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Massage, my foot!

Foreign masseuses coming down with STD

STEPHEN THEN

MIRI: Foreign masseuses here are offering more than just foot massage and this has got the authorities all riled up.

Having found some foot masseuses to be AIDS carriers, the Miri City Council (MCC) is not taking any chances and is toying with the idea of subjecting foreign masseuses employed here to undergo mandatory screening for sexually transmitted diseases (STD).

The council is expected to decide after a meeting with officials from the Environment and Public Health Ministry on Friday when to introduce the by-law that would impose mandatory screening.

MCC plans to subject masseuses to a full-blood test every six months, making it the first local government in the state and possibly even the country to impose such a stringent ruling.

The council has also categorised masseuses as "non-professional" workers because under the Malaysian Immigrations Act, foreign masseurs are categorised as "professional workers" and are not compelled to undergo health screening before entering Malaysia.

Miri Mayor Lawrence Lai said yesterday that his council had to be extra-stringent with the activities and goings-on in reflexology centres after doctors found foreign masseuses with AIDS.

"Foot massage centres are mushrooming all

over our city. There are those that are licensed but there are also many operating illegally. MCC is very worried that these places may become centres spreading sexually-transmitted diseases.

"Our council does not have any by-laws requiring compulsory blood-tests for foreign masseuses. We just follow the Immigration Department's regulation that categorises these masseurs as professional workers, unlike general workers like construction labourers and housemaids who have to undergo health screening," he said.

Besides the mandatory screening and re-categorisation of masseuses, Lai said his council has launched regular surprise checks on massage centres, operations against illegal massage outlets and formulated regulations compelling foreign masseuses found with AIDS and STD to leave Miri immediately and bar them from working here.

Lai said there are more than 60 companies that were registered as "foot-massage" operators throughout this city.

The Star found that there are many massage centres operating in obscure places located along backlanes of the city's streets and even inside motels and shophots.

Even in centres licensed by the council, *The Star* found some masseuses offering "extra-services" upon requests by the clients.

An hour's service can cost up to RM200, depending on the "physical attributes" of these masseuses, some customers told *The Star*.