

17/05/1999

Chua: 13 people on average down with HIV everyday

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - More than 4,600 cases of people with HIV were reported last year, while another 875 people having the virus developed AIDS last year, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said today.

He said there were 689 people who died of AIDS last year, an increase from 473 in 1997.

"With 4,624 cases of people being infected with HIV last year, that means an average of 13 people are getting the virus everyday," he said during a Press conference after launching the International AIDS Memorial Day at Sunway Pyramid.

There were 3,924 cases of people with HIV in 1997.

He said so far, 28,541 HIV cases have been reported since 1986, while 1,811 people have died of AIDS during the same period.

"Seventy-eight per cent of new cases were from intravenous drug users," he said, adding that if there were no drug users, the number of HIV cases would be very low.

More importantly, Chua said acts of discrimination against people who were HIV-positive should be exposed to put a stop to such cases.

"We have to shame these people who are discriminating against people with HIV, whether they are employers, doctors or nurses."

He said if a person had been unjustly dismissed due to prejudice, the victim could take his case to court, while doctors who were found to be discriminatory could be brought to the Malaysian Medical Council for action.

"By exposing cases of discrimination, we create consciousness. This would educate people who still fear the disease."

Chua added discrimination would cause people who have the virus to be silent about having the virus.

"HIV will spread with that silence."

He said that despite the high level of awareness of HIV/AIDS, many still acted as if they did not know the risks of the disease.

On the issue of expensive medicine to treat HIV/AIDS, Chua said his Ministry was talking to multinational drug companies to see whether they could conduct the final production here in Malaysia to cut costs.

"At present, a patient is allowed to choose between AZT, which costs RM550 a month, or DDI which costs RM350 a month. That is all we can afford. As for the other medication, the patient will have to buy it himself."

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said it was very difficult to determine how widespread cases of dismissals due to HIV/AIDS were.

"We are collecting details of such cases," she said, adding that with such details, a case could be presented to the Government for action.

She said there was a lot to do before cases of unjustified dismissal could be brought to court.

"Judges and lawyers have to be educated first. Also, Malaysia could follow the Indian system where people who have HIV can give evidence anonymously to protect their identities," she said.

Marina also said the highest number of complaints of discrimination from HIV-positive people were of incidents within the health system.

"These were people who were neglected in hospitals or clinics because they are HIV-positive," she said.

During the ceremony, 31 business and non-governmental organisations affirmed the Malaysian AIDS Charter which was launched 1995.

The Health Ministry, however, was not one of the signatories.

(END)