

More addicts to get free needles
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The Health Ministry will extend its programme of giving free needles for drug addicts to three new locations, namely Kuantan, Kota Bahru and Alor Star.

At present the Syringe Exchange Programme, which started in February last year, is in practice in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru.

Under the programme, drug addicts will receive clean syringes every month from the ministry in exchange to their used syringes.

The aim of this programme is to curb the spread of HIV/Aids among drug addicts. Needle-sharing has been identified as the main cause of the spread of the killer virus.

"We hope that the extension to the three new locations will enable us to reach our target for this year" said Health Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Lee Kah Choon.

The ministry's target is to enlist at least 3,000 participants for the programme, he added.

"Needle exchange programme is designed to prevent the spread of HIV/Aids among drug addicts who share syringes," said Lee who is also the Jelutong MP.

"Seventy two percent of reported HIV/Aids cases in the country are among the intravenous drug addicts, and studies show that they contract the virus by sharing needles," he added.

Lee was replying to a query from Abdul Fatah Harun (PAS-Rantau Panjang) who asked the ministry the effectiveness of handing out free needles and condoms to drug addicts.

Condoms to stop Aids

Lee also explained that a total of 1,380 intravenous drug addicts have participated in the programme since it was implemented.

Of these, 37 percent of them were still involved and continued receiving clean syringes every month in exchange to their used syringes.

"We also conduct follow-up checks with them, and we provide counselling when they come to get new set of syringes," he said.

He also dismissed claims that the government was promoting sexual promiscuity by distributing free condoms to HIV patients.

"We provide condoms so that these patients do not pass on the virus to their loved ones like husband and wife," said Lee.

"If we're not careful, even an unborn child can contract HIV," he added.

To a different question by Raman Ismail (BN-Gombak), Lee said apart from free needles,

the government was also experimenting by giving out methadone to the drug addicts to cure them from drug addiction.

Lee said his ministry was working with several non-governmental organisations, apart from Malaysian Aids Council, in its programmes catered for the drug addicts.

Meanwhile, Deputy Minister of Internal Security Mohd Johari Baharum said 22,811 drug addicts were detected throughout last year, a decline of 30.47 percent from 2005.

Of the 22,811 addicts recorded by the National Drugs Information System, 10,381 were new addicts while 12,430 were repeat addicts, he said replying to Bung Moktar Radin (BN-Kinabatangan).

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