

Rapid HIV test kit not a hit yet

Only 13 per cent of cases detected were through voluntary screening

TAN HUI LENG
huleng@mediacorp.com.sg

IT IS non-invasive and takes just 20 minutes to do at your neighbourhood GP – but the HIV rapid test kit made available from last year at more than 60 clinics has not had much impact on the rate of voluntary HIV screening.

According to statistics released by the Ministry of Health (MOH) on Tuesday, just 13 per cent of the record 422 HIV cases found last year were detected through voluntary HIV screening. The rate was the same in 2006.

Another 73 per cent were detected via HIV testing done in the course of some form of medical care.

At Changi General Hospital – where since December, adult inpatients have been given the choice to opt out of a HIV test – just 37 per cent of male and 25 per cent of female patients opted in from Dec 17 to March 31.

While the non-anonymous nature of HIV testing at such facilities is oft cited as the reason for why voluntary screening is not popular, doctors TODAY spoke to said that ignorance and fear are bigger factors.

Dr Chua Thiam Eng, who runs one of three clinics offering anonymous testing, says it is the fear of being stigmatised and rejected that puts people off voluntary testing.

“The difference between HIV and other illnesses is that you face greater risk of isolation, loneliness and even abandonment,” said Dr Chua. “Many of the patients who come forward know they are at risk and it takes a lot of courage to be tested.”

Rockeby biomed, the official distributor of the OraQuick test kit, sells 400 to 500 of the test kits every month – half of them to the anonymous clinics.

“I think if there are more anonymous testing sites, the take-up rate of voluntary testing would go up,” said its chief executive, Dr Tan Sze Wee.



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General practitioner (GP) Wong Tien Hua, who practises at an Anchorvale clinic, said people are generally aware that GPs do provide HIV screening – “and that we have to notify the authorities” of positive results.

His clinic is one of the 196 listed on the MOH’s website which have gone for a training course on rapid HIV test kits. Five to 10 patients present themselves each month at his clinic for the HIV test, a number “within expectations”.

He stressed the need for more public education on voluntary HIV testing for high-risk individuals. Its efficacy is evident as the take-up rate for the tests increase each time there is any publicity done on HIV, he said.

Overall, voluntary test rates have gone up since the 6 per cent in 2000. To further encourage those at risk to go for regular HIV testing, the MOH has amended the Infectious Diseases Act so that it is 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 agrees to undertake the risk, or if he has practised safe sex or tested negative before the act.

While Dr Chua said the MOH has to implement the measures to protect public interest, he added that he could not be sure this will actually help push up the voluntary test rate.

More Myanmar voters turned away

ZUL OTHMAN
zul@mediacorp.com.sg

IT WAS the second last day of voting, but many of the estimated 300-odd Myanmar nationals who turned up at their embassy here yesterday did not get a chance to do so.

They had come in groups – many in red T-shirts with the word “No” – from as early as 10am, spending the Labour Day public holiday waiting in the sun for their turn.

The plan: To cast their votes on a referendum for the country’s new but controversial Constitution, ahead of the actual voting to be held in Myanmar on May 10.

The country’s ruling junta, which has been in power since 1962, says approval of the Constitution will pave the way for elections in 2010 under their “roadmap” to democracy.

But though the day passed without incident, many who turned up were upset when they saw signs – in the Burmese language – stating that voters would be turned away if they were “improperly dressed” or could not produce their Myanmar tax forms for the past year.

Some of the voters told TODAY that it was up to the discretion of embassy officials at St Martin’s Drive to decide who could vote and who could not.

Embassy staff could not be reached for comment.

“The rules are ridiculous, and I think they left the signs there in the Burmese language so that outsiders would have no idea of the restrictions they are placing on us, preventing us from having our say,” said Ms Olive Win, a 34-year-old secretary.

It had been reported earlier that some voters were turned away last Friday because they did not have invitation letters.



PROTEST: A Myanmar national with a fan marked with a cross, which symbolises the rejection of the referendum, at the country’s embassy in Singapore.

Yesterday, engineer William Thein – who managed to cast his vote – wondered why tax forms had been called into play.

“What should only matter is that they are passport-carrying citizens of the country and nothing else,” said the 34-year-old.

Mr Zin Wai, 42, who managed to enter the embassy grounds after a two-hour wait to cast his vote, said: “It seems like the authorities are playing a game by making all these people wait.”

“They are making it hard for us to vote, but that may be because no-

body likes the government and maybe they are afraid of losing control.”

An estimated 30,000 to 100,000 Myanmar nationals live and work in Singapore and they have until today to vote on the referendum.

“Putting the last day of voting on a working day does not make sense,” said Ms Win. “We’ve been waiting the whole day without any success and it is hard to take leave to come here again.”

The remaining crowd of about 200 were peacefully dispersed by the police at 6.45pm.

A RARE BREED: The Night Safari’s success in its captive breeding programme for tapirs – an animal whose population is declining rapidly in the wild – continues with a male born in February. It is the park’s 26th tapir birth and the two-month-old baby is already out on exhibit and can be viewed at Night Safari’s West Loop. Currently, the Singapore Zoo and the Night Safari are home to 10 tapirs.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NIGHT SAFARI