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The best way to fight AIDS, by a long shot

It was controversial when introduced and remains so. But the impact of programmes under the HIV/AIDS harm-reduction approach has been positive, write CHOK SUAT LING and ANNIE FREEDA CRUEZ

FREE condoms, needle and syringe exchanges, and drug substitution have been championed as effective measures to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS in Malaysia since 2005.

This was a bold policy shift as for decades drug addiction was mainly treated as a law enforcement or "catch and lock up" issue.

Alarming relapse rates at correctional institutions as well as the steady rise in the number of detected addicts and HIV-positive cases through intravenous drug use, however, compelled the government to introduce these harm-reduction measures.

It was seen as more practical compared with sustained and unrelenting enforcement, incarceration and cold turkey detoxification — in short, zero tolerance for drug use and users, who account for some 75 per cent of HIV/AIDS cases in the country.

It elicited a storm of controversy then and continues to be opposed by those who perceive it as not only condoning but encouraging drug use.

Nevertheless, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tasked with implementing the programme on the ground have quietly gone about their work.

They now have many success stories to share, even though their work is rife with a plethora of occupational hazards.

They report that drug users on the programme have shown an interest in having full-time careers and closer interaction with family and society in general.

According to Dr Mohd Nizar Zakaria, Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) Needle and Syringe Exchange Programme manager, outreach workers who distribute needles, syringes and condoms also counsel drug users and urge them to kick their destructive habit.

"Drug users listen to these workers, who are reformed drug addicts themselves."

Methadone treatment has also enjoyed tremendous success.

Justin Chew (not his real name) has been on the



Most cases of HIV/AIDS are caused by the sharing of contaminated needles.

methadone programme for the past two years.

He is now completely drug-free and intends to wean himself off methadone, a rigorously tested medication for the treatment of narcotic withdrawal and dependence.

"I can now work full-time and no longer have the urge to shoot up or chase (inhale)."

The programme should in fact have been implemented earlier, others insist.

Irwan Ahmad (not his real name) says the needle and syringe exchange programme came too late for him.

"I contracted HIV from the sharing of contaminated needles. Those days, it was difficult to get them and we had to pay a 'street doctor' 50 sen to use his needles, which would inevitably have also been used by many others."

"But things are different now. Through word-of-mouth, drug users know where to go for new needles and syringes. The Ikhlas centre in Chow Kit, run by PT Foundation, not only distributes these items but also provides meals and shower facilities."

"If this programme had been in place all those years ago, I would not have contracted HIV," says Irwan, who is now drug-free and works as a technical assistant.

Irwan has been in and out of Pusat Serenti (drug rehabilitation centres) several times. He claims that incarceration does not help reform drug addicts.

"Shaving our heads and making us march under the blistering sun only make us more determined to go back to our old ways."

But while progress has been encouraging, there continues to be a mixed bag of obstacles.

For one, activists are concerned with developments in Vienna, where a new United Nations' declaration is currently being hammered out in time for a signing ceremony at a high-level ministerial meeting next month.

From how discussions are shaping up, it appears that a hardline "war on drugs" stance is being favoured over harm reduction.

According to Dr Alex Wodak, director (alcohol and drug service) at Australia's St Vincent's Hospital, the declaration will dictate the global position on drug policies for the next 10 years and beyond.

"It is thus crucial for nations which have implemented harm reduction programmes like Malaysia — one of the few Muslim countries to have successfully done so — to push for them to be given continued prominence."

Other problems include negative public perception, the fact that enforcement authorities, especially the rank-and-file, are oblivious to the programme's existence, and insufficient drop-in centres, which are run only by NGOs.

There are now only seven centres nationwide; one each

in Kelantan (Kota Baru), Kedah and Johor, and two each in the Klang Valley and Pahang.

MAC's Dr Nizar says outreach workers out distributing needles and syringes have been rounded up by the police and Rela (people's volunteer corps).

"There are also people who alert the police when they see our workers going around with bags of syringes and needles. These volunteers also get abused and called names."

One other complication, Dr Nizar points out, is that some outreach workers have taken up the habit again after being frequently exposed to their old way of life when out on their rounds.

Steps must be taken to effectively address these issues.

At the same time, there also needs to be political will to tackle the difficult issues such as sex education, and cultural and religious taboos.

The government is strongly behind harm reduction and has given its commitment to continue the programme.

Health Minister Datuk Liew Tiong Lai says RM500 million had been allocated and as such the programme would not be affected "even in the event of a recession".

"We will definitely keep expanding the programme. Already, more drop-in centres are being planned."

Liew acknowledges that many enforcement personnel are unaware of the programme.

"We are having regular meetings with the police and Rela to get them to understand what is being done."

"If the addicts are involved in criminal activities, however, they will have to be hauled up."

"The police and Rela have promised to speak to their personnel to ensure they do not disrupt distribution activities."

Most crucial, however, says Liew, is the fact that the programme has being very successful despite the obstacles.

"It has substantially reduced the number of drug addicts with HIV/AIDS. We are definitely going to continue with it and in a big way, too."