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Sensitivity in HIV/AIDS reporting



Left: Choo speaks at the AIDS Media Sensitisation Workshop.

by **Rajeshwary Menon**

THE media should play a greater and more ethical role when reporting on the subject of HIV/AIDS. This includes being more sensitive to those with AIDS and changing public perception of the disease.

These were some of the suggestions put forward at the AIDS Media Sensitisation Workshop held by the Malaysian AIDS Council last month, attended by media professionals, AIDS activists and non-governmental organisations.

The workshop was aimed at forging closer ties with the media and creating awareness among media professionals of socially and culturally sensitive approaches to dealing with the subject of HIV/AIDS.

“Newspaper headlines should not carry or use headlines such as HIV victim or sufferer or HIV carrier. The label makes them a victim and people have to understand that although it cannot be cured, it is treatable,” said Martin Choo, project co-ordinator for Centre of Excellence for Research in AIDS (CERiA).

He said reports that focused on HIV/

AIDS rather than people, victimised those in need of support and created stigmatising attitudes or behaviours that affect their ability to seek help as they are made to feel more vulnerable.

“At the end of the day, the pen is mightier than the sword and if used in the right way, we could work together to prevent the rise in the incidence of AIDS,” Choo said.

Dina Zaman, an AIDS

activist, spoke about the role of the media and principles of reporting on HIV.

“There has to be an intelligent coverage of HIV/AIDS, journalists have to understand the scenario in Malaysia, and news stories have to be balanced, objective, factual and

not sensationalise,” she said, adding that journalists should respect people with HIV/AIDS by not revealing their names or photos and avoid stereotyping them.

Pax Tan, exco member of the Malaysian AIDS Council, said media has the power to stem HIV and erode the AIDS stigma.

Because of the power of the media, “we want to encourage them also to be sensitive, compassionate and to think through some of the issues so that what they write will not in any way make life more difficult for people who are living with the disease”, he said.

“How people perceive HIV/AIDS or how society feels about people with the disease is very important,” Tan said.

The workshop also discussed in detail the discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS, and how society judges them.

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— Pax Tan