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Massive drop in nation's HIV rates

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SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS

MASSIVE DROP IN NATION'S HIV RATES

Malaysia 'ahead of the curve' with 5,700 cases, a major reduction of 34pc

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MALAYSIA has been praised for its efforts to end the spread of HIV/AIDS, efforts that have borne positive results.

Such is the success culled from the programmes and campaigns carried out that the number of new HIV infections dropped to 5,700 cases last year, a dip of 34 per cent from six years ago.

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) regional support team for Asia and the Pacific region director Eamonn Murphy said Malaysia had made significant progress in the fight against the epidemic.

"This is a major reduction, which is almost three times that of the regional average," Murphy told the *New Straits Times*.

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Ninety per cent of people living with HIV in Malaysia know they have the virus. FILE PIC

This, said Murphy, was another significant number as only two thirds of the people living with HIV in Asia and the Pacific were aware of their status.

He said Malaysia was "ahead of the curve".



"Malaysia has implemented a range of testing options for key populations, who are most at risk for HIV. The country is on the verge of eliminating cases involving transmission from mother to child.

"More than 70 per cent of pregnant women living with HIV are accessing services to prevent the onward transmission of the virus. Data from Malaysia indicates that the rate of mother-to-

child transmission of HIV is low."

He said Malaysia was one of only a few nations in the region being considered for formal certification of the elimination of mother-to-child transmission.

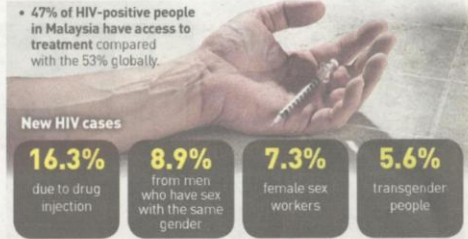
"Providing babies with the very best start in life is an important goal for UNAIDS, and Malaysia is showing this is possible."

On the most common causes of HIV infections, he said data showed that 16.3 per cent of new cases were due to the sharing of contaminated needles and syringes among drug addicts.

"In 2016, the AIDS Epidemic Model estimated that 41 per cent of adult new HIV infections were among people who inject drugs. However, through opioid substitution therapy and needle and syringe programmes, the government has made an effort to re-

HIV IN MALAYSIA: POSITIVE TRENDS

- From 2010 to 2016, new HIV cases have been reduced by 34% to 5,700 cases from 16,765
- 90% of people living with HIV in Malaysia know they contracted the virus.
- Data from Malaysia indicates that the rate of mother-to-child transmission of HIV is very low.
- More than 70% of pregnant women living with HIV have access to services to prevent the onward transmission of the virus.
- HIV contracted from injections declined to 37% due to opioid substitution therapy and needle and syringe programmes.
- 37% of people living with HIV are accessing life-saving treatment.
- 47% of HIV-positive people in Malaysia have access to treatment compared with the 53% globally.



INFOGRAPHIC: NST

verse the situation and the number of new infections among people who inject drugs has declined 37 per cent in the past six years."

The next highest category for new transmissions was men who have sex with other men (8.9 per cent), followed by female sex workers (7.3 per cent) and transgender people (5.6 per cent).

"Though Malaysia has taken big steps forward, data showed only 37 per cent of people living with HIV are accessing life-saving treatment. That is significantly lower than the regional average.

"Being on treatment has the double dividend of ensuring a person living with HIV is healthy and preventing the transmission of virus to their partners," said Murphy, who is among five speakers during the four-day 5th Asia Pacific Conference on Public Health organised by Academy of Medicine Malaysia's College of Public Health Medicine.

UNAIDS, he said, believed that the path to ending AIDS required strong partnerships between

governments and communities, focusing on innovative approaches for reaching populations most at risk and integrating HIV with other disease programmes.

He said such a potent mix could be applied to medical crises such as Hepatitis C, Zika and Ebola.

"Though we have experienced unprecedented success in the region, we are seeing what happens when we take the foot off the pedal. The region used to be a leader, but is now lagging behind global trends.

"Forty-seven per cent of all HIV-positive people in the region are accessing treatment. This is less than the 53 per cent of people living with HIV on treatment globally," he said at the conference.

He called on countries to re-energise efforts to reduce new HIV/AIDS epidemics since "the virus does not take a vacation".

"I am counting on Malaysia, which is one of 10 countries in the region, accounting for more than 95 per cent of new infections, to play a key role in relegating AIDS to the history books."