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40 Malaysians for World AIDS meet

Merina Hew

THE folks at the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) are all excited, and for good reason. About 40 Malaysians will be attending the 13th World AIDS Conference from July 9 to 14 in Durban, South Africa.

This is highly significant given that exposure of Malaysians to the international HIV/AIDS arena plays a crucial role in a greater understanding of the epidemic.

As such, MAC has given out scholarships amounting to RM100,000 in efforts to send 16 Malaysians - youths, caregivers, community workers and health care professionals working in HIV/AIDS - to the conference where ideas on the disease can be exchanged.

According to Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, chairperson of MAC: "We've learnt that the 5th ICAAP (the 5th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, held in Kuala Lumpur last year) had provided the exposure for many Malaysians to international HIV/AIDS conferences.

"To allow this learning process to continue, the 5th ICAAP committee made a commitment to provide an opportunity for people involved in grassroots HIV/AIDS work to attend world conferences such as that in Durban."

This conference is a golden opportunity for people who work at the grassroots levels to reinforce the necessary skills in their fields of work, update their knowledge of HIV/AIDS issues, network with peers from all around the globe and, most of all, to use all this to facilitate their own community-based HIV/AIDS programmes.

Whilst many of the Malaysians on scholarships will be presenting papers and posters as well as facilitating skills-building workshops, Marina will speak at the closing of the Community Forum, at a session on women and AIDS and chair a session on media and AIDS.

"I've been invited to participate in Durban based on the principle I have propounded in the 5th ICAAP: that regional conferences such as the ICAAP must have links to the global conferences.

"Continuity is very important for the country/region-specific HIV/AIDS problems to be heard by the more than 12,000 participants from all over the world.

"Therefore, regional conferences must feed into global conferences such as this one," Marina explains.

One of the more outstanding features of the 13th World AIDS Conference is that, for the first time, a conference of this magnitude is being held in a developing nation.

Geographically, it seems only too appropriate that the conference is to be held in the Africa where the epidemic is at its peak with something like one in five adults infected with HIV/AIDS.

Marina expects that over half the conference participants will be from Africa. Only about 600 will be from Asia, regrettably, due to financial constraints.

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