



# The Voice – Newsletter

Sep/Oct 2007

## Welcome to the Sep/Oct 2007 Issue of the Voice!

August-September is indeed hectic for AfA. Activities are aplenty! August saw the Vegas Royale Party – a Gala dinner for which funds are raised for the Pregnant Mother’s Fund. The dinner took place on 25<sup>th</sup> August. The 8<sup>th</sup> International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific took place from 19<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> August in Colombo, Sri Lanka. AfA Exco member, Raphael was awarded a scholarship to conduct a skills building workshop at the conference.

A milestone for us was the first AfA-SPPA (Action for AIDS, Singapore & Singapore Planned Parenthood Association) Joint Flag Day that took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August. On that same day, AfA unveiled our Captain Condom mascot and the Heterosexual Male Outreach Programme (HMO) campaign “I am responsible” at the Harbourfront Cruise Centre. A big thank you to Singapore Cruise Centre for being our venue sponsor.

September to November will be the months where we will be planning for events for World AIDS Day! Please check back in on our website for our event updates!

We hope you enjoy this issue of *The Voice*! Let us know if you have something to contribute. [info@afa.org.sg](mailto:info@afa.org.sg)

-Lionel Lee-

### Special Mission from Support Group – Muslim+

#### Visit to shelter house **PERNIM (Nurul Iman Welfare Society For The Children Of People Living With HIV/AIDS, Malaysia)** in KL



On 28<sup>th</sup> May 2007 a group of volunteers from M+ went on a trip to KL to visit a shelter house for HIV+ children as well as those who are orphaned by HIV/AIDS. Though the visit was short, it was quite an eye opener to see the shelter being run by a husband and wife team with such commitment, compassion and determination.

The purpose of our visit is manifold. We were able to see first hand, the running of the shelter. We also took some good pointers on the running of the shelter which may be applicable to us should the needs arise. As it was a Sunday some of the children were at Sunday classes and not all of them were present. A total of 39 children are under their care including 3 who are HIV+. One which caught our attention was Susanna who had been blind since 3 months old. When we saw her all of us can feel the pain which she went through. But a determined and cheerful person she is, smiling at our every touch, it just warms our heart. Our only concern is that she seems to be developing symptoms of progressing to AIDS.



The other two HIV positive children look healthy. With the good care given by Madam Hajah Norlina they seem to be healthy and happy. The infected children are being taken care of by their pediatrician in KL. Before we say goodbye to them, each of them received an ice cream from us. To see them running out and getting their treat and their infectious laughter made our day. With the love and care provided by Mdm Norlina and their pediatrician, we know that the children are in good hands. Hopefully, this will be one of many more visits from us. Goodnight but not goodbye Susanna. Love from all of us.

Events

AfA-SPPA Joint Flag Day



It was indeed a new experience for the student volunteers and fellow colleagues. Although it was a rainy day, that did not stop the volunteers from prowling the street for donations and us working hard to raise funds for our medical subsidy. We are also very happy to work with SPPA and like to thank them for such wonderful partnership.

Campaign Launch: I am Responsible with Captain Condom

The safer sex campaign directed towards heterosexual men, 'I am Responsible', builds upon previous initiatives which promotes **responsibility** of condom usage amongst high-risk heterosexual men, but seeks to go further in promoting and encouraging heterosexual men to take on the **responsibility** to go for HIV/AIDS testing.



The 'I am Responsible' campaign reiterates the importance of practicing safer sex and also plans to change the attitudes and behavior of higher-risk heterosexual men to take ownership of their own actions and responsibility in terms of condom use as mean of protecting themselves, and going for tests. The event took place in the morning with invited Guest-of-honour Ms Braema Mathi, the VP of Action for AIDS to launch the campaign. Also present were journalists from radio stations and the press. The launch was a roaring success with dance to songs from the 60s by volunteers and member of public participating actively in our HIV/AIDS quizzes. For more details on the event please pay at visit on our website: <http://www.afa.org.sg/otherevents/campaignlaunch2007.asp>

Singapore Fashion Week (FSW) & MAC AIDS FUND



**Singapore Fashion Week 2007 (SFW07)** is slated for 12 - 21 October 2007. This will be the 20th annual instalment, held this year to coincide with the 30th anniversary AFTEX (ASEAN Federation of Textile Industries). This year SFW is championing the awareness and the prevention of HIV/AIDS through Fashion Shares. The event is a tee-shirt exhibition displaying the unique and one-of-a-kind designs culled from a host of designers, personalities and celebrities including Singapore-born, now Paris-based international fashion designer Andrew Gn. He lent his hand in this project by designing a tee-shirt illustrating the importance of hope in fighting against HIV/AIDS. His tee-shirts will retail at \$39 exclusively at TANGS Orchard, TANGS VivoCity and the Fashion Shares exhibition at VivoCity Atrium from 12 October 2007 to 21 October 2007.



