

10/10/1998

Religious leaders 'should help in AIDS education'

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Religious leaders need to play a greater role in educating the community on HIV and AIDS as the network of religious institutions is far reaching and well integrated.

Malaysian National AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said religious leaders such as pastors, priests and imam could become counsellors and guides.

She said there was a spiritual dimension to HIV/AIDS as patients and their families go to churches, temples and mosques to seek solace and to deal with questions about life and death.

Marina said: "Religion plays an integral part in the daily lives of Asians and religious leaders are also community leaders who set examples for people to follow.

"There is a need for more awareness programmes among religious leaders. As the number of HIV/AIDS cases is on the rise, it is a problem we will have to deal with sooner or later."

Marina was delivering her keynote address on "An Update of National Strategies and the Work of NGOs in HIV/AIDS Prevention" at the National HIV/AIDS Enablers Workshop held at the YMCA.

The two-day workshop for social workers involved in HIV/AIDS related work is sponsored by the council and supported by the Catholic Church, Council of Churches and National Evangelical Christian Fellowship.

Speaking to reporters, Marina said there was a need for a national plan to co-ordinate efforts on HIV/AIDS prevention by the Government, non-governmental organisations and religious bodies.

She said there was some progress among the Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism as they were affiliates of the AIDS council.

Progress was slower among Muslim religious leaders as there was a reluctance to address the problem.

The HIV/AIDS Asean Regional Workshop of Islamic Leaders to be held in Jakarta on Oct 19 would enable Muslim religious leaders to learn from the success of Indonesian ulama in handling the issue, Marina said.

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