



Welcome to the Jun/Jul 2007 Issue of the Voice!

Indeed it was a hectic month for May. Amongst the many things, we had the World Without AIDS Party @ The Loof, and also Candlelight Memorial 2007 (CLM). This year we saw a lot of 'Firsts' - it was the first time for AfA to hold an indoor memorial service. It was the first time we collaborated with CDC. We also had First Hand for co-organizing with us for the first time. We would like to thank them for their contributions and also not forgetting the CLM working committee for meeting up and planning the event amidst their busy work schedule.

For the Jun/Jul issue of 'The Voice', I will share with you some of the events within AfA and also highlight some reports on discrimination faced within the health care system in other countries and also how a successful campaign is being run in Cambodia.

Let us all persevere in our fight against HIV/AIDS, stigma and discrimination.

-James Foong -

Letter to the Press

Review needed for Aids education Four suggestions to improve prevention programmes here

Letter from Assoc Prof Roy Chan President, Action for AIDS, Singapore

WE refer to the article, "Record HIV cases last year" (June 15). Action for Aids notes the increasing rate of HIV infection with concern and would like to reiterate our strategies to enhance prevention programmes in Singapore.

Firstly, there must be clear, unambiguous messages that include the consistent and correct use of condoms in educational campaigns. For too long, public education has skirted around the issue of safe sex.

While we have no problems with advice to have sex within marriages, it is inadequate if this is the only message - relegating the promotion of condom use to a back seat.

Shying away in embarrassment from dealing with youth sexuality more directly is also jeopardising the health of our young citizens. The escalating rates of HIV infection and sexually transmitted diseases are the result of this shortsighted approach. Action for Aids is appealing to the relevant authorities to review their educational programmes urgently.

Secondly, there must be universal access to treatment. Advocating testing without providing affordable and effective anti-retroviral medication is simply inadequate. Majority of the infected persons cannot afford HIV medication. Many resort to seeking cheaper generic alternatives from Thailand and Malaysia. Some others do not receive treatment at all. Furthermore, supplies of generic drugs may be inconsistent and quality cannot be assured.

Action for Aids believes that providing even partially subsidised medication will contribute to effective HIV suppression, maximise clinical response to treatment and reduce infectiousness.

Thirdly, there should be a clear direction from our leaders on the issue of Aids-related stigma and discrimination. The prevalence of such prejudice has a negative impact on prevention programmes. Appropriate legislation to address this should be put in place.

Lastly, those who run a higher risk of infection must be empowered to take action and responsibility. In Singapore, men who have sex with men (MSM) are at the greatest risk of HIV infection.

To engage them, they must be encouraged to seek counselling and testing, and be given relevant and appropriate information. Barriers that stand in the way of these efforts should be removed.

In particular, we call for the urgent repeal of Sections 377 and 377A of the Penal Code that criminalise homosexual behaviour. These have been obstacles to targeted educational campaigns and our ability to reach out especially to young MSM who are the most vulnerable. ~ Today, Voices, pp20, 19 Jun 2007

Call for Volunteers!

Volunteer Appeal #1

AfA will be having our first Flag Day in collaboration with Singapore Planned Parenthood Association (SPPA) on the 18th August, 2007. We are seeking volunteers to help out in the logistics support. For more info kindly email to pdafa@singnet.com.sg or james.foong@afa.org.sg

Volunteer Appeal #2

The high risk heterosexual male outreach programme is looking for volunteers to help distribute safer sex materials at the Ferry Terminals once or twice a month in the evening of Fridays (6-8pm), or early morning of Saturdays (7am-10am). If you are keen to help out pls email: xavier.wang@afa.org.sg

Wanted: Telephone helpline coordinator (volunteer) & volunteers

After we shifted our office from Rowell to our present office in Norris Road, we have been manning the hotline only during office hours. Now, we are looking to re-start our telephone counseling helpline in the evening. We are looking for a coordinator (volunteer) who would like to take charge of this service in our office and to recruit volunteers to answer phone calls on two evening nights. If you think you are committed, please contact lionel.lee@afa.org.sg

AfA News

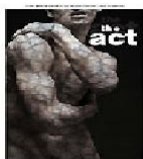


HIV/AIDS Quiz – You think you know all about HIV/AIDS?

Are you very confident of your knowledge on HIV/AIDS? Take the challenge yourself and or forward the link to your friends by logging to our website. <http://www.afa.org.sg/quiz.asp> to see if you can get a perfect score! If not time to brush up!

