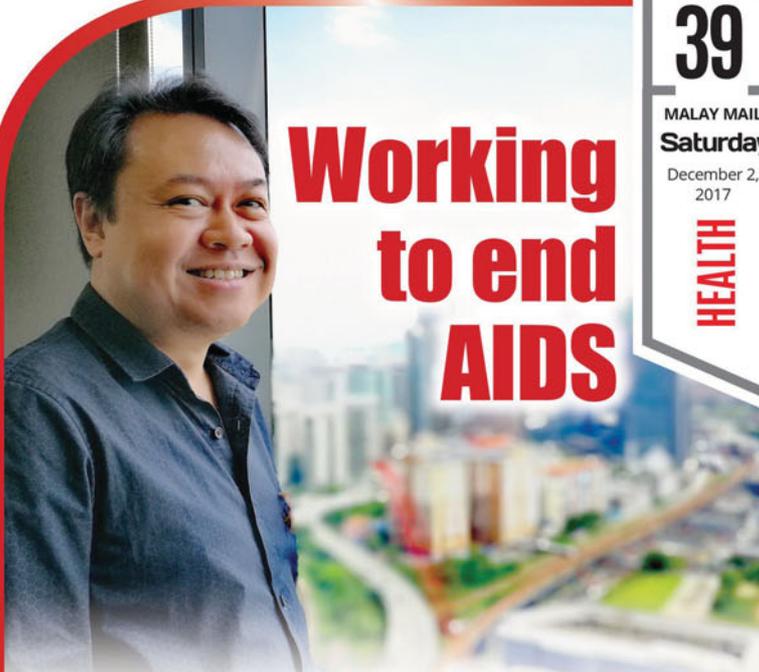


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Working to end AIDS

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HEALTH

MALAYSIAN AIDS Council president Bakhtiar Talhah is firm in saying HIV does not kill people. Rather, it is the stigma and discrimination.

"It can get depressing and lonely. The world is not unicorns and rainbows, and people are afraid of losing their jobs, family and spouses."

It is these feelings that keep people from getting tested and subsequently, sought treatment.

Bakhtiar has lived with HIV for the past 22 years and went on first line medication eight years post diagnosis.

The important thing, he said, was for PLHIV to get on medication if they needed to, and check-ups with their doctor.

Getting a support network such as people from the council and other partner organisations was also important.

He said looking back, it was a process for him to come out about his HIV status although those close to him, including his staff and employers knew.

Bakhtiar is currently the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil chief operating officer.

The former council executive director considered whether it would make a difference back then during his dealings with government officers whether they knew of his status.

He said he recently hesitated for "half of a split second" when he was recently asked by council media and communications department manager Zaki Arzmi about having his photo and name in the press.

He felt it did not necessarily mean that there were more Malaysians who would stigmatise.

Rather, it was the existence of social media that allowed more people to voice their opinions.

The council, he said, was doing more than releasing statements in reply to prejudicial remarks reported in the media.

He added partner organisations were stepping up to stand up against such remarks.

"The council is also working on getting policies changed," he said, citing among the work was with the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, and health and human resources ministries.

"We need to review policies targetting the LGBT community or it will drive them underground. We also need to look at policies about employment because there are more young professional Malaysians who are infected."

He said there was a need to examine sexual education in schools.

A task force, he said, had been set up by relevant stakeholders to look into the rise of infections due to sexual transmission.

Sexual transmission accounted for 84 per cent of new infections last year.

On living with HIV, he said his late father was the most important person and no one else's opinion mattered.

"I came out as gay to him when I was 20. He was very accepting," he said.

Bakhtiar wrote his father when he contracted HIV in 1995 while he was studying in the United States.

His father replied in a five-page letter and asked him to take care of himself.

"He wrote, 'You're my son and I love you no matter what'.

"In a way, I have had it easy. There were no challenges with my HIV status. My path has been easier compared to many others."