envelope. This deactivates the virus and prevents it from entering the cells.

The gel coats the surface of the vagina and forms a barrier, preventing the cells from moving into the epithelium of the vagina.

Govender emphasised that Carraguard was not a contraceptive or a spermicide, although further work on a dual-purpose gel could emerge should the trials be successful. ‘At present our focus is on preventing HIV infection, nothing else,’ he said.

Johannson said his centre hoped to begin with three more microbicide gel trials in South Africa next year. These were called Tro2000 – very similar to Buffergel, which changed the pH in the vagina to become unfriendly to the virus, and Cellulose Sulphate, which bound the virus in a manner similar to Carraguard.

Results in animals showed that the gel protected monkeys against SIV, rats against herpes simplex, while a special system in which tissue from the human vagina was transplanted into animals had also proved successful.

‘It’s not always nice to be a world leader in this kind of research because everyone else learns from our mistakes,’ he quipped.

Changing women’s lives

He emphasised that an effective microbicide would be the first socially acceptable prophylactic product that women could use themselves.

Condoms were very effective when used consistently and properly.

However, unless they were viewed in ‘a more epidemiological way’ that took into account the low status and lack of sexual negotiating power of women, their efficacy was dangerously exaggerated.

Govender said his team would begin analysing the data next year and ‘hopefully by 2007, give or take a couple of months, we’ll have solid results’.

Chris Bateman