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July 20, 2007

More finding out HIV-positive status during voluntary testing

13% of HIV-infected realised their condition this way last year, up from 6% in 2000

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MORE HIV-positive patients are finding out about their status from tests that they take on their own accord.

Last year, 13 per cent of HIV-infected Singaporeans discovered their condition this way, more than double the 6 per cent in 2000.

The jump is not just in the proportion but also in absolute numbers, as more people have been diagnosed with HIV, the virus that causes Aids.

Last year, 357 people were found HIV-positive, against 226 in 2000.

The Ministry of Health (MOH), saying it was encouraged that more people found to be HIV-positive had gone for a test voluntarily, urged those with high-risk lifestyles to be tested regularly so they can be treated early if infected.

The fact remains, however, that the majority of HIV-positive patients - 78 per cent last year - find out about their status only when they fall ill and seek medical treatment.

About 2 per cent last year were detected through contact tracing, that is, when their sex partners were found infected and were asked to list those they have had sexual relations with.

Then, there are those who are walking around with the virus, unaware that they have been infected.

To encourage people to get tested, more anonymous HIV-testing sites have been made available.

In June last year, MOH made anonymous testing available at two private GP clinics - Anteh Dispensary Family Clinic & Surgery in Geylang and Cambridge Clinic along Kreta Ayer Road.

Between last July and May this year, the clinics tested 623 people.

Previously, only Aids activist group Action for Aids (AFA) offered anonymous testing at its clinic in Kelantan Lane.

The clinic saw a record 6,046 people asking for tests last year. This was 130 per cent more than the number screened in 2002.

AFA's executive director Lionel Lee said: 'Greater awareness is the key reason. We've been actively promoting testing in our outreach programmes.'

As at the end of last year, the official number of people here living with Aids was 2,012.

This is far short of the UNAids' 2005 estimate - 5,500 - which suggests a significant number of undiagnosed patients here.

Health-care professionals say that, to close the gap between the official and estimated figures, more

publicity and education are needed.

Dr Chua Thiam Eng of Cambridge Clinic and Dr Joyce Liang of Anteh Dispensary noted that those who sought anonymous testing at their clinics tended to be better-educated, English-speaking and Internet-savvy.

To reach the less-educated, high-risk group who go overseas for paid sex, information on the need for testing should be made available at places like the Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal, said Dr Chua.

Both doctors are in favour of making anonymous testing available at more GP clinics.

Said Dr Liang: 'We need to bring testing to people...More might be willing to get tested in a heartland clinic where nobody can tell them apart from those who are there for coughs and colds.'

The MOH said yesterday that it plans to allow the use of rapid HIV test kits in all medical clinics and is also looking at introducing them in non-clinical settings.

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