

Why neutral stance on homosexuals

Sexuality programme gives information ‘in a non-judgmental way’

By SANDRA DAVIE & TAN DAWN WEI

THE Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) sexuality education training manual suggests that homosexuality should be viewed in “neutral” terms, rather than positive or negative.

It goes on to explain why: “Homosexuality is perfectly normal. Just like heterosexuality, it is simply the way you are. Homosexuals also form meaningful relationships, and face the same emotional issues that heterosexuals do.”

It was this statement that raised the ire of four new leaders of Aware – president Josie Lau, honorary treasurer Maureen Ong, honorary secretary Jenica Chua and committee member Lois Ng.

At their press conference on Thursday, Ms Ong, a mother of three, said it was the sexuality education programme that made her worry about what Aware was teaching children. “I’m concerned. I’m a parent. It’s shocking,” she said.

It spurred her to join Aware, and be part of its takeover last month.

But former Aware president Constance Singam said yesterday that the programme was a comprehensive one, designed to provide teens with information in a non-judgmental way. “We do not teach kids to impart judgment, we just give them information,” she said. “Their values come from their family, and their religion. Words like ‘homosexuality’, ‘sexy’ and ‘virginity’ are neutral words because Aware is non-judgmental”.

The sexual education programme started in 2007 and has reached about 12 secondary schools, run for small groups of students selected by their teachers to attend. To date 500 students, mostly girls, have attended the workshop, which comprises two three-hour sessions. It was only recently offered to boys.

The programme was developed over a

year in consultation with parents, youth social workers, teachers, and academics from a range of institutions. Mrs Singam said it was put through a rigorous process of testing before being taken to schools.

It was run by volunteers who were selected after an interview. Before they could conduct the programme, they had a three-day training workshop including testing, two shadow-training sessions, and a number of assisted workshops.

Each three-hour workshop consists of games, role-play, discussions, and a presentation, covering topics such as sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, contraceptives, negotiation skills to resist peer pressure and building healthy relationships.

Mrs Singam also explained that Aware believed in a comprehensive sex education programme that did not teach only abstinence.

“International reports, including the 2005 American Psychological Association report, have shown that only comprehensive sex education is effective in protecting adolescents from pregnancy and sexually transmitted illnesses,” she said.

“Just look at the statistics, the huge increase in pregnancies, abortions in Singapore is worrying. About 1,300 abortions were performed on women below the age of 20 in 2005 and also in 2006. From 283 cases of sexually transmitted infections in 2002, it hit 657 in the first nine months of 2007.”

She stressed the need for young people to have reliable information.

“Kids sometimes get very misguided information from the Internet and their peers. We want to empower teens and young women with the right facts and the knowledge to make informed decisions, to understand the consequences of their decisions and to protect themselves.”

Aware trainers who conduct the workshop said they volunteered because they believed in what the organisation aimed to do through the programme.

One of them, Mrs Mathangi Kumar, who has two daughters, said the topic of homosexuality was only a “very small part” of what the workshop covered.

She said that whenever the topic came up in her sessions, she focused on getting the youngsters to realise there is a diversi-



Aware's past president Constance Singam (left) and founding member Margaret Thomas were among those who spoke on the old guard's stance yesterday. ST PHOTO: MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN

ty of views on such issues and to respect them even if they disagree with them.

Dr Carol Balhetchet, director of Youth Services in the Singapore Children's Society, said teachers, counsellors and parents should not avoid the topic of homosexuality. “It’s the reality for teens these days,” she said. “There are gays all around them. What do we do? Ignore it and not talk about it?”

“That’s dangerous – because then your child will learn about it from their friends and the Internet.”

She agreed that when broaching the topic, it is important to avoid making value judgments.

“Just present them with the facts, what it is, what do the laws say about it, what different religions say about it, encourage them to talk about it to their parents and then let them make up their own mind based on their own value system.”

Two fathers whose daughters attended Aware's sexuality education programme

in school had differing views on the group's approach. One said he was concerned when his daughter told him about the discussion on homosexuality.

“They didn’t exactly say it was wrong, so I was worried that my daughter came away thinking that it was acceptable,” he said. “Organisations that run sex education programmes must be careful about giving such messages to teens who are at an impressionable age.”

