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# Getting tested

BEING certain that they have never engaged in behaviour that could infect them with HIV is one reason why Malaysians do not get tested and seek counselling for the disease.

Health deputy director-general Datuk Dr Hasan Abdul Rahman comments that many people do not get tested because they have never had a blood transfusion, while the reasons offered by others for not getting tested are less clear-cut.

"For instance, they think the stress of a positive test result and the issues it would raise among family members, friends, and sex partners would be more harmful than not knowing if they are infected," he says.

He adds that the fear that other people may find out about their results (leading to discrimination) deters testing.

A population survey in 2006 shows that the level of awareness of HIV is high, at 85.7%, and people know about HIV testing. Dr Hasan attributes this to the ministry's advocacy and HIV health campaigns.

About 1.2 million HIV tests was carried out last year, with about 700,000 tests done in government facilities.

Data also shows that for the past 12 months, 2% of Malaysians aged between 15 and 49 were tested for

HIV.

According to World Health Organisation and UNAIDS estimates for last year, approximately 19,000 Malaysians are eligible for treatment and the number of those on anti-retroviral therapy is 8,197 individuals (43%).

Among the testing approaches in Malaysia are voluntary counselling and testing (VCT), anonymous testing, routine antenatal testing, and routine testing among sexually transmitted infection and tuberculosis patients.

Others include routine screening for prisoners and those in drug rehabilitation centres, those who have donated blood and organs, premarital screening, and screening for those who have had sexual contact with a HIV positive person.

Dr Hasan maintains that it is important for Malaysians to know their HIV status and testing and counselling are entry points to HIV-related care and prevention services. It also provides opportunities for people to reduce their risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV, he says.

He adds knowing their status also enables them to begin or maintain behaviour to prevent acquisition or further transmission, gain early access to care, treatment and support, access interventions to

prevent transmission from mother to infant, better cope with the infection, and plan for the future.

Dr Hasan emphasises that HIV testing is key to slowing down the epidemic besides improving one's prognosis if diagnosis is done early.

"VCT aims to prevent the spread of infection, to care for those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, and to provide outreach and support to the community," he reminds.

"For those who test negative, counselling is aimed at helping them maintain this status; for those who test positive, it is intended to assist them to cope as best they can to ensure that the effects on their quality of life is minimised."

Malaysian AIDS Council president Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman says one way of increasing the numbers of those undergoing VCT is by having a special day set aside to carry out testing.

"But this requires a lot of money, commitment, and training. It is not like testing for diabetes or checking your blood pressure," she adds. "You need to have people like counsellors on standby."

She says stigma and discrimination remains the top obstacle to testing despite efforts like media campaigns, advocacy, and involvement by religious leaders. — **By Audrey Edwards**



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