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Chua-HIV

AIDS CAN AFFECT ECONOMY IF UNCHECKED, SAYS CHUA

KUALA LUMPUR, May 16 (Bernama) -- The AIDS epidemic will affect the economy through loss of productive and experienced workers if left unchecked, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said today.

He said this economic loss was apart from the personal loss suffered by families left with no means of support and the use of family savings for medical treatment and funerals.

"Rehiring and retraining can cut into profits and quality of service for employers," he said when launching the 16th International AIDS Memorial Day (IAMD) 1999 organised by the Malaysian AIDS Council here.

He said for an economy to grow well and for the country to successfully overcome the current economic crisis, a healthy work force was needed.

He said because of the long latent period from first infection to development of AIDS, the infected person could be a useful member of the work force, but the quality of his labour decreased as the disease progressed.

"We must remember that of the reported 28,541 infected persons in this country, some 24,000 have not yet progressed into AIDS and are currently healthy," he said.

Speaking to reporters later, he stressed the need for all sectors of the community and the government to work together to better the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS and to prevent further infection.

"We should act on the cases of discrimination we hear about, perhaps making it public would reduce future cases," he said.

He said better education on HIV/AIDS for everyone was also a positive way to eradicate discrimination.

Earlier, Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said it was estimated that one in 200 Malaysian adults is now HIV positive.

She said by the year 2000 the number was estimated to reach three in 200 adult Malaysians.

"By the year 2000, one of us will, if we don't already, have a friend, family member or loved one who will be infected or affected by AIDS if something isn't done to curb the spread of the epidemic," she said.

She said the theme of AIDS Memorial Day this year, which is "Building Global Solidarity Against Injustice and Fear For A World Without AIDS", outlined the many facets of the epidemic that need to be addressed.

One of them is that discrimination, stigma, violation of the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS and acts of injustice do exist in the lives of these people and their families, and need to be dealt with.

The most important thing was the need for government, business and communities to work together and ensure that appropriate policies and programmes were set in place so that the HIV-positive and their families were given opportunities to live their lives without fear of stigmatisation or discrimination, she said.

She also said the council had set up a Law and Ethics Sub-Committee recently to monitor and document rights violations of those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

"This is the first time a group of community-based Non-Governmental Organisations in the country have come together to work independently and jointly to protect the rights of people living with AIDS/HIV," she said.

At the function, Hugin Thomas, a man infected with the HIV virus eight years ago, came forward to tell the story of how he got the virus and the

struggle he has been going through since.

The IAMD is an event where family and friends honour the memory of those who have died because of AIDS, and demonstrate support for those still living with HIV/AIDS.

-- BERNAMA

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