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Ignorance, prejudice still impede the greater battle against AIDS

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TODAY is the first International AIDS Memorial Day of the new millennium and a good time to take stock of how far we've come in battling HIV/AIDS and the staggering impact it's had on our lives.

Are we doing enough to combat the spread of the HIV virus, and the AIDS disease that it causes? The figures tell us we haven't.

Malaysia has recorded over 33,000 cases of HIV infections since 1996, but this is a figure that the Malaysian AIDS Council has dismissed as extremely conservative.

While there have been visible efforts by the Government to warn people about the dangers of activities such as unprotected sex and intravenous drug use, the number of cases only continues to climb.

Awareness is the key and the continuing rate of infection makes it clear that attempts to stem the tide are not effective.

It's time to spread the message further and more effectively, but instead of being more bold, we're still squabbling, for example, over whether to make sex and AIDS education compulsory in schools.

While the Malaysian AIDS Council frets that not providing youngsters with this kind of information is tantamount to avoiding responsibility, other bodies say providing moral and religious instruction is sufficient.

Providing crucial information about sexual consequences, in other words, is being too simplistically equated with abandoning our moral values.

It's time to face facts: people can't be expected to be rational, moral creatures all the time. AIDS has claimed 16 million lives around the world so far, a fact which should replace our squeamish hesitation with urgency.

Another weakness in Malaysia's public awareness programme is how little the public knows about the issue.

The recent case of HIV being transmitted through a blood transfusion, for example, underlined how few people realise that contracting HIV does not condemn anyone to an automatic death sentence.

Highly-active antiretroviral therapy, a complex cocktail of drugs, was introduced into the battle against HIV/AIDS four years ago and has successfully reduced by 64 per cent the risk of dying within 10 years of developing AIDS.

Magic Johnson, the 40-year-old basketball superstar, who was one of the most famous celebrities to admit to being HIV-positive, continues to be a healthy, productive member of society. He is just one of thousands.

Being a carrier of HIV or AIDS is not an automatic death sentence, not any more. Believing that is symptomatic of how far we still need to go, as is our general lack of sensitivity towards HIV and AIDS carriers.

The housewife who recently discovered she had contracted the HIV virus from a blood transfusion feared being ostracised by her neighbours and friends, and this is a worry that is unfortunately very real.

The Malaysian AIDS Council recently embarked on a study to document the level of social discrimination that HIV/AIDS carriers face, and though preliminary, the results are telling.

"Few are willing to talk because of the implications of public exposure," said council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir yesterday.

"Many of those who did speak to us said it was difficult to seek medical help because they felt they were treated differently from other patients. They felt the medical staff treated them more slowly and with less friendliness."

There was little indication of discrimination from colleagues and other people the interviewees came in contact with, but that was only because shame and fear had driven them to keep their condition a secret.

People with HIV/AIDS should be concerned with just one thing, and that's doing battle against their illness.

They can ill afford the emotional turmoil of keeping up a masquerade for those too ignorant to be of help.

With the increasing number of cases worldwide, international efforts to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS are being stepped up - the United States recently took the unprecedented step of declaring AIDS a threat to international security.

Malaysia has to accelerate its own programmes accordingly because while doctors have been trying to unlock the secrets of this sly disease for years, a vaccine, much less a cure, is still not within sight.

Time is not on our side here - only by jettisoning our ignorance and prejudice do we stand a fighting chance.

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