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Video way to get message across

Rina Omar

WHENEVER an adult tells us what to do, that's what it is: adults TELLING us. But when peers do it, it's sharing information.

With this in mind, the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) has decided to educate young people about AIDS and HIV through a video where youth not only wrote the script and directed it but also starred in it as well.

The video, called Mencari Kepastian, was launched by MAC president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir on Aug 1 in conjunction with Asian Youth Day.

It was funded by Levi Strauss & Co (the jeans company) and produced by Red Communications (the people who also brought you the edutainment show 3R).

Instead of the usual preachy and boring style of educational videos, Mencari Kepastian is a contemporary drama, where the acting is actually more polished than the 7pm drama series on television.

The video, which runs for 27 minutes, revolves around five friends - Amy, Kee Hong, Iskandar, Elaine and Sachin. They're typical Malaysian kids whose lives suddenly get filled with questions when Amy discovers she is HIV+.

We see how each person deals with personal fears and issues - Kee Hong, Amy's boyfriend, is scared but wants to find out more about the virus; Iskandar deals with an ultra religious father who thinks it's a punishment from God; Sachin has experimented with drugs and is afraid he is infected; and Elaine fears for her brother Eric, who is gay.

Information about AIDS is cleverly woven into the storyline - from basic facts about HIV infection, sexuality, confidentiality, stigma and discrimination, religion, drug abuse and support for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Kuhbaer T. Jethwani, who wrote the script for Mencari Kepastian, has been working with Akshen, a youth theatre group which has been creating waves in and out of the country.

"I'm happy with the end product actually. We tried to keep it as realistic as possible, and there was lots of ad-libbing by the actors. One of the problems though was to fit in as many facts as we could while keeping the conversation flowing. But it didn't turn out preachy, so I'm happy about it," he said.

"The idea for the main plot came from Saw Teong Hin, the person initially roped in to direct the video (after that Bernard Chauly took over the job). But from there the story took on a life of its own."

This video is a first for the MAC, according to Marina, and is meant to be used in youth educational programmes, to raise issues and awareness.

"It is important to reach out to young people with educational messages about HIV/AIDS so they can empower and protect themselves. This video gives a very realistic depiction of how it affects young people in a Malaysian context," Marina said.

"We hope it hits home with the target audience, especially since young people wrote and acted in the video for young people," she added.

She also spoke about the importance of educating youth on HIV/AIDS because of the growing numbers of young people infected with the virus in our country.

At the end of December 2001, the number of young people between the ages of 15-24 infected with HIV in Malaysia stood at 763. And it is increasing.

"We need to do a lot more about the issue. We need to bring in young

people to design more programmes for us. We're currently talking to the Ministry of Education about AIDS education in schools," Marina added.

Lai Si Meng, regional director of Levi Strauss Malaysia, said that Levi's has a history of continued support for HIV/AIDS causes, working with NGOs and AIDS-focused groups to battle the spread of the virus via education.

"Recently we held the Speak Your Mind campaign, where representatives from 12 Asian nations were invited to voice their concerns as youth.

"These concerns were compiled and put into the Asian Youth Charter and presented to United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. High on the list of concerns is AIDS/HIV and how it will affect them in the future," he explained.

The appeal reads, "We urge governments to ensure all young people are educated about HIV/AIDS so that we can better protect ourselves and others."

The culmination of the Speak Your Mind Campaign was the declaration of Asian Youth Day by Annan on Aug 1.

"This video is an urgently needed educational tool. It talks about high-risk behaviour, its consequences and preventive measures one can take," he said.

The Mencari Kepastian video and its accompanying facilitators' guide is now available at the MAC office.

Apparently, there are plans to make the video more accessible to schools by making it either free of charge, or charging a minimal price.