

Headline **AIDS stigma hidier among medical fraternity**  
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by **Karen Arukesamy**  
newsdesk@thesundaily

**SUBANG JAYA:** Did you know that the stigma of HIV/AIDS, and discrimination against those afflicted is higher among the medical fraternity compared with others?

Malaysian Aids Council (MAC) president Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman said it is important to campaign with the medical profession, before engaging the rest of the community because there is still a strong discrimination within the group.

"All I ask of medical students who are going to graduate is to always put aside emotions and moral judgments in their profession," she told some 270 medical students at the East Asia Medical Students Conference (EAMSC) 2009 at Monash University Sunway Campus recently.

"Many of the older doctors are the worst people to stigmatise HIV/AIDS patients and those from the marginalised groups.

"Sadly, in the Malaysian medical profession as a whole, its engagement within the community to advocate for HIV has been muted," she said in her keynote address at the opening of the conference.

Adeeba said the task is often left to a few "to-be-doctors and advocates to educate the community and do prevention work".

She believes "you cannot teach old dogs new tricks" and hopes younger doctors will change that mindset.

Expressing regret over the recent controversy over pre-marital HIV/AIDS testing, she said: "I'm very sad that the Malaysian Medical Association did not come out in defence. It is a matter of public health, and it should remain within the medical fraternity."

Given that the Asian region has the fastest growing incidence of HIV in the world, Adeeba said Malaysia's "delay in instituting preventive programmes is reflective of the scenario".

In comparison with Australia, she said, although the population is similar, Malaysia has seven to eight times more due to the "delay".

"We have had 80,000 people infected that we know of, but the true figures are probably much

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higher," Adeeba said.

Relating her experience as a former medical student and an infectious disease specialist, she said that many people including her mother had asked her why she couldn't do something more conventional like cardiology.

Adeeba said sometimes people pretend they don't know her.

"Sometimes when I go to parties, my friends don't say they know me because they think I may be HIV-infected," she said.

Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Idris Haron applauded the conference initiative, saying: "When we start with young people there is less of a problem. They will get the first step right and will be able to move ahead progressively."

In his keynote address, he said engaging the young is an important strategy as they are among the high risk groups and changing their practices will be effective in curbing HIV/AIDS.

"This is where education and knowledge play an important role. It fuels research as the key to breaking down barriers, changing stereotypes and bringing new perspectives," Idris said.

The conference, organised by Monash, was themed *Engaging Asia-Pacific Youth in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS*.

Medical students from 27 Asia-Pacific countries including Australia, Bangladesh,



Cambodia, Fiji, Hongkong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand attended the conference.

Monash pro vice-chancellor and president (Malaysia) Prof Robin Pollard described the conference as a wonderful opportunity for future health professionals to build networks and discuss issues that will help them continue to make a real difference.

Monash medical student and conference co-chair Shazeea Banu said: "The importance of this issue is reflected in the prevalence and incidence of HIV infections in the Asia-Pacific, which have risen precipitously the past decade."

"It is estimated that over eight million people are living with HIV in Asia, with another 75,000 in Oceania," she said.

She said health officials recently revealed that the number of HIV/AIDS cases in Asia could reach an alarming 10 million by 2010, with 500,000 new cases annually unless countries take increased action against the disease.

Monash medical graduate and co-chair Dr Alessandro Demaido said the conference aimed to engage medical students as young doctors and community leaders in the issues of sexual health and HIV/AIDS, and "even more important is for these 270 students to be trained as engagers themselves to go back to their communities and engage their friends, peers and families".

One of the papers presented at the conference was *The Battle Against HIV/AIDS: Malaysia's Efforts in the Control and Prevention of the Rising Epidemic*, based on research by University Sains Malaysia students C. K. Tan, J. J. Lee and Y. C. Tham, who found that the obstacles to the government's efforts included political will, limited funding, shortage of skilled manpower and insufficient local research.