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NGOs against call to stop HIV sufferers from having children

KUALA LUMPUR: Kelantan's Women, Family Development and Health Committee chairman Wan Ubaidah Omar's recent call for people not to fall in love and have children with HIV/AIDS sufferers has been criticised.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datuk Zaman Khan said Wan Ubaidah's call was unwarranted.

"Men and women should be allowed to marry and live happily. One of the aspects of happiness is to have children," he said, adding the government has not stopped people with HIV/AIDS from getting married but advised them to take precautions.

On Wan Ubaidah's remark that married couples with HIV/AIDS should exercise birth control, Zaman said just because the parents have HIV/AIDS, it did not mean their children would be affected.

"According to statistics from the Health Ministry, in 1998, 161,087 pregnant mothers were screened for HIV and only 56 tested positive. Out of the 56, only three babies (0.35pc) were delivered with HIV.

"On the other hand, in 2008, 394,673 pregnant mothers were screened for HIV and 200 tested positive. Out of that, a mere five babies were infected with HIV. These are small numbers. So, it is not fair to tell people with HIV/AIDS not to have children," he said.

He added that anti-retroviral drugs, which are medications for the treatment of infection by retroviruses, primarily HIV, has been scientifically proven to prevent mother-to-baby transmissions by up to 99pc.

"This treatment is available for free at most government clinics. So, let us give people with HIV/AIDS a chance to fall in love, marry and have babies. It is their right."

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Member of the International Steering Committee of the Asia Pacific Leadership Forum on HIV and Development (APLF) Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, said the call to not fall in love with HIV/AIDS sufferers would only work if the person knew of their partner's condition when meeting for the first time.

"Most people only find out their partner is infected much later. Most times, they make the discovery when they have been married for a long time and have children."

She said HIV positive people have as much right to marry as anyone else and all they needed was counseling and treatment.

She added that Wan Ubaidah may not be aware of the anti-retroviral medication that could reduce the risk of transmission to babies.

HIV-support organisation PT Foundation's communications manager, Kevin Baker, also disagreed with Wan Ubaidah.

"There are ways to minimise mother-to-child transmissions. In Malaysia, there are few instances of such cases, based on the Health Ministry figures. Last year, from 318 registered HIV-positive cases, only 51 cases were mother-to-child transmissions," he said.

All Women's Action Society Malaysia's (AWAM) senior programme officer, Abigail de Vries, felt that Wan Ubaidah's remark was discriminatory.

"Is telling those with the disease not to fall in love and have children really the best way? Is she serious? She needs to be educated a little bit more on HIV/AIDS if she is serious about decreasing the number of such cases," de Vries said.

Wan Ubaidah had made the controversial suggestion at the Kelantan State Assembly on Monday in response to a supplementary question by Dr Nik Mazlan Nik Mahmood (PAS-Gaal) on the matter.