

Sex now the main cause of HIV

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It has overtaken use of needles by drug addicts

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PETALING JAYA: Unprotected sex has overtaken drug use as the main reason for HIV transmission in the country.

According to the Health Ministry's Global Aids Response Country Progress Report 2012, more than half (55.5%) of last year's new HIV cases were transmitted through sex while 38.7% of it were through sharing needles.

This appears to be more prevalent among women, as 87% of them are infected through heterosexual transmission compared to only 47% of men.

"Over the years, the number of people who contract HIV through injectable drug use or needle sharing has decreased," said infectious disease consultant physician Dr Christopher Lee, who was not surprised by the new development.

"This might be due to awareness and harm reduction programmes or the trend of younger people going for non-injectable designer drugs.

"However, we have also seen a steady increase in the number of people who were infected through sex," said Dr Lee, who is also the president of the Kuala Lumpur AIDS Support Service Society.

While the number of new HIV cases has been on a steady decline since 2002, this trend is worrying because HIV transmis-

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sion through sexual routes may lead to a more widespread epidemic, Dr Lee said.

"Sexual activities are more common among the general population compared to high-risk behaviour such as injecting drugs or vice.

"That is why we need to revisit the way we address the problem of risky sexual behaviour (such as multiple sex partners and unprotected sex) as soon as possible," he added.

PT Foundation chairman Hisham Hussein said that HIV prevention measures in the country had not caught up with current realities.

"There is still a lack of awareness among our community about HIV transmission through sex," said Hisham, whose foundation provides HIV education and care services.

Both Dr Lee and Hisham hope that more will be done to educate the public, especially the younger generation, about the ways to protect themselves from getting infected with HIV through sex.