

Malaysia needs to step up on sex education: Malaysian AIDS Council

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PETALING JAYA: Moral and religious sensitivities hamper efforts to curb sexually transmitted HIV infection through sex education, says Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC).

Its honorary secretary Hisham Hussein told *theSun* that it was time "to take the bull by its horn", as the number cases of HIV infection via sex transmission is alarming.

"Malaysia needs to step up on sex education to curb HIV infection via sex transmission. Last year, data showed that 83% of the HIV infection cases was sexually transmitted. It is difficult to work out education programs like giving out free condoms and all because we are accused of propagating free sex," he told *theSun* via a phone interview.

He was commenting on a United Nations report that stated that Malaysia is one of the ten countries which together accounted for over 95% of all new HIV infections in the Asia-Pacific region.

The report, compiled by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (Unaids) "Ending AIDS: Progress Towards the 90-90 Targets", said the other nine Asia-Pacific countries that had large constituencies of new HIV infections in 2016 are India, China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Vietnam, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Hisham said MAC is working with the Education Ministry to integrate sex education into school syllabus, at an upper secondary level.

"We need to look at the gaps. Look at the number of unwed mothers and teenage mothers. These girls are having unprotected sex at a young age, unprotected sex that got them pregnant and is also a ticket to get HIV. This is why we need to start in secondary schools," he said.

Hisham said that while NGOs have no problem providing sex education in private higher learning institutes, similar campaigns cannot be done in government colleges or universities.

"Sex education is a taboo and becomes a sensitive topic. NGOs cannot carry out sex education campaigns in public education institutes because it touches on moral and religious sensitivities."

Hisham added that is not the first time that efforts to curb HIV infection are met with roadblocks.

"When the government introduced the needle and syringe exchange program in 2006, there was a huge backlash. We had an infection rate at 75% due to drug users then, now it is at 11%. Our success story has been recognised by WHO (World Health Organisation) and UN (United Nation)," he said.

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