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# Putting HIV myths to rest

Awareness programme aims to give youth clearer picture of disease

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 Photos by NORAFIFI EHSAN



**T**HERE are many misconceptions when it comes to the transmission of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

Speaking at the Persatuan Kesejahteraan Rakyat 1Malaysia (KER1M) HIV/AIDS public awareness programme, Malaysian AIDS Council-registered resource person and speaker Surain Victor clarified several of these misconceptions.

In his presentation, Surain highlighted that HIV/AIDS can only be transmitted through four bodily fluids, namely blood, semen, vaginal fluid and breast milk.

Other fluids such as saliva, tears, sweat and waste products do not contain the HIV/AIDS virus in infectious amounts and cannot transmit the virus to another person.

He also busted the myth that HIV/AIDS could be transmitted through ingestion of the aforementioned bodily fluids.

"When the virus enters the mouth, your body has a mucus membrane and enzymes which will kill microorganisms," said Surain.

Transmission through public facilities such as toilets or through insects and animals were also not possible as the virus could not survive outside of the human body.

"The virus is very sensitive, so once it comes into contact with air or water it will not be viable anymore. It will die," said Surain.

He reiterated that the only way for HIV/AIDS to be transmitted from one person to the next is through direct contact between the four bodily fluids.

The programme held in VIVA Home Shopping Mall Kuala Lumpur recently was organised by KER1M in collaboration with Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) and the National Blood Centre (PDN).

This programme's purpose was to educate and provide knowledge about HIV/AIDS to the youth, said KER1M chairman honorary major Datuk Ranjith Raja.

"I hope that after this programme the youth can have a clearer picture of HIV and AIDS,"

said Ranjith, who also hoped that what the youth have learnt in the programme could be passed on to their children in the future.

Also present was MAC executive director Roswati Ghani, who was impressed at the youth turnout for the programme, despite it being organised during a long weekend.

"HIV has been an issue in Malaysia. Prevalence is very high among youth and we are not only talking about mother-child transmission," said Roswati.

Roswati urged youth to practice safe sex habits as unprotected sex was one of the main contributors to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Harm prevention through the Needle & Syringe Exchange Programme (NSEP) is one of the methods implemented by MAC to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS among people who inject drugs.

The NSEP programme started in 2006 and was designed to reduce HIV vulnerability among people who inject drugs nationwide by providing them with sterile syringes and drop-in centres for drug users where nutritional meals, basic first aid facilities, counselling as well as showers are provided free of charge.

"Response has been good between the drug users and concerned parties," Surain said, but adding that the general public were still on the fence about the NSEP.

According to the MAC website, there have been 91,362 HIV infection cases from 1968 to 2010, though the cases per year have been steadily decreasing from its peak of 6,978 cases in 2002 to 3,652 cases in 2010.



Good response: Lim Beng Leng donating blood for the 22nd time at the event.

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**Grateful:** Roshaidah Mohd (in wheelchair), 41, receiving a new wheelchair presented by Roswati (third from right) courtesy of KERIM at the HIV/AIDS public awareness programme in VIVA Home Shopping Mall.



**Related words:** Surain (front right with microphone) demonstrating the effects of HIV/AIDS with six volunteers from the audience holding laminated flash cards.