

AIDS CONFERENCE

HIV tests at the workplace

... and condom dispensers in public places are what one expert suggests

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BUSINESSES should provide their employees with testing facilities for Aids and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), a regional authority on the issue has suggested.

Dr Prasada Rao (picture), director of the UNAID Support Team for Asia and the Pacific, said such a move would be in the interests of the firm and its staff.

"If an employee is found to be HIV-positive, rather than lose a good worker, the company can make alternative work plans, like flexible hours or allocating work to other staff when he is away from work," he told TODAY.

"With early intervention, many people with HIV can live a healthy life for five to 10 years before they need anti-retroviral treatment."

Dr Rao is in town for the 6th Singapore AIDS Conference held on Saturday at the Suntec Convention Centre. In his keynote speech, he is expected to call on the Government and businesses to be more proactive in tackling the spread of HIV/Aids.

The conference aims to tackle the stig-

JUMP IN NUMBER GOING FOR ANONYMOUS HIV TESTS

More Singaporeans are getting tested for HIV, a week after four more private clinics started offering anonymous testing.

Doctors at these clinics say they have seen a jump from about five tests per month to five per day.

At Dr Martin Lam's clinic in Geylang, the number of people undergoing tests for HIV has gone up from one a week to 20 in the past week. And it has been mostly men.

Said Dr Lam: "(The patient) is entirely anonymous and at the end of the test, we give him a number unique to him so

he can identify himself again. The procedure only takes about 20 seconds."

Doctors said the HIV test is 99-per cent accurate. After the test is conducted, the result is available within 20 minutes.

The oral test and consultation cost about \$45.

Those who test positive for HIV may have to pay more for further blood tests and counselling.

Doctors hope that anonymous HIV test clinics would encourage more at-risk individuals to come forward for testing, so that the disease can be detected at an earlier stage. CHANNEL NEWSASIA

ma surrounding the disease and to help fight discrimination faced by HIV sufferers, as well as their loved ones.

HIV tests at the workplace could be tough for many to swallow — who would want their employer knowing that they had an STI, such as Aids? Would staff found to be HIV-positive be given the sack or shunned?

Dr Rao said it was "internationally accepted" that any employee dismissed for such reasons can seek legal redress. But in addition, tackling such discrimination is where government education programmes are most needed.

"Apart from educating the public, governments need to be proactive with chambers of commerce and small business associations to disseminate information about HIV/Aids," he said.

Ms Susie Solomon, executive director of Business Coalition On Aids In Singapore, thinks that testing facilities at the workplace is "premature at this stage" for Singapore.

"Testing is a great idea if society were more open. Unfortunately, HIV/Aids is still very much a taboo. If companies want to implement this, I would encourage anonymous testing where privacy is maintained between the doctor and the employee," she said.

Ms Solomon, who conducts workplace programmes on Aids, says that employers very often do not know what to do with an HIV-positive employee, which is why it is "important to educate people".

The authorities in Singapore have been active in doing this. Last July, Senior Minister of State Balaji Sadavisan led a study team to Sydney to learn about Australian best practices in fighting HIV and Aids.

Dr Rao also called on the Government to reach out especially to high-risk groups in the community.

He added that government funding

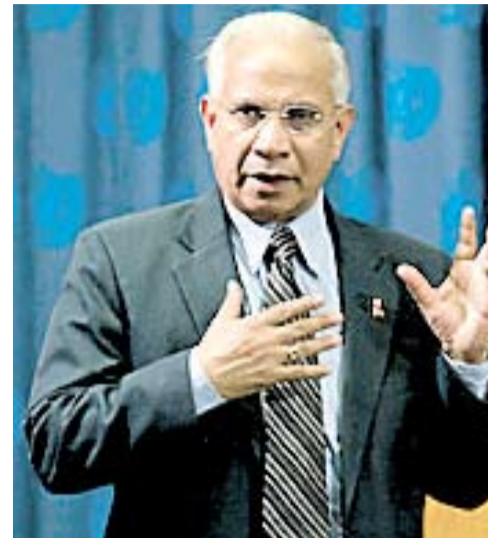


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for Aids awareness groups within civil society would help them to carry out their programmes. He is of the opinion that a more effective approach is a combination of messages on abstinence, safe sex and condom availability.

"Condom vending machines should be more available in Singapore — in public toilets, hotels, airports, even restaurants.

"It's a false notion that condom vending machines encourage promiscuity."

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Dr Prasada Rao

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Pimp's \$8,000 fine 'not enough': DPP

THIS being the first case tried under a new law here that makes pimping girls under the age of 18 illegal, Mr Wang Minjiang's \$8,000 fine did not send out a strong enough signal that Singapore does not condone such "heinous acts", a public prosecutor said in an appeal court on Friday.

Appealing against the "manifestly inadequate sentence", Deputy Public Prosecutor Mark Tay said the intent, when parliamentarians passed the new law in October last year, was clearly to take a tough stance against those exploiting immature and vulnerable young girls in the sex trade.

And with the maximum punishment for the offence set at seven years' imprisonment, a fine for the first convicted offender did not convey a strong enough deterrent message, DPP Tay added.

According to court documents, Mr Wang, 36, had brought two girls — aged 17 and 19 — into Singapore to prostitute themselves.

Together with his nephew, he took them to coffeeshops in the Geylang area to solicit for customers, using the girls' youth as a selling point.

The Chinese national subsequently arranged for a customer — whose case is now pending in a district court — to have sex with the younger girl for \$100.

Soon after, he was arrested and on Aug 28, District Judge Roy Neighbour slapped him with a \$25,000 fine for four offences. Mr Wang was unable to pay and is now serving a default 25-week jail term.

Urging Judge Choo Han Teck to up Mr Wang's punishment to at least a 12-month jail term, DPP Tay argued that it would prevent would-be perpetrators from disregarding the punishment for exploiting minors — if it was only a fine — as "a cost of operation".

Justice Choo said he needed to study the submissions further and adjourned sentencing to Nov 14. TEO XUANWEI