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Taking the AIDS battle to schools

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WHEN it comes to halting the spread of AIDS, young people really are our best hope. Perhaps our only hope. But they are also the most vulnerable. According to Health Ministry statistics, youth (aged 13 to 39 years) in Malaysia make up 80 per cent of reported cases.

"This is why we have to intensify programmes aimed at young people," says Malaysian AIDS Council and Malaysian AIDS Foundation chairman Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.

In the various programmes the foundation has organised, the most interesting response it received was when it held programmes for students within the school.

"Part of the session was meeting a HIV+ person of their age," explained Marina. "And young people are full of surprises... they didn't shy away, but instead, came forward and shook hands, and asked all kinds of questions. That's something you don't really see in adults."

Teaching what this disease encompasses is a tough task. One of the hardest things to do is to convince average, middle-class people that THEY are the ones who can be at the highest risk of contracting the virus should they lead a high-risk lifestyle - and not homosexuals, drug users or sex workers who are commonly associated with the disease.

This is why it makes sense to start with education programmes for young children. It has to begin early.

But pool together the resources of all the HIV/AIDS non-governmental organisations and there still wouldn't be enough to keep such a programme afloat for all the schools, on a regular basis. "We just don't have the capacity to conduct programmes like this on the scale necessary to make it effective," says Marina. "And it can't be just a general talk on the subject; it must be well-thought out."

An example of a programme which is working is the Youth-to-Youth programme. Involving mainly urban schools, it works by having teens depict real-life situations where people put themselves at risk in a performance. The programme kicked off at the 5th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and Pacific four years ago and has since expanded.

"But we have 8,000 secondary schools... how can we handle it on the funds and manpower we have? And there is the need for repeat programmes, for every school year sees more students coming in.

"There is no other way than to have it ingrained within the education system, not added on as an extra."

In most countries, she explains, programmes for the young are given the highest priority. Giving priority means allocating sufficient funds. Marina, who recently returned from Bangkok, relates how a manual for the Education Ministry has been drawn up to teach students and teachers alike about HIV/AIDS.

"As far as we (Malaysia) are concerned, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. All we need is the willingness to take something which works, and modify it to suit our needs."

Focus is important. And this is where statistics are vital indicators of reality, although it is generally accepted that the numbers are seriously under-reported for a variety of reasons.

"We have not done any real scientific calculations on numbers, but the Ministry of Health thinks it is double the numbers we have... although I am not sure on what basis... we aren't sure ourselves either, for that

matter."

But if the statistics are indeed right, then 72 per cent of all HIV+ Malaysians are drug users. Says Marina: "Then you would think 72 per cent of the budget would go towards this... but this isn't so.

"Why the mismatch between policies and fund allocations?" she asks. "The answer probably lies in the fact that the issue has not been thought of comprehensively."

An example of an inconsistency is that drug abuse comes under the purview of the Home Ministry, not the Health Ministry.

"The anti-drug people simply do not understand the connection with HIV, neither do they understand certain laws and policies... they are guided by the aim of stopping drug abuse."

But there have been steps taken in the right direction, although they have been small, slow ones. The foundation, for instance, recently gave a presentation to the Ministry of Home Affairs showing the link between drug abuse and HIV/AIDS.

"I feel quite positive about it because when the anti-drug programme was launched, the speech was actually amended to incorporate HIV/AIDS!"

Marina insists that we have to strategise some programmes better.

"The main thing is to push for policies and programmes that are evidence-based, not ones that are made on whims and fancies. Existing policies must be re-evaluated - we shouldn't be wasting time and resources by concentrating on low-risk groups, while ignoring the high-risk groups, just because they are distasteful to some people."

It is all about pushing the leadership to make it a priority. "Leaders have to have vision and courage. We must do things right even if we are criticised, as they will pay off.

"AIDS, after all, is a threat to development, and we can't allow what happened in Africa to happen here. Last year, we had the highest number of new infections, and that is a timely wake-up call."

Statistics from the Health Ministry show that the HIV/AIDS epidemic has reached alarming rates. In 2002, 19 new HIV infections were reported in Malaysia every day, of which 81 per cent were among those aged between 20 and 39 years. Worldwide statistics also show that every minute, a child with HIV/AIDS dies due in part to lack of shelter, medicine and food. In 2003, statistics continue to escalate.

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