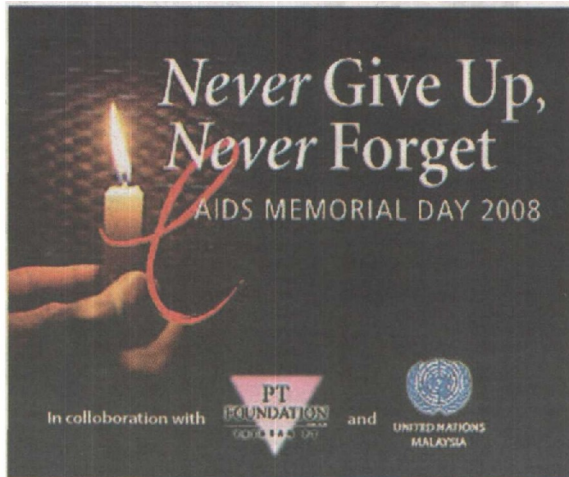


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Ignore it at your own risk



Many MSM have girlfriends or are married but occasionally have sex with men.



Dr Christopher Lee Kwok Choon say MSM think only others will get infected



Raymond Tai says there is an explosion of HIV infection in MSM



Dani Teo says 25 to 30 per cent of MSM in the region have HIV

MSM FACTS

- One out of 10 men who have sex with men (MSM) screened by PT Foundation in KL since 2006 is HIV-positive
- Doctors claim they're seeing more MSM coming through the 'HIV door' in recent years
- Regional statistics indicate three out of every 10 MSM could be HIV carriers
- Many MSM in Malaysia are married or have girlfriends
- Less than half of them use condoms regularly
- Some have given HIV to their wives

Call them gay men or call them MSM, or men who have sex with men. Ignoring their presence is a mistake Malaysia cannot afford in the fight against HIV infection, writes TAN CHOE CHOE

ONE out of every 10 MSM screened by PT Foundation in Kuala Lumpur in the last two years is HIV-positive.

The organisation has screened about 500 MSM at its centres in the city.

But before anyone proclaims that these men who have sex with men deserve to get HIV for engaging in "unnatural sex acts", consider this fact: the majority of MSM in Malaysia are married and lead "perfectly normal lives", on the surface, at least.

Dr Christopher Lee Kwok Choong, president of the Malaysian Society of HIV Medicine, said: "You may think that if they choose to be an abomination to God, then they should suffer the consequences.

"But there are MSM who have sex with women as well and, through that, it (HIV infection) can come into the mainstream.

"If every single MSM only has sex with MSM, and no MSM ever sleeps with a woman, then the population will theoretically die off."

But the reality of sexual behaviour among MSM is far from that exclusive situation.

There's a reason why this group of men isn't referred to as gay or homosexual, but prefer the technical term "men who have sex with men" or MSM, as coined by UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS).

Dr Lee said not all men who had sex with men thought of themselves as homosexual or gay.

"Many MSM have girlfriends or are married, but occasionally have sex with men.

"The old-fashioned terminology for that would be bisexual, but if you ask a MSM if he was bisexual, he'd say, 'Hmmm, that sounds like a bad word, so I can't be one.'"

The term MSM defines someone as a man who had sex with a man.

"Whether you do it exclusively (with men) or in between female partners, you're part of the definition."

And whether people chose to acknowledge them or not, there are more MSM today, especially those coming through the "HIV door", Dr Lee said.

He could also testify that trans-

mission of HIV from MSM to the mainstream occurred through their wives and girlfriends.

In the past, said Dr Lee, the HIV population was mainly driven by drug use.

But there is now an increasing proportion of MSM getting infected with heterosexual transmissions.

However, the percentage of MSM and heterosexual transmission is small as injecting-drug-users accounted for more than 70 per cent of HIV infection in Malaysia.

"But speak to doctors in public or private hospitals who see patients with sexually transmitted diseases and HIV and they'll tell

you the same," said Dr Lee.

Malaysia, specifically Kuala Lumpur, had witnessed a "substantial growth" in its MSM population in recent years, according to a 2004 report by Christopher Eugene Goerdts Scoville from Duke University in the United States.

Scoville's report was based on the assessment of HIV prevention work for MSM in KL.

"Gay-targeted businesses now dot the city and several informal gay groups have developed.

"Some MSM also congregated and may engage in sex at cruising parks, saunas and massage centres," Scoville wrote in his report.

He said while HIV-education and prevention programmes ex-

ist for female and even transsexual sex workers, there wasn't any for male sex workers.

Couple that with the fact that there are higher rates of intravenous drug use among sex workers, some experts believe the male sex worker community could become, if it wasn't already, "a conduit for HIV infection to the MSM population".

