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Fishermen with AIDS

Survey shows one in every 10 in Kuantan infected by drug injections

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MORE than one in every 10 fishermen in Kuantan, Pahang, are infected with HIV mainly because of drug injections, a new study shows.

The five-year research by the Centre of Excellence for Research (CERiA) also reveals more than a third of the fishermen in Kuantan are drug users.

CERiA project leader Martin Choo Kok Keong said the study was the first in the world to establish evidence of AIDS transmission via drug injection.

“Previous studies only proved transmission through sexual activities,”

he said. The results were based on a 2011 survey on 406 fishermen in Kuantan from three jetties there.

Choo said Kuantan was used as the initial sampling fishing community as it was one of several where the needle-and-syringe exchange programme was introduced by the Malaysian Anti Drugs Agency in 2006.

Similarly, surprise findings from the study showed half of the fishermen surveyed had Hepatitis C.

Choo said fishermen depended on drugs mainly to cope with their job and alleviate boredom while out

at sea.

“The risk and drug use are more prevalent among deep-sea fishermen as they have to spend longer time at sea compared to coastal fishermen.”

He said government agencies were focusing on spreading the needle-and-syringe exchange to mitigate the rate of HIV infections in the area, adding the risk of HIV in the fishing community was 10 times more prevalent compared to the general community.

“We are currently set to start a similar study in Kuala Perlis next month. They have not started the needle-and-syringe exchange pro-

gramme there as early as it started in Kuantan, so the results might be different.”

Choo estimated more than 180,000 drug injection users in the country but said government agencies were only reaching out to 30 per cent of them so far.

“To be effective, we have to at least reach 80 per cent of them,” he said.

He revealed his findings at a talk organised by CERiA at Universiti Malaya’s Medicine Faculty yesterday. CERiA, a HIV research body under UM, was established in 2007 and works closely with the Malaysian AIDS Council.