

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE NEW GLENEAGLES HOSPITAL
ON SATURDAY, 6 APRIL 1996 AT 5.00 PM**

It's now nearly forty years since the Gleneagles Hotel became the Gleneagles Nursing Home. Although in 1958 there were a number of private hospitals, these were run by religious and welfare groups. When Gleneagles Hotel was transformed into first a private nursing home and later a hospital, it became one of the first ventures into private health care.

Since then, private health care in Singapore has blossomed. Private health care together with the medical service provided by the public hospitals has given Singapore a good reputation in health care service in the region. This helps us to attract foreign companies to base their regional staff here as we can provide quality health care service to them and their families. Many people in the region also come to Singapore for medical treatment.

Singapore as a medical hub for the region is testimony to the quality of our medical care. We are proud of this and the government will continue to promote Singapore as a medical centre by creating the right environment for medicine to be practised here. But more important than being a medical hub, we are proud of the quality of medical care Singaporeans are able to enjoy at

affordable rates. The health statistics of Singaporeans tell us that the medical service has looked after us well. A Singaporean can, on the average, expect to live till he or she is more than 76 years old. This is as good as the life expectancy in the US and the UK. An even more important measure is the number of newborn babies that survive. In 1970, more than 20 babies in every thousand births did not survive. Today, the number has dropped to 4, lower than the infant mortality rate of advanced countries like Sweden, UK and the US.

Although most Singaporeans use the medical services of the public hospitals, we must also recognise the contributions made by private sector hospitals and specialists. Private hospitals play a dual role, first, in contributing to the health care of Singaporeans, and second, in helping Singapore achieve the position of a medical hub. In addition to treating Singaporeans, the supplementary bed spaces and medical facilities they provide to overseas patients ease some of the demands on the public hospitals so that the public hospitals can more effectively look after Singaporeans.

The growth of the health care industry has, however, had the effect of attracting many able doctors and specialists from the public hospitals to enter private practice. This is the understandable effect of market forces, even though the public hospitals have tried to offer competitive wages for senior doctors. I can understand the attraction of private practice for some senior doctors. But I urge senior doctors in private practice to consider seriously the schemes worked out by the Health Ministry for specialists to volunteer one or two half-days a week in public hospitals to train young doctors and care for some of the patients.

The Ministry of Health is looking into enhancing its Visiting Consultant Scheme to encourage more senior specialists in the private sector to return to contribute more time to teaching, research and the training of our future specialists. In return, the visiting specialists will be given admission rights in public hospitals which have the facilities to deal with their more complicated cases. These are good schemes and I hope senior doctors will give of their knowledge and skill to young doctors. Patients in the public hospitals will have the benefit of the knowledge and experience of these specialists whom they could otherwise not afford. A whole new generation of doctors would learn from the hands of masters and ensure Singapore's continued role as a medical centre for the region.

Good health care will only be ensured with a partnership between the private and public sector to provide a range of facilities in the different price ranges. Private hospitals will offer an alternative for Singaporeans who prefer non-public hospitals. But public hospitals will always be available to provide top-rate healthcare as well as subsidised B2 and C class wards. The Government has also introduced many schemes for health financing to make sure that a person can meet his or her medical needs, as well as the needs of close family members. The cost of health care is an emotionally charged issue, not the least because the payment of such bills comes at difficult times for families facing the severe illness or death of a loved one.

It is in this context that the Government took great exception to the slurs made by a political party in its publication and by its leader in Parliament. We know very well the emotional feelings this political party is trying to stir up about whether health care costs for the poor are subsidised, especially when it is

expecting a General Election around the corner. As responsible leaders, we must not allow something as important as health care to be kicked around as a political football. Certainly, the Government will not allow innuendoes that the Government is not subsidising the health care of the poor to be spread and get believed as fact. It is for this reason that we have asked for a Parliamentary Select Committee to decide whether the opposition party's accusations are true or not. All political parties are represented on the Select Committee together with a Nominated MP who is a medical doctor. Anyone can make a representation to the Select Committee. The Government will open itself to scrutiny, and the Select Committee will in turn scrutinise the claims made by the opposition party.

We want to get to the bottom of this serious accusation that the Government is not subsidising health care for the poor. The truth can be easily verified. And I would want the facts established clearly in front of all Singaporeans.

I have come today to officially open the new Gleneagles Hospital. It is to show support for the private health care industry which has made a valuable contribution in Singapore. You and your counterparts in private health care must continue to play your role in the Singapore community. In your drive for medical excellence, I would urge you to keep close tabs with Singaporeans. If you begin to price yourselves beyond what Singaporeans can afford and are willing to pay, you will lose the important community role which you now have.

It gives me great pleasure to open Gleneagles Hospital and to thank the Gleneagles Group, on behalf of the Singapore Cancer Society and the Singapore Children's Society, for the donation of \$250,000 to each of these Associations. Your generous gift, in response to my suggestion that you do something for charity, is a laudable way to mark this happy occasion. I now declare open the Gleneagles Hospital.

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