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Challenges in social work

Country facing shortage of trained workers

By **DERRICK VINESH**

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SOcial work comes from the heart but the feeling can be nurtured, according to academician Prof Dr Ismail Baba.

He admitted that social work was not an easy field because social workers were often torn between their personal and professional values.

"When providing help to individuals, families and communities, social workers are advised not to use their personal values because this may end up interfering in their work," he said in an interview recently.

For example, the distribution of condoms in a bid to promote safe sex, he said, might be offensive to some communities but to a social worker, it should be viewed as an effort to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

He also said a social worker had no right to condemn unmarried couples who live together before marriage, even if the social worker personally has strong objections to such a practice.

Dr Ismail said that because of such conflicts, many shied away from taking up social work as a profession.

"The main idea is to help people so we must respect them and render them professional assistance," he said.

He stressed that it was vital for social workers to stick close to the social work norms and values that were universally recognised and adopted.

Dr Ismail said the country faced a critical shortage of trained social workers with only 300 such persons registered with the National Welfare Department.

That is about one social worker for every 90,000 people in the country.

He said the ideal 1:200 social worker-to-population ratio might be far from becoming a reality soon but efforts must be taken to woo more trained social workers to "do what they are supposed to do".

"We have many graduates who are trained in social work from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and other institutions of higher learning, but strangely not all of them end up working as social workers.

"This could probably be due to a mismatch between the graduates with social work quali-

fication and those from other fields who currently occupy the positions of social workers in the public sector," he said.

He said social work graduates ended up working elsewhere partly because of the Public Services Department's policy, employing those with general Social Sciences degrees to fill up positions as social workers.

He said those who graduated with a Social Science degree could have majored in other fields of study such as Economics, Political Science and Sociology and not necessarily in social work.

"But the PSD may argue that it is up to the relevant ministries, departments and agencies to pick the right candidates to fill up positions as social workers according to their respective requirements.

"So, this is like a never-ending problem, but the fact remains that we still face a shortage of trained social workers in the welfare department and in other relevant fields," he said.

Dr Ismail said many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were unable to hire trained social workers with related academic qualifications due to financial constraints.

He said most of the NGOs depended on volunteers, who generally "came and went" and were unable to provide long-term support to an organisation.

While he agreed that only the richer nations could afford trained social workers, Dr Ismail strongly believed that every community should have trained social workers.

"This is important so they can look into the problems affecting the community as well as within an organisation, including in the relevant departments and agencies," he said.

However, he said, in certain cities where the people were more psychologically and socially-developed, the need for social workers might not arise due to fewer social problems there.

He said social workers could also help promote a greater sense of tolerance and understanding among the different communities living in a neighbourhood, including foreign workers.

"I do not see why we cannot deploy social

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workers who can converse in the mother tongue of some of our foreign workers from Bangladesh, Vietnam, Nepal or Myanmar.

"This way, we can further understand the needs of the foreign communities living here.

"It does not matter whether these immigrants are here legally or illegally, we are responsible for their social well-being.

"It is only humane to respond to their needs.

"We should deploy medical social workers into their midst to help curb the spread of infectious diseases, especially among the illegal workers," he said.

Dr Ismail, 60, who has over 30 years of experience in social work, was made a professor in March by Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM).

He heads the social work programme in the School of Social Development as well as in the School of Arts and Sciences.

He is believed to be the first social worker in

the country to be made a professor in social work management.

He obtained a bachelor's degree in social work from McGill University, Montreal in Canada, in 1979, and later pursued a master's degree in social work at Columbia University, New York in the United States.

He then completed his PhD in social work from Barry University, Florida in the United States, in 1995.

From serving as a medical social worker in University Hospital Kuala Lumpur back in 1979, Dr Ismail worked his way up.

He became Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Social Sciences dean from 2007 till February this year before moving to UUM.

As an active advocate on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, Dr Ismail founded the Community AIDS Service Penang (CASP) in 1989.

He is currently vice-president of the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC).



Dr Ismail: Social workers often torn between personal and professional values