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THE IMPORTANCE OF REVIEWING EXISTING DRUG POLICY WILL HELP TO CONTROL & CURB HIV TRANSMISSION AMONGST IDUS : MALAYSIAN AIDS COUNCIL

KUALA LUMPUR, 10 November 2011 – The Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC), in collaboration with International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), organised an exclusive symposium, ***“Symposium on the policy for the successful treatment and care of drug users and prevention of HIV infection”*** for Malaysian key stakeholders at Parkroyal Kuala Lumpur in Bukit Bintang.

The one-day affair was attended by key officials from government ministries and agencies as well as corporate associates and media practitioners who partook in an in-depth discussion on the importance and the significance to review the existing drug policies to create an enabling environment in, in Harm Reduction to reduce the risks of and vulnerabilities associated with HIV transmission primarily amongst injecting drug users (IDUs), through advocacy.

At present, the law, related specifically to drugs offenders, in Malaysia treats the drug offenders as criminals and the price of which these drug offenders have to pay for their offence is often very harsh. The new drug policy that MAC and IDPC are proposing now is through initiative that invites the Government, policy-makers, key stakeholders and the society to review and provide more humane treatment to drug offenders as patients with medical conditions.

The drug offenders will be treated as patients and they will have to undergo a Methadone Maintenance Therapy (MMT) programme to combat their drug addiction. Through this approach, MMT was introduced as a new service in the primary care clinic in Malaysia and was found to be successful in retaining patients in treatment, improving their quality of life, protecting them from blood-borne viruses and minimising drug-related crimes.

This stimulating symposium featured an esteemed panel of local and international speakers, comprising academicians and experts in the field of harm reduction and drug policies who provided insights on the HIV epidemic and its treatment, care and support. MAC President YBhg Tan Sri Zaman Khan, IDPC Chairman Mike Trace and speaker from the MAC’s Advocacy Department presented papers on related issues during the symposium. The purpose of this symposium was to initiate a discussion with the key stakeholder before a concept paper on drug law reform is produced for Government view in line to reduce stigma, discrimination and marginalisation of IDUs within the MMT and Needle Syringe Exchange Programme (NSEP); to strengthen and advance advocacy efforts with the relevant law enforcement agencies; and to develop structural interventions towards creating an enabling environment for Harm Reduction programmes, including a review of existing policies.

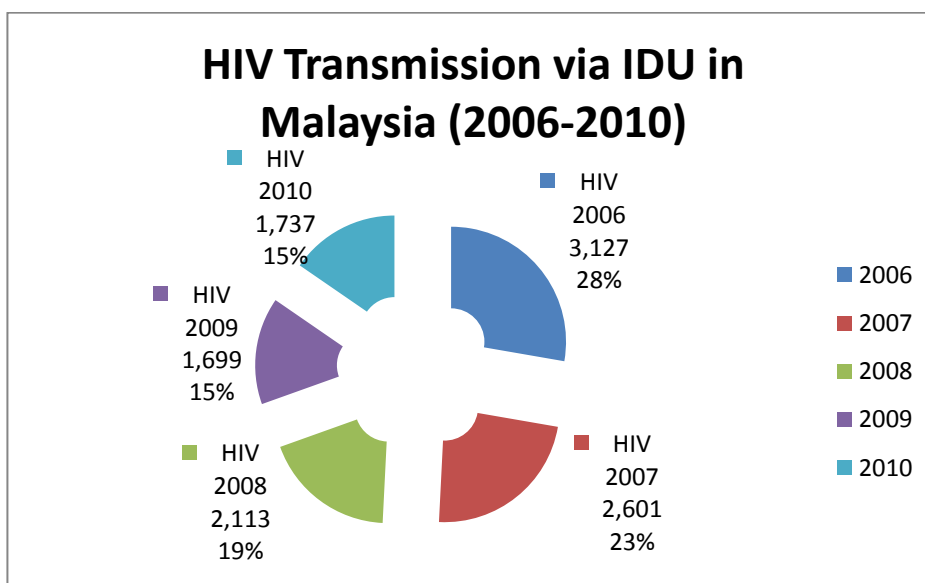
MAC’s collaboration with IDPC aims to promote the objective and open debate on the effectiveness, direction and content of national and international drug policy and to

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advance constructive recommendations for policy makers that lead to the adoption of more humane and effective drug policies.

Through this strategic collaboration between both parties, the activities surrounding this initiative encompass the facilitation of communication and co-operation between civil society stakeholders and supporting collaborative activities/endeavours; the production and dissemination information and analysis to highlight the failings of law enforcement-dominated approaches to drug policy and promote a public health and human rights based approach; and creating channels and advocacy tools for IDPC’s partners and members and building their capacity to better engage with and influence the policy making processes of national governments and international agencies.

The first HIV case was reported in Malaysia in 1986. A total of 91,362 cases have been notified to the Ministry of Health (MOH) ever since, with more than 70% of the cases being attributed to transmission via the injecting drug use route. Based on a 2009 population size estimation study, the MOH reported that there are about 170,000 IDUs in the country. A bio-behavioural survey conducted in the same year amongst IDUs in the Klang Valley recorded an HIV prevalence of 22.5%.



Statistics indicated HIV transmission via injected drug users in Malaysia from 2006 - 1020

“In the 2011-2015 National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS that is currently being developed, one core strategy has been identified; **“Creation of an Enabling Environment”** through advocacy initiative. As advocacy is a recognised strategic tool, MAC foresees more joint efforts and collaboration in this area with related government agencies, the corporate sector and the public in general,” said Tan Sri Mohd Zaman Khan.

Efforts to aggressively scale up Harm Reduction programmes for IDUs nationwide are underway, with Ministry of Health, other key stakeholders and civil society at the helm.



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However, stigma remains the greatest barrier to achieving wider reach in delivering the services to this key affected population. The double stigmatisation of drug use and HIV may discourage drug users, especially those living with HIV, from stepping forward to access prevention, treatment, care, and support services. “This symposium is but one of the many efforts to come in our response to eradicate stigma associated with HIV and drug use. Evidence-based discourses prove vital in challenging prejudices that impede the goals of universal access to HIV services, and influencing policies and mindsets,” Tan Sri Mohd Zaman Khan further explained.

MAC expresses hope that this one-day symposium would pave the way for greater adoption of evidence-informed public health approaches that respect, protect and fulfill the rights of IDUs to access healthcare services without fear of discrimination, such as the Harm Reduction programmes, by the relevant key stakeholders.

ABOUT MALAYSIAN AIDS COUNCIL

The Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) was established in 1992 to serve as an umbrella organisation to support and coordinate the efforts of organisations working on HIV/AIDS issues in Malaysia. MAC, in partnership with government agencies, private sector and international organisations, ensures a committed and effective response by NGOs working on HIV/AIDS issues in Malaysia. MAC, comprising the Secretariat and its Partner Organisations, work together as a team to provide nationwide coverage and serve as the common voice for the community. Besides coordinating and streamlining programmes with its Partner Organisations, the MAC Secretariat also provides these organisations with the necessary training, funds and other resources to implement effective HIV/AIDS programmes within various communities in Malaysia. For more information on MAF, kindly log on to its dedicated website, www.mac.org.my.

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