

# Malaysian Launch of the Global Campaign on Children and AIDS

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY H.E. DATUK DR ABDUL LATIFF AHMAD

Deputy Minister of Health, Malaysia

Mr. Phillip O'Brien, UNICEF's Regional Director, Geneva,

Ms. Gaye Phillips, UNICEF Representative to Malaysia,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to speak to you today at the Malaysian launch of the UNICEF / UNAIDS Global Campaign **"Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS"**.

The Ministry of Health welcomes this Campaign for its singular mission to limit the impact of HIV/AIDS on children by facilitating partnerships between governments, UN agencies, civil society, private sector, the media and most importantly young people themselves. The Campaign will meet the needs of children by providing a child-focused framework for nationally owned programmes around four key areas, namely prevention of mother-to-child transmission; paediatric treatment, protection of children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS as well prevention of infection amongst adolescents and young people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

### The Ministry's Commitment to Children

The Malaysian Government responded to the HIV/AIDS epidemic as early as 19 years ago, immediately after the first Malaysian was confirmed HIV-positive in 1986. In the same year, the Ministry of Health put forward a proposal for a safe-blood programme. The programme took effect soon after and has significantly reduced the risk of HIV transmission through blood supply. Today, there are more than 50 designated screening centres in all general hospitals and most district hospitals throughout the country. These routinely screen all donated blood for HIV to ensure that children and their families are protected from HIV infection should they receive blood transfusion in the country.

We also recognized that it is morally imperative to provide our children with free treatment for HIV and its related opportunistic infections if such treatment helps HIV-positive children remain healthy and live normal lives, which include going to school and playing with their friends. Children with HIV became one of the country's first recipients for free antiretroviral therapy in the late 1990s. We have seen how such treatment has transformed the lives of our children and I understand that we have children in Malaysia as old as 14 years living with HIV since their birth. It is treatment and a nurturing environment that made this possible. My Ministry is fully aware that we must do all that we can for our children in this respect, and this includes advocating for the production of paediatric antiretrovirals. This is yet another reason why the Ministry of Health is standing side-by-side with UNICEF in its efforts to promote and mobilize positive action for the development of AIDS treatments specifically for children.

Another key programme implemented by the Ministry of Health in reducing HIV transmission risks to children is the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission Programme or PMTCT initiated in 1998. We are cognizant that saving children is essential but it is not sufficient. We also need to ensure that children have their mothers to ensure they are looked after and protected. PMTCT Plus is the Ministry's response whereby free antiretroviral treatment is extended to HIV-positive mothers beyond pregnancy and delivery so that they remain healthy to preserve their families and protect their children from the terrible tragedy of becoming orphans.

In view of the growing number of young people becoming infected with HIV, we started incorporating comprehensive HIV, and drug abuse prevention education through PROSTAR in 1996 or 'staying healthy without AIDS for youth'. PROSTAR is a community mobilization programme where youth between the ages of 13 and 25 are trained as peer mobilizers, energizers, motivators, and changing agents towards a 'healthy young generation'. As of end 2003, about 64,000 selective youth have been trained to lead their peers on issues pertaining to HIV/AIDS. To ensure that our youth sustain their wealth of energy, ideas and enthusiasms, we - as parents, leaders, decision-makers, professionals, and communities - need to work closely with them.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

### **An Epidemic Rooted in Intravenous Drug Use**

We recognise that the epidemic of HIV infection shows no respect for age, background or culture. Nor is it a crisis which affects individuals in isolation from one another. This is particularly true with regard to HIV infection and children. And in the vast majority of instances, HIV infection in an infant indicates that the infant's mother is infected, also, as might be the case, the infant's father and some of the infant's siblings.

The epidemic of HIV infection in children in Malaysia is one that is rooted in the problems of HIV infection in women, intravenous drug use, and male attitudes about sexual responsibility. The strategies for reducing the transmission of HIV to children are not unique. Aside from providing HIV- positive mothers with antiretroviral therapy via PMTCT, the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV also requires risk reduction strategies which address injecting drug use and sexual behaviours of men and women alike. HIV education is a critical component of this response.

The Ministry of Health encourages all agencies and NGOs working with drug users to ensure these communities receive appropriate culturally and linguistically sensitive education and counselling that will address male sexuality and foster male responsibility for safer sexual practices, including a range of options from abstinence and monogamy to barrier contraceptive methods. At the same time, education efforts must also target women who are the sexual partners of injecting drug users.

### **Moving Forward The IHM- UNICEF Collaborative Centre**

Under the leadership of our Prime Minister, YAB Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Ministry of Health is steadfast in continuing our commitment to our people and to contribute to the Campaign's targets. We know that the scale and impact of the HIV epidemic is enormous and that interventions need to be scaled up if we are to stop the spread of HIV and protect the children of today, for tomorrow's future.

To design a comprehensive and competent response to any emerging health issue in our society, research and analysis are vital. Health policy analysis is an area in which international cooperation and exchange has brought tremendous benefits to stakeholders. Our Institute of Health Management and UNICEF are now cooperating to set up a collaborative centre of excellence which will focus on emerging health policy issues of mutual interest. We wholeheartedly endorse this initiative as it is firmly rooted in brain gain. On the august occasion of the launch of UNICEF's global campaign *Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS* Campaign. I take pleasure in declaring the launch of the IHM- UNICEF Collaborative Centre for Health Policy Enhancement and Appraisal as a forerunner to our contribution to the Campaign.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

### **In Solidarity with UNICEF for the Global Campaign on Children & AIDS**

This Campaign is indeed timely. Children and young people have suffered enough. Let this Campaign be a call to all of us to take decisive and collective action to save the lives of our children. Without our joint commitment, we cannot achieve Millennium Development Goal 6– that is to halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015. Worse, we would doom our children to an impoverished future, or even death.

I commend UNICEF for its leadership in the area of HIV and AIDS through the *Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS* Campaign. We must all unite to reach young people. This commitment, once made, must be translated into concrete action. We need to strengthen partnerships. We need to deploy better skills and unleash all our energy and imagination. We need to communicate with children and young people in a language that works for them. We need to see results. So let us listen to our young people. Let us speak up to support them. Let us **Unite for Children, and Unite against AIDS**.

Thank you.