

AIDS EDUCATION

Gen Y lacks HIV awareness

Early detection also needed for groups at risk

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IT IS as simple as ABC — literally. But young Singaporeans' knowledge of the three-step method to prevent the contact of HIV is still lacking.

A quarter of those aged 18 to 29 are unaware of at least two of these measures: Abstaining from casual sex, being faithful to one's partner and consistent condom use.

Singaporeans were most ignorant about using condoms for protection against the disease, according to the first large-scale national survey on sexual practices and HIV/Aids.

Based on the results, relying on the three-step method will not be enough to reduce infection rates in Singapore. Especially for the at-risk groups — which are approximately 17.8 per cent of the population, including young women — it will require an ABCD approach, with an emphasis by the Health Promotion Board on early detection through testing. The HPB revealed these findings and the strategies it will develop at a media briefing yesterday.

The survey, done over six months last year, involved 1,768 people aged 18 to 69. Those 29 and younger scored lower than the national average on awareness of HIV

AIDS AWARENESS SURVEY RESULTS

GENERAL POPULATION

Aware of three ways to prevent disease **36.6%**

Aware of at least two ways **80.4%**

Aware that consistent condom use helps prevent HIV **54.4%**

THOSE AT RISK

Aware of all three ways to prevent disease **49%**

Aware of at least 2 ways **82%**

Aware that consistent condom use helps prevent HIV **77%**

prevention. Attitudes toward HIV and Aids were also surveyed, and it was found that while roughly one in two people would care for an infected relative in their home, only one in five would share a meal or buy food from a person with HIV or Aids. Older Singaporeans were less accepting than were youths.

Voluntary welfare group Action for Aids (AfA) said it showed the gap between what people know about the disease and how they act towards sufferers. "They would rather not be associated with the condition. At the same time, there is no face to HIV or Aids in Singapore," said AfA spokesman Lionel Lee.

Apart from stigma, misconceptions were also tested in the survey. One-third of respondents were unaware that a HIV-positive person can still look healthy.

The findings show that more must be done to increase society's acceptance of HIV sufferers and to educate the young. To do this,

HPB will organise a concert prior to World Aids Day on Dec 1 at Fort Canning Park. It hopes to reach out to 6,000 youths through performances and messages by bands like Electrico, as well as theatre personalities like Hossan Leong and the Dim Sum Dollies.

But with HIV education already conducted in schools here, what does it say about the authorities' efforts so far? HPB director (adult health) Dr Theresa Yoong said: "In the past, all our HIV/Aids education programmes were targeted at the general population and, in fact, we were targeting mainly the older adults. So it's not surprising the statistics came out this way. Going forward, we will refocus our strategies to target the lower age group."

It was revealed in Parliament last month that the incidence rate of sexually transmitted infections nearly doubled to 418 per 100,000 youth between 15 and 24 from 10 years ago.

The "startling" ignorance of condoms as

a preventive method could stem from people associating them with contraception, and not disease prevention, suggested AfA's Mr Lee, who added: "Maybe it's also because condom use is a taboo topic in Singapore."

Future surveys, which the HPB hopes to do every three years, would have to include qualitative questions to ascertain these reasons. Dr Yoong also hopes the number of newly diagnosed HIV cases that are already in the late stages of infection will come down.

The Health Ministry found last year that this stood at half the cases, and she hopes this will dip by 10 to 20 per cent.

HPB's survey also indicated that the Malay community scored lower on attitudes to and awareness of HIV/Aids than other communities. HPB and AfA said they are starting to build grassroots contacts by reaching out to mosques. For example, HPB held a sexual health seminar at Sultan Mosque in July and art exhibitions by HIV sufferers at two other mosques recently.

"At the moment, it's just integrating into (the mosques') existing programmes for married persons and those thinking about getting married. In the future, we'll see what more can be done," said HPB deputy director (communicable disease education) JoAnn Taylor.



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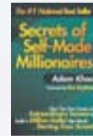
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The bet is off

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THE lofty plan trumpeted two months ago was to stage a big comeback — a poker tournament with a larger turnout and a more lucrative pot than the previous one held here two years ago — but the Asian Poker Tour (APT) will not be returning to Singapore this year after all.

Responding to TODAY's queries, Mr Chris Parker, APT's co-founder, said yesterday the tour had failed to get the nod from authorities here and had "made alternative plans to take it to another Asian city". He did not say where exactly.

The event was scheduled here for late-November or early December for its fourth and final leg after stops in Manila, Macau and Seoul.

Mr Parker, who is also chief executive officer and chairman of the Manila-based APT, did not respond to TODAY's queries as to why it had failed to get the official go-ahead.

In an email reply, he said discussions had been held with the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (Iras) and the Gambling Suppression Branch (GSB) over the last few months.

He claimed the tour did "not have a response from the Singapore Government".

According to the Iras website, APT organisers would have to pay 25 per cent of the total bets wagered.

The Singapore Police Force, which oversees the GSB, said in a statement: "The organisers were in discussion with several



The tournament held here in 2006 attracted over 700 players from 32 countries. TODAY FILE PHOTO

Government agencies apart from the police. It is premature to disclose details at this stage."

The inaugural tournament held here in November 2006 was sanctioned by the Singapore Tourism Board and was held to much fanfare, attracting over 700 players from 32 countries.

That year's finals also saw 313 poker players vying for the US\$500,000 (\$740,000) top prize, and organisers had told the media in August that they expected at least twice as many participants this year.

They had also promised a total prize pot of US\$2-million — \$500,000 more than the 2006 instalment. There were also plans to take the tour to at least six venues next year.

The news that the ATP will not hit our shores this year was a blow to poker enthusiasts.

Said Mr Kenneth Goh, 42, who has been playing poker for the last seven years: "I'm gutted that it will not come to Singapore. I have been reading up poker books in preparation for what was to be my first tournament, but I guess I'll have to go overseas to participate now."