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QEH treating 200 HIV sufferers

Anna Vivienne

HIV or Human immunodeficiency virus sufferers who come to the hospital for treatment after finding out they have the disease will usually feel ashamed about their condition. They are afraid to talk about it and refuse to confide in others about their ailment.

Understandably, they feel isolated and unwanted, and fall into deep depression which does not help their condition at all.

To help them overcome the negative feelings, a peer support group is deployed by the hospital to assist them.

One of the people in this group, John Juan, 40, says there are about 200 sufferers who come to receive treatment at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital presently, and he meets the sufferers three times a

month.

‘Initially, they feel apprehensive when speaking to us. They don’t want to confide in us about anything, much less about how they feel. Because we treat them just like anybody else or as normally as any body else, they eventually open up to us,’ he says adding that once the ice is broken, it becomes easier for them to communicate.

They will then confide in John and his colleagues their fears, predicaments and their feelings. They may even talk about how they acquired the disease.

‘‘Actually, we don’t ask them outright about how they acquired the disease. But as we go on meeting with them, they will gradually trust us enough to confide in us. Mostly we give them moral support and encourage them to carry on their medication no matter

how difficult it is for them, emotionally or financially. At times it may be difficult for them to come for treatment due to poverty or other circumstances,’’ he shares.

‘‘We all know that HIV is transmitted by body fluids like blood, semen and at times babies get it from their infected mother,’’ he says, adding that it does not leave one with any room for imaginations, so he is not too easily shocked at circumstances of how a patient acquire the disease.

John is not without compassion, however. He says that even though he has been a member of the peer group since 2008, and meet with HIV positive people almost everyday, he still feels that tug of sadness and sympathy every time he meets them.

‘‘We cannot judge them or feel that they are justified to

the disease just because they have been promiscuous or had lived an improper life. The pain and anguish is the same, be it of the ‘innocent’ victim like those who got it from blood transfusions or those who had multiple partners or those who took drugs.’’

His colleague Stacy Stephan, 28, quips that perhaps the saddest part is when children contract the disease. These innocents who have never done anything remotely ‘sinful’ in their life are suddenly felled with this awful condition.

‘‘They just keep on playing and laughing. Their exuberance is not marred even by the knowledge that they are HIV positive. The heartache is only seen in their parents eyes,’’ she shares.

It is therefore the parents Stacy speaks to, explaining and stressing on the them the

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severity of the disease.

"We tell them about the treatment and how important it is for them to adhere to it. Anyway, most of the children's parents are already sufferers themselves so the conveyance of knowledge and information is two-pronged," she says.

These two peer support group workers are people who should be saluted as they are willing to work with people with the incurable disease. Most people will think about being infected and shy off from working with HIV sufferers.

John says it's a risk he takes everyday but he believes that as long as he adheres to health requirements such as washing his hands thoroughly every time after being in contact with sufferers and live a healthy lifestyle, he will be alright.

"HIV is not an airborne disease. It will only infect you

if you get a blood transfusion from them, share needles or have carnal knowledge with them. If they speak to you or cough in front of you, you will not get the disease," he shares.

He says that even if their blood spills on you it still won't infect you unless a copious amount lands on an open wound and left unwiped for a while.

Stacy agrees, adding that members of the peer group know what they are getting into and if a sad twist of fate allows them to be infected, they will not be able to do anything but take the treatment.

"I am more afraid for my family. They may be able to understand but their neighbours, friends and relatives may ostracise them. Even now I shield them from the fact that I work with HIV sufferers. I don't want them to be associated with the

disease in any way. Neighbours may start saying that since I as the father works with HIV sufferers, I am an HIV sufferer myself," John says.

Stacy says her family knows that she works with HIV sufferers but they don't talk about it to their friends and neighbours.

"We are doing this because we believe that we can make a little difference in the sufferers' life," she says.

John who hails from Penampang and Stacy from Kepayan are not using their birth names as they want to protect their loved ones from people who are callous and judgemental due to ignorance.

They work periodically with Kasih or The Kota Kinabalu AIDS Support Services Association, lending their support to sufferers who go to the centre for moral support and assistance.