

Headline **190,000 AIDS sufferers by 2015**

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190,000 AIDS sufferers by 2015



IN REMEMBRANCE: Wong lights the candles while (from left) Dr Faizul, Bahktiar and Yuwana look on. The lighting of candles was in remembrance of those who died from AIDS and to give moral support to those living with AIDS.

We must not be complacent in assuming that it will not affect us and members of our own family. Everyone should understand the nature of the virus and the disease.

— Dato Sri Wong Soon Koh, Minister of Environment and Public Health

By **Ting Tieng Hee**

KUCHING: It is estimated that more than 190,000 Malaysians would be living with HIV/AIDS by year 2015 if nothing is done to stop the pandemic.

Everyone should be involved in stopping its spread in the country, suggested Minister of Environment and Public Health Dato Sri Wong Soon Koh at the International AIDS Memorial Day held at the Sarawak Islamic Information Centre here yesterday.

"We must not be complacent in assuming that it will not affect us and members of our own family. Everyone should understand the nature of the virus and the disease," Wong said.

He said correct information and knowledge of HIV/AIDS should be disseminated as widely as possible as it was one of the important factors in protecting ourselves and our families.

Wong, who is also Second Minister of Finance, said since HIV/AIDS was first detected in Malaysia in 1986, a total of 11,640 deaths have been reported nationwide.

A total of 881 Sarawakians are now living with HIV and AIDS.

"If you look at the statistics, only four deaths from HIV were reported in Sarawak in 1989 but it jumped to 89 persons by end

of 2008.

"This is the reality of how much the HIV/AIDS pandemic has taken its toll in our community. While the pandemic is dominated by drug users (IDU) who comprise 57 per cent of new cases last year, there is great concern that heterosexual transmission is on the rise," he said.

Last year, 27 per cent of new HIV cases reported were attributed to heterosexual intercourse. By comparison, it was only 20 per cent in 2004.

He pointed to the measures against influenza A(H1N1) where people took the necessary precautions to avoid getting infected with the virus. The same attitude should be taken when it comes to HIV/AIDS issues, he pointed out.

"Each year in May or June, the global community observes AIDS Memorial Day and it is no different for us in Malaysia.

"However, this year's event highlights the role of religion as a critical solution

to the pandemic," Wong said.

Organisers of the event are seeking the support of religious leaders in playing an active role in HIV prevention, treatment and care, particularly for those living with HIV and AIDS. This aims to eliminate the stigma and discrimination against Malaysians living with HIV.

Wong yesterday thanked religious leaders and organisations for showing their support and commitment to this cause.

"As a member of this community, let us take up the challenge to answer the call of the theme 'Together, We Are The Solution'. We need to work hard to do whatever we can to prevent HIV/AIDS from spreading," he said.

The work of Sarawak AIDS Concern Society and other social organisations dealing with HIV/AIDS issues should be emulated and their work supported.

Wong said HIV and AIDS are the most sensitive health

and social issues to be addressed by a conservative society like ours. He felt that finding a solution to health and social issues should not be solely left to the Health Department.

"Everyone - every agency, every civil society organisation and every individual - should play a role in helping to stop the pandemic. Everyone should be part of the solution," he stressed.

Meanwhile, more than 500 people attended the event organised by Sarawak AIDS Concern Society with the support of Malaysian AIDS Council and the Health Ministry.

Among those present were Semariang assemblywoman Sharifah Hasidah Sayeed Aman Ghazali, Kuching Resident Liew Jiu Meng, Health Department deputy director Dr Faizul Mansur, Malaysian AIDS Council

executive director Bakhtiar Talhah and Sarawak AIDS Concern Society president Yuwana Podin.

The programme included a briefing on HIV/AIDS by Sarawak Health Department's STI/HIV Unit assistant director-general Dr Norliza Jusoh and testimonials by HIV couple Marhalem Mansor and Jamaliah Sulaiman from the PT Foundation, Kuala Lumpur.