Vital for HIV children ‘to be detected, treated early’

SINGAPORE — More public education is necessary to ensure that the healthcare system can detect children infected with HIV, so as to get them treated early.

Without such detection — or what Dr Gareth Tudor-Williams (picture) of Imperial College London called “missed opportunities” — HIV would only present its obvious symptoms in an infected child’s teenage years.

But by then, it will be too late as the virus would have already damaged the child’s immune system and it is harder to treat the patient, the expert in HIV-infected children said in an interview yesterday.

According to KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital’s (KKH) head of infectious disease service, Dr Thoon Koh Cheng, the hospital is working with the Communicable Disease Centre “on transitioning care of our older HIV children to adult care (and are) in the exploratory phases of an integrated clinic”.

KKH is currently seeing 30 HIV-infected children. Last year, two new HIV cases were detected for those between the ages of zero and 14 and five new cases were seen for the ages between 15 and 19.

Dr Thoon said that managing teens who are diagnosed with HIV later gets trickier because not only do their lowered immune systems result in costlier treatments, their adolescence phase also means that “compliance to medications is a constant worry”.

Dr Tudor-Williams, who was in town at the invitation of Nanyang Technological University’s Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, visited KKH on Tuesday and praised the hospital for its care management.

However, he noted that having an integrated family clinic would better ensure that all family members get treated and not the child alone.

To detect HIV in children earlier, Dr Tudor-Williams said the stigma attached to the virus has to be reduced so that clinicians will be more comfortable talking to patients about HIV and getting them tested. People will also be more willing to go for voluntary testing.

But he added: “HIV testing in children has to be handled sensitively … It is important to be honest with the parents from the start.”