A prime feature of the collection is Andrew Gn's five limited edition pieces which are accompanied by a personalised card bearing his signature. These pieces will be auctioned off to raise funds for the cause. All proceeds from the auction and \$10 from the sale of each tee-shirt will go towards the AFA HIV+ Pregnant Mothers' Fund.

As a keen global supporter of HIV/AIDS funding, foremost cosmetic label M-A-C will also be selling their VIVA GLAM lipsticks and Kids Helping Kids Cards at Fashion Shares throughout the exhibition period. Full proceeds from the lipstick sales will go towards the M-A-C AIDS Fund which will in turn be contributed to the AFA HIV+ Pregnant Mothers' Fund. On top of this, M-A-C will also match dollar for dollar all proceeds derived from the sale of Andrew Gn's tee-shirts at TANGS for the same duration.

Event: Fashion Shares – A Tee-shirt exhibition to raise HIV/AIDS Awareness

Venue: Vivocity (South Avenue)

Time: 10am-10pm

Date: Friday, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2007

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## Call for Volunteers!

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### **Wanted: Telephone helpline volunteer coordinator & 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](mailto:lionel.lee@afa.org.sg)

### **Wanted: Volunteer IT Support personnel**

We are looking for a committed individual who can help provide the necessary IT support – hardware and software. Although we do not always have problem, we need someone to standby to help us in emergency cases.

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## Employment Opportunities with AfA

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### **Job Vacancy #1**

We are currently looking for an keen and committed individual who can help us operationalise our MSM programme. If you are interested please check on the NCSS website:

[http://www.ncss.org.sg/job/job\\_details.asp?job=V00001JOB07013901518&cd=V00001&type=V](http://www.ncss.org.sg/job/job_details.asp?job=V00001JOB07013901518&cd=V00001&type=V)

### **Job Vacancy #2**

We are looking for an outstanding candidate who can help us to spearhead a new Women's Programme and operationalise training programme within AfA. If you think you are suitable and possess the relevant experience, pls feel free to email to

[lionel.lee@afa.org.sg](mailto:lionel.lee@afa.org.sg) closing date: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2007

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## Local News

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### A Gap too wide

#### Study why big difference between UNAids, MOH statistics (Extract from Today July 23 - Voices p13)

Letter from LEONG SZE HIAN

I REFER to the article, "One in 350 patients is HIV positive — and they don't even know it" (July 18).

This statistic was from the findings of anonymous tests done on excess blood samples of 3,000 hospital patients earlier this year. UNAids estimates that 0.3 per cent of Singapore's adult population is infected with the Aids virus, which is about 9,000 people. As this is much higher than the Ministry of Health's own statistics of 2,852 people infected here, I suggest we conduct a comprehensive study and a review of the possible reasons why this has happened.

I believe a primary contributing factor is the reluctance of Singaporeans to go for testing. Why? Because should a person test positive, he or she would have to bear heavy costs to get treatment. In some Western countries, HIV-positive patients get free treatment, so the fear of financial ruin is minimised. Here, MediShield excludes Aids.

Without subsidies for treatment, patients should be allowed more liberal access to their own MediSave, as it may make no sense to restrict MediSave withdrawals to a fraction of the costs of treating Aids, since it is a terminal illness. In countries like Malaysia, its citizens with HIV get free life prolonging drugs as long as the medicine can be produced locally. Other reasons why Singaporeans may be unwilling to go for testing include the mandatory reporting of those found to be HIV-positive, notifying spouses and undergoing HIV testing for mothers-to-be.

Unless current policies relating to HIV and Aids are reviewed, the statistics may worsen, as long as people are, in a sense, driven to a state of mind that "it's better not to know". Knowing the truth may be akin to an immediate prolonged life sentence of financial, emotional and physical suffering for the victims and their loved ones.

