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Dr Siti Hasmah: Political parties must organise HIV/AIDS campaigns

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Political parties should organise awareness campaigns for HIV/AIDS targeted at primary and secondary schoolchildren.

The Prime Minister's wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, said political parties should follow Wanita MCA's example of "Project Iceberg," aimed at educating schoolchildren on the social and economic implications of the epidemic and set up similar projects.

"It is not difficult to get schools and organise quizzes or contests for them to create awareness," she said when launching Project Iceberg which comprises a series of articles on HIV/AIDS to be published in the Chinese daily Sin Chew Jit Poh to be used in class discussions.

Project Iceberg, organised by Wanita MCA together with the Malaysian Aids Council and Sin Chew Jit Poh, will be targeted at pupils aged between 10 and 18 years in 422 national-type and independent Chinese schools nationwide.

Dr Siti Hasmah said the project "depicts what an iceberg is: much of what can be seen above the sea level is just one tenth of the total bulk of the iceberg.

"Nine tenths are below the water surface and therefore is comparable to the iceberg.

"We have figures of HIV/AIDS sufferers. But we do not know how many shun help and treatment because of fear, stigma, ignorance, or are too ill to come forward.

"We do not want all our efforts, programmes, money and time to go down like the Titanic because we do not reach the right target groups and potential sufferers," she said.

Statistics from the Health Ministry reported 38,044 HIV cases, 4,649 AIDS cases and 3,538 cases of death from AIDS in Malaysia in 2000.

"This means that the possible HIV/AIDS epidemic in our country could be devastating for our nation," Dr Siti Hasmah said, adding that it was a potential threat to the region.

She said preventive education campaigns must have adequate information, should be plainly worded, frank and must not be vulgar.

She lamented that affected children had the misfortune of being excluded from schools, childcare centres and even medical treatment.

"The prolonged distress this causes can leave the affected child with deep emotional and psychological wounds."

Project Iceberg will include a quiz contest for schoolchildren aged between 10 and 18, and an elocution contest for those aged 16 to 18.

The finals of the quiz and contest will be held on May 6 in conjunction with the AIDS Memorial Day.

Wanita MCA chief and Deputy Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen said Malaysians had to ensure their country was healthy and its people remained robust and productive in order to sustain the country's progress.

Meanwhile, Malaysian Aids Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said there were many things that needed to be improved as far as creating awareness was concerned.

"We find that the programmes are too general, so we are not sure if the message gets across, as many people tend to think it will not happen to them.

"Existing programmes by the council has to be supplemented with specific

programmes," she said.

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