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**SPEECH BY MR YEO CHEOW TONG, MINISTER FOR HEALTH,
AT THE INAUGURAL ASIA-PACIFIC NURSING SCIENTIFIC MEETING
9.00 AM, 11 FEBRUARY 1998 AT PADANG ROOM, WESTIN
STAMFORD/WESTIN PLAZA**

THEME OF MEETING - NURSING AND RESEARCH: THE SYNERGY

INTRODUCTION

It is my pleasure to open this inaugural Asia-Pacific Nursing Scientific Meeting on "Nursing and Research: The Synergy". Indeed, it is timely that nurses are intensifying work in the area of research. Given the rapidly advancing technological changes in healthcare, nursing research is becoming more important and is a pre-requisite for nursing excellence.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF HEALTHCARE

The 20th century has seen great strides in healthcare. The discovery of

antibiotics in the late 1930s gave doctors a powerful weapon against harmful bacteria. New vaccines gave impetus to the fight against infectious diseases. New technology in the second half of the century made possible complex medical procedures, like organ transplants, which offered new hope to the sick and dying.

As we look back at the 20th century with some sense of achievement, we can look to the 21st century with hope and promise. New procedures will continue to emerge. Telemedicine will give people access to the best medical treatment available in the world. New drugs will be discovered to treat hitherto incurable diseases.

However, the new century will also see more demands on the healthcare system, as disease patterns change and new diseases emerge. We are facing an ageing population, not only here in Singapore, but also all over the world. At the same time, public expectations of the healthcare system will continue to rise. These lead to pressures on costs. Developed countries are already struggling under the increasing burden of healthcare expenditures. For example, the Swiss spent 9.6% of their GDP on healthcare in 1994. In comparison, Singapore spent about S\$3.6 billion or 2.7% of GDP on healthcare in 1996.

In the face of healthcare cost pressures, new technologies must carefully be assessed for their benefits against their higher costs. Increasing competition in healthcare makes it even more necessary to ensure clear benefits in adopting new healthcare methods and technologies. For in the 21st century, the competition is likely to be not only regional, but also global. Whether through telemedicine, open markets and freer travel, people will have access to medical treatment from the top specialists anywhere in the world.

NURSING EXCELLENCE

It is in this increasingly international context that the Singapore healthcare system will operate in the 21st century. We must continue to provide Singaporeans with good and affordable healthcare. We will pursue medical excellence, based on good clinical outcomes and high professional standards. These need to be supported by good research and teaching.

Medical excellence, however, follows from excellence of the healthcare team. This includes nursing excellence. The nurse is the lynch pin of the healthcare team. In the context of the healthcare team, the nurse is the care integrator who co-ordinates the care of patients with the doctors, therapists,

pharmacists, and other medical and social support services. In his/her role, the nurse is somewhat of a chameleon, juggling different roles. She is caregiver, advocate, health educator and friend to the patients. To strengthen the nurse's role in the healthcare team, nurses must therefore aim for nursing excellence.

Nursing excellence in the context of the 21st century must address the evolving roles of the nurse. And, hence, the changing requirements of the nurse. The traditional perception of a nurse has been that of a caregiver - someone with a compassionate heart. This should always be the case. Nurses must continue in their time-honoured role of attending to patients' needs with compassion. To this, however, the professional nurse of the 21st century must demonstrate other key attributes. I would suggest that these attributes would be **Leadership, Competency and a Curious Mind.**

Leadership. Strong leadership is essential for nursing excellence. Nursing leadership needs to be available at two levels. Firstly, nursing leadership within the profession; and secondly, leadership within the community on matters relating to nursing and healthcare.

Professional leadership in nursing calls for vision. Nurse leaders must approach this with open and forward-looking minds, charting the course for the profession to meet the changing healthcare paradigms and needs of the coming millennium. It is also the role of the nurse leader to drive and implement change. The excellent nurse leader is one who can create an environment that support nurses to practise at the highest levels and achieve the best outcomes for our patients. The excellent nurse leader will also inspire nurses towards continuous improvement, by providing opportunities for continuing learning, research and evidence-based practice.

