

It's money or life for AIDS patients

29 OCT 2000

Only 1% of sufferers can afford to pay for expensive anti-retroviral drugs

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JOHOR BARU, Sat: Only 1% of the nation's 34,000 HIV/AIDS patients can afford the expensive anti-retroviral drugs for antibody treatment that allows those with the deadly virus to live longer.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said the question of life and death depends on whether the patient has the money to pay for the anti-retroviral drugs.

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She added the drugs cost up to RM2,000 a month and only 340 patients throughout the country are currently seeking treatment at hospitals as they can afford to pay for the drugs.

Urging the government to start a pilot project to support the anti-retroviral drugs usage among the poorest, Marina said the drugs were too costly even for an average income earner, what more the poor.

Marina, who welcomed the RM41 million budget allocation to help non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and voluntary organisations in implementing various community activities, however, said the government needs to look beyond the aspect of negotiating the reduction of price of these drugs by demanding compulsory licensing and parallel importing.

"The anti-retroviral drugs are not locally available and need to be imported which

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'Treatment too costly for average income earner'

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makes them too costly for an average income earner, more so poor families," she said.

She also said an increased allocation for antibody treatment was appropriate because the government had proposed a substantial alloca-

tion of RM5.7 billion for the Health Ministry, as announced in the 2001 Budget.

She was speaking after officiating a seminar on Women and HIV/AIDS at the Johor Women's Council (Mawar) building today.

Marina said the government should conduct a pilot

project to extend the drug assistance to at least 500 patients in the country.

"A special drug assistance scheme under the AIDS Foundation has been set up to help poor and qualified patients who cannot afford to pay.

"There are about 50 patients under the scheme and

when someone dies or does not comply with the treatment, the seat is given to others," she said.

She added that a total of 20% of funds collected through the foundation amounting to about RM500,000 goes to helping patients under this scheme.

Marina said the drug assistance scheme is normally for a year but MAC tries to continue the treatment as they cannot simply stop as it was a heavy burden to bear.

She added that the scheme is extended to patients earning not more than RM2,000 a month.