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A State of Denial

November 28th, 2008



New

HIV/Aids infections are on the steady increase in Singapore. As we mark the 20th anniversary of World Aids Day this Dec 1, we find out how we've allowed the disease an easy ride here. By Ramesh William, photography by Richard Lee

The statistics are frightening. And they will only get worse. Such is the specter of HIV/AIDS in Singapore, where numbers are spiraling upwards. Last year, there were 422 new cases—a record high—up from 357 in 2006, bringing the total number of people living with the disease here to around 4,000. Most troubling are the numbers of young people falling prey to this vicious disease; nine youths between the ages of 10 and 19 were diagnosed with HIV in 2007, the most ever in a single year since records began in 1985. And, one-eighth of newly infected victims are between the ages of 20 and 29.

Just as startling are figures released last month by the Health Promotion Board (HPB) after an exhaustive six-month survey, revealing that only one in two Singaporeans are aware that consistent condom use helps prevent the spread of HIV. The survey also uncovered widespread negative attitudes present within the general population—only half of the nearly 2,000 respondents would care for an infected relative, and a mere fifth would share a meal with someone carrying the HIV/AIDS virus.

It is blatantly obvious that a new, bolder approach is required from hereon in to deal with both the rising numbers of newly infected HIV/AIDS victims and attitudes towards sex and sexuality in Singapore. But what is shocking is that we collectively continue to bury our heads in the sand hoping that the situation will somehow sort itself out.

Prominent gay activist Alex Au laments the Government's approach towards the whole HIV/AIDS issue in Singapore. "The Government doesn't see HIV/AIDS as a priority, it simply is not on the agenda," he says. "They seem to have a huge reluctance to talk about sexual issues. They claim to be doing sex education in schools but they're doing nothing of that sort; the only education they provide is: Don't have sex. And when you start from there, where do you even start about talking about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), contraception and HIV/AIDS?"

Associate Professor Roy Chan, president of Action for AIDS (AFA), a volunteer-based welfare organization for HIV/AIDS in Singapore, says that as a society we are still not addressing sexual behavior in a forthright manner. "We continue to take the ABC approach when dealing with HIV/AIDS and that simply isn't effective enough to combat the scourge of this disease today," he says.

The ABCs of Condom Use

The ABC approach Chan is referring to is the "Abstinence, Be faithful and Condom use" message that government agencies, schools and the media adopt when dealing with the issue of HIV/AIDS here. Even then, he says that abstinence continues to be the main thrust of the HIV/AIDS prevention campaign. "The mainstream media are very reluctant to talk about safe sex; in fact, it's only in the last few years that they've started to talk about condoms and condom use," he says. "Even then abstinence continues to be the first line of defense."

Chan, who has been with the AFA since its founding in 1988, believes that Singapore cannot afford to take an outdated approach when dealing with the HIV/AIDS situation. He points to the "hyper-sexual" environment of today where the omnipresent media delivers a continuous stream of highly sexualized images. "Sexual behavior has changed so much with the advent of the Internet; the Internet has allowed people learn about sex and different types of sex from a young age, and also providing them opportunities to hook up. Therefore the message of abstinence has little impact today."

Chan is also quick to point out that teaching young people about condom use will not lead to an explosion of sexual activity among the young. “We’re not promoting promiscuity, as studies have shown that talking about condom use will not lead to early sex. And even if they do start having sex at a young age, they’re at least protected.”

Au too feels that condom use should be promoted above all other messages, “How do you tell a junior college class of non-virgins to be virgins?” He asks. “We shouldn’t mind them having sex, as we’ve already passed the problem of morality. The message should be: Don’t get pregnant and don’t get sick.” Interestingly, the condom use message is only aggressively targeted at two groups, namely sex workers and homosexual males. “Condom use in brothels is in the high 90s [percent] today after years of intensive, collaborative programs and workshops done with the commercial sex industry,” says Chan, pointing at the collective efforts of the AFA, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education. “Yet we somehow do not want to replicate this approach for the general public and that reason is simple: Fear.”

Conservative with a Capital C

There exists in Singapore a conservative core that will view the promotion of condom use as a state-sponsored green light for promiscuity. “Every few months there are letters in the press ranting about the ills of condoms and how their use should not be promoted,” says Chan. “This can’t be helped, but the newspapers are at fault by propagating these views when they provide them space within their columns. It seems we are loathe to use an evidence-based approach towards a lot of things; we seem to be giving more space to people who have no idea of the situation on the ground. Evidence has shown that our sex worker condom use program has been thoroughly effective, and there is no reason why it wouldn’t work for the rest of the population.”

