

Headline	Malaysia committed to Ending AIDS by 2030		
MediaTitle	Borneo Post (Kuching)		
Date	24 May 2017	Color	Full Color
Section	Home	Circulation	89,224
Page No	1	Readership	267,672
Language	English	ArticleSize	555 cm ²
Journalist	Eve Sonary Heng	AdValue	RM 7,568
Frequency	Daily (EM)	PR Value	RM 22,705



Malaysia committed to 'Ending AIDS' by 2030

By **Eve Sonary Heng**

reporters@theborneopost.com

KUCHING: Sarawak can be ahead of all other states in Malaysia to achieve zero new AIDS infection as the country seeks to end AIDS by 2030.

Head of HIV/STI section of the Ministry of Health, Dr Anita Suleiman, said this was possible as people living with HIV in Sarawak were relatively small and consistently low each year.

However, there was also a concern because the state saw a rising trend of new HIV infections in the past five years, from 147 cases in 2011 to 258 in 2016.

She said Malaysia was committed to 'Ending AIDS' by 2030 through the 95-95-95 target: 95 per cent of key populations tested for HIV and knowing their results, 95 per cent of people infected with HIV placed on Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART), and 95 per cent of these adhering to treatment with suppressed viral load.

"The commitment includes reaching 90 per cent of the key and vulnerable populations with effective prevention," she said at the opening of the 'Teratak Kasih Tok Nan Kuching One Stop Support Centre' at Jalan Crookshank here yesterday.

The centre is a community project by Malaysian AIDS Foundation (MAF) and Malaysia AIDS Council under the care of Sarawak AIDS

Concern Society (SACS).

Patron of the Malaysian AIDS Foundation Kuching One Stop Support Centre, Datuk Amar Datin Patinggi Jamilah Anu launched the centre.

Dr Anita also pointed out that there was a possibility of many cases going unreported due to societal stigma and discrimination that caused people with HIV afraid to come forward to seek medical attention in both public and private hospitals.

Therefore, one initiative is community-based HIV screening. This approach will allow NGO to conduct HIV screening among key and vulnerable populations and those found reactive will be referred to health clinics for confirmation and further management.

Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia where the main transmission is through intravenous (IV) drug use, Dr Anita said the main mode of transmission in Sarawak is through sexual activities of either heterosexuals or homosexuals, and transmission through unprotected sex among homosexuals is also on the rise.

MAF chairman Professor Datuk Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman said the one stop centre is the MAF's response to the single largest barrier to HIV continuum of care in Sarawak - the

state's geographical diversity that impedes access to otherwise readily available services.

It is the first community-based facility established in the state to serve men, women and children impacted by HIV and AIDS.

According to her, the Malaysian AIDS Foundation Kuching Gala, a star-studded charity dinner was held in December last year to benefit this project, and raised over RM500,000.

She also revealed that the AIDS epidemic in Sarawak began in 1989, three years after the first HIV cases were detected in Malaysia. By the end of 2016, a total of 2,436 HIV infections were recorded, of which 542 resulted in AIDS-related deaths.

She said through the one stop centre, they could provide community-based HIV testing, counselling, treatment literacy, and legal and welfare service referrals, in addition to providing life skills training and other social reintegration support to its beneficiaries.

The centre would also serve as a halfway home for people who had to travel long distances to access treatment at the Sarawak General Hospital. It is able to accommodate up to 13 occupants at a single time.

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Jamilah signs on a plaque at the opening of the Kuching One Stop Support Centre. Also see are Dr Yuwana (right), State Welfare Department director Abang Shamsudin Abang Seruji (third right) and assistant director of Sarawak Health Department Dr Dalvinder Singh (second left).