### Almost zero, and it's worrying

#### Many heterosexual men still ignorant of sex-related diseases

The ignorance is staggering. Many men infected with HIV know almost nothing about sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) and

HIV/Aids before they get infected. According to Mr Lionel Lee, executive director of Action for Aids (Afa), focus group interviews among HIV-positive heterosexual men revealed that their level of knowledge of STIs and HIV “was almost zero”.

It is a worrying lapse that Afa hopes to address in a campaign, to be launched this weekend. With prominent stickers at ferry terminals, outreach programmes in red light districts and flyers inside clubs, it is one of the most high profile and large-scale attempts yet to target heterosexual men at the venues where commercial or unprotected sex is likely to take place.

The “I am Responsible” campaign will communicate the importance of taking responsibility and adopting safer-sex practices, and going for regular STI/HIV screening, said Mr Lee. Afa will also work with Indonesian non-governmental organizations on a campaign on the Riau Islands — a notoriously popular sex haunt with Singaporean men. A record 357 Singapore residents were diagnosed with HIV last year, up 12.6 per cent from 317 cases in 2005. Of the new cases, about 91 per cent were males. Heterosexual men, contrary to common perception, still form the bulk of HIV-cases here.

Last year, 60 per cent of the HIV cases were spread through heterosexual intercourse. “This particular demographic is especially vulnerable to infection because they tend to have fewer opportunities of being exposed to accurate information about HIV/Aids and STIs, as well as information about condom usage and regular health screening,” said Mr Lee.

To better reach Hokkienspeaking men, Afa will set up a *getai*-style (or song stage) performance in Geylang to coincide with the Hungry Ghost Festival. It also wants to rope in more nightspots so that safe-sex materials such as flyers, posters and condoms can be made available to their patrons.

Commenting on the Government’s plan to explore an opt-out scheme for HIV-testing for males admitted to hospitals here, Mr Lee said that while Afa is “generally supportive” of more widespread testing, it hopes the communication process will be clear. “Testing in medical settings must therefore have an opt-out clause that is made clear to all patients before the test is done ... in a language best understood by the patient,” Mr Lee said. And medical treatment must not be compromised or delayed if the patient decides to opt out, he added.

#### **Budget for Aids education hits \$4m**

THE Health Promotion Board (HPB) will spend \$4 million on Aids education this year, an increase on the \$3.3 million spent for the year end in March. This is more than triple the \$1.3 million budget it had in 2005. The spending on Aids education was increased after the Ministry of Health (MOH) corrected a mistake in its 2005 report on the number of new Aids/HIV patients. The reason for the spike? The HPB had originally reported 255 new patients. But last September, this number was revised to 317. With the new figure, the Aids education budget grew as well. Responding to a Straits Times query, an MOH spokesman explained: ‘The additional 62 cases were diagnosed in late 2005 and were retrospectively added to complete the picture.’

The correct number showed that there had been no fall in the number of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections here and, in fact, the upward trend continued unchecked. Last year, it rose again to 357 new cases, a 13 per cent increase from the previous year. Three in four people infected are heterosexual. The HPB’s stepped-up education efforts include placing advertisements targeted at specific groups, such as the one in The Straits Times last week aimed at young women who indulge in casual sex.

The HPB is also working with the Textile and Fashion Federation to promote more than 50 T-shirts designed by prominent personalities, such as TV actor Adrian Pang and MP Fatimah Lateef, to raise Aids awareness. The T-shirts will be on display at VivoCity from Oct 12 to 21. Dr Roy Chan, president of the non-governmental association Action For Aids, was not impressed by the new tack: ‘Giving information alone is not enough. Many people don’t take it seriously because they don’t think it applies to them.’ He said this is ‘true for any medical condition, and is particularly true for HIV infection’. People need to be encouraged to take control of their health. The stigma and discrimination against people with the disease also need to change, he added. Prevention is much more cost-effective than treatment, as the cost of medicine alone comes to about \$1,300 a month for each patient. This is on top of any other medical treatment patients may need due to their compromised immune system.

The HPB is focusing its campaign on three groups - teenagers, workers, and men who have sex with other men and illegal prostitutes. In schools, the HPB runs Aids/HIV education classes for Secondary 3 and JC1 students. They are taught the ABCs - abstinence, being faithful to partners and using condoms - as a way to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections. The messages going out to workers are slightly different. Apart from telling them about HIV and how to stay safe, the HPB also teaches them that there is no danger to working alongside a colleague with HIV. The third group the board is reaching out to are those considered high-risk - homosexual men and unlicensed sex workers. It is working with various voluntary organisations already helping these groups.

