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Help those with HIV live fruitful lives

THERE are more than 80,000 recorded cases of HIV-positive individuals in Malaysia. Eighty per cent of them are intravenous drug users who acquired the infection through sharing needles with HIV-positive individuals.

Prior to the recent discovery of newer and more potent methods of treating AIDS through "Highly Active Anti-viral Therapy" (HAART— a cocktail of multiple anti-HIV drugs) to treat these patients to effectively put off the progression to full blown AIDS, HIV infection was considered a potential death sentence.

The HIV infection would progress to full blown AIDS and the patient would have only about three years to live. It was a dreaded disease and people developed an entrenched morbid mindset to avoid even the most casual physical contact such

as a handshake with HIV-positive individuals.

This is despite the fact that it is not a contagious disease and its specific modes of transmission have been clearly spelled out and widely disseminated to the public.

With HAART the face of HIV infection has changed radically.

AIDS patients at the brink of death have recovered and returned to an active life.

Although the virus has not been eradicated and those infected continue to live with it, the progression to full-blown AIDS has been effectively checked with HAART.

The progression from HIV positive status to clinical AIDS has been reduced by 90%. Those diagnosed as HIV positive can live longer and more fuller lives and can even go back to work.

The sad fact is that although HAART has added many years of active and productive life to the HIV-infected, the world continues to harbour stubborn prejudices against

the unfortunate group based on the dreaded scenario that existed prior to HAART.

Such people are denied the right to earn a living. Unfortunately, this stubborn stigma will continue to remain long after the disease is gone and HIV-positive individuals will continue to be shunned by all and sundry, even relatives, friends and the so-called educated class.

According to Mother Teresa, "The biggest disease is the feeling of being unwanted."

**MGD,
Kuala Lumpur.**