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AIDS slowdown but 100,000 have it

Mary Chin

KOTA KINABALU: Slightly over 100,000 people in Malaysia have HIV/AIDS since the first case surfaced in 1986, said the Health Ministry's National Adviser for Infectious Diseases, Datuk Dr Christopher Lee (pic).

"About 20pc of this figure have passed away," he said.

Speaking to the *Daily Express* after presenting his paper on Malaysia National One Health Initiative at the 3rd Borneo Tropical Medicine and Infectious Disease Congress at Le Meridien Hotel, here, Thursday, Dr Lee said:

"The tally shows that the peak year was 2002 when 10,000 new cases were detected throughout the country. But since 2002, the HIV/AIDS trend has been on the slide."

He attributed the scenario to public health interventions and the gradual

change of the HIV epidemic, saying the last few years, only 3,000 plus new infections were detected per year throughout Malaysia.

"So the number seems to have dropped but what has changed is the mode of transmission. In the earlier years, most HIV sufferers were among intravenous (IV) drug-users, mainly in West Malaysia. Over here in Sabah, there is still less drug use but more transmission through sex.

"If you look at the nationwide chart, the number of IV drug-users getting HIV seems to have decreased. However, what has gone up now is sexual transmission due to multiple factors," he pointed out.

Dr Lee, who is also Senior Consultant for Infectious Diseases at Sungai Buloh Hospital, Selangor, said the situation could be partially due to the National Harm Reduction Programme for HIV Prevention (which consists of the needle and syringe exchange).

This, he said, may have contributed something but the other thing is the

changing drug-taking pattern from IV heroin to more of amphetamines (psycho-stimulant drugs).

"When people take amphetamines orally, the risk of getting HIV is not there but they get 'disinhibited'. It's like getting drunk with alcohol in the sense that there is lack of restraint. The amphetamine takers get high and take risks so they may have sex without condoms. The fear is there," he explained.

"Of course, we cannot blame amphetamines for all the HIV cases because there are people who are infected but don't take these substances."

Whatever the case, the National Adviser for Infectious Diseases said clearly, it shows that sexual transmission is the main mode of spread of HIV in our country now.

"It is either man to woman (that is, heterosexual) or man to man for which we use 'MSM' (or men who have sex with men). That's the UN way of talking it out. We don't use the word 'homosexual' now," he added.

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