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Need for cheaper anti-AIDS drugs

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - The Health Ministry will push for western multinational companies to produce locally anti-retroviral drugs used by HIV and AIDS patients.

Its Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said today these companies were not allowing developing countries to produce the drugs which could help reduce the deadly virus in the body.

"The drugs were used only in the West where they could afford the high price being charged," he told newsmen after attending the Health Dialogue 2000 with non-governmental organisations at a leading hotel today.

"Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had also urged these companies to allow countries in Africa, South America and Asia to produce these drugs under 'compulsory licensing' and 'parallel importing', he said.

Expressing regret over the attitude of these companies, Chua said the companies should understand that millions of AIDS victims were hastening to their deaths in developing countries as they simply could not afford the costly drugs.

Chua said the companies were protecting their patents and not allowing developing countries to produce the anti-retroviral drugs.

The pharmaceutical companies that manufacture these medicines have patent rights that prohibit countries from producing them on their own.

"This is a moral dilemma that we are facing in the new millennium where a remedy is available but 'patent rights' are preventing widespread utilisation, resulting in so many preventable and premature deaths in poor countries.

"When drugs which can help AIDS victims have been found in the West, they instead give priority to profits rather than saving the lives of people in developing countries."

At present, 33.6 million people in the world have the HIV virus and AIDS which has claimed 13.3 million lives so far.

The Asean region has an estimated 700,000 HIV and AIDS patients.

The World Health Organisation estimated that 13.8 million women and three million children have been infected.

Chua said the increase in HIV and AIDS cases was occurring mainly in developing countries, and the divide between the developed, western countries and developing countries was widening.

Even though advances in the medical sciences had successfully come up with drugs that could check the progress of the disease by reducing the amount of the virus in the body, only the rich and developed countries could afford these drugs.

"Some time ago, beds in the hospitals of developed countries were filled to the brim with HIV/AIDS patients, but today they are quite empty as patients can now work normally and continue to contribute to the nation's productivity, with the help of these drugs," he said.

Conversely, millions of adults and children infected with HIV and AIDS in the developing countries are continuing to die because they could not afford these medicines which are very expensive.

At the recent WHO conference in Geneva, five multi-national companies had pledged to reduce the prices of anti-retroviral drugs for developing countries but they have yet to honour their pledge.

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