricant while the other,

Smuscan, is used for ultrasound

scans on pregnant women.

Already, the African Union has

taken note of Unipron. At the AUorganised

All Africa Public Sector

Innovation Awards ceremony held

in Brazzaville last month, Unipron

won one of the top prizes among innovations

deemed likely to become

very beneficial to the public across

the continent.

gwarigi@ke.nationmedia.com

Dr Mwethera will partner with

the Aga Khan and Nairobi

hospitals for clinical trials

once approval is granted”

“It’s now the turn of

young scholars to break

new ground for Africa’s

resurgence through innovative

research geared towards

African transformation.

Younger intellectuals should

expand our horizons of imagination

and creativity to

forge practical solutions

that can yield measurable

results” **— Retired**

**President Mwai Kibaki’s**

**reflections on African**

**universities last week.**

OPINION MAKERS | What they said

“We want to ensure

nobody is discriminated

against on the basis of tribe

or gender during recruitment

... We have stepped

in following challenges

that most counties faced

**— National Cohesion and**

**Integration Commission**

**vice-chair Milly Lwanga**

**on the plan the commission**

**is developing to**

**guide the 47 counties on**

**employment.**

“We join the people of

Kenya and Tanzania in

honouring the sacrifices

of the victims of this

heinous act. We continue

to stand with our

East African partners to

bring terrorists to justice

**-- United States President**

**Barack Obama in memory**

**of the 1998 Nairobi and**

**Dar es Salaam embassy**

**terror attacks in which**

**more than 200 people**

**were killed.**

“The Independent

Electoral and Boundaries

Commission did not have

any right to nominate or

promote anybody in the

list submitted by the party

**— Election petitioner Lydia**

**Mathia of The National**

**Alliance Party during the**

**hearing in a court case**

**where she has sued the**

**electoral body for nominating**

**journalist Naisula**

**Lesuuda to the Senate.**

“We shall first do a traditional

wedding at my

parents’ place in Nakuru,

followed by a church wedding

... is there anything

wrong with someone

getting married to a rich

person? Being in God’s

ministry, he is perfect for

me **— Celebrated gospel**

**musician Emmy Kosgei**

**on her upcoming nuptials**

**to Nigerian pastor**

**Anselm Maduboko.**

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