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Seeking access to better treatment for HIV patients

Esther Tan

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The Health Ministry has set up a committee to look into ways of enabling HIV-infected people to be treated with a triple combination of drugs which is said to be highly effective but expensive.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said today the committee would also develop an eligibility criteria for those who would be given priority for the treatment such as those with very low CD-4 cell count.

The committee, headed by the Ministry's director-general Tan Sri Abu Bakar Suleiman, is expected to submit its recommendations by the end of the year.

At present, HIV patients in the country are mostly being treated with the anti-viral AZT drug which is relatively cheaper.

The drug is subsidised by the Government and some third-class patients are usually treated for free.

However, there are patients in the Kuala Lumpur Hospital who buy their own drugs for the triple treatment which costs between RM2,000 and RM3,000 per month.

"Triple treatment can be very effective. It cannot cure HIV or AIDS but it can prolong life and patients can go back to work.

"AZT also helps but to a lesser extent," Chua told reporters after presenting the 1998 Pingat Bestari Public Bank awards to 31 students who excelled in their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia and Penilaian Menengah Rendah examinations.

Chua was commenting on the statement by Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir that most people who tested HIV-positive were unable to obtain regular treatment because of the high cost involved.

She said since most of them were ex-drug addicts and prisoners who have been abandoned by their families and unable to find employment, it would be a problem for them to meet the high cost of treatment.

Chua said the high cost for the new triple treatment was a world dilemma.

He said the drugs involved were very expensive as they were developed and patented by multinational corporations.

"Our hope, and that of other developing countries too, is for the multinational corporations to reduce their prices.

"At present, we are doing whatever we can," he said.

At the same time, Chua said the Ministry was looking into ways of overcoming the problem to provide better treatment for HIV patients.

The Ministry hopes to get some allocations from the Treasury or from the proposed National Health Fund.

The committee will even propose ways of getting the multinational corporations' cooperation in the matter.

Chua said at present, the Ministry was "very close" with the pharmaceutical industry.

"We are not trying to raise hopes but we want to try to do the best we can," he said.

On the two brothers from Muar who are suffering from the rare genetic disorder known as progeria, Chua said they would be undergoing a series of medical examinations to be carried out by a team of specialists from the Muar district hospital starting tomorrow.

The team include ear, nose and throat; eye; skin; physiotherapy; and dental specialists.

Chua said the specialists were to recommend the types of treatment to control the symptoms brought about by rapid aging faced by the boys - Tan Huey Juan, 11, and Huey Jyh, 20.

"We can only control the symptoms because there is no known cure for the disease," he said.

If need be, the boys will be referred to Dr Hussein Ibam, a specialist at the KLH who has seen similar cases involving a pair of twins from Penang.

Chua has also asked local experts to seek as much information as they can on the disease from the Internet and their foreign counterparts.

Earlier, he presented three students who scored 10 AIs in their 1997 SPM examinations with the Pingat Bestari awards.

They are Hannah Ahmad Rosli of Sekolah Tun Fatimah, Johor Baru; Lee Sze Yin of Sekolah Menengah Perempuan St, George, Penang; and Sri Raeen Kandan of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan La Salle, Petaling Jaya.

Each received a gold coin worth RM 1,200, a certificate and a blazer. They will also receive a monthly cash award of RM200 each for 22 months.

Twenty-eight other students received the 1998 Bestari Muda Public Bank awards for excellent results in their 1997 PMR examination.

They will each receive RM80 a month for two years.

The 1998 Bestari School Public Bank award went to Sekolah Alam Shah, Kuala Lumpur and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Subang Utama, Subang. The schools were chosen for having the most number of students who excelled in their examinations and for having a good co-curriculum record.

Each school was given a multi-media computer set worth RM4,000 and a plaque.

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