An MOH spokesman said that efforts are paying off as more people are going for HIV tests. In 2005, 5,349 went for anonymous HIV testing at the Kelantan Lane clinic. Last year, 6,046 did the test, while in the first seven months of this year, 3,949 were tested.

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## Regional News & Beyond

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### 8th International congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP)

The 8th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) takes place in Colombo, Sri Lanka on from 19 - 24 August. The conference brings together more than 3,000 delegates from some 60 countries to discuss critical issues on AIDS in the region such as stigma and discrimination, access to HIV prevention and treatment and the importance of sustained political commitment on AIDS.

#### Closing Remarks by Mr. JVR Prasada Rao UNAIDS Regional Support Team, Asia Pacific

##### ***Acknowledging the success of the 8th ICAAP Local Organising Committee***

- Congratulations to all participants and the organizers of the conference. The Local Organising Committee, under the leadership of Minister Nimal Sripala de Silva, the three co-chairs (Professor Sherifdeen, Mr. Weerakoon, and Dr. Sujatha Samarakoon) and Conference Coordinator Kamanee Hapugalle, should be congratulated for a job well done. They have exceeded all our expectations and despite the trying circumstances were able to convene a Congress that is at once substantive and exciting. I also want to thank ASAP, civil society partners, the United Nations family and others who have stood by the Local Organising Committee and provided support to the preparations.
- The doubting Thomases have been proved wrong. On the first day, I tried to identify some of the challenges which should help in setting our agenda for the future. I have noticed that these themes have reverberated several times in various sessions in the conference. I will try to place before you some of the main messages which have come through strongly in the last two days.

##### ***Barriers to Universal Access***

- The commitment to Universal Access is there, the rhetoric is right but the enabling environment needs to be more supportive. The most serious barrier is the stigma attached to HIV infection will not go away and which will continue to hamper efforts to scale up treatment.
- Injecting drug users, MSM and sex workers who are positive are subjected to the burden of additional discrimination that makes normalcy difficult to achieve even if treatment services became available to them.
- Harm reduction appears to be gaining acceptance in the region. The efficacy of substitution treatment of opiate addiction (both in terms of methadone and buprenorphine) has been scientifically validated but legal obstacles to the use of methadone remain in most countries in the region, despite the fact that methadone has been on the WHO Essential Drugs list since 2005. We need leadership to take on these laws and regulations that stand in the way of scaling up substitution therapy.
- In our review of progress of UA in Asia-Pacific region, countries have done well in setting targets but the participation of civil society groups has been poor and there is scope for them to be more involved. The launching of the 'minimum standards' for civil society participation in Universal Access by the Seven Sisters is an important tool for promoting greater involvement.
- There is renewed emphasis on the need for continued activism. Somehow we seem to be losing our way in pursuing it as an effective weapon in our fight against AIDS. We cannot afford to lose our activism – and I use Justice Edwin Cameron's definition: we are all activists in this response.

##### ***Our fears about human rights violations of positive people***

- In some countries, positive people and their networks continue to be denied their rights to free association, the holding of meetings and accessing legal services for protection against harassment. This is going to be a major battle we need to fight in countries, large and small.

##### ***Testing and counseling***

- There is an urgent need to clear up access to HIV counseling and testing in countries of the region, as a means for enhancing access to comprehensive HIV prevention, treatment and care.

- UNAIDS convened a regional consultation on provider-initiated testing and counseling in June 2007 in Cambodia, and we note that there is still confusion about the guidelines adopted at that consultation, and many have observed that it does not address the concerns of civil society groups. I noticed also that the guidelines adopted at the Phnom Penh consultations have not been disseminated and needs to be widely distributed immediately.

- Given the dynamics of the epidemic in our region, voluntary testing and counseling will be the cornerstone of programmes. We need to better support VCT and to make it more widely available. There may be specific circumstances where provider-initiated testing and counseling is appropriate, but let us be clear: the 3C's are constants no matter what the approach to testing: counseling, informed consent and confidentiality. Where provider-initiated testing and counseling is introduced, it should invariably lead to the provision of services.

### ***Conflict and instability***

- It became clear in a number of sessions that conflict and unstable political conditions which can disrupt national AIDS programmes especially in conflict zones and also divert resources from health and social programmes to the military.