But the other father felt that the Aware trainer handled the topic well.

“The trainer discussed how people view homosexuality differently, which led my daughter to quiz me on how exactly our religion views it,” he said.

“I thought it was a healthy approach to a very difficult topic. But the last thing I would want is for issues like this to be ignored.”

The Education Ministry said yesterday that in addition to its sexuality education programme, schools can collaborate with

Sexual education programme’s aims

What it is: Aware's Comprehensive Sexual Education programme is aimed at helping young people develop a healthy and positive attitude towards sexuality and empowering them in their decision-making.

Who it is for: Girls aged 12 to 18 in schools and special homes. Aware recently developed a programme for boys as well. Workshops are limited to 25 participants. Parents can sign opt-out forms if they do not want their children to attend. The sessions are held after school hours.

How it is done: Two three-hour sessions are conducted by certified trainers. Topics covered include information on sexuality; sexually transmitted infections; HIV and contraceptives; how to resist peer pressure to engage in sex; clear communication skills; and evaluating one's needs and wants. Games, role-play and discussions are employed to make the sessions more engaging.

What sex education is available in schools: The Education Ministry's sex education programme aims to arm students with information and skills to make informed decisions.

It is premised on the importance of the family and respect for various ethnic and religious communities' values, and that parents bear the main responsibility for their children's sex education.

Sex education in schools is taught throughout curricular subjects like health education, science, civics and moral education. Schools are also encouraged to engage the services of other experts and agencies.

Centre manager sacked for insubordination, says vice-president

By DEBBIE YONG

AWARE'S new vice-president Charlotte Wong yesterday explained why the services of Aware centre manager Schutz Lee were terminated on Thursday evening.

She said Ms Lee had not been performing her duties well, had disclosed information without authorisation, and had committed acts of “insubordination” on several occasions.

Ms Lee was handed her termination letter by Ms Wong at about 7.30pm on Thursday. She has been an Aware member for more than 15 years. She started work at Aware in February under a

short-term contract slated to last until the end of May, after which she was to work part-time.

On April 10, Ms Wong said, reporters managed to contact the new exco members very shortly after the election results. This led her to suspect that Ms Lee had released their numbers to the media.

“How did they get hold of our phone numbers? When we signed up as members, the information should be kept confidential,” she said. She said she raised the matter with Ms Lee the same day.

She also told Ms Lee that all matters involving external parties should be handled by the president, as stated in Aware's constitution.

On April 14, Ms Wong said that Ms Lee had gone to the police regarding a suspicious powder-filled envelope sent to the centre.

Though the powder turned out to be baby powder, Ms Wong said that she was “astounded that for something so serious, she goes off on her own without telling us”.

“Especially when I had already told her that all matters with external parties should go through myself or the president,” Ms Wong said. “That’s insubordination isn’t it? And if you disobey your employer, what are the consequences?”

She also claimed that Ms Lee had not been doing her job maintaining the organi-

sation's electronic communications. She cited two incidents, on April 17 and on April 23, when president Josie Lau was unable to access her Aware e-mail account as the password had been changed.

Ms Wong also took issue with the numerous e-mail messages she had been getting from new members on why they had been given student memberships, which cost \$5, after signing up and paying for \$40 ordinary memberships. Ms Lee was supposed to have rectified that error.

Ms Lee had also sent out two issues of Aware's electronic newsletter to members without Ms Lau's prior approval.

“After all this, I think this is unacceptable in terms of job performance,” said Ms

Wong.

On why she did not respond to media queries on the termination on Thursday night, Ms Wong said that she did not want to “broadcast the issue”.

Citing her years of working in human resources, the consultant with ExxonMobil said: “If you have an appraisal with your boss, it’s always one on one. It has never been done like this but she has chosen to go out to the press.”

A replacement has been found for Ms Lee. Former civil servant Magdalene Teo, 40, will likely take up the post of centre manager from Monday. Her contract is being drafted, Ms Wong said.

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Excerpts from Thursday’s press conference by new leaders

‘FEMINIST MENTOR’ OR COUP LEADER?

