

Headline **Help on the Safe side**  
Date **19 Oct 2010**  
MediaTitle **New Straits Times**  
Section **Life & Times**  
Journalist **N/A**  
Frequency **Daily**  
Circ / Read **136,530 / 330,000**

Language **English**  
Page No **3**  
Article Size **691 cm<sup>2</sup>**  
Color **Full Color**  
ADValue **20,440**  
PRValue **61,320**



# Help on the Safe side

Two friends have set up a non-profit facility for the screening and counselling of sexually-transmitted infections for the marginalised, writes **SYIDA LIZTA AMIRUL IHSAN**

**T**HE narrow Jalan Thamby Abdullah in the heart of Brickfields is dusty and noisy, with cars lining bumper to bumper on both sides of the road.

Yet, in a white house in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the predominantly Indian neighbourhood, peace and quiet reign. It looks like any family home except for a discreet black sign that indicates otherwise.

This is a clinic but of a different kind. Three women wearing baju kurung and tudung alight from a car, shake my hand and introduce themselves as staff of the clinic.

"He will be here shortly," says one with a smile before she walks into the house.

She is referring to Dr Raja Iskandar Raja Azwa, 37, who helms The Safe Clinic ([www.thesafeclinic.com](http://www.thesafeclinic.com)) together with childhood friend and corporate lawyer Tina Fazlita Fadzil, 41.

This is a non-profit clinic for the screening and counselling of sexually-transmitted infections (STI) and HIV.

A few minutes later, a car pulls up and a man in blue shirt and spiky gelled hair alights. He introduces himself as Iskandar, medical director of the clinic which has been in operations for three months.

Educated and trained in Britain, Dr Raja Iskandar returned home last year after completing his sub-specialisation.

"At that point I was already eligible to be a consultant. And I thought of coming back — it was either now or never."

When he returned, Tina, 41, the clinic's executive director, roped him in for The Safe Clinic project. Dr Raja Iskandar was interested partly because sexual health is a stigmatised branch of medicine that some doctors don't want to dabble in.

The Safe Clinic targets the marginalised community — the underprivileged, transsexuals,

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sex-workers, refugees and people living with HIV. There are no consultation fees and it charges only cost price for vaccination.

"We are targeting a difficult population. If we don't charge, then they will come. We want the control of infection and hopefully, prevent onward infection," he says.

There are individuals who walk in for advice and counselling. Some are brought in by non-

governmental organisations. Thursday is always busy because it is the day when the clinic is open to women only. Many women prefer not having men around when they seek help about STI or HIV.

"HIV is already getting into marriages due to husbands who stray. While I am not judging their behaviour, we are trying to address the issues of contraception and family planning and even things like vaccination against HPV to prevent cervical cancer," he adds.

Meanwhile, Tina, who is casually dressed in printed blouse, quirky patched jeans and platform heels, studied law and accountancy, also in Britain. She returned 12 years ago to start her own practice.

"But I have always done stuff on the side, like helping out in a children's shelter or The Soup Kitchen, which helps feed the homeless and poor. A friend told me about the lack of a facility like this clinic in the city and that was how The Safe Clinic came into being," she says.

Tina's role is the clinic receptionist. Everyone teases her about being an overqualified receptionist but she is happy with her job.

"I have learned so much about things I didn't know or care about before. Once, I saw a young man. He either has STD or HIV, I can't remember which. I don't read their files. But he had lost his job and at 23, he was living on the streets."

Working in the clinic has helped change her into a different — and perhaps better — person. She now sees the other side of society, the side not mentioned in travel brochures and the side some quarters think doesn't exist... or would be more than happy to just sweep under the carpet.

"But it exists and you know

what, they are generally a happy bunch. They don't complain and they are positive-minded. They even taught me how to put on make-up," she says about the job which she finds "more fulfilling than legal work where all I hear are complaints and phrases like 'Where's my papers?'"

She has learned to be less judgmental. "Never judge a book by its cover. Who knows, if we are in the same living conditions as them, we will resort to doing what they do. We all make the best of what we can in life," she adds.

The clinic has two doctors, nurses and counsellors and a lab technician, a cleaner and a receptionist. Other areas like Chow Kit and Jalan Alor were checked out before Brickfields was chosen. Some landlords weren't receptive of an STI and HIV clinic in their premises, but Tina is now happy with the location because it's discreet, slightly off the main street but still easy to get to.

"I work with sex workers and I see that they fast during Ramadan. They say Alhamdulillah all the time. It's like they maintain a degree of religiousness and I see how they see themselves living their lives vis-a-vis how they should lead their lives," says Dr Raja Iskandar.

