

# Medifund for HIV patients

The needy can get help with bills, but HIV drugs are still not subsidised

BY APRIL CHONG

THE Ministry of Health (MOH) has extended help to needy Singaporeans requiring treatment for HIV, following years of feedback from welfare groups and medical practitioners.

An additional \$8.5 million will be injected into Medifund, the national endowment to help the needy, to support this extension.

From next month, those with human immunodeficiency virus who face difficulty paying their medical bills, including payment for drugs, can approach Medifund-approved hospitals and institutions for help.

While the fund can fully pay for the patient's share of the bill, the actual amount of assistance provided will depend on the patient's financial and social circumstances, as well as the bill incurred, said an MOH spokesman.

In a statement yesterday, MOH said: "Despite the injection, the funds available to the Medifund committee will always be limited, and the committee will need to balance between the needs of HIV and non-HIV patients."

The ministry's spokesman added that there is insufficient information at present to gauge how many people will benefit from the Medifund extension.

Currently, patients can use only up to \$550 a month from their Medisave accounts for HIV treatment, an amount which welfare groups and health workers have

said is not enough for some.

A cocktail of locally approved anti-retroviral HIV drugs can cost \$1,200 a month.

Action for Aids, a voluntary group that supports and advocates for HIV patients, applauded the Medifund move.

Said its president, Professor Roy Chan: "Medifund will benefit individuals who are in the lowest-income bracket and those who are unemployed."

But he also expressed hopes

that the ministry can classify a few HIV medications as standard drugs to help those who do not qualify for Medifund assistance but struggle with high costs, "so that they too would be able to afford these life-saving medications".

Drugs classified as standard are cheaper, as they attract government subsidies.

There have been calls for HIV drugs to be subsidised, but MOH has said that there are no plans yet to do that.

Chairman of the Medisave advisory council Gerard Ee said that for now, HIV drugs cost more because most are still protected by patent rights. Once these rights expire, they will become cheaper.

Singapore remains the only developed country in Asia which does not provide free or subsidised treatment for HIV infection.

As a result, some patients here have resorted to buying medication from countries such as Thailand, which sell the same drugs at less than a quarter of the cost here.

Mr Ee, explaining why the move to include HIV treatment was made only now, said: "When the question of assisting with HIV treatment was first raised many years back, MOH had to say no.

"HIV was then still poorly understood, and drugs were costly with many side effects. We made the difficult decision to give a higher priority to assisting with other treatments instead."

In the first 10 months of last year, there were 378 new HIV cases, and MOH expects the figure for the whole of last year to remain similar to 2008's figure of 456.

Since 1985, about 4,300 HIV cases have been reported here.

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## CALL TO RECLASSIFY DRUGS

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## JUGGLING LIMITED FUNDS

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Ministry of Health statement