SENIOR lawyer Thio Su Mien, 71, revealed on Wednesday that she became disturbed when she noticed what she felt was Aware's promotion of lesbianism and homosexuality. She then began urging women she knew to join Aware and reset its focus on women's issues. New Aware president Josie Lau is married to Dr Thio's nephew, Dr Alan Chin, who is an affiliate member of Aware. Like several of the women on Aware's new executive committee, Dr Thio attends the Anglican Church Of Our Saviour in Margaret Drive. She described herself as a “feminist mentor” to working women, and at Thursday's press conference, was pressed on her role in the leadership grab at the Aware AGM.

Q: Dr Thio, why didn't you run for a position in the exco? You have such strong views about everything and you are speaking on their behalf.

Dr Thio: No, I'm speaking on my behalf. **Honorary treasurer Maureen Ong:** I want to make a point clear. We are not puppets of Dr Thio. We are mature, thinking professional women. We joined Aware to stand for a cause that we believe in.

Q: Sure, but I still don't understand why Dr Thio didn't run for an exco position, someone with her qualifications and background?

Exco member Lois Ng: Honestly, Aware is too small an outfit for her. It's for newbies like us.

Q: But (was the leadership takeover) orchestrated, planned beforehand? Was she the organiser?

Aware president Josie Lau: I will place on record, no.

Dr Thio: No, no, it depends on what you mean by organiser. Actually it's kind of flattering, in a way...

What I did was that I put down, collected info, I sent to different people. So it's up to you. You want to join? You go and join. If you want me to help you, I will help you.

So I'm quite happy with that because you see, you suddenly discover that networking helps, that if there's a view we want, we network through the e-mail. And I certainly have come out from the Jurassic Age because I'm quite proficient with e-mail and it is an efficient way of educating people.

Q: Dr Thio, are you implying that you have thought of it for a long time, that you planned all this?

Dr Thio: No, no. No, no, I have better things to do than this, okay? I have to earn a living, I work and I do a lot of other things. But the idea came I think round about when (Aware held an AGM and only 29 people attended). So I said, what's happening?

HOW JOSIE LAU JOINED AWARE

AWARE president Josie Lau joined Aware in January after her husband's aunt, Dr Thio Su Mien, suggested it. Aware member Claire Nazar also asked her to join and help with Aware's marketing. Mrs Nazar was elected president at the AGM on March 28, but resigned after 11 days. Ms Lau was then appointed to the post. Asked why she joined Aware, this is what she said.

Aware president Josie Lau: I've been married to the (Thio) family for 20 years. We meet occasionally once or twice a year, during Christmas, Chinese New Year. And she (Dr Thio) has been nagging me for the last 15, 20 years: 'Are you doing something in the public, contributing back to the community? You have such a good life, everything, you're jet-setting all the time. When?' And I wasn't ready.

But now my kids are much older, I feel that it's time for me to contribute and when last year I personally was very, very taken aback by the (choice of the movie) Spider Lilies for Aware's premiere gala, that set me thinking: What actually is Aware doing?

I did not join Aware thinking that there will definitely be a new exco. I just knew that I was joining Aware and if I stood for election and got elected, this is the area where I think I can contribute.”

A CHURCH CONNECTION?

SIX of the women in Aware's new exco attend the Anglican Church Of Our Saviour in Margaret Drive. At the press conference, they were asked if there was a “church connection” in the power grab at Aware.

Honorary treasurer Maureen Ong: No, the answer is no. We all attend Church Of Our Saviour. We joined the church at various different times. I didn't know any of these people until I got on to the committee.

Yes, we all attend the church. And really I only know Su Mien because I was invited by one of the people who attended her Tanglin fellowship to attend a talk that was given by Su Mien. And that was when I first met her. But I don't move in her circles. I'm a working mother. I don't move in her circles.

And I don't call Su Mien up. I didn't even know her mobile phone or home number until we got onto this committee and really, because of all the problems we're having – the death threats and so on – we went to our mentor to ask if she could help us in what we're trying to achieve. And that was only after we were appointed.”

She added that although Dr Thio held regular fellowship meetings at her home, she did not attend them because she had her own church cell group, which did not include any of the women on the Aware exco.