Tina chips in: "Some transsexuals come from rural villages, hoping that the stigma doesn't exist here. Then they realise that the city streets aren't paved in gold and that living expenses are high. They can't go back either. They don't have options and they'd do anything, including selling sex, to keep alive."

The privately-funded clinic has a strict confidentiality policy. Anyone seeking treatment or advice need not furnish their real names, just a real date of birth and a mobile phone where they can be contacted.

"This clinic is not promoting sexual activities. Rather, it promotes education. Many young girls have sex without contraception and this leads to STI, unwanted pregnancies and baby dumping."

Dr Raja Iskandar says he understands the veil surrounding contraceptive issues because he comes from a family which

doesn't approve the use of contraception.

"The challenge of this clinic starts with me trying to convince my family... which I am still doing," he adds.

Outside of office hours, Dr Raja Iskandar cycles, swims, dances and reads. An emphatic optimist,

he loves *Eat Pray Love*, the new Julia Roberts' movie that the *Daily Mail* has called "the worst foreign journey ever experienced" and that *Rolling Stone* says is about "a person of privilege who won't stop with the whine whine whine".

But he maintains his stand. "Everyone has a little conflict in them and no matter how selfish it is or how it will hurt others, sometimes you just feel like you want to flee from the situation," he says.

Perhaps this is why he is so suited to the job. He is emphatic and open, crucial when dealing with this segment of society.

In fact, the staff is all about being emphatic and open. No judgement, just smiles. A blog entry on this clinic commented: "All in all, it was a good experience and something I felt I needed to do at my age," the author wrote. "More than anything I'm glad I did it there and I'm glad someone is providing an option for women out there. You don't have to be embarrassed, self-conscious or shy because this place and the people who run it are just amazing."

The clinic has got its first rave review.

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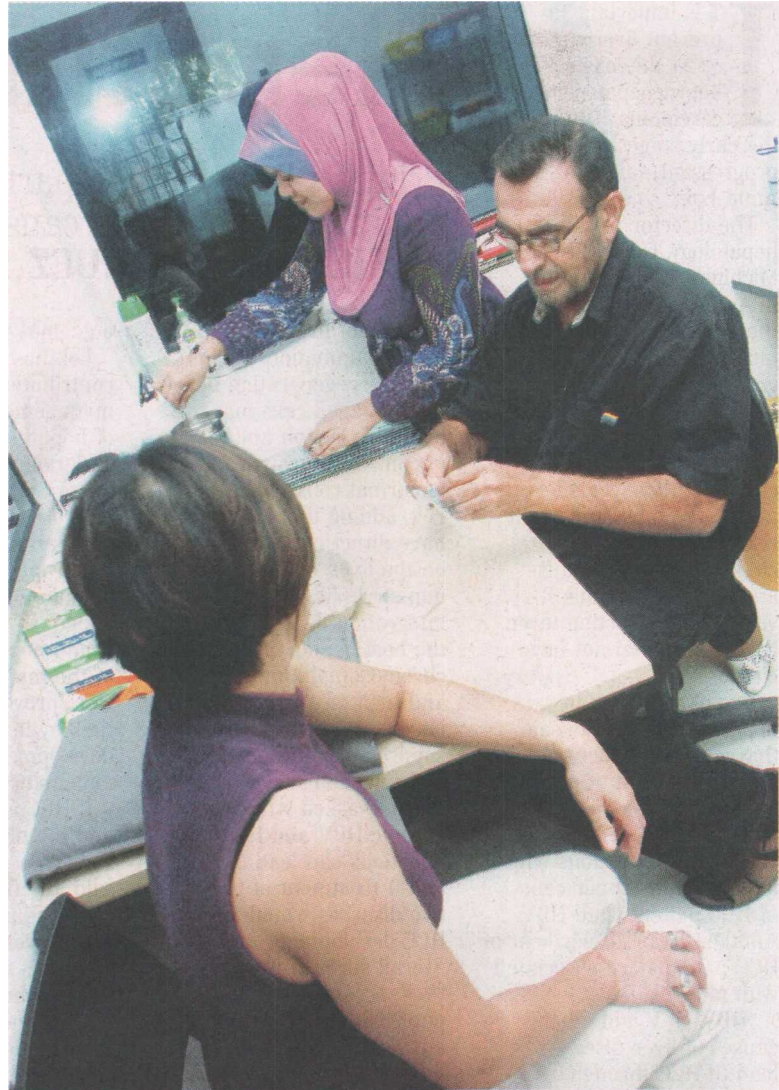
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Tina, the executive director-cum-receptionist, says her work at the clinic teaches her to be less judgmental



The clinic aims to help the marginalised community. It charges no consultation fees and vaccination is at cost price