Breaking the social taboo of talking about sex

Ignorance is bliss but that is true only until it endangers one’s life. Last year, a project was launched to educate and empower the youth of this country on the subject still regarded in prudish circles as taboo: sex. How much have we achieved?

A reason to change

These statistics are a major cause for concern and should be the catalyst for a mindset change when it comes to sex among the young. It is clear that preventive measures and scare tactics such as public humiliation are no longer effective and the sooner we accept this fact, the better. Clearly, the focus should now shift from abstinence to safe sex.

Dr Mary Huang Soo Lee, vice-president of the Federation of Reproductive Health Associations, Malaysia (FRHAM) believes that one of the reasons for the rise in sexual activity among the young is the freedom that these people are experiencing in this era.

“In Malaysia, children now leave home for further education or to start work. Some young people have sex when they leave the nest,” she points out.

Huang, who is an advocate for sexual reproductive health, also attributes exposure to the different forms of media as well as the easy access to pornography for the higher sexuality among young people.

Peer to peer

In response to the increase in sexual activity among young people who are still ignorant – sometimes even oblivious – to problems such as sexually-transmitted infections, the government launched an awareness and education campaign last year to target undergraduates.

Dubbed the #SomebobyLikeMeChoose2Protect Campaign, condom manufacturer Durex teamed up with FRHAM, the Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO) and Anisec Malaysia, which is the world’s largest global youth leadership organisation, to spearhead this initiative. The campaign is the world’s first such programme that gets youth to educate their peers.

“Youth have the strongest voice and therefore they can play a major role in influencing their peers,” says Reckitt Benckiser Malaysia and Singapore marketing director Abhishek.

From left: Dr Mary Huang Soo Lee, vice-president of the Federation of Reproductive Health Associations Malaysia; FRHAM programme services head Lim Hwee Mian; and Abhishek Chukkarathu, marketing director of Reckitt Benckiser Malaysia and Singapore.
Empowering youths with peer sex educators

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Chuckarbutty. "It is only natural that we team up with Alesec Malaysia." Reckt Benckiser Malaysia and Singapore is the company that markets Durex condoms.

Dubbed peer educators, the undergraduates are hand-picked by Alesec's leaders from their respective universities and then trained by FRHAM and WAO on reproductive health issues, including positive body image, the dangers of STIs as well as the characteristics of a healthy relationship.

The peer educators are also given soft skills training involving cultural and religious sensitivities as well as the importance of being non-judgmental and non-discriminatory.

FRHAM programme services head Lim Hwee Mian adds that for this campaign, peer educators who have had experience in volunteer work are preferred as it is easier for them to interact with their peers.

"STI is a confidential matter and if the peer educator displays a judgmental expression during the confident process, the person confiding will most certainly clam up and hesitate to share any personal details in the future. This is why we need the peer to be non-judgmental, be willing to listen and provide the right information. Everyone has different values but these educators must put them aside and provide fact counselling and eventually let the person make a decision." The current campaign has attracted 131 local and international peer educators from several public and private universities, including Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Sunway University, Taylor's University, Universiti Teknologi Petronas in Tronoh, Perak, Curtin University in Miri, Sarawak and soon Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Each university has a peer director who oversee their peer educators.

Towards a safer environment

Condoms first appeared in Malaysia almost three decades ago but the usage of the protective rubber is still very low in this country.

According to Abhishek, the Durex Global Sexual Wellness Survey 2011-2012 revealed that in a study involving Malaysian youths aged from 18 to 24 years, almost 45% of those surveyed said they did not use a condom during their first sexual encounter. In addition, 55% of them did not use any form of contraception in their subsequent sexual encounters.

"It is not that condoms are not easily available but many people believe that they would not get infected as they lead a normal life. Some also have the wrong misconception that protective sex will get in the way of your sexual pleasure. Sexually transmitted infections are more than just HIV or AIDS," Abhishek points out.

