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Programme gives second chance in life, says former drug user

PETALING JAYA — Introducing harm reduction nearly 10 years ago to bring down the number of HIV infections among injecting drug users (IDUs) was the turning point in a bid to stem the disease in Malaysia.

The preventive move, consisting of methadone maintenance and needle syringe exchange programmes has seen the number of infections among IDUs decrease.

In conjunction with World AIDS Day today, *Malay Mail's* Audrey Edwards spoke to two individuals whose lives have been made better because of this once controversial programme.

Hamdan Isnin, 40, mechanic, Petaling Jaya

He was an IDU for 20 years and was on methadone maintenance for four years. He was among the first prisoners to be enrolled in a study on methadone by Universiti Malaya's Centre of Excellence for Research in AIDS (CERiA).

"I started taking methadone when I was in prison in 2010. I was in and out of prison and rehab centres for four times in each place. Sometimes, it was for breaking into houses. Other times it was for robbery or trespassing. I would go in for one or two years and when I was released, I was back again on drugs within one or two days. Then, I would be back in prison again after two to three months.

But I have not taken any drugs since I have been on methadone. In fact, I have managed to get married, have a child and hold down a steady job as a mechanic. I take methadone every morning.

Being in this programme is good because besides the methadone, they also provide IDUs with support such as counseling, a place to stay when we get out of prison and even job placement.

They even monitor to ensure that our workplace is a safe environment. My boss knows that I was in jail and on drugs but he's fine with it because he knows I no longer take it. I tried to quit before by buying methadone from a clinic but it didn't work because there was no support system.

I started on ganja when I was 16 or 17 then went on to heroin. When you're on

drugs, you will resort to all kinds of things to get money to buy it. But when you're on methadone, you don't even have any cravings for it.

Even if you tried taking it, there's no point because you don't get high. There is a 'port' near my house where the users gather. And some of them know me but they know I won't take drugs anymore.

My family knew I was a user. I would ask them for money to buy drugs. But now, I can give them money because I have a job. My mother was touched when I gave her money for the first time in 20 years.

As for my wife Mariatul Akmal Mesni, she and her family are aware of my past. We come from the same village and her father is a shop owner there. When we got engaged, her family, especially her mother, wanted to be sure that I was totally off drugs.

She's 24 and I'm 40. But she didn't realise I was that old until I told her my birth date. I guess my siblings and I all look young.

As for my friends who are still using drugs, they look at me like I'm some sort of a freak but some of them have seen the benefits. About 20 to 30 of them have decided to go on methadone too.

Some people sarcastically ask how difficult can it be to stop taking drugs. It's easy to talk but they don't know how we feel.

Now, every morning when I get up I feel thankful that I can enjoy life. I would rather stay at home and play with my baby or watch television. Besides, I only earn RM2,600 a month.

I don't want to go back to that life. I think of all the people who have helped me. (CERiA director) Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman will be disappointed if I went back on drugs. I think of my family, my wife.

Being on methadone is only 50 per cent of the journey. The other 50 per cent falls on your determination."

Pak Ahmad (not his real name), 63, Kota Baru

Father to an IDU who is on the needle syringe exchange programme.

"I have already lost three sons to HIV. I

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couldn't save them. But this one, maybe I can do so. He has been a user for 10 years and my wife and I have pleaded with him to stop. He has been twice to prison and rehab but he doesn't want to listen. I'm heartbroken but I have come to accept it.

An NGO (Kelantan Patient Mediation Association (Sahabat)) comes to our house to pass us the packs and when my son is at sea, I keep it on his behalf. He can't be on methadone because he is a fisherman and can't go to the clinic to take it. He doesn't shoot up in front of us. He does it in the room. When he's at sea, he brings

enough needles and 'supplies' to last him while he's away. He has been getting clean needles for the past three or four years.

One of my sons wanted to stop but he died before it could happen. Sahabat had approached us with the programme a short while before that. I am still afraid for this son of mine. His brothers died of HIV.

I have 12 children and the rest are fine. Some are working in Kelantan while some are in Kuala Lumpur. I myself can't work ever since I got into an accident at the jetty so my kids give money to my wife and I."



Hamdan and Mariatul at their home. Hamdan is among the first prisoners to be enrolled in a study on methadone by CERiA. — Picture by Hafiz Sohaimi