Watch Out for TabTV - Focus on HIV and Sex - YOUTH

Look out for a special interview with a PWA in the month of Jul hosted by Ms Vernetta Lopez together with guests Singapore Idol Paul Twohill, and Ms Daphne Khoo on their views about HIV and Sex and Ms Daphne Khoo's mum on her role as a parent in teaching about the birds and the bees to her kids when they were as young as 8 and finally Ms Ho Lai Peng, a social worker who handles HIV/AIDS patient on her view on the stigma and discrimination faced by PWAs.



The Act – Issue 34

This issue of The ACT examines issues surrounding HIV prevention programme address the need of MSM – which includes behavioral studies in collaboration with Fridae.com, and also the implication of the Penal Code 377 & 377A in the effort against HIV prevention work for this community at risk. To read more, pls visit our website for the pdf version <http://www.afa.org.sg/act/34/TheAct34.pdf>

New photos uploaded to our Website – www.afa.org.sg

We have recently uploaded pictures of two events: The Loof “A World without Aids” Party and The Candlelight Memorial event which was held at SMU lecture hall. For those who missed the events, you can now see the pictures online on our website. Logon regularly for news and pictures of our events.



Donation online

You can now make donations regularly to help needy People with HIV/AIDS! At AfA, we provide assistance to pregnant mothers', needy patients who are in dire straits because they are out-of job due to their illness. We pay out a hefty sum of about \$20,000 in

2006 for pregnant mothers just last year and \$80,000 to about 100 patients. We seek your help to make regular donations so that we can extend our help further to those we have been unable to help so far. To donate login to: <http://www.afa.org.sg/donate.asp>

Local News

An increase of 357 Singapore residents were diagnosed with HIV in 2006

The updated figure on the Ministry of Health's (MOH) website brings the total number of HIV infected Singaporeans to 3,060 as of end-2006. Of the new cases, 78 per cent were detected when they were tested for HIV while receiving other medical care. Only 13 per cent were detected as a result of voluntary HIV screening. The rest were identified through contact tracing and other screenings.

While two-thirds of those infected through intercourse got it from heterosexual sex, just 3 per cent of infected heterosexuals were found through voluntary screening — in contrast with 35 per cent of infected homosexuals diagnosed last year.

Last year, 13 pregnant women were found to be HIV-positive, down from 15 in 2005. The test is part of standard antenatal screening here. Since it was implemented in 2004, only one case of mother-to-child transmission has occurred, and that was because the mother refused her HIV test until very late in her pregnancy.

"If we detect a HIV infection in a pregnant mother early enough, we can treat the mother and give her advice on how to deliver and feed her baby safely," said Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan.

"This can break the transmission from mother to child." But even with conscientious screening, there are still undiagnosed HIV carriers. More than half of all new cases last year were aged 30 to 49.

Just under one in five were 20 to 29 years old. Some may have gotten infected as teens as the virus can go undetected for years. The challenge is to identify them early, Mr Khaw said: "If they are careless, they can infect others without knowing it."

Speaking at the the Champion Blood Donor Ceremony yesterday, he also touched on the subject of blood donation. (Source <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/282364/1/.html>)

Regional News & Beyond

Malaysia cannot promote Condoms

Malaysia's health ministry cannot openly promote condom use to prevent HIV/AIDS, fearing perceptions it is advocating promiscuity in the mainly Muslim nation, reports said Monday.

The ministry's deputy director for disease control, Jalal Halil Khalil, said the government understood that condom use prevented the transmission of HIV - cases of which are rising in Malaysia - but could not openly support it.

"We realise that we are an Islamic country and we have to do things carefully," Jalal told the New Straits Times daily.

The health ministry earlier this year warned Malaysia could face an HIV/AIDS epidemic with the number of infected people rising fourfold to 300,000 by 2015. Of some 75,000 people with HIV/AIDS in a population of nearly 27 million, about three-quarters are intravenous drug users, but heterosexual transmissions are growing.

Jalal admitted not being able to openly promote condoms would render prevention programmes less effective, adding the ministry was relying instead on non-government organisations (NGOs) to advocate condoms.

"It may slow down the effectiveness of prevention. It is difficult to promote the open usage of condoms," he told the Star newspaper. "We let the NGOs do the work ... we use different ways of communicating it or else people will think we are promoting promiscuity," he said.

