Ignore it at your own risk

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", said Lee Kwok Cheong, president of the Malaysian Society of HIV Medicine.

"You may think that if they choose to be an abomination to God, then they should suffer its 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, who is also the executive director of PT Foundation, added in his report that MSM are "gay-targeted businesses that dot the city and several informal gay groups have developed."

"Some MSM also congregate and may engage in sex at cruising parks, saunas and massage centres, " he said.

The term MSM defines someone as a man who has 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 choose to acknowledge them or not, there are more MSM today, especially those coming through the "HIV doorknock".

He could also testify that transmission 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, percentage of MSM and heterosexual transmission is small as injecting drug users accounted for more than 70 per cent of HIV infection in Malaysia.

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Malaysia, specifically Kuala Lumpur, had witnessed a "substantial growth" in its MSM population in recent years, according to a 2004 report by Christopher Eugene Goedert 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 congregate and may engage in sex at cruising parks, saunas and massage centres, " he said.

He said while HIV-education and prevention programmes exist 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, " he said.

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," he said.

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 73,788 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 believe 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.

Danil Lee, advocacy manager

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We help ourselves by helping them

"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."

Commercialisation 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 mean 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."