

01 DEC 2001

Aids-Fund

INSUFFICIENT FUND, ATTITUDE THWART NATION'S WAR ON AIDS/HIV

A News Focus to mark World AIDS Day on Saturday

By: Gurdial Singh,

PENANG: Insufficient funding, high cost of treatment and society's attitude towards HIV/AIDS is setting back the nation's war against the deadly disease.

President of the Penang Family Planning Association Tunku Datuk Dr Ismail Md Jewa said the deadly disease had become a global problem and its spread and control had to be monitored closely.

He said AIDS/HIV could not be ignored and continuing education of school teachers, educators and volunteer workers on the disease was necessary for its prevention and eradication.

It was timely to raise the education of these people as they could in turn educate students and people, he said.

PFPA and its members, said Dr Ismail, were actively involved with AIDS awareness programmes through seminars, conferences and general dissemination of information for the public as part of its contribution to society, while it continued with its family planning work.

These two activities were inter-related, having to do with sexual contact and the AIDS menace.

He noted that the summit of leaders of the Group of Eight in Genoa in Italy this year, announced that US\$1.2 billion (RM4.56 billion) had been committed to a United Nations (UN) "Global Health Fund" that would primarily be used to fight AIDS/HIV.

#### 16,000 HIV INFECTION A DAY

Dr Ismail said the world rate of new infection per day was estimated at 16,000 people, while the number of people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide at the end of 1997 was estimated at more than 30 million and this was indeed a very frightening figure.

According to him, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, chairman of MAF, had said that the major problem was indeed "denial" by those infected by the disease for various reasons such as rejection by society, therefore actual figures of AIDS sufferers were not readily available and many preferred to suffer in silence .

He said statistics of the Malaysian Aids Foundation (MAF) showed that about 4,000 of the 40,049 HIV-infected people in Malaysia died of AIDS from 1986 to April 2000. But the numbers were increasing at an alarming rate, he added.

However, compared with other countries in the region, AIDS and HIV patients in Malaysia have better access to treatment and the cost of treatment was coming down, particularly because of private sector collaboration and contributions.

He said affordable treatment was necessary for AIDS victims, otherwise the problem would continue to escalate.

#### CHEAPER TREATMENT

Dr Ismail said it was gratifying to note that giant drug manufacturers like Bristol-Meyers-Squibb, Glaxo, Merck, Boehringer Ingelheim and Roche Holding have agreed to slash prices of their AIDS drugs for developing countries.

Presently, the government was contributing to the fight against AIDS by making the cost of treatment reasonable at its hospital and via pamphlets, brochures and fliers and public seminars, talks and conferences through

various bodies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as MAF, PFPA and the private sector to educate the public about the disease, he added.

Dr Ismail said funding was inadequate in view of the high costs involved, including high costs of drugs only available from Western drug manufacturers.

Contributions from local charities were not enough to cover the huge expenses needed to fight the disease, he said, noting that even the UN stated that the disease would be a costly affair for everyone.

While he was not sure of the exact costs of the drugs, he said it was reported that Glaxo would be selling its drug "Combivir" for US\$2 a day in the Far East.

But several NGOs, he said, believed that even if HIV/AIDS drugs were produced at lower costs, they might not reach the destitute and illiterate.

Then, they were those who denied that they had the disease because of the social and cultural stigma, he added.

Dr Ismail said preventive education to highlight the need for more safe sex, particularly for people in the rural areas, should be the first battleline against the disease.

He, however, cautioned that the cultural sensitivity of the people must be taken into consideration because it was still a taboo to talk about sex openly. -- Bernama

GS KGO