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**SPEECH BY DR ALINE WONG,  
SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND EDUCATION  
AT THE INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH'S  
FOURTH ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC MEETING  
- NEW FRONTIERS IN PSYCHIATRY -  
AT SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION  
AND EXHIBITION CENTRE, SUNTEC CITY  
ON 5 OCTOBER 1997 AT 9.00 AM**

It is often said that we live in an age of rapid change where the only constant is change itself. This applies not just to forces of economic competition, nor to the brave new world of cyberspace, but also to other aspects of life, including advances in medical knowledge and technology. Every year, there are advances and breakthroughs in the world of medical science. Treatment modalities change or are continuously being improved upon.

The field of mental health is no different. Your theme today - "New Frontiers in Psychiatry" - shows your keen interest in keeping abreast of the latest findings and treatment methods in your profession.

Research is an integral part of this endeavour. The Ministry of Health and the National Medical Research Council are fully cognisant of the need to encourage research activities by medical personnel. Over the next 5 years, \$150 million have been set aside by the National Medical Research Council to fund medical research. And as you may be aware also, my Ministry has also set aside

\$50 million to reimburse public hospitals which give time off to their doctors to do research. I, therefore, urge you all to make full use of such opportunities to engage in research activities. In the final analysis, clinical and research work are mutually reinforcing, and ultimately benefit our patients.

Research not only helps us understand better the causes of current diseases and design better treatment methods, it also helps us identify and face new challenges posed by newly emergent illnesses. As Singapore's economy and society develop, it is inevitable that a new set of mental health challenges will appear.

I note that you will be addressing some of the emerging health problems with psychological dimensions, such as depression in the elderly, domestic violence, smoking, alcoholism, drugs and so on. I should hope that, firstly, in addressing these problems as "healers" of mental health, you would be mindful of the need to promote and maintain good mental health also. Thus, you should identify the changing trends of mental illness and recommend measures that can be adopted to prevent them as far as possible.

Second, I would like to mention that while research in the medical sciences is crucial, it has to be complemented by psycho-social research. Let me cite just three examples where a multi-disciplinary approach involving the psycho-social framework will be most useful.

i) The changing role of women in Singapore

The role of women in Singapore has undergone tremendous change. The life issues confronted by women a generation ago have changed quite significantly. Many women are now both homemakers and breadwinners. What

are the mental health challenges that are likely to be countered by them? What are the long-term psychological effects on the children of working mothers?

ii) The psycho-social implications of our rapidly ageing population

As the number and proportion of our elderly population increase, we must look into not only their physical health but also their mental health. Dementia among the elderly is one important concern. Loneliness among those elderly who have little family or social support is another. It is necessary that the aged remain both physically and mentally fit. The Institute of Mental Health is in a good position to study the psycho-social implications of this demographic trend and the changing roles of women, and recommend measures for the prevention of mental ill-health associated with such changes.

iii) The effect of natural or man-made disasters on people's mental health

Almost daily, the media carry reports on mass disasters such as earthquakes, air crash, typhoons, fire and so on which kill and injure many people. Although Singapore lies outside the major earthquake and hurricane zones and is spared many of the natural disasters that have struck our neighbouring countries, we do have our share of man-made disasters such as building collapse, accidents and fire. As Singapore is urbanised and industrialised we face the potential for disaster as a consequence of high population density, high-rise housing, complex transportation network, and modern energy production and consumption.

Because of this potential for disaster, apart from the loss of lives and limbs, it is time we take note of the likely impact of disasters on people's mental health and on our society. It is for this reason that the Institute of Mental Health

(in collaboration with other Government ministries) is organising a parallel public forum on mass disasters and mental health as an adjunct to this Scientific Meeting this morning.

In this regard, I am glad to announce the formation of the National Emergency Behaviour Management System (NEBMS). This multi-agency and inter-ministry system has been established to manage community stress and to provide psychological support alongside the existing medical and other emergency services during disasters and civil emergencies. Its mission is to support and help victims, essential service personnel and the community cope emotionally and psychologically during civil emergencies and to enable them to return to normalcy as soon as possible.

I am pleased to note that the Institute of Mental Health has been at the forefront of the development of this System. This is both a suitable and a worthy role taken up by the Institute over and above its traditional role and the role of Woodbridge Hospital in caring for the mentally ill patients.

Woodbridge Hospital and the Institute of Mental Health have gone some distance in destigmatising mental illness but the journey is still a long and arduous one. Many who previously suffered in silence have availed themselves of the help provided by your institution. But we still need to inform and educate the public as well as ensure that those who are afflicted with mental problems will seek help early.

Today, I am impressed by the turnout to your Fourth Annual Scientific Meeting. I am told that the attendance has been rising with each passing year. An equally significant development is the participation of your colleagues from overseas. Through the six workshops held today, you are also fulfilling your role

as a teaching institution, imparting practical knowledge and expertise not only to your own staff but also to allied professionals in the community. This out-reach effort can only lead to a better understanding of mental illness by the wider public.

I congratulate you on the commitment and enthusiasm that you have shown in organising this Meeting.

It only leaves me to wish you a very productive and successful Meeting.  
Thank you.

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