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Understanding AIDS

> This modern-day equivalent of the Black Death is not a homosexual plague but a medical condition that diminishes a person's immune system

LEON CHIN

THROUGHOUT the history of mankind, humans have been plagued by diseases, some of which are endemic and deadly such as the plague known as the Black Death, which was caused by a bacterium found in fleas carried by rats. It killed 40% of Europe's population during the 14th century.

Even then, such human tragedies were surrounded by religious superstitions. The Church claimed that the Black Death was an act of God because of man's immorality and wickedness. Death among its own rank finally put a stop to such mumbo jumbo.

Over the centuries, a number of other diseases, including leprosy and smallpox, claimed many lives but with modern science, many of them were soon under control or eradicated.

The modern plague equivalent with its share of religious superstitions is undoubtedly AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

To be clear, AIDS is not a 'homosexual plague' but a medical condition that diminishes a person's immune system to fight against even the mildest form of infection.

Therefore, AIDS is not an act of God to punish sinners but is caused by the HIV virus which is responsible for attacking the immune system cells. Once these weakened cells can no longer fight off infections, the person becomes an AIDS victim.

The first cases of AIDS were discovered in 1981 in Los Angeles among homosexuals which prompted the media to misleadingly name the disease as GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) but GRID was renamed AIDS once it was found that the disease also affected Haitians and hemophiliacs.

More than 25 million people have since died from AIDS and over 11,000 AIDS related deaths in Malaysia have been recorded since it was first detected in 1986. Malaysia also has the unenviable reputation of being one of the fastest-growing AIDS epidemics in the East Asia and the Pacific region.

There is no cure for AIDS but the HIV infection can be suppressed by taking antiretroviral drugs to delay the onset of the disease. But AIDS is more than just a health problem.

In the Third World, the death of AIDS victims, many of whom were workers and breadwinners, have had an impact on the social and economic fabric of their communities. The break-up of families is another tragic consequence, leaving many children as orphans.

AIDS victims suffer not only from the physical aspect of the illness but social stigma and shame as well. Consequently, the fear of shame and social exclusion may stop the victims from coming forward to declare their illness.

The need for secrecy because of social prejudice is insidious not only in terms of depriving the victims of medical help but also in spreading it. Fear of discrimination is not the only worry as there are other hardships as well.

The most obvious is the high cost of treatment. Those unable to pay their medical bills may turn to other alternative treatments such as herbal remedies or witch doctors. This false hope only adds to their sufferings.

Then, there is the psychological and emotional trauma. The shock and horror of finding out that they had contracted HIV/AIDS is extreme and one of the immediate reactions is the thought of committing suicide.

Shock is then followed by guilt, anger and fear – fear of losing their job, fear of shame and

abandonment, and fear of death.

The mental pressure is so great that many victims go into severe depression and may develop other forms of mental health problems such as mood swings, psychosis (hallucinations and delusions) and substance abuse (addictions).

The victim also has to endure physical discomfort such as mouth sores, burning feet sensation and sinus infection, which are agonising and distressing. Other symptoms such as diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting can be fatal.

AIDS is not a homosexual disease because its victims include women

and children. Public ignorance of the disease is bad enough but when governments deny that it is a fatal disease and deprive their citizens of medical treatment, the consequences are horrendous.

The South Africa government, led by then president Thabo Mbeki, had taken such a stance. He considered AIDS as a poverty-related illness rather than a viral infectious disease and encouraged victims to eat beetroot and garlic as a way to combat it.

This, apparently, caused several hundreds of thousands of AIDS-related deaths in South Africa.

Though there is no cure for AIDS, prevention is possible. Therefore, AIDS awareness through public education is paramount. In the meantime, all sufferers should rightly be treated not only with proper medical care but without prejudice, discrimination and more importantly, with dignity.

Leon Chin is a cognitive behavioural psychotherapist with a PhD who has lived and worked in England for 38 years. He will attempt to help readers with their problems through this column. They can write to him at psychology@thesundaily.com. No personal replies will be entertained.

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