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|------------|------------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Headline | New ways to manage HIV | | |
| MediaTitle | The Sun | | |
| Date | 15 Jul 2013 | Color | Full Color |
| Section | National | Circulation | 270,506 |
| Page No | L-22 | Readership | 171,000 |
| Language | English | ArticleSize | 331 cm ² |
| Journalist | N/A | AdValue | RM 5,886 |
| Frequency | Daily | PR Value | RM 17,658 |



New ways to manage HIV

> Living with the human immunodeficiency virus now no longer means certain death

BY S. INDRA SATHIABALAN

AT THE 7th International AIDS Society Conference held in Kuala Lumpur recently, Prof Andrew Carr from St Vincent's Hospital, in Sydney, Australia, declared: "HIV no longer means certain death."

This director of the HIV, Immunology & Infectious Diseases Unit at the hospital said: "When treated, people living with HIV can expect to live to a ripe old age."

Carr was presenting a paper at the conference where researchers and scientists from all over the world met to discuss the latest developments and advancements made in treating those who are infected with HIV.

He added: "It's because of this prognosis as well as the changing nature of the virus itself, that the way we manage patients has to change."

"In the early days of treatment, there was no monitoring at all. Today, we know a lot more about the virus - which has required diagnostic tools to become more sophisticated, not so much for the diagnosis, but for ongoing monitoring and patient management."

HIV multiplies quickly in the body and often changes form during this process, especially for patients on antiviral treatment.

In order to gauge the success of this treatment, it is important for

the patient to be monitored regularly, ideally twice a year, with a viral load test.

This can help the doctor determine the amount of virus in the blood and take necessary measures in terms of the patient's treatment.

According to Hospital Sungai Buloh's head and senior consultant physician (Infectious Disease) Department of Medicine Dr Christopher K.C. Lee (right), as of December 2012, 98,279 patients have been diagnosed (since it was first detected in 1986) with HIV and this year, it is estimated that they will cross the 100,000th mark.

"Gradually, over the last few years, the number of new cases has decreased. Hopefully, the infections will be fewer and fewer," said Lee, who, however, is unable to confirm how many cases have gone undiagnosed in Malaysia.

As Lee puts it, there are still people dying of AIDS in this country and he has seen many

cases in which the patient is aware he is infected but has taken years to build up courage to seek a doctor's help because of fear of telling their spouse (which is required by the Health Ministry) and also fear of the social stigma attached to it.

At the beginning of the epidemic, most of those infected with the virus were intravenous

drug users. While they still make up a large portion of HIV victims today, they only make up 38.7% of new infections.

The number of women getting infected has also increased making up 21% of those newly-infected.

Lee said it gets more complicated when a woman gets infected. If she is pregnant, she risks transmitting the disease to her baby.

However, if detected early, there are treatments available to help ensure the baby is spared from the virus.

Lee said people can get their blood tested for HIV at any government hospital, university hospital or certain government-run clinics.

He also advised against going to the blood bank, as some have done believing that it would be more discreet.

"If you have the virus, early treatment helps," he stressed.

Lee said in Malaysia, treatment for AIDS is easily available and the government has subsidised the medication.

For more on HIV and treatments available, go to www.unicef.org/malaysia/aids-overview.html or www.who.int/hiv/about/hiv/en/.

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