Currently the Government runs HIV/AIDS awareness programs through the Ministry of Health and also through the Health Promotion Board (HPB). A spokesperson for the statutory board, however, declined to reveal how much money is spent solely on HIV/AIDS campaigns. On its part, the HPB organizes health fairs, exhibitions, workshops for youths (including the upcoming Love Amplified concert), runs programs educating employers on HIV/AIDS and the workplace and has also worked with the Media Development Authority and MediaCorp to develop *By My Side*, a drama serial highlighting the impact of HIV/AIDS. The Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan referred to the conservative core recently when he touched on the peculiar sensitivity in broadcasting the ABC message, saying “Many parents will be upset with such a campaign and we will be accused of promoting promiscuity. So, the general broadcast has a small ‘c’. On the other hand, the ABC campaign targeted at high-risk groups will have an enlarged ‘C’ as the main theme.”

Sex Education?

In such an environment, is it any wonder that schools throughout the island are reluctant to broach the topic of sex? While there is some sex education in some schools, most schools have none and students continue to learn about sex from a host of sometimes dubious sources.

Stefanie Bates, 16, a first-year science student at Serangoon Junior College, says her college offers no sex education classes whatsoever. “The only sex education I had was in Secondary 3 at Bowen Secondary School,” she says. “We learnt about STDs, HIV/AIDS and condom use. The main message however was to abstain from sex totally.”

Another 16-year-old, Grace Ignacia See, said there is no sex education at all at her school, the prestigious St Joseph’s International, but didn’t see that as a problem. “We’re pretty liberal, we know how to protect ourselves and we learn about the birds and the bees in biology class anyway,” said the bubbly International Baccalaureate student.

Also playing its part in providing conservative sex education is, unsurprisingly, the Roman Catholic Church. The Redemptorist mission based at the Novena Church prides itself as an order heavily involved with helping the downtrodden and youth, and their message is, yes, abstinence. “The church believes that sexual union should only be part of a loving marriage and the message for our teenagers is to abstain from sex altogether,” says Father Gerard Louis, 34, a Redemptorist priest who works closely with teenagers. “Even if you talk about condoms as a means of protecting one’s self, you have to remember that they’re not 100 percent safe.” He adds, “The church also views pre-marital sex as immoral and therefore cannot condone it.”

But perhaps the most important message Father Louis provides his young charges is to show them that it is possible to lead a non-sexual teenage life. “Everywhere you look today, you’ll find SEX, SEX, SEX,” he says. “This highly charged environment is not conducive to normal teenage life; youngsters today are pressured from every direction to have sex. And therefore the onus is on us to show them another way forward, one that is more fulfilling and less self-gratifying. Getting HIV/AIDS shows that there are consequences when you indulge in high-risk behavior. By all means go out clubbing, have fun and party as much you want but think before you do anything you might regret later on.”

Too Taboo

For both Alex Au and Associate Professor Roy Chan, sex education also involves lifting the veil of ignorance, for only then will sex and sexuality become less of a taboo topic, which in turn will help in the battle against HIV/AIDS.

“We need to thoroughly educate the general population on how HIV/AIDS is transmitted, how it can be managed and how to deal with HIV/AIDS carriers,” says Assoc. Prof Roy Chan. “Discrimination continues to be a very real problem for HIV/AIDS carriers—especially at the workplace—and if this continues, then

fewer people will talk about the disease, fewer will get tested; sending the disease underground. The last thing we need in Singapore is for HIV/AIDS to be a silent epidemic.”

Echoing the view is Au who feels we need to do more talking about sex and the sex industry here. “We have to break the silence about commercial sex,” he says. “People—married, single, widowed men—will have sex with prostitutes; we shouldn’t wrap it in shame and denial. And the only way to protect them is to make it a badge of honor to wear a condom.” He adds that people must not be made to feel queasy about handling or buying a condom, “We should be giving out free condoms on Orchard Road, or even handing out prizes there to people have a condom in their wallet.”

Gay Issues

Singapore’s record on matters concerning gays—another taboo issue—and HIV/AIDS is weak to say the least. Gold Poovan, who runs Fabulousasia, a LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual) portal, feels that law 377A (the sodomy law which criminalizes homosexuality) impedes the work of organizations like the AFA. “Bodies like Action for AIDS are unable to execute many of its plans and campaign due to this law,” he says. “Being gay still carries a social stigma, and many gay men are scared to go for HIV/AIDS testing.” After several years of plateauing off, HIV/AIDS numbers among gay men are once again rising sharply. Associate Professor Chan points to several reasons for this and they include factors like internet networking, multiple partners and very little access to proper sex and health education. Gold Poovan believes that the gay community has to help itself to sort out the mess by being proactive, sharing information and knowledge on the disease, and also through regular testing. “I’ve been testing every three months for the last eight years and constantly urge my friends to do the same,” he says.

