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Stigma begone

Dec 1 is World AIDS Day and there's lots you can do about it.

CYRUS KWONG WHYE JI

AIDS. The mere mention of it is enough to put people on guard. I wouldn't be surprised if the mere whisper of pirated goods being infected with AIDS (an impossibility) would clear out most dodgy DVD stalls quicker than an incoming police raid.

In Malaysia alone, it is estimated 10 more people test positive for AIDS everyday. The Ministry of Health began reporting HIV/AIDS cases in 1986, and as of 31 Dec 2008, a total of 84,630 HIV infections have been reported in Malaysia and 11,384 people have died from AIDS.

This is so serious a matter that there is even an annual World AIDS Day held on the 1st of December. This year's theme is "Universal Access and Human Rights."

You may ask why AIDS needs this much attention when it is already infamous. But do we all really know what it really is? Is our fear of it justified or irrational?

First, a quick lesson. AIDS is short for "acquired immune deficiency syndrome" or "acquired immunodeficiency syndrome." It is characterised by the highly reduced capacity of one's immune system to fight off diseases, such that one's immune system is barely functional, if at all. As such, people with AIDS are much more vulnerable and susceptible to common everyday illnesses such as colds and influenza.

AIDS, however, is not a disease in its own right. It is the terminal condition of those who have been infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). As such, people cannot just "get AIDS", and the resulting fear and stigma we often associate those with AIDS is uncalled for.

That is not to say that people are not aware that HIV is the root cause of AIDS; many are.

However, they may not be as well informed as they think, as they merely shift the focus of their fear away from AIDS and towards HIV. This actually does nothing to assuage their fears as they will have an even larger number of people to fear, as there are more people with HIV than there are people with AIDS.

HIV can only be transmitted via the exchange of bodily fluids, such as blood, semen, vaginal fluid, and breast milk. It cannot be caught through casual contact (unlike influenza, for instance, which can be transmitted through sneezing or coughing).

As you can see, HIV usually only spreads in the most intimate of settings, and those who happen to casually encounter people with HIV/AIDS are at negligible risk. Therefore,

there is generally very little risk of people contracting HIV under normal circumstances.

What you can do to learn more

- Attend one of the events listed here.
- Visit the Malaysian Aids Council website at mac.org.my. Here, you can find information about AIDS, or on how you can contribute to their efforts, either by volunteering or donating.
- Play a fun and informative game on AIDS such as on avert.org/hiv-aids-game.htm.

You can also screen yourself for HIV. Although HIV currently cannot be cured, it can be effectively controlled if detected early. However, visible symptoms do not manifest immediately in HIV-positive persons, and HIV can only be detected by a blood test.

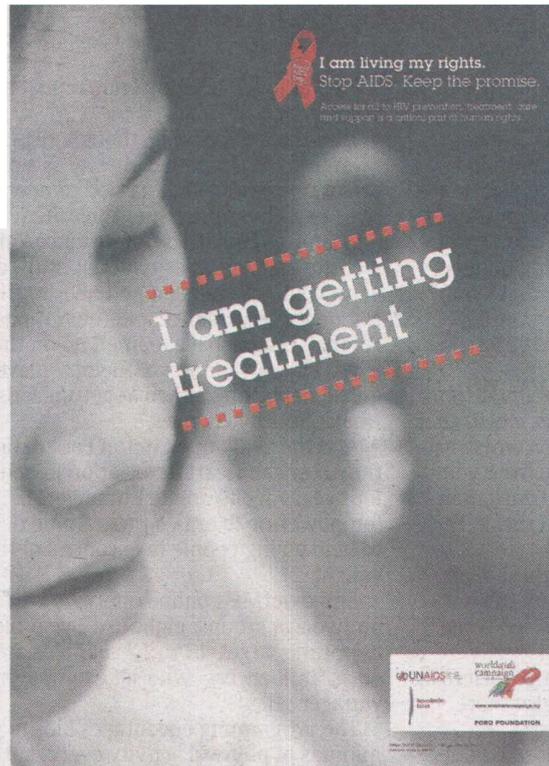
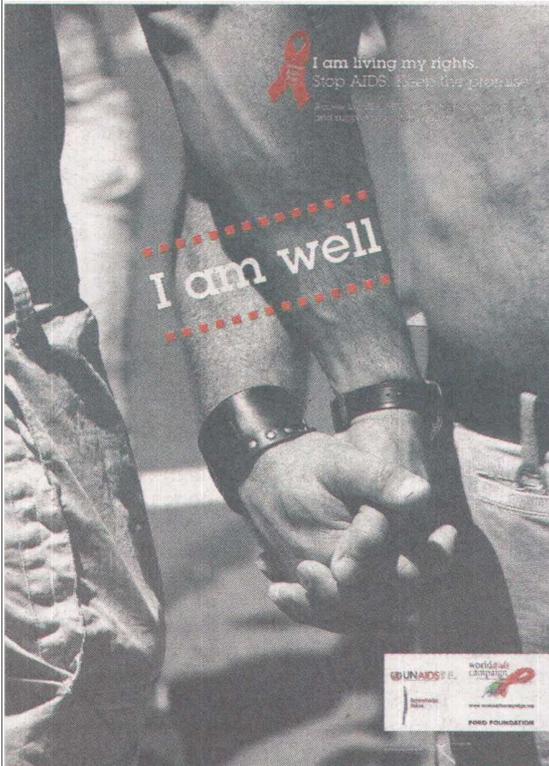
A free and anonymous screening service, including counselling, is provided by the Pink

Triangle Foundation twice weekly in Kuala Lumpur, and monthly in both Penang and Seberang Jaya. For further information, read *Events* or visit ptfmalaysia.org.

■ *Art4Health is aimed at getting Malaysians to think global and act local about their health. If you are organising a health-related event that the general public will benefit from, email us at starhealthfeedback@thestar.com.my so we can help you reach a wider audience.*

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These posters (two of a series of four) were created on behalf of the World AIDS Campaign. They highlight the fact that HIV-positive persons and people with AIDS are every bit as human as the rest of us, and deserving of access to their basic human rights, not our unwarranted fear nor scorn.