He adds that another survey showed that one in five Malaysians has been infected by a form of STI during his lifetime. "It is not so much about the problematic STIs like HIV, the fact of the matter is the need for education is continuous as the temptation and risk are constantly there."

Lim of FRHAM says many young people believe since they only have one partner at a time and since they do not visit sex workers or prostitutes, practising safe sex is not a necessity. "There is a cultural belief that a condom is only to be used when one goes to a sex worker," she says.

She adds that FRHAM has always advocated safe sex to prevent abortion, which is a result of unprotected sex. "We teach young people how to put on a condom correctly. In the current Choose2Protect campaign, a specimen was used to educate them on how to put on a condom correctly as most of them were ignorant."

When asked whether the module for the campaign would evolve in time, Abhishek said the fundamentals would remain the same but there was always a need to broaden the scope of communication to ensure the message effectively and accurately reached the undergraduates.

He hopes the campaign will make inroads to all the universities in the country. "However, aside from that goal, we also want the quality maintained by ensuring there are constant follow-ups with the current universities."

Despite the fact that the campaign is still in its infancy, it has spread its wings to Singapore and many countries are interested to launch this campaign. However, Abhishek says there is a need to find the right partners from among the right agencies to emulate the current model used in Malaysia which has, according to him, borne fruit.

The younger generation of Malaysians today are exposed to more information than their parents or grandparents three or four decades ago. It is evident that the shielding tactics from the old days can no longer be used to protect the youths of today.

So while there is still hope for university students with campaigns like Choose2Protect, it is about time sex education be introduced in primary and secondary schools to enable children to make informed decisions before they indulge in risqué activities.

Spreading STI awareness: the fun way

Despite sex education being a serious topic, the Choose2Protect campaign peer educators are trying innovative ways to attract undergraduates in participating universities to have fun while learning about sexually transmitted infections (STI).

According to 19-year-old Aqilah Afraa, peer educator director at Curtin University Miri, among the strategies used to attract students at the campus to its first workshop on STI included organising flash mobs, live performances and parodies, sending out flyers, setting up booths, placing fact boards around the campus as well as talking to people to encourage them to attend.

"The result of that strategy saw more than 250 students attending the workshop which had speakers such as Matrin Fu Choon Kee of Sarawak General Hospital in Kuching talking to the undergraduates on the types, causes and symptoms of STI."

"For our STI awareness week, a follow-up to the workshop, we set up a booth and walked around talking to people about STI. Our target was to attract the interest of about 10% of the students in the campus and we exceeded it."

Aqilah says she was initially approached with the prospect of spearheading the Choose2Protect campaign at Curtin, the first institution of higher learning to do so, and was asked to rope in a few more people.

She found volunteers and then flew to Kuala Lumpur to attend the training course conducted by the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) and Federation of Reproductive Health Associations Malaysia (FRHAM). "Sex education has never been a part of the government school syllabus and as such, the training was definitely an eye-opening experience. I think I learnt much more than I wanted to," she laughingly adds.

For Grace Tean Hui Yee (pic), a keen interest in reproductive health prompted her to sign up as a peer educator for this programme. "I was a subject normally discussed among friends, instead of discussing with my parents or teachers. Since I was interested in sexual health and reproduction, I thought I could utilise it to benefit my fellow peers."

Despite having the training conducted by WAO and FRHAM, Tean admits that it was rather awkward initially having to approach people to talk about STI but she and the other peer educators got accustomed to it after a while.

"At each approach, we do a post-mortem to find out what were the problems that we faced and figure out how to tackle different types of students."

UM currently has 16 peer educators with an even distribution of international and local students. When asked how she ranked UM undergraduates on their level of awareness of STI on a scale of one to 10, Tean, who is the team leader, says on average its a six. "Most of them have heard of STI but don't exactly know what the causes and symptoms are or whether they are capable. Most of them have heard of HIV but not other STI," she adds.