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Baby steps towards AIDS-free youth

KUALA LUMPUR: Like most mothers, Aini (not her real name) yearned for a healthy baby but when told of her pregnancy, she also found out she was HIV-positive.

She had a one-in-three chance of passing the virus to her child during term, birth or breast feeding if she did not seek proper treatment.

Fortunately for Aini, she had heard of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme which offered counselling and free drugs treatment throughout her pregnancy.

Today, her son is 2 years old and has been given the all clear.

In today's world of free sex and increased drug users, contracting HIV/AIDS is inevitable.

PMTCT has been proven to save many a baby's life. Since it was introduced in 1998, Malaysia's PMTCT has screened some four million women nationwide giving hope to HIV-positive mothers like Aini.

Under the programme, pregnant women who visit government antenatal clinics are tested for HIV (voluntary as an "op-out" option) and those positive are given counselling and free drugs treatment throughout their pregnancy and for life.

The newborn babies are also put on treatment and undergo regular HIV tests.

According to Malaysia's 2010 Report to the United Nations, PMTCT coverage of mothers through public facilities had improved from 49.7 per cent in 1998 to 99 per cent last year.

The programme has been suc-

cessful in reducing the incidence of mother-to-child transmission of HIV to four per cent among women enrolled in the programme.

"When mothers and babies get the full course of drugs on schedule, from pregnancy through breast feeding, PMTCT is highly effective in ensuring an AIDS-free generation," said Unicef Representative to Malaysia, Hans Olsen.

He said the risk of the baby becoming infected with the virus dropped from around 40 per cent to about two per cent.

Despite Malaysia's dedicated efforts to protect babies from HIV, a recent Health Ministry and Unicef review of the country's PMTCT programme reported that this life-saving intervention benefited only a handful of people, mostly highly-motivated mothers and those in the low-risk category.

Socially and occupationally mobile groups, drug users, sex workers and immigrant populations, unfortunately, were not accessing the programme for fear of reprisals in the home, community and workplace.

"I was scared," said HIV-positive Sharmila (not her real name) who felt powerless to protect her unborn baby from HIV because she was afraid of being rejected.

"When I was pregnant I was scared to go to the hospital. What if someone found out (I was positive)?"

"I could lose everything — my family, my friends, my job. Where would I go? Who would help me?"

Sharmila's baby is HIV positive. Although there was heightened

awareness of HIV/AIDS over the years, there is still a stigma attached to it and this continues to deny infected women and children their right to live.

"There are measures that can reduce the burden of HIV and AIDS among pregnant women," said Olsen, adding that these included promoting and protecting women's rights, increasing education and

awareness on HIV/AIDS and providing simple solutions to HIV-positive pregnant women.

A recent innovation to help HIV-positive women who are pregnant overcome this is the colour-coded-take-home box by Unicef and the World Health Organisation's Mother-Baby Pack.

Inspired by the Lesotho government, the box will be introduced in five countries in eastern and southern Africa by July.

Mothers-to-be will be provided with clear instructions on what medicines they need to take, and when and what to give their babies after birth to protect them from HIV.

In Malaysia, Unicef is working with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to set up a task force to advocate universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care to meet the special needs of girls and women in the country.

Under this programme, Unicef, in collaboration with other UN agencies in Malaysia, supported a seminar this month which deliberated and proposed policies and programmes to protect the rights of infected women and girls.