

02/12/2003

AIDS national strategic plan needed

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - In calling for a National Strategic Plan to fight the increasing number of HIV/AIDS cases, Malaysian AIDS Council chairman Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir today said the number Malaysians infected with the disease may have reached more than 100,000.

She said although the official figure was only 57,000, of which about five per cent were women, the number could be more than double because many victims do not report for fear of being discriminated against.

"Many stay away, especially women. Some seek treatment overseas, some traditional treatment and others simply cannot afford to pay for their hospitalisation," she told reporters after launching the PT Foundation World AIDS Campaign at Sungei Wang Plaza.

"I don't know whether the figure is just the tip of the iceberg, but I think the number of Malaysians suffering from HIV/AIDS is more than 100,000," she said, adding that the Health Ministry, the council and Malaysian AIDS Foundation were compiling a behavioural study to ascertain the factors that made people vulnerable to the disease.

She said the completed study would give a better indication of the number of Malaysians suffering the disease as well as new cases.

"We do not want to be caught by surprise," said Marina, who stressed that there was a HIV/AIDS epidemic that needed to be seriously looked into. Last year, she said, 7,218 new AIDS cases were reported, the highest since 1986, and the number could be more this year.

Marina also said that very little was known about the HIV/AIDS victims' family and friends. They, too, could also have the disease.

Malaysia, unlike other countries, did not have a good picture of its actual HIV/AIDS situation, which was worrying, and the fight against the disease was only done by NGOs and the Health Ministry.

"Non-governmental organisations alone cannot tackle the rapid spread of the disease.

"Every ministry must have a HIV/AIDS unit, like in Thailand, to create awareness of the disease among people and assist those suffering from it," she said.

Malaysia had only three HIV/AIDS cases in 1986, with one death. The number rose over the years to 51,256 last year, with 5,424 deaths. The figure now stands at 57,000 cases with about 6,000 deaths.

Marina expressed concern over the latest Durex Global Sex survey, which revealed that one in four Malaysians (16-45 age group) were prepared to have sex with a new partner on the first night or within the first week, and nearly half of young Malaysians would still sleep with a new partner who refused to use a condom.

"Statistics show that heterosexual transmission of HIV has increased by 46 per cent over the past year," she said, adding that they already knew Malaysians were having sex at a younger age, and many of them were not using condoms.

Marina said a multi-pronged approach was needed to reach the different needs of the population.

"Telling a drug user to stop taking drugs would not be very effective in creating the desired result. The person needs to be informed on ways of cleaning his needle and syringe, and how not to share needles, so that he at least prevents himself from being infected with HIV/AIDS.

"Let's not forget drug users do have spouses and children, If they can

keep themselves from being infected, then chances are their spouses and children may be spared," she said.

United Nations resident co-ordinator and the UN Development Programme Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei resident representative, Richard Leete, said the HIV/AIDS pandemic was one of the world's most serious development crises.

An estimated three million people died of AIDS this year and more than five million acquired HIV, bringing to more than 40 million the number of people living with the virus around the world, he said.

This year's World AIDS Campaign 2003 will focus on stigma and discrimination under the slogan "Live and Let Live".

Every year, PT Foundation organises events during the International AIDS Campaign to create HIV/AIDS awareness and consciousness to reduce the effects of HIV/AIDS epidemic in Malaysia and to provide care and support to those infected and affected by the disease.