THE THIN RED LINE

With this year’s International Aids Society Conference about to take place in Kuala Lumpur, we speak with two exceptional women who’ve been tireless in contributing to the fight against HIV/AIDS.

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There are heroes in every war, and one war in particular has been waged for over three decades. The enemy was identified in a laboratory during the early 1980s: the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV. HIV infection and its resulting consequence, AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), has killed over 30 million people worldwide and a similar number are living with HIV/AIDS today.

The disease has spread to every region around the globe, and Malaysia is no exception. At the forefront of the battle is Prof. Dr. Adeeba Kamarulzaman, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Malaya. She was also President of the Malaysian AIDS Council from 2006 to 2010 (and continues to serve as an Executive Committee member) and is Chairman of the Malaysian AIDS Foundation. In 2008, she established the Centre of Excellence for Research in AIDS (CERiA), the only HIV/AIDS-dedicated research centre in the country. "I feel that research is very important to medicine in general, but also to HIV/AIDS in particular. The field is ever-changing, and it allows us to understand the epidemic better," Adeeba explains.

One of the biggest issues in HIV/AIDS management is stigma and discrimination. "It has reduced a little since the early days, but not by much,"...
Adeeba sighs. She and her colleagues continue to struggle to introduce programs that have been shown to be effective. “This is especially true for marginalised communities, like sex workers, drug users and men who have sex with men,” Adeeba continues. “There are many policies and laws that prevent us from working with these affected groups in an open and large-scale manner.” She also notes that there is a severe lack of skills and interest amongst medical and public health professionals to get involved with HIV/AIDS. Could that be prejudice rearing its ugly head once more?

Adeeba is no stranger to the world stage, either, being involved with several regional and international organizations. In fact, she cites travelling all over the world as one of the perks of her job. “My work has also given me the opportunity to meet some very amazing people from all walks of life and from different professions and NGOs from all over the world, all committed to making the world a better place,” she says.

This year, the IAS, in partnership with CERIA, is holding the 7th IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention (IAS 2013) in Kuala Lumpur, for which Adeeba is Local Co-Chair. Each incarnation of the event attracts thousands of delegates from all over the world, and present as International Chair will be the President of IAS, Prof. Françoise Barre-Sinoussi, Director of the Regulation of Retroviral Infections Unit of the Pasteur Institute in Paris, France. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2008 along with colleague Luc Montagnier for their discovery of HIV. “The IAS strategy relies on several diverse priorities,” she explains. “However, I would like to reinforce dialogue and cooperation with researchers, health professionals and other decision-makers. This is something that I think will be more important in the coming years. In addition, I think we have to strengthen the role of women in research and participation in clinical trials.”

Given that this is the first time the IAS conference is being held in Asia, Françoise is planning on concentrating on the state of the HIV epidemic in the region. “I think the focus will be stronger on injecting drug users and men who have sex with men, as many Asian countries are facing a concentrated epidemic in these populations,” she says.

On the backs of such stalwart professionals, the future has a tentative brightness. “How could it be possible to turn away from HIV/AIDS research while people continue to get infected and die all around the world?” asks Françoise. “The AIDS epidemic is far from over. One thing I am sure of is that, even after I retire, I will pursue the battle for prevention, treatment and access to healthcare in general.”

Some believe that a cure or a vaccine may be on the horizon. It will not be easy to achieve, however. “Be prepared for hard work; there are no short-cuts,” Adeeba counsels to aspiring scientists and doctors. “But if you are passionate and focused, the satisfaction that you will get from being able to make a difference is immense.”

The 7th IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention (IAS 2013) will take place at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre from 30th June to 3rd July 2013. For more information, visit www.ias2013.org.