

09/08/2002

The will to say `no`

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THE question still remains: If there are so many campaigns and resources available, together with so many school outreach programmes, why is the number of HIV-infected young people still rising?

Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, president of Malaysian AIDS Council, and Dr Ang Eng Suan, executive director of the Federation of Family Planning Associations Malaysia (FFPAM) share their thoughts on this situation.

"I don't think we're doing enough," said Marina. "We have a problem with expanding our programmes, not only financially but in terms of human resource."

And it's not just about resources - negative attitudes surrounding sex education act as a hindrance to the proper spread of information.

"We can't even talk about condoms! Every time we do, we're accused of promoting promiscuity among teenagers," says Marina. "In the meantime, teenagers are not really getting the information they need to keep themselves safe."

She believes that policy-makers should wake up and deal realistically with the young.

"Adults don't have enough insight into the lives of young people. They need to understand and address the diversity of the youth. They're not all the same, they all have different experiences.

"We should bring in young people to design these programmes for us, even play a part in the policy-making because they, as peers, would have a better picture of the lifestyles and behaviours of young people today."

She believes that merely educating young people with the facts and figures is not enough.

"Teenagers may know enough about HIV/AIDS to, say, pass a quiz. But is the knowledge enough to change their behaviour?"

The importance of promoting safe behaviour is why she says that HIV-awareness programmes should also address the dynamics of relationships and gender relations.

"Gender balance is one of the contributing factors to this problem. Boys are raised to think they are superior, and among their peers, are expected to know everything about sex. But the reality is that many of them remain ignorant about many issues surrounding sex.

"Girls, on the other hand, are self-conscious and most times feel inferior, and are not really aware of how to assert themselves. Many young girls still feel that the only way to keep a boyfriend is to have sex with him, regardless of whether she wants to really do it or not."

Marina would also like to make sure all teenagers know the power they have over themselves, through the choices that they can take, even through the simple act of saying "yes" and "no".

"The difference of getting or not getting infected is often a result of a choice that is made in a person's life. How the choice is made is determined by the knowledge they have and the environment they are in," she says.

"We just have to make them aware that they have the power to make these choices over their lives."

The FFPAM also believes in trying to educate teenagers not just in the bare facts of HIV/AIDS, but also in relationship situations.

"Though the awareness (of HIV/AIDS) is there, the life skills and skills of prevention are needed to complement this knowledge as well," Dr Ang

says.

These life skills, as she calls it, are basically a guideline to appropriate boy/girl relationship behaviours.

"We (FFPAM) never discourage boy-girl relationships. After all, interaction and dating is a normal part of growing up."

What FFPAM is trying to promote is healthy relationships between young people, within an appropriate code of conduct.

"We want them to know of issues that may arise in a relationship and how to react in certain situations. For example, how to say no if you're not comfortable with doing something, with someone," she explains.

These skills of asserting one's self and knowing one's choices in a situation would not only be valuable in dating and relationship scenarios, but also when it comes to peer pressure in other things, like substance abuse.

"We want to be able to provide these skills to teenagers, along with the factual knowledge about safe sex and prevention of HIV infection. But we can't work alone, we need a concerted effort by all parties to reinforce these messages," she says.

These "parties" she refers to are the other factors of influence in a teenager's life - parents, community, religious organisations, the Government, NGOs, schools and their own peers.

"If everyone worked together on arming our teenagers with the knowledge and the ability to protect themselves, then we might see some changes."