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HIV spread: Not apt to use handshake analogy

I NOTED with interest last Saturday's report, 'Charity helps to spread the Aids message', about the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics and its efforts to reach transient workers in Singapore.

I applaud its work and would like to see more charities involved in this kind of outreach. I was dismayed, however, to see the picture that accompanied the story with the caption describing 'a handshake exercise, which shows how easily HIV can be transmitted through unprotected sex'.

Although the exercise is designed to illustrate how HIV can spread in a population through serial sexual contact among individuals, the use of the handshake analogy is unfortunate.

Studies of beliefs about the spread of HIV, including surveys I have done in Singapore among both lay members of the public and health professionals, show that people often harbour the belief that HIV can be transmitted through everyday social contact, which includes shaking hands.

In my work as a volunteer counsellor at the Action for Aids anonymous testing site, I have had individuals come to be tested, in one case with a child, based solely on their concern that someone they know has HIV and they might have contracted the virus through everyday social interaction with that person.

These beliefs persist, despite overwhelming evidence that HIV is transmitted only through blood contact, including sexual contact, sharing needles, vertical transmission from mother to child and so on.

The mistaken belief that HIV can be transmitted through everyday social contact is, unfortunately, still with us and is one of the factors underlying the fear people express towards individuals who are HIV positive and exacerbates the stigma they experience.

It is therefore unfortunate to use an analogy like the handshake to illustrate the spread of HIV. It would be better to find another analogy and, at the same time, strongly and explicitly emphasise that HIV is spread only through blood contact and not through everyday social interaction.

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