

malaysia

Study: Needle exchange, methadone programme shows signs of success

By Boo Su-Lyn December 18, 2013 UPDATED: Dec 18, 2013 03:39 pm



Herlianna said the harm reduction programme is very cost-effective. — Pictures by Choo Choy MayKUALA LUMPUR, Dec 18 — Malaysia's controversial needle exchange and methadone programme targeting the spread of HIV among drug-injecting users has prevented about 39 per cent of new infections and saved RM47 million in healthcare costs during the first eight years of implementation, a research study has shown.

The study conducted by the Centre of Excellence for Research in AIDS (CERiA) in Universiti Malaya, in collaboration with Australia's Kirby Institute, also showed that the programme — which was once criticised for encouraging drug use — would prevent a whopping 87 per cent of new HIV infections, as well as save about RM210 million in healthcare costs, if continued for another 10 years till 2023.

“The harm reduction programme in Malaysia is very cost-effective,” lead researcher Herlianna Naning told reporters at Universiti Malaya here today.

Herlianna said that intravenous users remain the largest group of people living with HIV in Malaysia at 67 per cent out of cumulative HIV cases as of 2012, citing Health Ministry data.

According to the Health Ministry, 98,279 HIV infections and 19,047 AIDS cases were reported as of December 31, 2012.

She added that since the RM92 million programme was implemented in 2006, every ringgit spent from 2006 to RM2013 returned 51 sen in direct healthcare cost savings, but noted that the return on investment would increase over the next 10 years till 2023 to RM1.07.



Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman, Dean, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya December 18 2013. CERiA director Professor Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman noted, however, that the methadone and needle exchange programme only covered 30 per cent of intravenous users, due to difficulties in carrying it out openly amid strict laws on drug use.

“There are still raids by the police. Outreach workers are being harassed,” said Dr Adeeba.

She also noted that the fastest growing groups being infected with HIV are women and the gay community.

“The prevalence now among men who have sex with men are 12.6 per cent, according to a study by the Ministry of Health in 2012. The ratio between men and women being infected has narrowed. In the 80s, it was 80 to 1. Now, it’s four men to one woman,” added Dr Adeeba.

Sexual intercourse has also overtaken drug use in transmitting HIV, with 70 per cent of new HIV infections being transmitted through sex in 2012, said Hisham Hussein, honorary secretary of the Malaysian AIDS Council, at the press conference.

Dr Adeeba admitted that intense stigma is complicating HIV prevention efforts targeted at the gay community, like safe sex campaigns.

“We use the internet to give prevention messages and we contact them to come for HIV screenings. It’s difficult to do an all-out campaign like using condoms,” she said.

“Decriminalisation shouldn’t stop at sodomy, but drug use and sex work,” she added.

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