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Healthcare providers also stigmatise HIV/AIDS patients

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Even in the health care profession, there are doctors who perpetuate the stigmatisation of HIV/AIDS, which hinders the prevention and treatment of the disease, the Third National Medico-Legal Conference heard today.

Dr Christopher Lee, a consultant to Kuala Lumpur Hospital's Department of Infectious Diseases, said expertise was "pointless" if medical practitioners themselves could not overcome prejudices against HIV/AIDS patients.

"If healthcare providers stigmatise AIDS patients, we cannot expect society to be any better," he said in his presentation on the medical perspective on human rights and HIV/AIDS.

Dr Lee said there were doctors who were reluctant to learn about HIV/AIDS for fear that they would then "be expected to treat it".

"Healthcare professionals should be at the forefront of changing public perception," he said, adding that there was also a lack of specialised HIV/AIDS care providers here.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said HIV/AIDS was connected to every aspect of human rights. She noted that HIV/AIDS patients often found it difficult to obtain information on treatment and prevention as little public funding was allocated to such projects.

"The perception is that we should not use public money on educating the marginalised who are viewed as a non-productive sector of society."

She also noted that partner notification (of a HIV-positive person to his or her spouse) as required by the Health Ministry was sometimes conducted insensitively by health officials.

"There have been cases where officials call up a spouse and inform them casually over the phone. Even worse is when they visit the house, find no one in and leave a message with the neighbour."

Marina said HIV/AIDS was probably the most stigmatised disease because "no other disease brings into question a person's morals".

Another speaker, Australian High Court judge Michael Kirby, suggested Malaysia consider radical steps to curb the pandemic.

He said Australia had allowed special rooms where sterile equipment is provided for drug addicts to inject themselves.

"It is controversial but the decision was made because it would be worse to let people die through spread of the disease."

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