Gay or straight, most men don't use condoms

No statistics are available but in a case study conducted by Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2005, only four out of 10 MSM use condoms regularly.

But the sampling size is small, 99 men, and conducted by interviews at PT Foundation and online.

The study was to assess risk behaviour associated with HIV/AIDS among MSM.

Raymond Tai, PT Foundation acting executive director and Pink Triangle programme director, said he thought less than half of the MSM population used condoms.

"I think most don't use them all the time. The majority only use them when they think there is a risk. Many don't use them with their long-term partner."

Dr Lee said: "No, they don't. Straight men, crooked (gay) men, (they're) all the same. But we

don't have data to support this."

Don't they know the risk? Dr Lee and Tai believe they do.

Tai said: "But they think 'only other people will get it'. It's the not-me syndrome."

Some think that because they were not "promiscuous", they wouldn't contract the disease, never mind that they had had sexual intercourse with two or three boyfriends, or girlfriends, as long as they were faithful to each other.

"As far as STDs or HIV transmission is concerned, the more partners you've had, the higher the risk."

It takes only one encounter to get infected and the prevalence of HIV infection was higher among those who engaged in anal intercourse, as compared with other forms of penetrative sex, according to Wikipedia encyclopaedia.

Like many other countries, early HIV transmissions in Malaysia were initially confined to the MSM community.

Figures from the Health Ministry showed MSM contributed only 1,406 to the cumulative 78,784 cases of HIV infection in Malaysia from 1986 till last year.

That means they made up less than two per cent of the HIV infection rate in the country.

But experts believed the figures did not reflect the situation on the ground as many MSM did not come forward to be tested.

Of those who were tested, many were not willing to say they were homosexual.

Tai said: "In addition, the percentage seems small because the figures are mostly contributed by drug users who are tested at rehabilitation centres."

The Thai Red Cross Research Centre reported last year that there was a 30.7 per cent HIV prevalence among MSM in Bangkok, with Chiangmai at 16.9 per cent and Phuket at 20 per cent.

Experts in Hong Kong said it was set to hit 30 per cent by 2020 if nothing was done now.

Dani Teo, advocacy manager

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We help ourselves by helping them

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of Pink Triangle, said: "We're looking at a regional prevalence of 25 to 30 per cent." That means three out of every 10 MSM in the region could be HIV-positive.

In Malaysia, Tai and Teo found it hard to target their HIV prevention messages because of what they called "a conspiracy of silence from the media, government, public and religious people".

Tai said: "We know from our visits to hospitals, from our telephone counselling line, from our voluntary counselling and testing services that there is an explosion (of HIV infection) in MSM.

"The same is going to happen to the mainstream community because MSM is not an exclusive population."

The message is clear: ignore MSM and their HIV-infection rate at your own peril.

Dr Lee said: "I'm not gay, but if you ask me, 'do we need to do something for them?', I'd say yes. If I want to protect my kids in the future, I have to do it now."

The problem, he said, was that people thought by helping them, they were being sympathetic to MSM.

"I'm not saying it's okay or not okay (to be MSM). I'm just reacting to the situation. When we help them, we're helping ourselves, too. It's not about them or us. It's about us, all of us."

Availability of condoms

One controversial way to prevent HIV transmission among MSM is to provide condoms at the point of sex.

Tai said: "We provide them condoms at premises where they are likely to go for sex — saunas, gay pubs or clubs — so they don't rush to the car or run to the convenience shop for a condom."

But most Malaysians would find the idea offensive.

"Just because you have a knife doesn't mean you'll use it to kill someone. So just because you get a condom, it doesn't make you want to have sex with anybody."

The authorities' continuous raids on places where MSM gather also hamper PT's efforts to promote safe sex practices.

"Every time we have our prevention programmes, the police raid the place and hold the condoms up to the media. That frightens every premise owner.

"They tell us 'no condoms' and ban us from their sites because

they think PT will get them into trouble."

In Malaysia, MSM is "so hidden, so underground" that the only way to reach them is through places where men go to have sex.

"If the authorities clamp down on these places, there is nowhere else to reach them," says Tai.

Together with condoms, the right information about HIV-prevention must also be given.

Some MSM thought they were less likely to get infected if they were the one on top during intercourse, or if their partner didn't ejaculate inside them.

"These are myths and misinformation. As long as you don't wear a condom, you're at risk of getting infected."

□ For free and confidential HIV screening, counselling and information on HIV/AIDS, call PT Foundation at 03-40445455 or 03-40445466. PT (previously known as Pink Triangle) is a community-based, non-profit voluntary organisation providing HIV/AIDS education, prevention, care and support programmes for marginalised groups like drug users, sex workers, transsexuals, MSM and people living with HIV/AIDS.