

29/07/2003

A right to life

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THE woman stood apart from the crowd. Though healthy looking, multiple scars across her wrists hint at something amiss. The occasion was the launch of Wanita MCA's AIDS community project and as she held out her hand out to introduce herself, she revealed her life's tragedy.

The 25-year-old had not only contracted HIV but also syphilis. Her philanderer husband was the source of both infections. He had known of his ailing state but had kept it a secret until she fell ill. Out of sheer despair, she attempted suicide by slashing her wrists.

"Women are actually not considered a high-risk group but having sex with their own husbands sometimes pose a high risk," says Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, president of the Malaysian AIDS Council.

"Our culture doesn't really allow them to say no (to husbands). We probably need to change their mindset so that they are empowered to say no," she explains further, adding that this cultural standard is the biggest problem of all. A change, says Marina, "should be supported by everybody, including religious leaders."

Marina, along with Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, was among the VIPs who attended and spoke at the launch of Project Iceberg 2, a pet project of Wanita MCA chief Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen, who is also Deputy Minister of Finance.

The first event, Iceberg 1, had sought to raise general AIDS awareness among 12- to 18-year olds through education programmes. Iceberg 2, with the tagline A Message of Love and Hope, narrows the mission down to:

- * creating greater HIV/AIDS awareness within the Chinese community, particularly among the youth and women
- * Reducing the occurrence of HIV within the Chinese community by disseminating proper information and empowering vulnerable groups
- * Removing the stigma of HIV/AIDS so as to improve acceptance for People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAS).

The mission will be executed via roadshows in the Klang Valley before moving on to Malacca, Sabah and Penang.

A champion of women's health issues, Dr Ng strengthened her resolve to better the situation of Chinese heterosexual women contracting HIV/AIDS when she met Pei Pei (not her real name).

Chinese and in her early 20s, Pei Pei was brought to see Dr Ng by Kuala Lumpur Aids Support Society (KLASS) founders Dr Christopher Lee and Dr Tan Lian Huat. She had contracted HIV from her fiance, who knew he was infected with the disease.

Her condition has caused much grief to her family, who relies on her for financial support as she is the eldest child.

Dr Lee and Dr Tan felt there was a need to drive home the gravity of the situation - that the greatest spread of HIV/AIDS among Chinese women is caused by sexual activity among heterosexuals. More importantly, some are innocent parties who trusted their partners.

The consequences have been dire, as in the case of 30-year-old shop assistant Mei Mei who tried to commit suicide when she, too, tested positive for HIV.

It has been eight years since the attempt to take her own life but the scars on her wrists remain, showing her frustrations at having contracted the disease from the one she trusted.

She was only 22 when her husband infected her. Stricken with extreme

angst and grief, she had to undergo countless counselling sessions. As she gathered emotional strength, she came back into society and worked hard to pay for her husband's medication until he succumbed to the disease.

Pei Pei and Mei Mei, like many unsuspecting others, are just two of thousands who have contracted the disease or have become HIV carriers through heterosexual contact.

In most cases, the other party is someone they trust sexually. The mindset is that AIDS can only be contracted through specific groups such as sex workers, homosexuals and drug abusers, certainly not through their husbands, fiances or boyfriends.

Through Iceberg 2, Wanita MCA aims to send a very strong message out to all women, says Dr Ng.

"It is a right for health. It is a right to life," she says, adding that if women felt that there is danger, "you have every right to say no or to demand a condom. And I don't think any person would deny a woman this right if it is for protection,"

Health Ministry statistics actually show that there are more reported cases among heterosexuals than there are among homosexuals/bisexuals. In fact, heterosexual HIV transmission has significantly increased by 46 per cent since last year.

Last year alone, an average of 19 new cases of AIDS were reported daily. The incidence of women contracting HIV through heterosexual contact last year increased to 63.9 per cent from 59.2 per cent the year before.

While the sharing of needles among drug abusers remains the No.1 method of HIV transmission (76.3 per cent), heterosexual activity comes second (12.1 per cent) while transmittal of the disease from homosexual/ bisexual activity is lower at (0.9 per cent).

Tragically, the number of HIV cases among women has increased, from nine cases in 1990 to 629 cases last year. Also, the number of women reported to be infected with HIV has increased by 35 per cent last year.

In this respect, Wanita MCA's main concern is the finding that Chinese-educated women are not getting adequate and accurate information on their options due to the language barrier.

"The difficulty arises because a lot of information (from the medical experts at KLASS) is in either Malay or English," says Rita Sim, Wanita MCA's deputy secretary-general. As such, Wanita MCA has come out with Chinese-language training manuals to be used at its workshops and training sessions in the Iceberg 2 programme.

Apart from infection prevention, there are also the support programmes to be put in place. In relation to this, both Dr Ng and Sim discussed the high rate of suicide among Chinese women and they wondered if perhaps HIV/AIDS was a major contributing factor.

In such cases, they also wondered if the extreme depression experienced by the victims is exacerbated by the lack of support from family members, the shunning by society at large or the sheer despair of living with the disease.

"It's hard to tell because nobody keeps track of that exactly," says Marina, "but it tells you about the level of stigma." Marina then added a macabre twist to the concept, "Why did we help them die that way by refusing to understand, by refusing to reach out and help?"

While the Ministry of Women and Family Development does not have the authority nor resources to start halfway houses for desolate victims of HIV/AIDS, Shahrizat gave her word that she will look into playing a role in establishing such shelters. She also suggested that Iceberg 2's training manuals be translated into other languages.

Supporting Marina's sentiment, Shahrizat urged family members to rally around with a message of love and hope.

"This is a family issue. It's very important. They (the victims) need it," said the minister. In fact, as a prevention and precaution, Shahrizat urged women to "learn to say no when they have to. Say no when it's not safe sex."