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10pc of HIV/AIDS cases women

Brenda Lim

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - More women in Malaysia have become infected with HIV than ever before, Malaysian AIDS Council president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said today.

The rise in numbers might seem small, but from representing one per cent of reported cases, women now made up 10 per cent of reported HIV/AIDS cases, she said.

The statistics are puzzling as women usually make up half of the HIV-infected population in the rest of the world. "This is a cause for concern," Marina told reporters after presenting prizes to winners of the Project Iceberg HIV/AIDS awareness programme.

She said stigma and stereotyping might have resulted in women shying away from hospitals and doctors giving the wrong diagnosis, such as not naturally suspecting a housewife of HIV infection.

"Assuming that most men are heterosexual, the female is at risk or affected," she added.

As of April 2001, 40,049 people have been tested positive for HIV, of whom 5,103 have full-blown AIDS and 3,881 have died from AIDS-related diseases.

On the steady and sharp rise in reported cases of HIV/AIDS despite awareness programmes being conducted, Marina said some programmes could be shallow as participants learnt about the disease, but did not understand how they would be affected and were not moved to change their behaviour.

Special programmes should be drawn up to cater to the specific needs of different groups, women for instance.

In this, working with women-based organisations would be ideal as they already have a ready-made network and only need to incorporate suitable programmes, including trainer training, at different levels, Marina said.

There is also a need to scale up the programmes, which are mainly based in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor.

Although many other places needed similar programmes, financial and human resources were insufficient, she said, adding that the national budget for all aspects of managing the disease, amounting to over RM200 million before the economic crisis, had been cut.

The numbers were slowly creeping up again, but allocation for non-governmental organisations had never been enough, she added.

Marina, who had recently returned from the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in New York, said the Declaration of Commitment had covered all aspects, from identifying the problem to deciding that prevention was the key response.

Other matters included reducing vulnerability, mobilising resources, dealing with gender issues to protect women and removing barriers to treatment such as highly-priced drugs.

The declaration states that by 2010, 95 per cent of the world's youth aged 15 to 24 should have access to information on HIV/AIDS, peer support, special youth education on HIV/AIDS and other services, Marina said.

More than 6,500 young people in the world were infected with HIV last year, the equivalent of a youth being infected every five minutes.

A Global AIDS Fund to help poorer countries was also discussed.

At today's ceremony, Wanita MCA chief Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen said Project Iceberg had some 21,000 students from Chinese schools learning about HIV/AIDS through reading the newspapers.

She said the programme, jointly organised by Wanita MCA, the Malaysian AIDS Council and Sin Chew Jit Poh, helped promote awareness among the Chinese community who rarely discussed HIV/AIDS as it was inaccurately linked with promiscuity and drugs.

Datin Seri Endon Mahmood officiated at the prize-giving ceremony today. She praised the three organisations for working together to help students learn more about HIV/AIDS, especially about preventive measures.