

weekend TODAY

we set you thinking

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IN YOUR WEEKEND XTRA THE FAMILY THAT GREW AND GREW

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Aids stats point way to HIV tests

 Health Minister 'seriously considering'
 opt-out scheme to stem tide

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WITH recent statistics pointing to a worrying Aids trend here, the Government is thinking of extending the opt-out scheme to HIV-testing, too. So, if you are male, admitted to a hospital and have not opted out, then don't be surprised if you are asked to take an HIV test.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) is looking into an opt-out system for HIV testing as statistics show that one in 350 hospital patients is HIV-positive. A recent MOH study of more than 3,000 anonymous blood samples collected in hospitals showed that 0.28 per cent of those who thought they were free of the disease were in fact HIV-positive.

Also, 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.

Since then, a voluntary welfare organisation has called for mandatory HIV testing for those in high-risk groups – which some have described as intrusive. Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan said on Friday that while mandatory screening is good from a public health point of view, there are objections and difficulties in implementation.

"The minimum is, I think, we have an opt-out scheme," he said.

For example, it could be administered when a patient is admitted to the hospital as part of standard tests.

"So, you can opt out if you want to, but otherwise people would just take it as a routine exercise like taking high blood pressure (and blood sugar)," said

The trouble is, unfortunately, some patients think ignorance is bliss, that it's better not to know. From a public health management point of view, I cannot take such an attitude.

— Health Minister
 Khaw Boon Wan

Mr Khaw on the sidelines of a National Day Observance Ceremony at Tien Wah Press.

Mr Khaw added that he was "seriously considering" the move to routinely test adult males on an opt-out basis.

He said: "If you take this rate of 1 in 350. Every day, the public hospitals

probably have about 5,000 in-patients ... so at this rate, that means there are about a dozen unknown HIV patients whom we have very close contact with every day.

"As healthcare workers, we have proper infection control – (we wear) double gloves and so on – but accidents do happen ... so it's a problem I cannot ignore."

Of the new HIV cases last year, 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 MOH's opt-out screening for pregnant mothers, implemented in 2004, has been successful in saving babies, with just one case of mother-to-child

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