- Let us remember two things: that even in difficult settings: i) it is possible to deliver services; and ii) people have rights to services. Donors should be encouraged not to withdraw from such environments.

- The involvement and cooperation of the military and the police is often essential to ensure that most-at-risk groups continue to have access to services and that the space for ensuring service delivery will be protected.

### ***Gender issues***

- We need to better understand how harmful gender norms, including violence against women, are driving the epidemic. That knowledge has to be brought to bear on how we design programmes. One message we have heard loud and clear is that we need to foster male leadership, and male responsibility as we work for gender equality. We cannot go on equating 'gender' with women. I hope male leadership can be addressed in some innovative sessions in 2009.

### ***Development, mobility and HIV vulnerability***

- The problem of migration and mobility, especially in the context of rapidly expanding economies of the region, has come out strongly in some of the sessions. Migrant labour movements between countries should be better supported and managed, taking into account the need for pre-departure orientation programmes and the need for sending and receiving countries to coordinate better.

- In this regard, the LOC convened a symposium to address migrant labour issues, urging the UN system to assist sending countries from Asia to follow-up on the agreements reached at the WHA sideline meeting on migrant workers and HIV vulnerability held on 16 May 2007 in Geneva. Among the recommendations were: the need to integrate HIV prevention into pre-departure; and post-arrival processes; and to ensure that sending and receiving countries could come together to share information and to dialogue, so that worker recruitment and repatriation could be more coordinated.

- I am pleased to see that CARAM-Asia had launched its report on "No to mandatory testing" during this Congress.

### ***Adolescents and young people***

- A number of presentations clearly indicated that not all adolescents and young people are exposed to the same level of risk or vulnerability to HIV infection. While there was a need to prioritise comprehensive prevention services for young people who are at risk or vulnerable to infection, we also need to ensure the right of all adolescents to full and correct knowledge about HIV and adolescent friendly health services.

### ***Paediatric treatment***

- Paediatric treatment access remains low in the region. Apart from three countries, the average coverage is only 8 percent. However the foundations are being built for rapid scale-up. Affordable early infant diagnosis, simplified dosage tools and new paediatric formulations will all contribute to making a difference for the region's children.

**Promoting participation from the Pacific**

- Pacific issues and concerns need to be given more systematic attention. We also need to have more participants from the Pacific. One way to do this is for the ICAAP cosponsors, ASAP and UNAIDS, to work with the next LOC for the 9<sup>th</sup> ICAAP to ensure that the Pacific voice is heard by having a separate track for the Pacific.
- It would also help to already identify and mentor prospective participants who could then be invited to contribute at the next ICAAP in 2009.

**Establishment of Regional Networks**

- I am pleased with the launching of APCOM, the network for MSM in this region, and note that the sex workers' forum is planned to be launched with the support of UNFPA and UNAIDS before the end of the year.
- I am also very delighted to note that Sri Lanka Business Coalition on HIV and AIDS has been constituted, initially with the Chambers of Commerce, 21 Sri Lankan companies, trade unions, the Employers Federation of Ceylon and the ILO as founding members.

**Leadership**

- The launching of the 'Portraits of Commitment' by the APLF was a significant milestone in documenting the tireless efforts of a group of advocates from the South Asia and what inspires their work in fighting AIDS.

**Acknowledge donors present**



- For the very first time, we see the strong presence of a group of non-traditional and Asia-Pacific donors attending this Congress, who are committed to playing a larger role in the region. These donors are ADB, AusAID, The Global Fund and JBIC and they also have a special interest in infrastructure and HIV vulnerability. We are greatly encouraged by the presence of Dr. Michel Kazatchkine of the Global Fund, Ms. Ursula Schaefer-Preuss of the ADB and Annemarie O'Keefe of AusAID.

As we move out of the conference to our various fields of activity, let us remember one thing – there are no shortcuts to success. We need to constantly remind ourselves of the long and arduous road ahead of us. But what keeps us going is HOPE. Hope that we will ultimately succeed – and succeed we must!

Ms. Deborah Landey, UNAIDS Deputy Executive Director talking to Prof. Myung Hwan Cho, President of the AIDS Society of Asia and the Pacific during the 8th International congress on AIDS in ASIA and the Pacific, Colombo, Sri Lanka 19th August 2007.

**The next issue of 'The Voice' will be for Nov/Dec 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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