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Take care of their health

THE Consumers' Association of Penang urges the Health Ministry and the Prison Department to work together to improve healthcare in prisons.

Prisoners have a high risk of developing health problems, such as HIV, tuberculosis, drug addiction or poor mental health. Improving healthcare in prisons will help combat such illnesses as well as reduce the risk of prisoners committing offences once they are released.

After discovering the health risks in prisons, the World Health Organisation established a Health in Prisons Programme (HIPP) in 1995.

The programme focused on improving public health by promoting links between prison and public healthcare systems. Today, HIPP works on both national and international levels to promote health in prison settings.

Malaysia falls far behind in terms of recognising the importance of maintaining healthcare in prisons.

In Malaysia, policies regarding healthcare in prisons are in the hands of the public, judiciary, police and prison. In other countries, healthcare systems act as an over-head entity which develops and ensures the implementation of policies in prisons.

In an United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime report on crime statistics for 2005 and

2006, it seems neither the Malaysian prison service nor the Health Ministry were able to provide even basic data on the proportion of prisoners suffering from drug addiction, HIV/AIDs, tuberculosis and mental illnesses, whereas other countries had a better grip on their problems.

Prison populations tend to have relatively poor health, with poor mental health becoming a particular concern. A considerable portion of prisoners in Malaysia are incarcerated for drug-related offences. AIDs and drug abuse are becoming an increasing problem in Malaysian prisons, and in many cases are directly related.

One of the main purposes of prisons is to rehabilitate prisoners.

Healthcare systems are included in this process, as it targets psychological recovery as well as treating poor health.

If health problems are treated in prisons, the risk of committing offences again, the risk on society, and the risk on their health will be reduced after they are released. The process and effectiveness of rehabilitation will improve, allowing prisoners to reintegrate into society. It is, therefore, a great benefit to society to have a comprehensive prison

health programme.

Recently, the Health Ministry has implemented programmes to reduce HIV prevalence. However, they have not developed a comprehensive healthcare programme for prisons. Malaysia should develop health and medical experts to proficiently run a prison health programme.

These experts should include doctors, psychologists, public health experts, health economists, criminologists, biostatisticians and epidemiologists. The ministry must collect data on health indicators in prisons. This will assist the monitoring and evaluation of healthcare in prisons.

If we are to improve standards in prison health programmes, we must dramatically change and develop our policies. It is important to understand the impact prison healthcare has on society.

Although prison populations are a fraction of the population, their well-being is of concern to the entire society.

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