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## Calling for repeal of 377A, Action for Aids says law has negative impact on HIV prevention

By VICTOR LOH



TODAY file photo

Non-governmental organisation Action for Aids said that the repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code will help to control HIV and sexually transmitted infections not only for homosexual men, but everyone.

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SINGAPORE — Advocacy group Action for Aids (AFA) has lent its voice to the heated debate over a law here that criminalises sex between men, saying its repeal will significantly strengthen programmes to control the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexually transmitted infections in Singapore.

The repeal of Section 377 A of the Penal Code will help to control HIV and sexually transmitted infections not only for homosexual men, but everyone, said AFA president Roy Chan in a statement on Tuesday (Sept 18).

Section 377 A is discriminatory and stigmatises men who have sex with men as well as people living with HIV and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Aids), he said.

Stigma and discrimination are the main barriers to early HIV testing and treatment. “Many men who have sex with men fear that if they go for HIV testing, they will have to reveal they engage in illegal sexual activity,” said Professor Chan.

Section 377A has stifled HIV prevention campaigns for this group, in particular those who are not “out” and do not patronise gay-identified venues, he added.

Heterosexual and bisexual men at risk of HIV are also deterred from being tested as, in addition to the fear of testing positive, they may fear being suspected to be homosexual.

AFA's stance is not new. In a 2012 forum letter, AFA said that Sections 377 and 377A of the Penal Code "have been obstacles to targeted educational campaigns and our ability to reach out especially to young (male homosexuals) who are the most vulnerable".

The number of HIV cases in Singapore, especially among men who have sex with men, continues to rise, Prof Chan noted.

Last year, 408 new HIV/Aids cases, or 94 per cent, involved male Singapore residents, compared to 380 of such cases in 2016. Of the 408 cases, 261 identified as homosexual or bisexual.

Cases involving heterosexual male Singapore residents also jumped from 121 in 2016 to 132 in 2017. About 41 per cent had late-stage HIV infection when they were diagnosed, which worsens their prognosis, AFA said.

“Earlier diagnosis and treatment will mean better health outcomes for patients and lead to better HIV prevention and control of the epidemic in Singapore,” said Prof Chan.

Besides stifling research of gay and other identities and sexual behaviours here, Section 377 A has also made it difficult to reach young men who have sex with men.

“School-based sexuality programmes do not provide information that discuss homosexuality in a sensitive and unbiased manner. They do not include accurate or useful information on same-sex relationships and safer sex practices relevant to (male homosexuals),“ Prof Chan said. “This has resulted in young (male homosexuals) being especially vulnerable to sexually-transmitted diseases and HIV infection compared with their heterosexual peers.“

The debate over Section 377 A here was sparked by the Indian Supreme Court's decision earlier this month to strike down a similar law. Since then, petitions have been started by activists on both sides of the divide, religious groups have weighed in, and a deejay has filed a fresh legal challenge.

Responding to a question last Friday at a conference, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said that there is no discrimination against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community “at work, housing (and) education“ in Singapore.

He said it is in Singapore's DNA to be inclusive, but added: “However, on the issue of LGBTQ, it is also an issue of social mores and societal values.“