

MALAYSIAN AIDS FOUNDATION TUN DR. SITI HASMAH AWARD GALA DINNER 2018

By : YAB. TUN DR. MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD, PERDANA MENTERI MALAYSIA

Venue : HILTON HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR

Date : 16/12/2018

1. Salam Sejahtera and a very good evening. Thank you for inviting me to the Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Award Gala Dinner.
2. Although it has been a while since the honour was given out, Hasmah and I are very delighted that it is back again after six years.
3. I am very pleased to note that both the Malaysian AIDS Foundation and the Malaysian AIDS Council continue to do its admirable work as the umbrella non-Governmental organisation for AIDS service organisations in Malaysia.
4. I recall that at the 5th International Congress on AIDS in the Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP), that was held in KL in 1999, it was the first time a civil society movement took to organising a major HIV/AIDS awareness gathering in the region. Following that AIDS was widely discussed in Malaysia and efforts to contain and manage it became mainstream.
5. Prior to that, though HIV/AIDS was an already known subject, it was still taboo to be openly discussed and it was indeed a filled with myth and misconceptions and victims stigmatised.

6. That was the scenario of HIV and AIDS some two decades ago, when antiretroviral access was limited, victims shunned and ostracised.

7. Even though some of the past misconception and prejudices towards the victims are still prevalent, we have taken numerous positive steps. Now for example, we have eliminated the threat of mother to child transmission, the first line of antiretroviral treatment is free and harm reduction is streamlined into public health system.

8. We have come a long way since the 5th ICAAP and much of this can be attributed to the constant activism, courage of conviction, and the resilience of civil society.

9. “Taking stock into the millennium” was the theme then. And 20 years later, it still resonates as we are taking stock of our successes, investments and challenges in the AIDS response into the next phase – putting an end to AIDS.

10. In our efforts against AIDS, Malaysia has made major strides in tackling it and with significant progress made. Though I must admit, that at times it seemed to be an insurmountable task, for example when at a peak more than 7,000 new cases were reported in 2002. However, the latest report by the Ministry of Health gave an indication that this number has levelled off to approximately 3,000 new cases annually.

11. A number of factors have contributed to this decline. Among them is the advancement in HIV treatment as the drugs are very effective in helping people with HIV live longer. This is a marked difference from what it was when HIV/AIDS first surfaced and the prognosis then was truly bleak.

12. Today, those who are on treatment and achieve sufficient viral suppression cannot infect others. The discovery that treatment equals to prevention was a ground-breaking development in AIDS research and something that should also be the basis for our response in Malaysia.

13. In Malaysia, we have invested heavily in ensuring free first-line HIV treatment is given out at Government healthcare facilities. In contrast to many other countries in a similar economic bracket, 95% of Malaysia's HIV prevention and treatment activities are funded through domestic funds. We should also be proud that Malaysia became the first country in the World Health Organisation (WHO) Western Pacific Region to be recognised for eliminating mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.

14. Malaysia can be proud of its bold undertaking to stem the HIV epidemic among people who inject drugs by introducing the needle and syringe and methadone programme – otherwise known as the Harm Reduction programme.

15. It is by working with grassroot non-governmental organisations that the Ministry of Health implemented the methadone replacement therapy and needle syringe exchange programme that has led to a dramatic decline in the number of new infections among people who inject drugs.

16. The infection rate has declined quite dramatically that only 115 of new infections were reported in 2017 compared to 5,176 in 2002. This success points to the important principle of setting policies that are based on evidence and science, and global best practices no matter how unpopular or controversial it may be.

17. Despite these achievements, the battle is far from over. The virus in Malaysia is now driven by sexual transmission where 90% of all new infections is transmitted through sex.

18. And while, some may not want to talk about sex, it is about time we do in the context of public health. We cannot sit on our moral high ground and look for who to blame for this occurrence. We need to be pragmatic. We need to continue saving lives.

19. All stakeholders, including civil societies, need to intensify its HIV prevention services to key populations. And they must be allowed to do their jobs whether in sex education or promoting the concept of safe sex.

20. Now, I come to another challenge faced by those working in the field of HIV - stigma and discrimination. This continues to be a stumbling block in Malaysia's response to the disease. More often than not, it is because of stigma and discrimination that all the good work is hampered.

21. The equation is simple. Because of stigma, people, whether they are part of the key population or not, are wary to even take the first step of being tested. Testing is key to knowing one's status and if they test positive, they can then move forward to get the necessary treatment which allows them to lead essentially normal, healthy and productive lives.

22. I urge all of you here who have turned up to support this Gala to also commit to ensuring that you have a sound HIV workplace policies that do not stigmatise and discriminate your employees. I would like to commend Petronas that for a number of years now, have had an HIV workplace policy that is in line with international best practices.

23. Statistics have shown that up to 89% of people with HIV in Malaysia are those who are in the prime of their lives and make up the majority of the working population.

24. HIV has a direct impact on businesses. It is therefore crucial for Malaysia to invest in a policy that will provide support for those infected and affected by HIV at the workplace. HIV discrimination is unlawful and should not be tolerated in this day and age.

25. To this end, the initiative by the Malaysian Business Consortium on HIV/AIDS at the Malaysian AIDS Foundation to have a Regulation in place to protect the rights and manage HIV positive employees at the workplace in Malaysia should be given attention.

26. In recent weeks several Cabinet members too have stressed on the importance of having a regulation to stop discrimination of HIV-positive employees.

27. As we gather here tonight to honour the winner of the Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Award, let us not forget all the other members of various non-governmental organisations that have sacrificed so much to create a better Malaysia. They continue to ensure that Malaysia remains a prosperous nation for all. I would like to commend them for their hard work and may they never waver in their determination to continue their good deeds. These are essential in building a Malaysia that is compassionate, just and respectful of individuals' rights and dignity – which are crucial in our efforts against HIV and AIDS.

28. I wish the Malaysian AIDS Foundation all the best in its endeavour and to continue to lead the civil society movements in Malaysia. And I hope,

with their contribution and others involved in these efforts, will bring an end to AIDS in our nation.

Thank you.

Copyright of the Prime Minister's Office portal

Source:

http://www.pmo.gov.my/home.php?menu=speech&page=1676&news_id=29&speech_cat=2