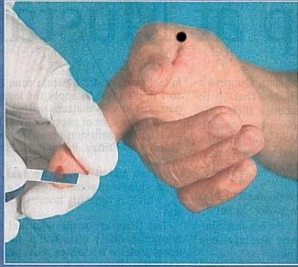


HIV tests for Home Team NSmen



Aim is to protect officers, public but privacy issues have arisen

"They deal with emergencies and crisis situations, so it's good to know they have no health issues."

Mr Alvin Yeo, Government Parliamentary Committee chairman for Home Affairs and Law



ST FILE PHOTO

By ANG YIYING

NATIONAL servicemen (NSmen) from the police and the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) will now undergo mandatory HIV screening.

The testing is to safeguard the health and well-being of officers, as well as members of the public they come into contact with, says the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

But the move has also raised privacy issues relating to how information gained about an NSman's HIV status will be handled.

Replying to queries from The Straits Times last week, MHA said the screening of Home Team NSmen started this year.

But it did not elaborate on why the policy was being implemented now or how the tests are done.

It also did not say how many servicemen would be affected, but according to publicly available statistics there are around 36,000 police and civil defence NSmen, including more than 7,000 in full-time national service (NS).

The Straits Times understands

that the NSmen are likely to undergo the tests from their fifth NS cycle, that is, the fifth time they are activated for in-camp training.

MHA is not alone in implementing mandatory HIV testing. Since 1995, SAF servicemen have been tested for HIV at least once during full-time NS or during their NS cycles. Contacted for comment, Government Parliamentary Committee chairman for Home Affairs and Law Alvin Yeo said the policy would inspire confidence among the public who come into contact with the officers. "They deal with emergencies and crisis situations, so it's good to know they have no health issues."

Asked why he thought it was being enforced now, he replied that the police and the civil defence force complemented the military in the overall defence of the country, so "for the same reasons considered by the SAF, it could have been considered necessary".

An NS police assistant superintendent aged 28 said he had been told during a briefing that there was the risk of blood from healthy and infected individuals mixing

when injuries are sustained in the line of duty, "so to avoid such things happening, it would be good to post infected people to other lower-risk vocations".

Dr Asok Kurup, an infectious diseases specialist, said the risk of HIV transmission through injuries would depend on how widespread HIV infection is among the population, as well as the circumstances of the injury. Even so, the risk of infection through being pricked by a needle used on an HIV-infected patient is at most, 0.3 per cent, he said. He added that the prevalence of HIV infection here and the risk of infections through injuries are low, but not zero.

Community organisation Action for Aids (AFA) said large studies done in the West have not shown that infected emergency or health workers transmit HIV in the course of their work, but screening can mean early diagnosis and treatment.

A copy of a call-up notice obtained by The Straits Times states that a fine of up to \$5,000 or a jail term of up to three years or both can be dealt to those found guilty of failing to report for the test.

On the issue of privacy, an NS police sergeant aged 29 said: "It should be voluntary, not compulsory. This is a personal medical health status and is private unless it's relevant to a person's full-time career."

But NS police Sergeant Satinderpal Singh Sandhu, 29, said he saw the rationale. "You could suffer open injuries while on duty and people coming to your aid could get infected. I think it's justified." But he, too, is concerned about the confidentiality of the test results.

AFA president Roy Chan stressed that it was crucial to put in place measures to protect the identity of those tested, especially those who test positive, and to ensure their service and prospects are unaffected; he also called for a system of support, including pre- and post-test counselling.

Asked about policies governing HIV test results, the Health Ministry said it is notified when someone tests positive, but maintains patient confidentiality, as required by the Infectious Diseases Act.

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Additional reporting by Jermyn Chew