

25/06/2004

Enemy in the blanket

DATUK Paduka Marina Mahathir, the indefatigable president of the Malaysian Aids Council, recently delivered both good and bad news on the relentless effort to keep the spectre of HIV/AIDS at bay in this country. The good news is that the infection rate has declined among one of the groups once deemed most at risk of contracting this dreadful contagion. Fewer sex workers tested positive for HIV last year than the year before, and the overall number of new infections - 6,756 - was a little lower than the 6,978 who came down with the lethal infection in 2002. This would imply that the message assiduously delivered by the Ministry of Health, the Malaysian Aids Council and other concerned non-governmental organisations, hospices and charities has been clearly heard by those whose livelihoods as well as lives depend on safe sex.

As Marina strongly emphasised, however, HIV/AIDS has long stopped being a "gay plague" or some kind of grotesque "divine retribution" against prostitutes and their clients. The bad news is in the rising number of ordinary housewives and unborn babies infected. There is no understating this: Three times more housewives than sex workers were infected last year (1,120 to 347), and nearly 400 of them had unwittingly passed the virus to their unborn children. The adultery and infidelity of wayward spouses is attaining new heights of murderous potential.

Once again, we see how the scourge of HIV/AIDS is intimately tied to social ills of a much wider range than sexual promiscuity or hardcore drug abuse. The disease lurks demonically in the shadows of illicit behaviour, waiting on either side of the straight-and-narrow to destroy not just individuals but families, undermining entire communities. Be that as it may, by far the largest proportion of the more than 58,000 HIV/AIDS sufferers in the country today - more than 75 per cent, in fact - are intravenous drug users, of whom another 5,000 tested HIV-positive last year. In all, some 44,000 of today's HIV/AIDS victims got the disease from contaminated needles, more than five times more than the 8,000 who were infected through sex whether gay or straight.

Let not too much cold comfort be drawn from the moderate decline in the number of new cases last year. It was the first time such a decline had been recorded since 1986, and although the proportion of Malaysians with HIV/AIDS remains relatively small as a percentage of the population, there can be no let-up in disseminating the message that loose living can lead to the slow but inevitable, and agonising, death of innocents.

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