

15/06/1999

Fighting AIDS with imams' help

Merina Hew

THEY had seen it all before, you know, the denial that HIV/AIDS is a major health threat to the wellbeing of the nation.

Eerily enough, even the number of reported cases of HIV/AIDS in Malaysia, 29,000, echoes the figures in that of Uganda Accordingly, "Act now!" was the crux of imams Dr Magid Kagimu, President of the Islamic Medical Association of Uganda, and Neema Nakyanjo's message at the colloquium on Islam and HIV/AIDS.

With help from the UNAIDS, Kagimu and Nakyanjo were invited by the Malaysian AIDS Council to share, with local imams and muftis, the secrets of their success in arresting the escalation of HIV/AIDS in Uganda.

Over 40 muftis, religious state department representatives, non-governmental organisations and governmental agencies participated in this colloquium, "Pencegah HIV/ AIDS dari Kacamata Islam: Menangani Cabaran".

This colloquium marked the first ever gathering of NGOs, governmental representatives, representatives of religious departments and muftis of each State collaborating to find a solution to the HIV/AIDS situation in Malaysia through Islam.

Ultimately, MAC hopes the colloquium will be a start of collaborative knowledge and energy of religious authorities and NGOs in its effort to halt the growth of the pandemic in this country.

Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, the president of MAC, said: "On average, 13 Malaysians a day are infected with HIV, most of whom are Muslims. In comparison with other religions, it is worrying to note that Islam seems to be left behind in the nation's confrontation with HIV/AIDS."

One of the main obstacles that stands in the way of HIV/AIDS education among Muslims here is the fear to discuss sexuality.

This colloquium was inspired by the success of the Ugandan experience educating Muslims through imams and muftis.

The project was initiated by the Islamic Medical Association of Uganda, an association that was established in 1988 to improve the health of the people in Uganda in general, and Muslims in particular.

One of IMAU's first efforts at mobilising Muslims in the fight against AIDS was the formation of the Family AIDS Education & Prevention Through Imams Project (FAEPTI).

FAEPTI was considered a highly innovative project that helped imams incorporate accurate information about HIV/AIDS prevention into their spiritual teachings.

It also trained teams of community volunteers to provide education, basic counselling and motivation for behaviour change through home visits.

FAEPTI was launched in two districts in 1992 and has expanded to 10 districts within five years. It worked with leaders at 850 mosques and has trained 6,800 community volunteers who have visited 102,00 homes.

IMAU said that the most effective way to retard the spread of HIV was the modification of sexual behaviour. However, addressing the issue of sexuality with Muslims was a delicate task so it approached imams, trusted "message bearers" within that community.

IMAU found that people became more receptive to discussion of sexual behaviour in the context of health and the wellbeing of loved ones.

The association also discovered that individuals were more likely to adopt safer sexual practices if these practices were regarded as the norm prevailing among their peers.

IMAU said the imam, who is a respected community figure and head of the mosque, was the best conduit for sexual behaviour changes among Muslims.

Joe Selvaretnam, manager of law and ethics with MAC, said the colloquium was a success in alerting its participants to the gravity of the HIV/AIDS situation in this country.

It also showed them ways in which the problem could be tackled from an Islamic perspective, he added.

"One of the most touching parts of the colloquium was the first-person accounts by People Living With HIV/AIDS and their caregivers. Many of the participants have never had the opportunity to speak with PLWHAs.

"The colloquium made the participants realise that the pandemic spares no one. This drove home the important point that AIDS/HIV is a threat to each and every one of us, and not just to high-risk groups."

There was a lot of positive feedback from the muftis, who seemed fired up by the discussions during the colloquium. A draft resolution subject to alterations was drawn up and debated on the third and final day of the event.

The next step, Selvaretnam said, would be to work with muftis at the State level to develop specific programmes for HIV education.

MAC intends this to be the first of a series of projects with the religious groups here because religious leaders can play a vital role in dispelling many fears that may otherwise stop a person from seeking correct advice.

(END)