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## Need for code of practice on HIV/AIDS at workplace

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IN A move to prevent the HIV and AIDS from affecting workers' productivity, the Human Resources Ministry would issue a code of practice on "HIV/AIDS in the Workplace" to guide employers and workers in dealing with such matter.

Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn said the most productive segment of the population - people who are between 15 and 49 years old - are at the highest risk of contracting the HIV.

This, he said would have an adverse impact on the country and the business sector in terms of loss of well-trained employees needed for economic growth as well as the fall in national savings for health expenditure.

While the chance of contracting the virus stood at 1 in every 220 for Malaysians, the employers were still clouded in misunderstanding and misconception about the HIV/AIDS issues at workplace.

"From the survey conducted by the ministry's Department of Occupational Safety and Health (Dosh) on 154 employers from various industries, we found that most of the respondents thought HIV and AIDS only affects the unskilled and lowly educated workers.

"The employers also perceived that the issues were only significant at the national level and not at the enterprise level," Fong told a news conference after officiating a seminar on "HIV/AIDS in the context of the World of Work" in Subang yesterday.

On the contrary, if not dealt properly, HIV and AIDS could pose significant impact on business, healthcare expenditure, absenteeism and low productivity.

As such, he said, a policy or guideline on HIV and AIDS at the workplace is necessary to raise the awareness of such issues so that discrimination and under-reporting of HIV and AIDS cases can be prevented.

He said such guideline can be incorporated into the company's policies and practices with respect to employment, the rights of the HIV-infected employees as well as the measures needed to prevent discrimination and stigmatism.

"That is why we are organising this seminar to get feedback from the experts as well as learn from experiences of other countries in dealing with this issue," he said.

On a question, Fong said the ministry had not received any report from employee who had been unfairly dismissed for contracting HIV.

However, he said, human resource managers have approached the ministry to get advice in dealing with employees who have AIDS. These managers are then provided with a list of organisations dealing with AIDS.

Although the existing labour laws in the country have no specific provision on HIV and AIDS, he said the law discouraged workplace discrimination including discrimination against HIV-infected workers.

"It is not so much of dismissal but we want all parties concerned to act properly in dealing with this issue so that there would be no discrimination.

"More importantly, we want to ensure that the productivity of the workers were not affected," he said.

Meanwhile, Malaysia AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said the council has been approached by workers who claimed that they have been wrongfully dismissed because of AIDS.

However, she said the cases were hard to prove as employers always use other excuses to dismiss their workers.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) resident representative, Mr Phillips Young said a HIV-infected person is not a risk to other workers.

He said open discussion on HIV and AIDS should be held regularly to increase the awareness of general public, especially the adolescent.

The one-day seminar, which was jointly-organised by Dosh and Institute of Occupational Safety and Health was attended by about 500 local and foreign participants. The seminar was funded by UNDP and International Labour Organisation.

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