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## Dr Mahathir calls for affordable HIV/AIDS treatment

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has directed the Health Ministry to look into affordable alternative HIV/AIDS treatment as imported antiretroviral medication was expensive.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said the Prime Minister had proposed that the ministry conduct studies on herbal treatment used in India and affordable medicines used in other countries.

Chua said Dr Mahathir issued the directive at the Cabinet meeting yesterday.

"We will look into this proposal seriously as we want HIV/AIDS patients to seek treatment so that they could have a longer life span instead of just succumbing to the disease," he told reporters after chairing a closed-door 5th AIDS ministerial meeting attended by representatives from 14 ministries and the Malaysia AIDS Council at Pan Pacific Hotel today.

He said the introduction of affordable HIV/AIDS therapy would in the long-run help reduce the number of AIDS cases in the country.

Chua said last year, the Government spent RM4.1 million on antiretroviral medicines.

"From the amount, RM3 million was spent to buy the drug Zidovudine to treat AIDS/HIV patients," he added.

He said full-blown AIDS patients were given free treatment at Government hospitals and it cost the Government RM1,400 to treat each patient.

"Free treatment is also given by the Government for children and pregnant women suffering from AIDS, besides hospital staff handling HIV/AIDS patients and those contaminated through blood transfusion such as the case in Jitra," he added.

Following the Patent Act (Amendment) 2000, Chua said a number of companies producing antiretroviral medicines had agreed to reduce the cost of the drugs between 10 and 68.5 per cent, depending on the brand.

He added the ministry was holding talks with these companies to further reduce the cost of the drugs to make them more affordable.

"Free treatment is not given to those in HIV stage. It is this category of people who need to buy the medicines so that they can extend their life span."

Chua said he would seek the help of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin to co-ordinate with other relevant agencies and departments in bringing in affordable HIV/AIDS drugs from overseas.

As for the meeting today, Chua said members had proposed that the current RM4 million allocation for antiretroviral drugs be increased to RM15 million so that more victims could receive free treatment.

"It was also proposed that HIV victims also be given free treatment," he added.

Chua said these proposals, among others, would be submitted to the Cabinet for consideration.

He said between Dec 1986 and June this year, 40,877 HIV/AIDS cases were reported.

Last year alone 5,107 people were infected with HIV, an average of 14 new cases a day.

"An average of between 4,000 to 5,000 new cases are reported every year," he said adding that many of them were between 20 and 39 years.

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