Sex is a taboo topic rarely discussed in public in the conservative nation, while HIV/AIDS patients suffer from social stigma.

Malaysia last year embarked on a five-year plan to curb the spread of the disease, including needle exchange programmes for drug addicts, free antiretroviral drugs and drug substitution therapy

Sharp Rise in new HIV infections among MSM in Hong Kong

By News Editor - Fridae.com

Reporting an increase in new HIV infections in the first quarter this year among gay men in Hong Kong, a government consultant also warned that prevalence of the disease in this group could hit 30 percent by 2020 if left to its own devices. HIV prevalence in this group is estimated at four percent now. Health authorities last week reported 91 new HIV infections in the first quarter of 2007, up from 89 in the same period in 2006. Of those, 35 were in men who had had sex with other men, an increase from 29 new infections in the first quarter of 2006 and 19 in the same period of 2005.



A poster promoting safe sex in Hong Kong"

If there is no intervention, HIV-infected men who have sex with men could hit 15,000 by 2020 in Hong Kong, that would be a prevalence of 30 percent," said Wong Ka-hing, a consultant with the Health Department.

"New HIV infections are increasing among men who have sex with men everywhere. Some of that is of a cross-border nature because of gay parties," said Loretta Wong, who heads Hong Kong's Aids Concern. "Some are under the influence of drugs and they don't even remember if they used condoms. People tend to be less careful when they are overseas."

Of concern to Hong Kong health authorities and AIDS groups is one cluster of new infections which ballooned from 34 men last September to 53 by March while a smaller cluster in Hong Kong grew less rapidly, from 12 men last September to 13 by March. "Genetically, viruses isolated from them are very similar.

From genetic sequencing, we determined they were all together (passed the virus to one another)," Wong said.

He has also urged people with a history of unprotected sex to have HIV tests, saying the findings suggested "rapid local HIV transmission" among gay men in the city with a population of seven million. The government has yet to find out how the virus spread in the bigger cluster, or if there is a "super-spreader" involved.

Wong said cited greater numbers of homosexual men using the Internet seeking sex partners. "We did a study recently and found that people are looking for sex partners on the Internet but we do not know if this cluster was formed that way," consultant Wong said, adding that the government was trying to promote safe sex via the Internet.

AIDS Concern's Wong cautioned against losing sight of other high-risk groups, such as heterosexual men with multiple sex partners, the commercial sex industry and intravenous drug users. "There are many things we need to do to prevent this from escalating further," she said. The detection of clusters of cases among gay men in Hong Kong follows regional findings that the proportion of gay men in Asia newly infected with HIV has risen sharply in recent years.

According to a TREAT Asia (Therapeutics Research, Education, and AIDS Training in Asia) report released in August 2006, high prevalence rates are observed in Thailand (28 percent), Nepal (four percent), Taiwan (eight percent), Vietnam (eight percent) and Cambodia (14 percent). MSM make up a substantial portion of new HIV infections in South Korea and Singapore.

Experts would consider any high-risk group as having a "concentrated epidemic" once prevalence reaches five percent

For HIV Positive We Don't have Dialysis!

For more than two decades now India has been fighting HIV/AIDS epidemic and the situation is still the same as late 1980s, many organizations like- PLHA network, UN, NACO, SACS and NGOs are trying their best to reduce stigma and discrimination.

Despite of more than 20 years have passed by, still there is no change in the mindset and attitude of the society and stigma and discrimination associated with HIV continue to run high. On daily basis PLHA are facing different forms of stigma and discrimination.

In Delhi we came across with similar situation Mr. Tagore (name changed). Mr Tagore too needed a dialysis as both his kidneys were not functioning, he was admitted in LNJP hospital and his treating doctor referred him for dialysis. The dialysis department said

that for HIV positive we don't have dialysis. After the intervention of Delhi Network of Positive People then only the Hospital authority allowed the patient to undergo dialysis.

Most of PLHAs are silently bearing multi-faceted stigma and discrimination. Most cases go unreported because they don't even know where to report. Also strange is the fact that despite of the medical fraternity being well informed about HIV/AIDS, stigma within healthcare settings continues to thrive nastily.

There is an urgent need for a parliamentary law to protect interests of people living with HIV.

Condoms are lucky in Cambodia!

