

Headline **Educating young doctors**
Date **17 Jul 2011**
MediaTitle **Sunday Star**
Section **StarMag FitForLife**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Weekly**
Circ / Read **320,964 / 1,072,000**

Language **English**
Page No **6**
Article Size **507 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
ADValue **18,973**
PRValue **56,919**



Educating young doctors

Most of the time, a person's life living with an HIV infection starts in a clinic or a hospital. That is why it is important to educate healthcare professionals, especially aspiring doctors, about the disease.

By LIM WEY WEN

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INTO his second year of medical school, Muhammad Khair Mohamad Yunus has learned quite a bit about HIV and AIDS from lectures and medical textbooks. But the impact of the disease on those who are living with it did not hit home until he visited a home for persons living with HIV.

"It was during prayer time, and I was talking to some of the residents there. And after I got to know them better, a resident finally asked me, 'Why are you so nice to us? Are you not afraid of us?'" he recalls.

"When you hear such statements, you really feel the stigma and discrimination they face every day from society. It made me want to cry," says Muhammad Khair, who is a student from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM).

His experience is not one that is common among medical students. While medical students today may have more opportunities to see patients who are living with HIV for

other conditions in hospitals – like a simple cough and cold, hypertension or other ailments – some do not have the opportunity to talk to them and understand their way of life in their

own environment.

"We usually see patients in the ward and not in their homes," he says.

Muhammad Khair's visit to the home was part of the "It Begins With You" programme, an educational programme for medical students that aims to change their mindset about people living with HIV and increase the number of dedicated HIV and AIDS treaters in the country.

As he told his story, fellow participants Alicia Ng and Rachel Chong Hui Min can relate.

Ng, a second year medical student from the International Medical University followed up with her own story. "One patient I met had such a challenging life, it was crazy. After this man was

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scammed by his business partner, he lost his car and business, and was thrown into jail shortly after. He found out that he was HIV-positive in jail.

"These are the stories that we don't normally hear in lectures."

What medical textbooks don't teach

While Chong, a first year student from University Malaya, hasn't actually met a HIV patient yet, she looks forward to learning more about their lives.

"Medical textbooks can tell you a lot about the virus, its transmission and how to treat it, but it doesn't tell you what happens in reality, and how it affects people," she says.

Even when they are educated about HIV and AIDS, some medical students still have their reservations when they come into contact with people living with HIV (PLHIVs).

"I think the stigma and discrimination can sometimes run so deep, that even when we are educated about the ways HIV can be transmitted, some will still be reluctant or afraid to face PLHIVs," says Ng.

These perceptions and fears may play a role in the emotional detachment medical practitioners have, as described by president of the Malaysian AIDS Council Tan Sri Mohd Zaman Khan in his speech at the programme's finale event.

"I have been made aware of certain grievances made against medical practitioners, in particular of their emotional detachment with the patients/clients that they serve," says Mohd Zaman.

"While this is obviously subject to personal views and perception, it is unfortunately a common notion within the sphere of public opinion. Although there is a need for doctors to practise professionalism in delivering their services, it certainly doesn't hurt to humanise the contact and display a certain level of apathy and affection to patients who are more than often, scared, confused and uncertain about their futures."

Reducing stigma

How, then, can medical stu-

dents change their own perception about the disease and people who are living with them?

To Muhammad Khair, Ng and Chong, it starts from the medical students.

"Try to read more about the disease and get to know the people who are living with the virus better," says Muhammad Khair, who has already participated in the programme for two years running. "That is why this year I tried to get as many of my juniors to participate in the programme. The more we are aware of the problems PLHIVs face, the better we are equipped to help them."



Muhammad Khair... Medical students who are aware of the problems PLHIVs face will be better equipped to help them in the future.



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Chong... Medical textbooks can tell you a lot about the virus, but it doesn't tell you what happens in reality, and how it affects people.



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