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Harm reduction for all

Malaysian AIDS Council celebrates World Contraception Day 2011.

THE Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) recently celebrated World Contraception Day 2011, in recognition of the role that contraception, particularly condoms, play in promoting sexual and reproductive health, including reducing the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

World Contraception Day (WCD) takes place on September 26 every year. The annual worldwide campaign centres around a vision for a world where every pregnancy is wanted.

Launched in 2007, WCD's mission is to improve awareness of contraception to enable young people to make informed decisions on their sexual and reproductive health. The WCD movement is governed by a coalition of 10 global NGOs with an interest in sexual health.

Condom use falls under the ambit of Harm Reduction, a broad public health strategy founded on a set of principles designed to minimise harmful consequences

from high-risk behaviours, including injecting drugs and unprotected sex. When used correctly and consistently, condoms can prevent HIV and other STIs as well as unwanted pregnancies. Condoms are currently the only means of preventing sexual transmission of HIV.

The United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, in his remark for a three-day special summit to commemorate the discovery of AIDS in June 2011, highlighted the importance of "correct and consistent use of condoms" in the fight against AIDS. He called this strategy, "an absolute imperative if we are to succeed in realising our vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related mortality".

At the home front, MAC President Tan Sri Mohd Zaman Khan has reiterated MAC's support for condom use within the context of HIV and AIDS prevention as a pragmatic solution to a public health crisis that could potentially affect the wellbeing of a nation.

"The argument about the use of condom as an effective tool of mitigating HIV and AIDS is dated as far back as the beginning of the epidemic. While we are constantly challenged with the discourse that questions the morality of promot-

ing condom in our highly conservative Muslim society, for MAC, our conviction is clear. Condom use is, by far, the most effective and pragmatic way to prevent the spread of HIV in any given population. We have only the best interest of our future generation in mind, really," he explained.

The urgency of the situation became even more pronounced when the most recent HIV statistics by the Health Ministry revealed that sexual transmission has taken over injecting drugs as the main mode of HIV transmission in the country.

In 2010, 48.7% of all new HIV cases were transmitted sexually, while 47.4% were transmitted via the injecting drug use route.

The rising number of young people and women living with HIV, especially those of childbearing age, also suggests that an integration of HIV/AIDS component into family planning services is an appropriate move that could effectively address the dual risks of HIV infection and unwanted pregnancies.

Though the Malaysian AIDS Council is not a member of the WCD coalition, the organisation is strongly supportive of the vision and underlying messages that the WCD wishes to convey to the public.