Peer outreach worker Run Sakuon is calling for all Cambodian men who have sex with men to use condoms and take no chances with the HIV epidemic. "I would like to appeal to all men who have sex with men to use condoms so they cannot infect each other," he urges.

Until he tested HIV positive Sakuon never used condoms. "Men who have sex with men feel that when they carry condoms they will be unlucky and unable to find customers or a partner to have sex with. So they never carry condoms and they never use them during sex," he explains. "I want to change this dangerous practice among men who have sex with men otherwise they will get into trouble like me."

Unofficial estimates put the number of men who have sex with men in Cambodia at 7,000, although the actual figure is thought to be higher. There is also no precise figure for the number living with HIV, although unofficial estimates range from 7 to 8 per cent.

Sakuon lives in Siem Reap in Cambodia where tourism is booming. "I sold sex to survive and I sometimes had sex with as many as five men a day," he says. Sakuon first began to feel unwell in 2002. "I sold my six buffalos to treat myself but my sickness could not be cured. Then one of my friends took me to have a blood test and I found out that I was HIV positive," he explains.

Embarrassed and fearing stigma and discrimination, Sakuon left his home in Thnol village in Siem Reap to live in another province. However, he returned a year later when his elderly widowed mother persuaded him to come home. "I feel normal now and the villagers do not discriminate against me," he says.

Sakuon has since become a peer outreach worker for local non- governmental organisation (NGO) Men's Health Cambodia. The NGO is based in Siem Reap town and is a partner of Alliance linking organisation Khmer HIV/AIDS NGO Alliance (KHANA). KHANA has managed so far to reach more than 4,000 men who have sex with men in Sihanoukville, Siem Reap and Battambang provinces.

In October 2006, KHANA offered financial and technical support to a group of Cambodian men who have sex with men to launch a national network, Bandanh Chaktomuk. The network aims to mobilise men who have sex with men nationally to become aware of their social rights, the danger of HIV, drug use and other social issues.



Global AIDS Week: 20-26 May 2007 - Let's take a peek on what the other Parts of the World had done for their Global Aids Week.

Cameroon – A network of positive activists organised a press conference to raise awareness of the stigma and prejudice which people living with HIV&AIDS face. A candlelight memorial was held with positive people telling their stories and experiences through songs and theatre and asked for mobilisation and action to fight against discrimination of positive people.

The Gambia – were successful in organising an action most days of the week and this gave them the opportunity to cover a range of interest groups and affected parties, including issues women and young people face and international funding demands. *Saffie Bojang a positive woman and member of the network of Gambian positive women (Mutapola), speaking at a march of women and youth groups, called on people 'to join the fight against stigma and discrimination which is believed to be responsible for many HIV related deaths. As the saying goes, 'one is either infected or affected' so every one of us has a role in this fight. We should together kick this vice out of our society.*

Ghana – Activists organised actions to raise awareness amongst young people and encourage them to become more involved in the fight against HIV&AIDS. There were also a number of radio programmes which aired and gave people a chance to share their views and experiences.

Kenya - Delegates representing 13 eastern African countries took time out of a conference they were attending to take part in the AIDS Week. They took part in a candlelight memorial and shared information about the current HIV&AIDS situation in their respective countries. There were also a number of radio programmes, giving people the opportunity to talk about issues such as violence against women and stigma.

Nigeria – Activists organised a press event to call on the government to guarantee the universal access they had promised. A rally featuring a renowned gospel singer, also took place which called on the government to improve access to AIDS drugs and campaigners also delivered a charter of demands to the government.

Somaliland – A TV debate engaged with a wide public audience, plus a football match took HIV&AIDS message to young people, both of these are great examples of using creative campaigning which goes beyond workshops and meetings.

Sierra Leone – “The Voice Of Women” was launched, which is a national network of women living with HIV and AIDS. This action was successful in helping to highlight the situation women face and to clearly establish their collective demands – it was also a good example of using the AIDS Week to launch a major new initiative.

Tanzania – Engaged with different stakeholders, such as the legal service, women’s groups and young people, but very much kept positive people as central to their actions, giving them an opportunity to feed in their views on government policies and meet with officials in order to present their views.

Zimbabwe – Successful in gathering together a wide network of activists to participate in an AIDS Week action and remember those who have died of AIDS. Key figures, including religious ministers and musicians came together to spread messages and raise awareness. As well as creating a commemorative banner, campaigners also devised a charter of demands for their government and an international charter, for the international community to deliver on.

