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OPENING ADDRESS BY MR CHAN SOO SEN, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE & MINISTRY OF HEALTH), AT THE OPENING OF THE 5TH ASIA & PACIFIC NURSES (ASPAN) CONVENTION ON WEDNESDAY, 14 NOV 2001 AT 9.00 AM AT MANDARIN HOTEL, MANDARIN COURT (4TH FLOOR), ORCHARD ROAD

Good morning

Ms Kathleen Fritsch

Regional Advisor for Nursing

World Health Organisation Office for the Western Pacific Region,

Ms Sally Shaw

Consultant for Nursing & Health Policy

International Council of Nurses

Miss Susie Kong

President of the Singapore Nurses Association

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very happy to join you this morning at the opening of the 5th Asia & Pacific Nurses (ASPAN) Convention.

I would, first of all, like to extend a very warm welcome to our guests from overseas. I hope you will have an exciting three days of professional update and networking. I also hope you will find

time to do some sightseeing and shopping, as well as to sample our festive mood. You may know that today is Deepavali, the Festival of Lights for the Hindus.

I was formulating this speech some two weeks ago when I was campaigning for the General Elections. I therefore did not have the benefit of my Ministry of Health colleagues giving me professional advice and data. However, I was observing my Party Branch at work during the General Elections. I must say we put out a very good and intensive campaign. My heart goes to the many comrades who work silently behind the scene to make things happen.

There were those who ran the mail room, sort out the candidate's brochures, votes appeal cards, and rally invitation cards by names and addresses. There were those who walked the constituency to deliver those materials on three occasions to my constituents. There were a few who decorated and wired the campaign broadcast vehicle, and drove it a few rounds in the constituency everyday. We had a few enthusiasts running a small kitchen, ensuring all of us were well supplied with food, especially the herbal tea and fragrant coffee. We also have a small team who put up, and regularly maintaining our campaign posters. Another dedicated group of campaigners followed me for walkabout and cycleabout. They worked without asking for rewards and without seeking publicity. Without them, there would not have been a good campaign.

As I saw my comrades, my heart went to our nurses. They are the silent workers behind the success of any healthcare system. We are often impressed by the beautifully designed new hospitals and specialists' clinics, as well as the high tech and state-of-the-art equipment. We read about the research findings and new procedures by our best specialists and researchers. All these are excellent. However, without the group of silently working nurses who work in the background, perform all the day-to-day functions, without seeking the glare of publicity, without asking for gratitude and commendation, there would have been no healthcare system that serve the people well.

This has been the tradition and spirit since the days of Florence Nightingale. She, with a group of nurses, left the comfortable setting of England to tend to the sick and wounded in the Crimean War in the 1850s. They did so without being asked, despite the lack of professional recognition and proper equipment. Their work saved the lives of thousands. Their work more than illustrated the fact that while doctors put the patients on the road of recovery, it is the nurses who bring the patients down the road towards recovery.

Things have changed a lot since the days of Florence Nightingale. Nurses' training have been improved, and professional recognition institutionalised. The jobs of the nurses have diversified. We see nurses today performing a wide range of jobs, ranging from primary health, to home nursing, to accidents and emergency, to very specialised jobs in operating theatres. People do not stop to say thank you. But in your hearts, you know that without your dedication to ensuring basic tasks are performed well, your patients' road to recovery would have been longer and more difficult.

As the theme of this Convention, "Exploring the web of nursing: integrating touch and tech", I am sure you will be exchanging notes and experiences on the very many new development in terms of 'tech'. However, let us always remember the 'touch' element. For one thing remains unchanged.

Nursing is a vocation and a calling. You need special passion and dedication to do what you do everyday, feel proud and good about doing them. Despite advancements in 'tech', you may always be on the frontline to witness pain and suffering, to handle anxious, frightened and even angry patients and relatives. Your work will be full of stress, both physical and emotional. Your satisfaction comes when you see patients recover and their relatives won over by your 'touch', through your professionalism and dedication. Even if some patients do not managed to recover, you can still help them to leave in peace and dignity. To most of our patients, it is your 'touch' that makes them feel the difference between a good healthcare system and a mediocre one.

As I salute my silent workers in my Party Branch after the General Election, I also salute our nurses who are our healthcare programmes' silent workers at this ASPAN Convention. You are always at the frontline of our healthcare system, doing vital work many take for granted. However, you are the first people patients and relatives turn to for support and help. This will not change in the new millennium.

I wish you a very successful and fruitful Convention. It is now my pleasure to declare the 5th ASPAN Convention open.

Thank you.

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