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**SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND
MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE NEW HORIZON CENTRE
AT LORONG 2 TOA PAYOH ON SATURDAY, 16 MARCH 1991 AT 11.00 AM**

A very goodday to all of you.

We all know that the speed of change in Singapore is rapid. Sometimes we may be surprised by the change. We may go overseas for a while and return to find familiar landmarks gone. In the area of ageing, the change is also occurring very fast. In Singapore today, eight working persons support one aged person. The ratio of elderly to working people will decrease by about a quarter every ten years to 1:6 in 2000, 1:4.4 in 2010, 1:3 in 2020 and 1:2.2 in 2030. Look at it another way, France took 115 years for the elderly population to double from seven per cent to 14 per cent. Japan will take 25 years to double her elderly population in 1996. By contrast, Singapore will need only 20 years to double her elderly population in 2020.

Some years ago, MCD received a complaint that an elderly lady was being abused by her children. My officials investigated and found that this old lady was forgetful and hard of hearing. She would put stale food in the refrigerator. She kept telling her friends that her daughter-in-law was not feeding her even though she would drink a bottle of chicken essence daily. Her daughter-in-law would get irritated and would shout into her ear to tell her not to put stale food in the fridge or to remind her that she had eaten. A concerned neighbour misunderstood the frequent shouting to be verbal abuse of the old lady and lodged a complaint.

This is not an isolated incident. I have heard of other distressing stories. There was the case of an elderly man who would leave the home at various times, even at night. He would wander about, sit in the middle of the road oblivious to traffic and would lose his way getting home. Another elderly person would get angry for no apparent reason and smash the bird cage of his son. Yet another person had problems with his wife who objected to his father undressing himself in the hall and defecating.

All these people are suffering from senile dementia. What is senile dementia? It is a condition characterised by a progressive deterioration of memory, intellectual functioning and personality. In the early phase, the aged person has difficulty remembering recent events like what he has eaten but retains a good memory of the past, like what happened in his youth. As the illness progresses, the person may become disoriented and does not know the time of day or whether he has eaten. He fails to recognise familiar people and places and may lose his way and wander about. Intellectual impairment is seen in an inability to add and subtract and solve routine household problems. Personality changes include apathy, social withdrawal, angry outbursts, suspicion and a lack of inhibition in behaviour causing embarrassment.

Senile demented persons suffer greatly from their illness. But it is their family members, who care for them also suffer most. They suffer from severe stress and strain, even embarrassment in caring for the demented person, and in seeing their beloved father or mother degenerate.

In UK, USA and Spain, five per cent to eight per cent of the elderly 65 years and older suffer from senile dementia. For Singapore the prevalence is comparatively low today, about 1.8 per cent. In absolute numbers, the projection shows that the 3,050 cases of senile dementia in Singapore today will increase to 4,100

in 2000. But it will increase three folds to 12,400 in 2030.

Studies have shown that the prevalence of senile dementia increases with the age of the elderly population. The distribution of dementia in Singapore shows a bulge in the 70-74 years age group and in those above 80 years of age.

Is there hope for the senile demented? Is there help for them?

I am told that prevention is not possible in a majority of cases. However in some, early detection and control of hypertension as well as a diet low in cholesterol and fats can reduce the chances of getting multi-infarct dementia.

The setting up of day care centres for senile demented people like this New Horizon Centre is a help for both the demented person himself and his carers. A day care centre is a community-based facility which cares for the aged person in the centre during the day where he is looked after by specialist staff like psychologists, occupational therapists and social workers. He returns to his home in the evening to be with his family. In this way the person is not separated from his family, home or familiar surroundings. Yet family members can have a respite during the day and need not resign from their employment to look after the senile person.

Day care centres also provide support for carers by providing education and counselling through group meetings and discussions. At these meetings, the carers are able to express their feelings, exchange ideas and learn how others cope.

I congratulate the Singapore Council of Social Service for setting up the New Horizon Centre. It will be the start of more help for the aged suffering from senile dementia and for their

carers. Such day care centres are a good alternative to putting the aged in an old folks home and I hope to see more such centres being set up by other voluntary groups.

The setting up of such day centres has the support of the Government. The Government is helping to fund the operation of New Horizon Centre. It has also set aside funds for the setting up of another such centre for the aged suffering from dementia. The Ministry of Health is also providing professional advice and support to the New Horizon Centre.

I congratulate the Management Committee of New Horizon Centre for their hard work in setting up this Centre. I am confident that with your belief in what you do and the support of the Singapore Council of Social Service as well as the support of individuals, groups and organisations in Toa Payoh, you can be assured of New Horizon Centre's continued success.

It is now my pleasure to declare open the New Horizon Centre.

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