Asia Pacific

Bangladesh – Also organised state and regional level actions, with a national meet the press event engaging with a wide range of print and electronic media, and at a regional level, art competitions and blood donation drives helped raise awareness and spread messages of tolerance.

Cambodia – Held a conference on food security, particularly in relation to women and child, it was successful in having positive speakers from different regions taking part, helping give a more complete picture of the situation across the country. *“We do not want them to help us always. We want them to help us stand up. And when we can walk, we will walk by ourselves,”* said Long Socheat, a positive speaker

Guam - Activists created and displayed memorial quilts for those who have died of AIDS.

India - At a national level, activists were effective in building a wide network of groups taking part in the AIDS Week, including taking message to MPs. Ms. Ranjit, an MP from Bihar who attended, said that she had *found the meeting especially useful and gave her new insights into the issues and problems of positive people.*

At the regional level, candlelight memorials took place across the country and in a large number of states activists devised charters of demands which were delivered to state officials. In Orissa state, activists worked with a wide range of people, including linking up with the transgender community, and in the state of Maharashtra actions took place at local levels, with a number of press conferences which gave positive speakers an opportunity to share their experiences and have their voices heard. In Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kolkata states street theatre was effectively used to take HIV&AIDS messages to a wider audience, with songs, skits and stories used to creatively reinforce messages on the need for tolerance and healthy living.

Nepal – Early on in the week an interaction programme enabled the media and civil society organisations to meet together. There was also a special focus on the needs of young people, and meetings with students and student unions helped raise the profile of HIV&AIDS on their agenda.

Pakistan – Held a number of candlelight memorials which engaged with a wide range of people, including teachers, students and religious leaders. Banners were also displayed in prominent locations to increase awareness of the AIDS Week amongst local communities.

Sri Lanka – Sri Lanka will be undertaking their actions from June 1st. Activists are planning a candlelight memorial, film shows, local performances of street theatre and a presentation by positive people in order to create awareness about the AIDS Week.

Thailand - Positive activists, NGOs, youth networks and others who work on AIDS held a workshop to identify ways to work better together. Campaigners also held a press conference on access to drugs.

Europe and North America

At the **European Parliament** in Strasbourg, France a key meeting was organised with parliamentarians, which looked at the political barriers to the fight against HIV&AIDS. At the meeting Luisa Morgantini, Vice President of the European Parliament argued that "we have to name and identify every single structural cause and political barrier, such as the TRIPS Agreements"

Italy - Following on from popular campaigning and music events, a meeting with parliamentarians and southern activists took place, highlighting the current HIV&AIDS situation.

Sweden – Activists delivered a new report on HIV&AIDS to the government and activists met with the national HIV secretariat to lobby them. Popular campaigning, media interviews and participation in a seminar on HIV and women also enabled activists to reach a wider audience.

United Kingdom – Undertaking popular campaigning whilst also targeting the Prime Minister in his last weeks as leader to deliver on his AIDS promises and provide sustainable funding. Activists delivered a record of achievement to Tony Blair which covered his achievements but also encouraged him to take real action at the G8 meeting in Germany.

United States - HIV and Women’s Rights activists took part in Congressional Briefing focused on women and girls, where they shared the experiences of women from Zimbabwe and Liberia and called on the US government to improve their HIV policy.

Charter of Demands

Many countries had devised charters of demands as part of their AIDS Week actions. Although some made calls at a national level, whilst others focused on a district or international level, there were some clear themes running throughout them all. These included:

- *Access to treatment* - ARTs available at local health facilities, including sufficient provisions of second line drugs
- *An end to stigma and discrimination* – some have called for this at a specific level such as within hospitals, whilst others demanded the introduction of specific legislation to protect the rights of PWAs
- *Promotion and support for the specific needs of women and children* – this included securing sufficient access to food, an end to violence against women and educational resources specifically targeted at this group to ensure they are able to access the information.

The next issue of ‘The Voice’ will be for Aug/Sept 2007.

Formed in 1988, Action for AIDS (AfA) is a voluntary community based organization and a registered charity. Our objectives are to provide support and assistance to persons living with HIV and AIDS (PWAs); to increase awareness, education and understanding of AIDS and HIV infection; to combat discrimination and stigmatisation of (PWAs) and their loved ones; and to encourage AIDS-related research activities in Singapore.

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