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Hepatitis C test will help curb HIV spread

WE refer to the article, "Many Malaysians are walking time bombs" (New Sunday Times, April 24), on the threat of Hepatitis B and C virus among Malaysians. The article pointed out correctly that unlike Hepatitis B, no vaccination is yet available against the Hepatitis C virus (HCV).

The article also stated that unsafe injection practices was a primary cause of new infections among drug users. The results of our study, published in 2009, support this. Of our sample of 552 drug users drawn from five key urban centres in Peninsular Malaysia, 65.4 per cent were HCV positive. The rate was even higher (67.1 per cent) among injecting drug users. In contrast, only 30.8 per cent of non-injecting drug users were found to be positive.

In multivariate analysis, sharing injecting paraphernalia emerged as an important risk factor for the spread of the virus. Thus, in the fight against the spread of HCV, injecting drug users deserve special attention.

Unlike HIV, drug users are not routinely tested for HCV. As HCV is more common among drug users, early screening will allow implementation of measures to reduce its transmission. Given that HCV and HIV share similar risk factors, screening for HCV will automatically control the spread of HIV.

By emphasising screening drug users for HIV rather than HCV, as is the current practice, valuable time is being lost as the infectivity of HIV is lower and less pervasive.

Furthermore, drug users who are made aware that they are HCV-positive at an early stage might be motivated to voluntarily adopt safe injecting practices and this will go a long way towards reducing HIV infections as well.

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