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AIDS spreads its deadly tentacles

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TO emerge victorious in war, one has to know the enemy and his weaknesses - even before the battlehorn is sounded. This maxim has withstood the test of time as historical battles were won or lost.

However, in the global war against AIDS, many people seem to be blissfully oblivious to the far-reaching effects of this pandemic.

Thus, myths about contracting the deadly Human-Immunodeficiency Virus which leads to AIDS abound in countries where the poverty rate is higher than the domestic growth rate.

Among the fatal misconceptions which prevail, in the Dark Continent, for instance, is the belief held by HIV-positive men of being cleansed of the illness if they have unprotected sex with virgins or young women.

Sadly, by not realising the fatal folly of their unfounded faith, these men would have then transmitted the virus over to their partners, ironically doing the virus a favour by propagating instead of subduing it.

Therefore, it was no shocker that Sub-Saharan Africa was home to 70 per cent of those infected with the virus last year and the burial ground for eight out of every 10 people who died of AIDS worldwide in 1998.

But the hard-hitting reality is, after Africa, countries in the South and South-East Asian neighbourhoods are the next to witness an explosion of HIV infections.

Malaysia, of course, is no exception, with over 34,000 HIV-positive cases recorded with the Health Ministry since 1985 as AIDS is a notifiable disease.

But these statistics may in fact belie the true situation of the AIDS scourge in the country. The World Health Organisation has estimated that one out of every 200 Malaysian adults is HIV-positive.

Even more unnerving is that WHO further predicted approximately 170,000 Malaysians will be infected with HIV by next January.

However urgent the situation may be, mainstream Malaysians still believe they are protected from the threat of HIV/AIDS, perceiving it to be the ultimate punishment of society's "undesirables" - namely the homosexual, the drug addict and the sex worker.

According to Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, even local authorities have failed to realise the far-reaching effects of HIV/AIDS.

"The AIDS situation in the country has created a crisis of governance with a great impact on the household, education, agriculture, business and the health sector," she says.

As in the HIV/AIDS scenario, the assumption that ignorance gives birth to discrimination and fear naturally prevails.

Thus, no matter how much the "Caring Society" concept is propounded by the Government, People Living With HIV/AIDS (PWLAs) - as they have come to be known - will be stigmatised and ostracised by the public at large.

To make matters worse, Marina said PWLAs were shying away from therapy because of the discrimination and social stigma associated with the hyper-sensitive issue.

Furthermore, the anguish of being HIV-positive does not necessarily end there. It has been reported that some employees with AIDS had also been unfairly dismissed.

Seeking redress against unwarranted dismissals had proven difficult as victims were afraid of exposure and employers had, in most cases, managed

to find loopholes to justify each termination.

Apprehensive managers, on the other hand, were said to have consulted the Labour Department or non-governmental organisations when faced with the predicament of having HIV-positive employees on their payrolls.

In light of these unsavoury matters, the Human Resources Ministry had finally decided to formulate a code of practice to address the issue of AIDS and AIDS-related discrimination in the workplace - both of which have yet to be accorded provisos in current employment laws.

This comes on the heels of an announcement by MAC that it was undertaking a study on discrimination faced by PWLAs on the job, to "prove the existence of AIDS discrimination to the authorities who do not realise that it is very pervasive and should be eliminated".

Kudos then, to NGOs crusading against HIV/AIDS for their tenacity in addressing and redressing the discrimination issue.

But, the real battle is far from over as there is still a large chunk of the Malaysian population dangerously unaware of the impact of the disease, making them especially vulnerable to the global killer.

Thus, the tedious task providing HIV/AIDS education should not taper off momentum-wise and instead be channelled towards those who have limited access to information, such as ruralfolk.

While Marina should be applauded for going down to the grassroots level in creating awareness of HIV/AIDS among women, this shift in focus leans ironically towards being discriminative in its own right - this time against men.

Even if women are usually the ones bearing the brunt of domestic violence and social stigma, targetting them as the exclusive recipients of HIV/AIDS education comes into direct conflict with statistics as 95 per cent of the HIV-positive identified in the country are men.

What needs to be done in a patriarchal society like Malaysia, therefore, is to target the anti-AIDS messages at the ones who have the power to make significant changes to the social dimensions ruling the country.

It must also never be forgotten that AIDS does not choose its victims according to gender, even though women are three to four times more likely to get infected from their male partners than the reverse.

Then, there is the expensive problem of "Living With AIDS" with the recent shocking revelation that only one per cent of Malaysians were able to afford life-prolonging treatment which cost a whopping RM2,000 per month.

"If a subsidy could be set aside in the 2001 Budget for kidney patients undergoing haemodialysis treatment, why not aid for AIDS?" asked Marina.

Imagine, then, the catch-22 situation of a PLWA being terminated from his job because of his affliction, and losing his means of independently supporting his anti-retroviral therapy which limits the devastating effects of the virus on his immune system.

The point to be driven home is contracting HIV is not an automatic death sentence. People who are HIV-positive are still very much functional and it is only when they develop AIDS do they become gradually incapacitated.

With less than a month to go before we celebrate yet another World AIDS Day on Dec 1, the winds of change are still taking their time in blowing in the right direction.

By ignoring that discrimination against PLWAs persists and by continuing to wallow in the taboos of society vis-a-vis AIDS, humankind - and Malaysia - may have already lost the war before the battle has even begun.

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