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News Analysis

THE PROS AND CONS OF HIV TEST BEFORE MARRIAGE

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KUALA LUMPUR: Compelling Muslim couples to be tested for the HIV virus before they tie the knot may seem an ideal way to ensure healthy progeny but there can be serious implications.

The suggestion that Muslim couples undergo pre-nuptial HIV testing was made by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman recently.

But such a recommendation warrants an indepth study before it can be taken in earnest by the authorities.

A Muslim marriage is preceded by an engagement which can last between six months and a year and according to the minister's suggestion, the HIV test should be carried out just before the marriage is solemnised.

Picture this scenario: the wedding plans have been finalised, guests have been invited and the couple, their families and relatives are eagerly awaiting the big day. Then comes the HIV test and either the bride or groom is diagnosed as infected with the virus which causes AIDS. What happens next?

Also, what happens if the couple concerned is determined to marry each other, regardless of the outcome of the test?

According to doctors, babies born of parents who carry the HIV virus face a 30 percent risk of being infected as well.

Some feel that the mandatory HIV test as a prerequisite for marriages between Muslims is unfair as non Muslims are exempted from undergoing similar tests.

Insisting that his proposal would not inconvenience anybody, Dr Hamid argued that it was, in fact, beneficial as it would bring about a future generation of Muslims who are healthy and secure.

Under the proposal, the "kadi" or registrar of marriage can only issue the certificate of approval to Muslim couples to marry after they are tested and proven free of the HIV virus.

Some wives-to-be may be happy with the proposal as it would assure them of life partners who are free from AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, meanwhile, said that the proposal could be discussed by the Cabinet because the matter not only involved the Muslims but the non-Muslims as well.

Considering the growing menace the disease is posing, the government has implemented various measures to check the spread of AIDS. Medical records state that an average of 300 HIV cases are reported throughout the country every month.

AIDS related deaths are expected to increase, as no medicine or vaccine has been discovered to counter the deadly HIV virus.

Since the discovery of the first four cases in 1986, the number of HIV carriers has increased to 13,945 as of October last year.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Marina Mahathir expressed uneasiness over Dr Hamid's proposal, saying that it is an infringement of a person's basic rights.

"It's certainly discriminatory as well for it is only compulsory for Muslims to undergo the HIV test, while for non-Muslims it is done on a voluntary basis," she said.

Marina said that the proposal should be accompanied by other measures as well and they include counselling before and after the test.

If the result is negative, it does not mean that the couple is free from HIV for there is a "window period" or incubation period of about three months during which the virus can exist undetected.

To be entirely certain that the virus is not present, a couple must undergo a second test three to six months after the first, explained Marina.

"If one of the partners is diagnosed as HIV positive, will the couple be forbidden from marrying and will help be extended to the infected person?" she asks.

She stressed that it is improper to cite the outcome of a HIV test as the reason to restrain a couple from getting married.

"It is also impossible to keep the result of the test a secret because if the marriages ceremony is cancelled, everybody will become suspicious and this will cause a lot of emotional trauma to the couple concerned and their families," said Marina.

She does not dismiss the possibility of couples affected by the proposal, tying the knot in another country.

Religious scholars, academics and community leaders, meanwhile, want the government to look into the proposal carefully and study its implications before implementing it.

They feel that the test should only be subjected to those in high-risk groups like dadah addicts and people known to have led a promiscuous lifestyle and those who have undergone blood transfusions.

Ahmad Awang, president of the Malaysian Ulama Society, wants to know who will foot the bill for the test if the proposal is implemented.

Medical specialist Datuk Dr Hashim Nik Omar felt that the proposal is a "waste of time and money". It also further complicates the existing administrative procedures which have to be observed before a Muslim marriage is solemnised, he said.

At present, Muslim couples in most states have to attend a marriage course and obtain a certificate of approval in order to get married.

"Doctors will face a dilemma as medical ethics dictate that they should not divulge their patients' health status to a third party," said Dr Hashim.

Parliamentary Secretary to the Health Ministry Datuk M.Mahalingam said existing regulations required hospital authorities to obtain the permission of a person first before a sample of his or her blood is taken for testing.

The same procedure, he added, applied to HIV testing and, hence, it cannot be carried out forcibly.

Honorary Secretary of the Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, R. Thiagaraja, dismissed the proposal, saying that the problem of HIV infection is related to each individual's moral conduct.

To curb the spread of AIDS, the authorities should take a positive approach without hurting the feelings of any party. Any proposal compelling blood tests, he said, should be implemented cautiously to avoid HIV carriers from being treated with contempt. -- Bernama