

'Prisons Dept has right to ask for allowance'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri: The Prisons Department has a right to ask for an increase in allowance for its staff handling HIV-positive prisoners, the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) said yesterday.

"We firmly believe that the staff understand about HIV transmission, and how to protect themselves from getting infected," its president, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, told *The Sun*.

She was asked to comment on Prisons Department director-general Datuk Omar Mohamed Dan's recent statement that the department wants the government to pay special allowances to those assigned to handle HIV-infected prisoners.

He said the allowances must commensurate with the risks to personal health that staff are exposed to.

Marina said Omar's statement indicates that there are some misconceptions regarding HIV transmission as the disease can only be transmitted through unprotected sexual intercourse with an infected person, transfer of infected blood through blood transfusion or sharing of needles, and from mother to child during pregnancy or breastfeeding.

"Unless one commits any of these three actions, there is no real danger of HIV infection," she said.

There is risk of infection for jobs that involve possible exposure to blood and other infectious body fluids such as healthcare workers who are exposed to needlestick-related transmission.

However, the risk can be significantly reduced with adherence to universal pre-

cautions and if there is exposure, there are post-exposure measures that can be taken.

"As for prison personnel, the risk should be much lower and we cannot foresee any obvious exposure routes except maybe during injuries among inmates. In such cases, universal precaution should already be in practice.

"We don't disagree with any effort to provide allowances or pay increase for civil servants but in the case of those working with HIV positive prisoners, allowances will not prevent transmission," she said.

She said the proposed allowance should instead be given as "recognition for the challenging and noble work they are doing to help people living with HIV/AIDS in very difficult conditions such as in prisons".