

The Mosque's Role In Treating Drug Addicts

This is the first of a three-part series on the treatment for drug addiction run by the University Malaya Centre for Addiction Sciences (UMCAS) using the combination of spiritual and medical approach.

By Kurniawati Kamarudin

KUALA LUMPUR (Bernama) -- Opioid dependent drug addicts are currently being treated through the drug replacement therapy using methadone.

The treatment approach, introduced in 2005, showed positive outcomes in overcoming opioid addiction and reduced the number of HIV/AIDS cases among addicts.

Today there are around 7,000 addicts receiving methadone from government run clinics and hospitals nationwide. The government is targeting 72,000 addicts using the replacement drug nationwide by 2015.

To improve the efficacy of the drug replacement therapy and achieve the drug-free nation target by 2015, the Islamic approach is also incorporated into the treatment regime.

A SPIRITUAL AND MEDICAL REMEDY

The Spiritual Enhancement Drug Addiction Rehabilitation Programme (SEDAR) is a combination of treatment using methadone and the spiritual approach, pioneered by University Malaya Centre for Addiction Sciences (UMCAS) in 2009 through the collaboration with Malaysian Islamic Religious Development Department (JAKIM).

The programme has proven to be successful in reforming the lives of drug addicts who were previously disregarded by society.

Some of those who underwent the therapy are now employed, and even married and have been leading a normal life like others.

UMCAS' effort has attracted international attention, including the Western media, which acknowledged the complementing nature of the treatment approach.

The two-in-one programme sees recovering addicts going to the mosques to not only seek spiritual strength but medical treatment for their addiction, said the programme's head coordinator Dr Rusdi Abd Rashid.

THE FIRST MOSQUE

The Ar-Rahman Mosque in Bangsar was the first mosque involved in the programme in 2010, with a total of 50 participants.

A methadone clinic has been set up at the top floor of the mosque, with representatives from the mosque administering spiritual elements with the aid of the National Anti-Drugs Agency and the Universiti Malaya Islamic Studies Academy.

Patients wishing to join the treatment programme have to fulfill the prerequisites - they have to be at least 18 years old, have been using opioid-based drugs like heroin and morphine continually and participate in the programme voluntarily.

"We have been checking up on their health by taking their blood samples and found 60 percent of them are infected with hepatitis C, six percent are HIV positive and another six percent are infected with both," he told Bernama, recently.

ISLAMIC APPROACH

Before entering the mosque, the patients are required to perform ablution and the tahyatul prayers (voluntary prayers one performs when entering a mosque), followed by the reading of several supplications.

"We will then have a taaruf (introduction) and counseling session to prepare them spiritually. It is only after that they will see the doctors and be given their methadone prescription," said Dr Rusdi.

For the first three months, patients would have to come to the mosque to get their methadone prescription. If they appear committed to their cause, they would be allowed to come once a week, bringing back with them a week's supply of methadone.

"It is a form of incentive for those who take the programme seriously," he said, adding that other aspects would also be taken into account such as the ability to become independent and gain employment.

HOW METHADONE WORKS

Dr Rusdi said drug addicts have to rely on their daily dose of methadone to overcome their addiction.

"This is because the system in their brain has malfunctioned and to normalise and stabilise the system, they need methadone.

"Methadone will block the intake of opioid-type drugs and help take the edge off the withdrawal process," he said.

EFFICACY OF PROGRAMME

The free dispensing of methadone at government clinics and hospitals has shown positive results, particularly in the declining number of HIV/AIDS infection among drug users.

"The UMCAS study revealed that the SEDAR programme is as good as the government's initiative. In fact, the spiritual addition to the treatment approach has yielded even better outcomes with 83 percent of addicts sticking to the programme within a year," he said.

Those following the programme were also tested negative for drugs and most avoided criminal activities.

Dr Rusdi said six months into the programme, the number of negative urine tests climbed to 94.3 percent from 34.3 percent.

He noted that more of the recovering addicts have transformed into true practicing Muslims after joining the programme.

PROGRAMME TAKING OFF

However, the pioneer programme had to cease operation when the mosque underwent renovation in 2012.

Nonetheless, the same programme was launched at several other mosques nearby Universiti Malaya and around Petaling Jaya, including the Ad-Deeniah surau within the Universiti Malaya Medical Centre.

The same module is being carried out at other mosques such as the Al-Ikhlasih Mosque and the Ar-Rahah Mosuq, both in Kampung Kerinchi as well as Masjid Abdul Aziz in Petaling Jaya.

"The public methadone treatment clinics are packed and the government can no longer afford to open up new ones. Our effort is the best way to overcome the problem.

"There are over 6,000 mosques in Malaysia and if only even a third of them are willing to run the programme, I believe our target of becoming a drug-free nation by 2015 is achievable," he said.

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