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Journalist	Vathanipanir Chellvum	AdValue	RM 5,569
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# Number of HIV cases **alarming**

> Religious sensitivities hamper efforts to curb infection via sex education, says AIDS council

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**PETALING JAYA:** Moral and religious sensitivities hamper efforts to curb sexually transmitted HIV infection through sex education, said the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC).

Its honorary secretary, Hisham Hussein, (pix) told *theSun* that it was time "to take the bull by its horns", as the number of HIV cases via sex transmission is alarming.

He was commenting on a United

Nations report that Malaysia is one of the 10 countries which together accounted for over 95% of all new HIV infections in the Asia-Pacific region.

The report, compiled by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (Unaid) "Ending AIDS: Progress Towards the 90-90 Targets", said the other nine countries which had large constituencies of new HIV infections in 2016 were India, China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Vietnam, Myanmar, Papua New

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Guinea, the Philippines and Thailand.

"Malaysia needs to step up sex education to curb HIV infection via sex transmission. Last year, data showed that 83% of the cases were sexually transmitted," said Hisham.

"It is difficult to work out education programmes, such as giving free condoms, because we would be accused of promoting free sex," he said in a phone interview.

Hisham said MAC is working with the Education Ministry to integrate sex education into the



school syllabus at upper secondary level.

"We need to look at the gaps. Look at the number of unwed and teenage mothers. These girls are having unprotected sex at a young age which could result in pregnancy and, also be at risk of being infected by HIV. This is

why we need to start in secondary schools."

Hisham said while NGOs have no problem providing sex education at private higher learning institutes, similar campaigns are not easily done in

government colleges or universities.

"NGOs cannot carry out sex education campaigns in public institutes, because it touches on moral and religious sensitivities."

Previous efforts to curb HIV infection had also met with obstacles, he added.

"When the government introduced the needle and syringe exchange programme in 2006, there was a huge backlash. We had an infection rate at 75% due to drug users, now it is at 11%.

Our success story has been recognised by WHO (World Health Organisation) and UN (United Nations)," he said.