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Medical staff discriminate against HIV patients

KUALA LUMPUR: "You are HIV positive. Did you bring your own spoon, your own cup, and your own plate as well?"

These are the cynical remarks hurled at people with HIV. Yet, it is surprising to know that these words came from medical staff who should know better about the transmission of HIV.

The irrational behaviour and misperceptions harboured by people within the medical community contribute to discrimination and prejudice against people living with HIV.

Jamaliah Sulaiman told Bernama about the emotional agony she underwent while seeking treatment at hospitals for her HIV ailment.

"I was even told by hospital staff to bring my own utensils like plates and cups when I was in the maternity ward," she said.

The mother of four felt insulted, especially when the nurse shouted those disheartening words loudly in front of other patients and their families.

When she sought treatment for food poisoning at a hospital, the staff was reluctant to attend to her after knowing that she has HIV, which resulted in complications to her kidneys.

"I could have sued her. But she came to me and personally asked for forgiveness and admitted her mistake. I forgave her."

"When people in the medical field cannot set a positive example in treating people with HIV, what can you expect from society?" asks Jamaliah, who contracted HIV from her late husband.

This prevailing attitude goes to show that the lack of knowledge or awareness on HIV is not the sole reason why this group is still stigmatised or discriminated.

They are aware that HIV is transmitted by the exchange of contaminated needles, unsafe sex and from mother to child. It is not contracted through sharing toilets, holding hands and sharing food and drinks.

Yet, there are people who still choose to be indifferent to people with the disease.

"I'm not asking for special treatment, but I have feelings too."

"They are actually the 'public figure' and if they treat us like that in front of the public, it is only natural for the public to think that it is okay to treat people with HIV the same way," adds Jamaliah.

This is far different from

how her friend treats her, even though her friend is just a farmer.

"Just imagine that he is only a farmer, but he knows how HIV is transmitted."

"In fact, the truth is, the discrimination and prejudice from medical staff are not because there is a lack of awareness or knowledge. It is due to their lack of conscience and their lack of love for fellow humans."

"When the two factors are there, then the discrimination and prejudice can be eradicated," notes Jamaliah.

However, Jamaliah, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1998, has also come across many medical staff who empathise with people infected by HIV.

She recalls the care and concern shown by Dr Kamarul Zaman from Kuala Lumpur Hospital's Pediatric Institute when her third child was confirmed as HIV positive after birth.

Jamaliah notes that Dr Kamarul's positive attitude

while treating her child has helped her renew hope.

"He not only saw to my child, but also those close to the child. To him, if the child is to recover he has to take care of people related to the child, too.

"This a good precedent for the society out there. Moreover, we are not looking for sympathy, we only seek support," she said.

Meanwhile, Dr Mazliza Zaid, the spokeswoman for the Malaysian Society for HIV Medicine (MaSHM),

was quoted as saying that the discrimination only involved a small group of medical staff.

"People involved should change their ways and, instead, help those with HIV to lead a life like the rest of us," said Dr Mazliza.

Commenting further on the matter, Datuk Mohd Zaman Khan, the president of the Malaysian Aids (MAC), admits that the council received complaints on the way people with HIV were treated by medical staff.

However, he says that the number of complaints have declined compared with four or five years ago.

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“The Health Ministry rolls out courses regularly to eradicate discrimination and prejudice within the medical community when treating people with HIV.”

To overcome the stigma faced by people with HIV, numerous programmes and initiatives have been undertaken by the government and non-governmental organisations (NGO).

In line with this is MAC Malaysia, which involves cooperation from (MaSHM) and MAC. The programme rolled out with the title “It Begins With You” in 2005 to help people pursuing a career in the medical field to avoid stigmatization and prejudice when treating people with HIV.

The programme is also meant to help educate the public.

“That is why it is held at public places,” said Mohd Zaman. - Bernama



Jamaliah Sulaiman (left) who is HIV positive hopes that medical staff act as 'public figure' as an example to the general public to wipe out the irrational behaviour and misperceptions harboured by people within the medical community that contribute to discrimination and prejudice against people living with HIV. - Bernama photo