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Repercussions of AIDS on workforce

Merina Hew

AFTER a sumptuous lunch last Thursday, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, president of the Malaysian AIDS Council, walked into a conference room at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel in Petaling Jaya with a winning smile.

Filing into the room behind her were Mina Cheah-Foong, president of the Malaysian Business Coalition on AIDS Society and managing director of Rampai Niaga; Tan Sri Dr Jeffrey Cheah, president of the Sungei Way Group; and Tan Sri R.V. Navaratnam, group corporate advisor of the same company.

Marina and her friends were pleased. Lunch, aside from being delicious, was successful beyond expectations.

Thanks to Cheah and Navaratnam's initiative to "invite a few friends over to lunch", the MAC-MBCA's up until now near-futile efforts to raise the awareness of corporate heads concerning the gravity of HIV/AIDS seemed to have taken a big leap in the right direction.

"Lunch was amazing," said Marina. "We were invited over to lunch by Tan Sri Cheah and we knew that on the agenda would be a discussion on the debilitating impact of HIV/AIDS on the workforce, but when I saw who his other guests were, it was like, 'Wow!'"

Although this luncheon discussion on HIV/AIDS between MAC-MBCA and corporate heads was organised by the Sungei Way Group, the idea of using a lunch gathering to sensitise the corporate world to latest facts and figures on the pandemic is the former's.

"We had our first MBCA-MAC CEO luncheon dialogue over a month ago and that too proved successful. It is actually difficult to reach the corporate world and what pleases us beyond words about this luncheon is that it was the initiative of a corporate head," said Cheah-Foong.

Penetrating the thick walls of the corporate world is one of the biggest challenges for the MAC-MBCA. However, once aware of the ways in which it can help stem and even reverse the escalating trends of HIV/AIDS, the corporations, more than any other sector, stand to make the most profound differences due to the fact that they can reach thousand of people on their payroll.

One of the main driving forces behind for the formation of the MBCA in 1996 was the UNAIDS experience that, worldwide, public health alone is not strong enough in stopping the disease.

It was found that all sectors of society need to band together; consequently, one of the main goals of the MAC-MBCA is to provide the platform for businesses to come together to inform themselves, share information and seek solutions with the Government and non-governmental organisations.

So that is why Marina and Cheah-Foong were so pleased with the outcome of this second luncheon dialogue.

"Many of those at lunch were people whose business decisions affect thousands of others under their command.

"These business leaders are the best means of disseminating HIV/AIDS education to the young people who make up the engines of growth in this country," said Marina.

Some of the latest statistics on HIV/AIDS presented at the luncheons were:

- * Over 33 million people worldwide are HIV-positive; this translates into one out of every 100 people worldwide between the ages of 15 and 44

- * Ninety-five per cent of HIV infections occur in developing countries,

in-cluding Malaysia

- * Half of all new infections occur in people below 25

- * Five young people be-come infected with the virus every minute

- * By the year 2000, one-third of the deaths among the work population in Thailand will be from AIDS

- * By the year 2000, three in every 200 adult Malay-sians may be infected

What the MAC-MBCA aims to achieve from these dialogue sessions is the formulation of position papers that depict the Malaysian private sector's stand on HIV/AIDS workplace issues.

From this, the MAC-MBCA will prepare a country paper on these points for the 5th International Conference on AIDS in the Asia-Pacific to be held in Kuala Lumpur in October.

The MAC-MBCA said HIV/AIDS will seriously affect the economic growth of the country, of which the private sector is a major stakeholder.

"Business leaders have to be made aware that they can make a big difference in their staff's attitude towards the prevention of the disease and the way in which it ought to be viewed," Marina said.

Now, many corporate heads are not fully aware of the financial repercussions this disease may cause them.

Some of the more obvious economic impacts of the diseases on businesses are the loss of experienced, skilled and qualified personnel in an already shrinking pool of labour; higher expenditure on the retraining of replacement personnel; an increase in staff turnover and absenteeism; the lowering of consumer purchasing power as their financial resources are directed to medical costs; and the increase in company health-care costs.

By committing themselves to positive HIV/AIDS policies within and without the workforce, however, business leaders reduce costs by retaining experienced staff while ensuring profits from healthier consumers whose financial resources will not have to be channelled into medical bills.

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