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ADDRESS BY MR YEO CHEOW TONG, ACTING MINISTER FOR HEALTH,  
AT THE OPENING OF THE NATIONAL SKIN CENTRE  
ON FRIDAY, 14 APRIL 89 AT 5.00 PM

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**BETTER MANAGEMENT OF SKIN DISEASES**

Today's ceremony marks a new milestone in the development of dermatology in Singapore. It represents my Ministry's commitment towards developing Singapore into a centre of medical excellence. The opening of the NSC is part of my Ministry's plan to improve all aspects of medical services in Singapore. Our concern today, is not only with diseases that cause the greatest number of deaths such as cancers and heart diseases, but also with those diseases which are less devastating but are nonetheless equally debilitating or distressing to the sufferer. Skin disease is one such example.

**DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIALITY CENTRES**

The NSC is our second speciality centre. Last year saw the opening of our first speciality centre, the National Blood Centre. Such institutions allow us to concentrate our scarce specialist resources and technology in certain key specialities in their own centres of medical excellence. They will allow us to provide Singaporeans the highest level of treatment and care, as well as integrate service with research and teaching.

## PATTERN OF SKIN DISEASES

The pattern of skin diseases has changed over the years. Whilst previously, infective skin conditions like bacterial or fungal infection were common, today, nine out of 10 of skin conditions are non-infectious. Our main concerns now are diseases of occupational origin, such as contact dermatitis and drug induced skin eruptions. Our main strategy is to identify the potential chemical agents and hazards, prevent their contact with the skin and educate all those at risk to take precautionary measures.

Our dermatologists work closely with the Industrial Health Unit of the Ministry of Labour, factories and construction companies to investigate the cause, to advise on preventive measures and to educate the workers. With these measures, we have contained the devastating effects of contact dermatitis. They are generally more difficult to diagnose and manage and require prolonged treatment if the root cause is not found.

## INFECTIOUS DISEASES WITH SKIN MANIFESTATIONS

Skin disease is one of the external manifestations of the two important infectious diseases, leprosy and sexually-transmitted disease or STD. Because of their close association, specialists in skin diseases are also the specialists for the management of leprosy and STD. Like typhoid and polio, leprosy and STD were the main scourges of Singaporeans after the war. Over the years, through effective treatment, and my Ministry's vigilant contact tracing and case finding programme, they have been successfully controlled.

The incidence of leprosy has shown a steady decline from more than 500 cases a year in the 1950s to 39 in 1988. About a quarter of the notified cases were

imported. As for STD, the total number of notified cases has declined from 19,695 ten years ago to 7,687 last year. In spite of this success we cannot afford to be complacent. With growing affluence, they will continue to be of great public health importance. New forms of STD such as AIDS have developed to become even greater public health problems. There is no effective vaccine as yet against these diseases so we are at all times susceptible and vulnerable to their resurgence. The control of STD, AIDS and leprosy poses important challenges to my Ministry and to the staff involved in their management.

We have taken measures to tighten the monitoring and control of these disease conditions. An Epidemiological Department has been established for the surveillance and control of STD, AIDS and leprosy. We will be strengthening our case finding and contact tracing activities among the high-risk groups. We will also be enhancing our health education programme to educate the public, especially young adults, on all aspects of STD and to emphasise the dangers of promiscuity and the risk of contracting infections. We have also stepped up our individual counselling programme for those at high risk to change their sex behaviour, to take preventive measures and to seek early treatment.

Whilst the incidence of leprosy has declined significantly over the years, we will not be satisfied until we have completely eradicated the disease altogether.

#### EXCELLENCE IN DERMATOLOGY

The NSC, befitting its role as a national centre, has 13 qualified skin specialists. This represents about half of the total dermatologists in Singapore. In addition, there are four residents under training in dermatology and five general duty Medical Officers. In planning the building, we have also kept the patients' wellbeing and

convenience in mind. Its environment, facilities and services have therefore been designed to be 'patient-friendly'. Facilities have also been provided for the training and teaching of undergraduates, postgraduates and general practitioners and for research into all fields of dermatology. The NSC also serves as the training centre for WHO, Colombo Plan and ASEAN scholars.

SUBSIDISED CARE WILL BE AVAILABLE

Like Middle Road Hospital, the NSC will provide for subsidised patients. The government will provide the Centre with subsidies each year to ensure that those who cannot afford to pay the full cost can still obtain quality specialist care. Since the opening of the NSC five months ago, more than 60 per cent of its patients attended the subsidised clinics.

I am confident that the Centre's dermatologists, nurses, scientists and other ancillary support staff will continue to upgrade and develop their skills within this pleasant milieu of institutional practice. Intensive medical research and education plus high quality patient care will ensure that it will achieve the status of being the referral dermatological Centre for the region.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, it is now my pleasure to declare open the National Skin Centre.

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