

## More going for anonymous HIV tests: MOH

SOME 22 per cent more Singapore residents have been tested for HIV in the first nine months of this year, compared to the same period in 2007. In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said 124,559 HIV tests were done, compared to 102,490 between January and September last year.

There has also been an increase in anonymous HIV testing. The number of tests carried out in the first 10 months was 6,983, compared to 6,706 for the same time-span last year. Since last month, four additional GP clinics have also begun to

offer anonymous HIV testing.

Between January and October this year, there were 382 reported new HIV cases among Singapore residents. In comparison, there were 423 HIV cases notified for the whole of 2007. The Ministry added that the total number of notified HIV cases in 2008 will exceed that of last year.

"Although there is an increase in the number of notified HIV cases, it does not necessarily mean that there are more new infections," it said. "As people infected with HIV may not present with symptoms for several years, people who are newly diag-

nosed to have HIV may have acquired their infection several years ago."

The MOH said it "would like to continue urging those at risk of HIV infection and those who engage in risky sexual behaviour to go for regular HIV testing".

It urged employers to adopt a more pro-active approach in HIV prevention at the workplace. It highlighted several companies that have adopted HIV/Aids awareness programmes, among them Apex-Pal, UMW Equipment & Engineering Pte Ltd, Standard Chartered Bank and Shell Eastern Petroleum (Pte) Ltd.

## MANAGING HIV/AIDS

# Businesses not biting

Few Asian firms are involved in the fight against the disease

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HE CALLS himself a "very good salesman", but getting companies in Asia to help combat HIV/Aids is still an uphill battle, said Dr Peter Cowley, a country director at non-profit organisation Family Health International. Only 25 to 30 per cent of companies that he approaches agree to help.

In Asia, where HIV is spread mainly through commercial sex, men having sex with men or drug use, the stigma is such that businesses do not want to be associated with the disease, he said. By contrast, up to 60 per cent of businesses in Africa would say "yes".

Based in Cambodia for the past year, Dr Cowley draws on funding from the United States government to work with corporations in fighting the spread of HIV/Aids.

"The HIV epidemic is very different in Asia and Africa, so the business response is different," he explained. "The higher the incidence, the greater the responsibility for businesses."

In Africa, the HIV epidemic reaches across the population and is spread by heterosexual sex, so there is less stigma associated with it, making it "much easier to work with businesses," said the man who spent some 12 years (1996 to 2007) working in Uganda, where 6 per cent of the population, down from 30 per cent a decade ago, is infected.

One of his projects there included getting two companies to open their clinics for Aids treatment to the community.

"When I left Uganda, there were almost 1,000 people being treated by businesses. I'm very proud of that," he said.

"I could never imagine that happening in Cambodia," said Dr Cowley, partly because the government system for Aids treatment is much stronger, and also businesses do not see the effects of HIV on their employees. With slightly under one out of 100 adults in Cambodia HIV positive, companies rarely see an employee die from the disease, said Dr Cowley.

In Africa, businesses have

lost many employees.

Firms are motivated to help when the incidence rate is higher and work productivity is affected, he said. Businesses in India, Indonesia and Thailand are more involved, he said.

They also participate because it is "good for their image," added Dr Cowley. "(Companies) want to join the fight against HIV/Aids to enhance their corporate social responsibility exposure among politicians and the local community," he said.

Businesses can use their supply chain and efficient management styles to help, he said.

"For now, the response is led by governments and NGOs, but the business sector brings with it ways of doing things that happen to be more efficient," he said.

**(Companies) want to join the fight against HIV/Aids to enhance their corporate social responsibility exposure among politicians and the local community.**

Peter Cowley

Dr Cowley added that he is seeing more companies helping organisations to address the HIV issue. For instance, The Coca-Cola Company has offered to teach more than 20 non-government organisations battling Aids in Cambodia to better manage their finances. More importantly, business engagement helps remove the stigma from the disease.

"If a business is seen to be involved in HIV/Aids, it is easier for society not to shun those who are infected," he said.

Dr Cowley normally approaches companies that are well-managed and willing to contribute some effort — particularly if their employees, customers or community fall in the high-risk category. For instance, females who serve beer in Cambodia and Vietnam fall into this category, so the beer industry has been very responsive, he said.

In countries like Singapore, where the prevalence of HIV/Aids is low, Dr Cowley said he engages businesses by reminding them that HIV/Aids is "a small problem that can be big, and can spread rapidly if we're not careful".

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