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46pc rise in AIDS from unprotected sex

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The spread of HIV through unprotected sex rose by 46 per cent between 2001 and 2002, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said today.

Although the largest affected group among reported HIV/AIDS cases was drug users who shared needles, their high rate of sexual activity saw the virus spreading to even more people.

HIV was spread sexually in 1,218 cases last year, compared with 843 in 2001.

"This is an increase of 46 per cent. The potential of increase in HIV cases is very strong through high-risk behaviour such as the sharing of needles, combined with unprotected sex," he said.

He said a 1998 study in government drug rehabilitation centres found that 82 per cent of drug users have had sex with sex workers, their girlfriends or wives.

Though HIV/AIDS in Malaysia may appear to be largely among drug users, young people who do not practise safe sex or have multiple partners are equally at risk.

The number of HIV/AIDS cases in the country as of December was 51,256. Of these, 7,218 have developed into AIDS and 5,424 were deaths due to AIDS.

Of last year's total, 76.3 per cent of cases were intravenous drug users who shared needles.

Between 2001 and 2002, there was a 17.5 per cent increase in the number of new HIV cases reported, based on results at rehabilitation centres and prisons, where inmates undergo compulsory HIV/AIDS testing.

On the accuracy of the total number of cases in the country, he said while it was difficult to get the correct picture, the ministry's figures were "fairly representative" of the situation due to screening done on donated blood and pregnant women.

"I think we do more screening than other countries as we screen for HIV/AIDS at many levels," he said.

Earlier, he presented the Government's grant of RM40 million for the next 10 years to the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) and its affiliates for educational and prevention programmes.

At RM4 million a year, he said it was the highest the ministry had ever spent on any disease.

"We hope that through their activities they can bring the number of cases down," he said.

MAC president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said fighting AIDS was a collective effort by all sectors of society.

"We are very grateful to the Government for the grant, which will enable us to sustain and scale up our programmes nationwide."

Among the programmes to be funded by the grant are grassroots projects such as counselling and temporary accommodation for marginalised people including high-risk teenagers, sex workers and drug users.

There are also plans for a 24-hour telephone hotline and a Malaysian AIDS Information Network.