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Left: Volunteers from M.V. Logos Hope (bearing placards with HIV/AIDS-related messages) with Kasih officials.

Below: Joseph (left) and Alex Qiu from China distributing information leaflets and free condoms to the public.

## ‘Go easy on condoms in handbag’

### Mary Chin

**KOTA KINABALU:** The authorities should not be hasty in linking women found with condoms in their handbags at nightspots as proof of involvement in vice, if the HIV/AIDS problem is to be effectively addressed.

Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH) Infectious Disease Consultant, Dr Timothy William, emphasised the need to reach out to high-risk groups such as girls working in pubs and other entertainment outlets, as well as sex workers.

“Let us educate them in a non-judgemental way,” he said, in conjunction with World AIDS Day this year (Dec. 1). According to Dr Timothy, many part-time sex workers refuse to carry condoms with them for fear that being found with these items could incriminate them as being involved in prostitution.

“Say a woman gets stopped by a policeman at 11pm and he finds three condoms in her handbag, is that evidence of prostitution?” he asked.

“While the police have to enforce the law, we (health professionals) have a role to play to reach out to the sex workers and advise them to carry condoms as a protective measure. I think these two government arms have to work together.”

Expressing concern over the upward trend of women getting infected throughout the world, Dr Timothy said being a vulnerable group, women need to be educated on the danger and necessary protection.

“Which is why raising awareness on the disease is so important. It’s important to go to schools and enlighten the students, especially school-leavers.”

On the general perception that usually women contract HIV from their husbands, the doctor said this was not 100 per cent accurate. “We have women patients whose husbands don’t have HIV.”

Dr Timothy stressed that efforts to combat HIV/AIDS involved a multi-pronged strategy. “Giving talks to schools is one of them, and others are radio and TV advertisements and public education through seminars and exhibitions. Still many people out there are unaware.”

Nevertheless, he advised those who engaged in high-risk behaviour to check their blood often. “Don’t delay. Sometimes people just don’t want to know or put it off their mind.”

“This is quite sad because if HIV patients are treated early, they have the potential to live 30 to 40 years more. Remember these three things – detect early, seek treatment early and comply with



Dr Timothy

Hence, if someone is 30 years old when diagnosed as having HIV, there is a lot of hope with HAART. The patient may be able to live up to 60, 70 or even above,” he said.

This is provided there is compliance with treatment and is detected and treated early with Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART). HAART is treatment with multiple anti-HIV drugs to suppress viral replication in the blood and has been shown to delay progression to AIDS and prolong life.

Dr Timothy, however, regretted that some came early for treatment but defaulted along the way with no follow-up. Although HIV treatment with HAART is very expensive, the Government is providing it free to Malaysian citizens but not to foreigners.

“If foreigners want the HAART therapy, we can prescribe it but they have to buy it from the pharmacy. On the other hand, we provide emergency treatment for them in the event that they become ill.”

Based on the average cost of HAART which is about RM300 to RM400 per patient per month, Dr Timothy said this therapy alone costs about RM5,000 per year.

“That’s the cheapest as it can go as high as RM1,200 a month, depending on the type of anti-HIV drugs. So the total cost ranges from RM5,000 to RM12,000 per patient per year.”

Asked whether World AIDS Day has any impact on the public, Dr Timothy said he did not think they paid enough attention.

“In fact, we still have educated patients who come in late for treatment. Being educated, they should know better, yet they seek treatment late.”

He attributed this to several factors, including failure to go for regular medical check-ups.

“And even after they have been detected, some are either in denial or seek alternative therapy like supplements. There are a lot of so-called cures for HIV,” he said, adding there are also quite a number of fraudsters offering cure.

The other reason is that some HIV-infected people are afraid of other people getting to know about their condition because of the strong social stigma attached to HIV/AIDS.

“People who find it difficult to reveal that they have got HIV are people who are respected in society or in religious circles, for example.”

■ 700 free condoms snapped up