

Headline	With help from family, friends		
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Latifah says she is blessed with the presence of her adopted son, Yazid, whose biological mother died from AIDS.

ATTITUDE SHIFT: The first AIDS case was reported in Malaysia 28 years ago. Those infected and living with the disease say the country has come a long way in terms of treatment, tolerance and acceptance of those living with HIV/AIDS, writes Shanti Gunaratnam in conjunction with World AIDS Day tomorrow

THE stigma is still there but there is now greater understanding and acceptance among family and friends of those living with HIV/AIDS and this has allowed them to lead normal lives.

And as long as family and friends are able to come to terms with their condition, it does not matter to them what "the world thinks of us".

Regina K, 38, was stunned when doctors told her that her husband was HIV-positive.

"I felt weak and sank to my knees. The doctors wanted me to be tested along with our four children because they were afraid my husband could have infected us.

"Luckily, all of us tested negative but I did suffer from depression for some time after my husband's diagnosis.

"Life has never been the same. We can only have protected sex and I have to make sure my husband takes his HAART (highly active anti-retroviral therapy) medication every day without fail if he wants to live a long life without complications," says Regina, an odd job worker.

Some of her family members know of her husband's condition but nobody says anything.

The couple's three older children, aged between 8 and 12, know about their father's illness and have come

to terms with it.

The youngest daughter, who is 5, is too young to understand.

The management of HIV/AIDS normally includes the use of multiple anti-retroviral drugs to control HIV infection.

There are several classes of anti-retroviral agents that act on different stages of the HIV life-cycle.

HAART, which uses multiple drugs that act on different viral targets decreases the patient's total burden of HIV, maintains function of the immune system and prevents opportunistic infections that often lead to death.

Regina suspects her husband con-

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tracted the virus either through drug use or womanising.

“Living with a spouse who is HIV-positive and a drug user can be challenging because of their mood swings and temperament.”

Regina said she was optimistic that a cure for AIDS would be found soon.

“The government has been understanding; we do not have to pay for HAART medication.

“Doctors and staff at Hospital Kuala Lumpur (HKL) and Sungai Buloh have been kind to us and are always looking out for us.

“I do see some changes in my husband because he is worried that if he does not change his ways, he may not be around to see our children grow up and get married,” said Regina.

Former nurse Latifah (not her real name), 46, found out about her condition after a routine blood test eight years ago. She had contracted it from her boyfriend.

She felt beaten and almost gave up on life, but her family stood by her and encouraged her to seek medical help.

Not knowing where to turn, she sought the assistance of Pink Triangle Malaysia.

Through counselling and family support, she managed to turn her life around.

She broke up with her boyfriend and sought help from doctors at HKL, who put her on HAART.

But what turned her life around was her adopted son, Yazid (not his real name), whose mother had died of AIDS.

“When I tested positive for HIV, I stopped working because I needed to sort my life out. After a few months, I went to work in a home which looked after the less-fortunate and those with HIV/AIDS.

“That was where I met my son for the first time. He was just 2. His mother had died and his father had abandoned him.”

Latifah said after adopting Yazid, her luck changed.

At Pink Triangle, during one of the counselling sessions, she met former drug addict and HIV-positive Omar (not his real name).

They married and Omar officially adopted Yazid.

“Ironically, it was the dreaded disease that brought the three of us together.”

Omar, 45, works in the same home as Latifah, and all three of them are on HAART.

“We work hard to sustain ourselves financially because we want to give our son a bright future and, at the same, we look after ourselves because we do not want Yazid to become an orphan again,” said Latifah.

The couple has been married for 10 years and enjoy a warm relationship with both sides of the family.

“My father-in-law was a former headmaster and he is very understanding and so are all our siblings.

“Though our son is adopted, he is treated with love, care and tenderness by our families,” says Latifah.

While many of their family members, close friends and employers know of their condition, Latifah and Omar are apprehensive about re-

vealing Yazid’s condition to his teachers and schoolmates for fear of being stigmatised.

“He is only a child and should be allowed to lead a normal life.”

Housewife Lily’s (not her real name), world collapsed the day the 32-year-old learnt she was HIV-positive and shortly after she was diagnosed in 2005, she lost her husband to the disease.

“When I was diagnosed as HIV-positive, I confronted my husband to find out how he got the disease. But till the day he died, he did not give me an answer.

“I was loyal to my husband throughout our marriage and don’t deserve this. But I suppose God had other plans for me.”

She met and married former drug addict Ray (not his real name), 53, and they have a daughter, Feliza, 6, who is HIV-negative.

“My daughter from my first marriage and Ray’s daughter from his previous marriage are also HIV-negative.”

While the couple struggle to make ends meet on Ray’s income as a petrol pump attendant, they are happy as a family.

“What is the point of being miserable every day? We are just taking things one day at a time.

“While HAART has kept us going, both Ray and I have suffered from other complications, including tuberculosis and Hepatitis C, as he was an intravenous drug user,” said Lily.

But she said they were both fighters and planned on staying healthy for as long as they could.