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Educate the public about AIDS, PM urges media

Adeline Ong

THE media must use its power to educate the public about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Aids) and help prevent its spread, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

He said not enough people are well-informed about the disease, and stressed that education played an important role.

"This is where the media comes in. The role that the media can play is immeasurable and its practitioners should recognise this and make full use of their power to spread knowledge.

"We see today the power of the media. We talk about the information age, and yet, there is not enough information on something as important as Aids prevention," Dr Mahathir said.

He was speaking at the presentation of the Red Ribbon Media Awards to media practitioners in recognition of their contribution towards Aids awareness.

Dr Mahathir said that in presenting the award, the media would realise the important role it can play in preventing the disease.

"It is distressful that we should have to have this function at all, because we are faced with a disease that did not exist before.

"When I was studying medicine, I was amazed that there were thousands and thousands of diseases that can befall human beings.

"I had thought then that we have discovered all of them, and that there are no more new diseases. As long as we found some cure for these diseases, we would be safe. We could live a longer life.

"However, apparently there are still diseases that can emerge and can be identified which we had not known before - like Aids," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that Aids was discovered in a developed country although the disease has been present in the developing countries for a much longer time.

"Because the focus was not on developing countries or their health problems ... we did not discover the disease until it had been with us for quite some time.

"Only when it affected people in developed countries, there was sudden fear that it would wipe out a lot of people there. Then, only then the world discovered Aids," he said.

"According to statistics, 16,000 people get infected with Aids everyday. This adds up to a lot of people with Aids. The unfortunate thing is that Aids spread through ignorance," he said.

He said there are problems with different cultures whose practices somehow or other act against Aids prevention.

"In certain cultures, women cannot deny the rights of the husbands. This has complicated things. And yet there are simple ways of preventing Aids which we all know, but those who do not know are unable to benefit," he added.

Chairman of the Malaysian Aids Foundation Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said in Malaysia 27,000 people are reported to be HIV-positive and most of them were infected when they were young.

"... We should not wait until we reach the severe level that is found in Africa before we realise the danger of this epidemic to our young people. We must start efforts to equip them with the knowledge to protect themselves from getting infected.

"This effort should reach all young people, be they in or out of school.

The time has come for us to stop talking about whether we should do these programmes in school and just do it.

"Every second that we wait puts our young people in danger. This is an extremely urgent issue," Marina said.

She said that Aids is a youth-centred epidemic, particularly for young people aged 10 to 24. About half the 33.4 million people in the world with HIV/Aids are from this age group.

She added that this is why this year's World Aids Day theme is "Force For Change: World Aids Campaign with Young People".

Marina added that in these troubled times, it is easy to put aside the issue of HIV/Aids using the excuse that financial assistance is lacking or that there are other priorities.

"But we should look at this for the long run. If we are not careful now, even if the economy recovers, the recovery can be limited by HIV/Aids.

"So, whatever money and effort we put in now towards prevention and awareness should be seen as an investment for the future," she said.

Marina added that to kindle the spirit for change among youngsters, there has to be HIV/Aids education programmes in schools and in teen-oriented clubs wherever youngsters meet, including discos and nightclubs.

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