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Accept the existence of HIV epidemic, says Marina

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Malaysians have been urged to accept the existence of the HIV epidemic, sex workers, out-of-marriage sex and homosexual relationships if these problems are to be successfully addressed.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said today that denial of their existence would make it more difficult to overcome the issues.

"If the very existence of these problems are denied, then they can never be addressed," she said in a talk on AIDS/HIV problems to a group of New Straits Times staff undergoing a three-day course at Balai Berita on reporting of social issues.

With better education and understanding of the HIV virus, she said its spread and rate of infection could be checked and ultimately prevented.

She said the HIV virus epidemic could be managed with a realistic approach and attitude.

She said an open attitude was needed regarding the use of condoms.

"Such an attitude is also needed on ways to reduce harm among drug users. We cannot expect users to change overnight as it takes time to kick the habit.

"Apart from this, efforts should also be made to reduce the stigma and discrimination of a person living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAs). The stigma prevents many from going for tests as they are afraid to be identified."

Marina said that efforts should also be made to respect the basic human rights of the marginalised community.

"Apart from this, there should also be joint effort between the Government, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and PLWHAs.

"This will result in better prevention and management programmes for those infected."

She added that sufficient funds was also needed for the prevention, care and treatment programmes.

"These programmes will effectively curb the HIV/AIDS epidemic."

About 5.4 million people were infected with HIV virus last year and 18.8 million people have died due to HIV infection since the epidemic began worldwide.

The deaths have resulted in 13.2 million children becoming orphans, having lost either their mothers or both parents to the infection.

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