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MM: No S'poreans want to ask a question?



THE issue of homosexuality cropped up again during a question-and-answer session (picture) with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew at the Nanyang Technological University's Ministerial Forum last night.

An English language undergraduate asked Mr Lee this question: Whether there was a "mutual contradiction" between Singapore's censorship laws and artistic expression, specifically on homosexuality and politics.

Mr Lee replied: "I cannot answer you on that. I just find it unbelievable that your artistic expression, or the desire and impulse in you, is suppressed because of the censorship laws. It cannot be.

"We are in a stage of transition ... I see no profits in having gay parades. If you are born homosexual, so be it. But must you parade it, or go out of your way

to antagonise, embarrass or defy the more conventional view?"

During the one-hour session, he addressed issues such as press freedom and censorship. But when the session came close to an end, Mr Lee was concerned that only two out of the nine questions were asked by Singaporeans. He said: "Are there no Singaporeans who want to ask a question?"

Two Singaporean undergraduates then stood up to ask whether he was concerned with the high turnover rate of the teaching profession and what Singapore can do in the fight against global warming.

Mr Lee replied that the teaching profession is "unglamorous" but the Government's efforts to attract talents has paid off. He also revealed that the Cabinet is studying a paper on climate change. — LOH CHEE KONG

WHEN PASSION GETS THE BETTER OF REASON

An ignorance-no-excuse law may yet discourage some from taking HIV tests

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THE law may compel you to do certain things, but can it endow you with reason in the heat of passion?

The Ministry of Health (MOH) certainly hopes so, as it proposes an amendment to the Infectious Diseases Act that makes it an offence for any HIV-positive person to have sex — regardless of whether he knows of his status, as long as he has reason to believe that he has been exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. He is not liable, however, if he has informed his partner who voluntarily agrees to undertake the risk, or if he has practised safe sex or tested negative before the act.

If this legislation is pushed through, Singapore will be the first country with such laws in place.

Yet another punitive approach for the "fine" city? Not so, said the ministry. Rather, this new provision is to make people take personal responsibility and get tested regularly if they are in "high-risk groups".

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of an event last week, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan, talking about who would fall into the high-risk groups, explained: "A high-risk one is really simple: 'Do you visit prostitutes?' — that you must know, right? And if you do, then at least, you must do regular testing."

But is it really that simple?

Conservatives may not like this. Parents may not like this. But the truth is: In an increasingly sexually-open society, one can be sexually-active but not necessarily promiscuous. It will not be difficult to find many who have had several, or even many, sexual partners in a number of serious relationships in a lifetime.

If a woman has had sexual intercourse with five boyfriends, would she be considered high-risk? Should she have reason to believe she might have contracted HIV? She certainly might not think so. But if she had contracted HIV in such a manner, would she be liable?

Just as a drunkard tends not to admit he has had too much, a high-risk person would not want to classify himself as such.

Where is the line between safe and high-risk? Such subjectivity can be highly controversial in a court of law.

What is more, it will not be easy to investigate each case. Indeed, even with current legislation, under which it is an offence for an HIV-positive person to have sex without the voluntary consent of his partner, just two people have been found to have run afoul of the law — one was not charged but fined, another left the country before he could be prosecuted.

As a report in the London-based *New Scientist* magazine said recently, even genetic sequencing may not reveal the HIV source. Given the uncertainty of it all, surely what one should do is to get tested anyway, whether one is high or low-risk.

But why should anyone do so? Especially if one is young (and feels invincible and immortal), especially if one appears healthy and has no symptoms, and especially if one already chooses to live life in a certain way.

In fact, we should be wary that the new laws may end up as a disincentive to getting tested for HIV. After all, whether or not I know of my infection, if I choose to have sex and not be upfront with my partner, I would still have broken the law. Without the test result, I could well carry on with my life — and perhaps never be caught. But what if I decide, one day, to go for a test, and it comes up positive? Will that spark off contact tracing, and will I be hauled to court to answer for the sexual encounters I had before the test?

One wonders, too, what is 10 years' in jail to someone already slapped with a death sentence, or a \$50,000 fine to one who has lost almost everything?

A scenario posed by a spokesman for Aids activist group Action for Aids also

merits serious consideration: Will the proposed amendments lead to more frequent anonymous and casual encounters, where there is no exchange of identities or contact information between the partners?

Rather than jump into legislation, the Government should continue its efforts on public education and expand its message beyond "abstain, be faithful and use a condom". When announcing the new provision last week, MOH's director of medical services Professor K Satku lamented that some are still not having safe sex or going for regular HIV tests despite public education efforts.

It is a pity the ministry holds that view. Where Aids campaigns are concerned, Singapore remains conservative and could certainly be more creative in exploring its choice of messages and strategies.

For a start, the MOH could do more to demystify the Aids patient, who is hitherto unseen and unheard. It is no wonder people think of Aids as a death sentence — you disappear from public view and are as good as dead even before the illness claims your life. More information on how HIV can be treated, and how one can continue to lead a constructive life even after contracting the virus, will help remove some of the irrational fear that may be stopping people from going for tests.

Getting the individual to take responsibility for his actions may be a righteous move. But in dealing with a problem that has its roots in emotionality and irrationality, punitive measures don't always work.



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