The Way Forward

Au believes a three-pronged approach is required in order to reverse the spiraling numbers. “First, to break the aura of negativity surrounding the disease, we need to subsidize treatment immediately,” he says.

“Why? Because it gives hope. It’s not about the cost, instead it is a psychological fillip to all those who are not yet infected; that even when you become infected, you will still be recognized as a human being worthy of care and support rather than someone who will be condemned.”

He adds, “All this talk about testing at public hospitals is absolutely meaningless because why would people want to test themselves when they know they will be condemned without treatment upon their diagnosis. Secondly, to further dispel negativity we should decriminalize homosexual relationships; we have to de-marginalize this sector of society, as the gay community is highly suspicious of the government; the trust is just not there. And finally, we need a thorough sex education curriculum in schools.”

Like Chan, Au believes that the HIV/AIDS situation will have to hit rock bottom before it gets better. “The Government will only act if we have a thousand new infections a year, and that would be tragic as more lives would need to be lost before real change occurs,” he laments. “We are too full of ourselves to recognize problems building up under the surface.”

“The Government cannot run World AIDS Day like the much maligned Courtesy Campaign or the Speak Good English Campaign,” he says. “It can’t be run once a year for a couple of weeks. There has to be a sustained approach to the disease—all year round. Courtesy and poor grammar won’t kill you, AIDS will.”

I-S also talks to Dr. Ng King Kang, media personality and author of the recently published *Born This Way—the Changing Politics of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Singapore*, and his previous book *Rainbow Connection—the Internet and the Gay Community in Singapore*.

Why are HIV/AIDS numbers rising once again amongst gay men in Singapore?

As more AIDS awareness campaigns are being launched, more people are encouraged to get tested for AIDS, which could be one reason why the figure has increased once again.

What can the gay community in Singapore do to address this spike in numbers?

The issues have to be addressed openly. The community has to organize seminars and talks with government bodies or with respected organizations and personalities; this will give their cause more prominence and credibility.

Why is HIV/AIDS routinely seen as a gay disease in Singapore when, on the whole, there are more heterosexual infections?

There have been constant and continuous misconceptions from the start; misconception of the disease itself, and the way it is being spread. The way media has portrayed the whole HIV/AIDS-gay promiscuity link plays a part too.

What do you think of the level of HIV/AIDS awareness in general in Singapore?

The effort is there, but the effect is still weak, as people in general are still avoiding the topic.

Are we not aggressive in pushing the HIV/AIDS message across in Singapore? Are we too conservative in trying to push for a bolder social awareness program?

A bolder social awareness program needs to be supported and endorsed by heavyweight organizations. Most importantly, the message has to reach the general public and not be restricted to a niche or targeted group.

Do you think a lot of heterosexuals in Singapore still think they won’t catch HIV/AIDS because it a gay disease?

Yes.

Is the government doing enough to debunk the myth that HIV/AIDS is solely a gay disease?

Such efforts are never enough. That is why government officials should be extremely careful when they want to convey a certain message.

Do you think the Government's unwillingness to accept gays as part of mainstream society compounds the whole problematic perception regarding gays and HIV/AIDS?

Not entirely. How and what the general public choose to perceive and how such perceptions can be adjusted are the real challenges.

Do you think the Government needs to be more involved during World AIDS Day? What more should they be doing?

Any effort from the Government should be encouraged. They should be more aggressive and pro-active in such related campaigns and aim to correct wrong perceptions.

<!--[if !supportEmptyParas]-->This is not a homosexual or heterosexual issue. People should not only be encouraged to go for HIV tests, but the public has to be educated on how to accept HIV patients. It's a chicken and egg situation; if people are afraid to lose their jobs upon testing positive then no one will want to get tested. We should take another big step to encourage the nation as a whole to accept and help HIV/AIDS patients.

HIV/AIDS is also on the rise among the young in Singapore. Are students being taught enough about HIV/AIDS in sex education classes in schools?

<!--[if !supportEmptyParas]-->It is never enough. The truth is, not much about HIV/AIDS or sex (homosexuality or heterosexuality) is being taught. This is Singapore; sex education is not an examinable subject and thus very little weight is assigned to it.

Are more people becoming lax towards the threat posed by HIV/AIDS because anti-retroviral medications these days are more powerful and can thus dramatically extend one's lifespan?

I doubt so. No matter how powerful medication is, HIV/AIDS is STILL a deadly disease.