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HIV cases to hit new high

Jump partly due to more awareness, record numbers getting tested

By Lee Hui Chieh

THE number of people diagnosed here this year with the Aids-causing virus looks set to hit an all-time high, fuelled partly by record numbers getting tested.

In the first 10 months of this year, 382 residents here were found infected by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), 7 per cent more than the 356 cases uncovered over the same period last year.

The count for the full year is expected to exceed last year's, the Health Ministry (MOH) said, in a statement timed to coincide with World Aids Day today.

Last year, 423 residents here were diagnosed with HIV, the highest number in a year since the disease first surfaced here in 1985. The official tally of people here stricken with HIV now stands at 3,865, of whom at least 1,176 people have died.

Those who died did so after the infection developed into full-blown Aids - their immune systems were destroyed, which opened the door to other infections such as tuberculosis.

The true prevalence of the disease here has been put by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAids) at two to four times higher from undiagnosed cases and cases diagnosed abroad but so far unrecorded here. UNAids estimated 33 million people worldwide were living with HIV last year, of whom 2.7 million were infected last year.

MOH said the record number diagnosed here this year may not reflect an actual jump in the number of infections. More cases emerged because more people got tested. Some of the newly diagnosed were infected long ago, but went undetected as they had no symptoms, it added.

The laboratories were busier, processing 124,559 tests in the first nine months of this year - 22 per cent more than the same period last year. More people have sought anonymous tests too - 6,983 in the first 10 months of the year, or 4 per cent more than the same period last year.

The jump could have been prompted by growing awareness, more test sites, and fear of the law, said Madam Halimah Yacob, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Health.

Since April, it has been an offence for people who are HIV-infected to have sex without warning their partners or clearing an HIV test. The law also covers those who do not know their HIV status, especially those who lead a high-risk lifestyle - one which includes intravenous drug-use or sex with multiple partners.

Where only one clinic offered anonymous testing in 2005, the number stood at seven last month; Changi General and Singapore General hospitals began testing all willing inpatients for HIV this year.

MOH said that it is 'encouraged' by the increased awareness and uptake of HIV testing.

Calling this an encouraging sign too, Dr Lam Pin Min, the Health GPC's deputy chairman, said early detection allowed for early treatment and for the patient to be taught about protected sex; over time, transmission can be minimised.

Higher testing rates seem to have brought a 'noticeable slight improvement' in the number of patients who were diagnosed early, noted Associate Professor Leo Yee Sin, the Communicable Disease Centre's clinical director.

But testing cannot be the sole strategy, she said; more support is needed.

Social acceptance of people with HIV is still low. Prof Leo cited a recent Health Promotion Board survey in which half of those polled said they would not care for a family member with HIV.

'Such high level of rejection is a strong deterrence to testing,' she said.

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