

25/10/1999

Discrimination continues despite awareness drive

Chok Suat Ling

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Discrimination against people living with HIV or AIDS is still widespread despite campaigns and education programmes to cultivate awareness.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said was saddened that public support for AIDS patients was still "very much lacking", considering that Malaysians were generally caring.

As at May 31, there were 30,187 cases of HIV infection, 2,761 AIDS cases and 2,157 AIDS-related deaths reported in the country.

Chua said: "We hope by the next century, there will no longer be stigmatisation and discrimination against AIDS patients. We hope there will no longer be stories of families and society as a whole rejecting not only those who have been diagnosed with AIDS, but also those who are HIV-positive."

Chua was speaking to reporters after chairing a plenary session on "Taking Stock of the Asia-Pacific Epidemic" at the Putra World Trade Centre.

The five-day congress was opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday.

Chua said health education and promotion would continue as the main strategy for the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS.

"Almost RM5 million a year has been allocated for this activity since 1991 when the Government launched the nationwide healthy lifestyle campaign.

"The promotions were done through the print and electronic mass media, public forums, seminars and outreach activities."

On the Prostar programme launched in 1996 to mobilise Malaysian youths to fight HIV/AIDS, Chua said as at June, 19,870 youths had been trained as peer motivators.

"Through these trained youths, we succeeded in exposing almost 205,000 young people between 13 and 25 years of age to issues related to healthy lifestyle and the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

"Up to June this year, 339 schools have Prostar clubs and 119 district Prostar clubs have been established all over the country."

Chua said dadah users made up 77 per cent of HIV/AIDS cases in the country.

He said screening for HIV, which was available in all government hospitals and health centres, was periodically carried out.

"We carry out routine screening of pregnant women and foreign workers applying for work permits, and confidential testing for the public and high-risk groups."

Elaborating on the screening of pregnant women, Chua said as at June, 64 of the 250,000 women screened were confirmed HIV-positive, including some Thai and Myanmar nationals.

Out of the 64, 43 had given birth. "And out of the 43 newborn, only two were found to be HIV-positive."

Chua attributed the low incidence of HIV among the babies to the free anti-retroviral treatment given at government antenatal clinics to the women until they delivered their babies.

"The treatment costs RM600 per mother every month. The Government has spent almost RM6 million on the programme since it was launched last year.

"The programme has pulled down the mother-to-child transmission rate to

4.25 per cent, which is indeed a success compared to the average global transmission rate of 30 per cent."

Chua assured the public that donated blood was also screened. "So far, we have screened 2.4 million samples of donated blood, and only 1,379 samples were reactive to the HIV test."

He said 30 health clinics, to start services early next year, would deliver healthcare, laboratory and counselling services to HIV-infected persons. A total of RM1.2 million has been allocated for the clinics.

Chua said annually, the Government allocated about RM35 million for HIV prevention and control, patient care, and health education.

Chua expected the amount to be increased over the next few years.

(END)