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Study: Risky sex in Batam

There is nothing new about Singaporeans going to Batam for sex, but now we know the magnitude of the potential HIV problem that involves Singaporeans.

— BRIDGET TAN

Only one in four men use condoms regularly, Home discovers

ABOUT 60% of sex workers in Batam have Singaporean clients, and only one in four of these clients use condoms regularly.

These are some of the key findings in a recent study by migrant welfare group Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) and non-governmental organisations in Batam.

Bridget Tan, president of Home, said the main aim of the study was to look into the practising of safe sex among Batam's sex workers, and how that data could help shed light on cross-border human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections in Singapore.

"There is nothing new about Singaporeans going to Batam for sex, but now we know the magnitude of the potential HIV problem that involves Singaporeans; before we did not know much about their numbers or their condom use," she said.

The survey did not elicit the reasons Singaporeans shunned practising safe sex. But Donovan Lo, executive director of non-governmental group Action for Aids cited studies showing lower condom use among Singaporeans abroad mainly because sex workers abroad are less likely to initiate condom use.

"So Singaporean men need to exercise more responsibility for themselves when they are away," he said, adding that his organisation has encountered men who were diagnosed with HIV after patronising sex workers overseas.

He noted that the Singapore men who visit Batam for such trysts are mostly older Chinese men, but there is an increasing number of younger Malay males.

The survey interviewed 300 sex workers; about half were from four of the eight sex

farms in Batam and the rest worked in entertainment joints, such as bars or clubs. There are about 5,500 sex workers in Batam.

Conducted in April, the survey included questions such as when they began working in the sex industry, if they were forced into the trade, and if they practised safe sex.

Of the 300, 29% said they were forced or tricked into the sex trade, and 3% said they came into the industry underage, or below 18. The study also outlines several recommendations, and Home has since submitted the study to the authorities.

The recommendations include running a nationwide No Condom, No Sex campaign to promote safe sex among Singaporeans.

The latest available figures from 2007 show that about 9% of Batam's sex workers are HIV-positive. — The Straits Times/Asia News Network