Within the community, nurses can exert stronger leadership in matters relating to nursing. Nurses will be expected to play leading roles in home and community health. These could range from the running of nursing homes to the provision of home nursing services. The role of the nurse as a health educator will be boosted by way of patient education, training of family members in the care of patients at home, and general health education and promotion. Nursing excellence also calls for nurses to take a leadership role in advancing knowledge on nursing and basic nursing skills among the members of the community. This will bolster the capability for self-help within the family and within the community.

Competency. Excellence in clinical practice is grounded on competency in the basic nursing duties - from the activities of daily living to the more complex

procedures. The professional nurse of the next millennium, however, will require increased competency as they take on higher level responsibilities and functions.

At the high-end, the range of work is increasing. "Multi-skilling" and specialisation increase the breadth and depth of the nurse's job. Specialised nurses will be expected to work independently, and have greater autonomy over patient care. The nurses must master more and more of the advanced nursing skills and new technologies. As care co-ordinators, nurses will require new skills to effectively integrate the care of patients across the continuum of care within the hospital or across the different care-settings based on clinical pathways.

These changes in the role of nursing pose many challenges. The challenge for nurses is to gain the competency and skills necessary to take on these higher responsibilities and functions. The challenge for nursing education is to help raise the level of competency of nurses to take on their new roles -- to enable nurses to keep up with developments in technology and nursing practice, and guide nurses towards developing skills that foster analytical and scientific thinking. And, the challenge for nursing administrators is to structure the workplace in a way that will enable them to spend more time on core nursing activities. One way is to relieve nurses of some of the non-nursing activities. The Nursing Task Force set up by my Ministry is looking at these issues and challenges.

A Curious Mind. Nursing excellence is not possible without nursing research. We therefore want nurses who are interested and passionate about contributing to the body of nursing knowledge. The curious mind must be encouraged among nurses -- minds that probe and question how nursing practices and knowledge can be expanded and developed. Nursing research is the cornerstone for improvements in nursing practice. It strengthens and deepens the theoretical and clinical foundations of nursing. It is the means by which we identify better, safer nursing practices, to help the patient recover faster, and return to their normal lives.

Recognising the importance of nursing research, steps have been taken to encourage nurses to undertake research activities. One of the first measures undertaken was the formation of the Nursing Research Committee in my Ministry in October last year.

The main objective of this Committee is to spearhead, co-ordinate and support nursing research activities. The Committee will work together with the Hospital Research Committees and the Nanyang Polytechnic to initiate nursing research, thereby uplifting our standards of nursing practice and teaching. The

Committee has obtained a grant of \$50,000 from the National Medical Research Council (NMRC) to fund some basic research infrastructure, such as computer equipment and software. The Committee will provide courses and lectures on research methodology to interested nurses, and support small pilot research projects. Bigger approved projects will be funded by the National Medical Research Council and the hospitals concerned.

Whilst we can set up the infrastructure to support nursing research, it is nurses themselves who must respond. In this regard, I am pleased that some hospitals have formed nursing research committee to co-ordinate research work.

LEARNING AND SHARING, SHARING AND LEARNING

Research, however, should not be an end in itself. For research to be useful, the knowledge gained must be shared, and preferably as widely as possible with other institutions and other countries in the spirit of mutual learning.

Hence, the value of today's inaugural Asia-Pacific Nursing Scientific Meeting organised by the SGH Institute of Advanced Nursing. It is one of the few forums in the Asia-Pacific available for cross-regional exchanges of knowledge and continuing education. I am very heartened that nurses throughout the region are supporting this meeting, and that 12 of the presenters are from our neighbouring countries.

Indeed, Singapore is well placed within the region to bring nurses together, to mutually share and learn from one another. We need to build upon today's meeting and play a greater role in promoting and co-ordinating opportunities for continuing nursing education. We need to build more robust alliances with greater professional and research value. Such alliances could lead to joint studies across the region, with bigger samples and cross-cultural perspectives, which will enrich the knowledge base. This research activity will also contribute to the overall development and professionalism of the nursing profession.

The 21st century is full of promise. I would encourage nurses to seize the opportunities. By embracing and preparing for the changes which the new millennium brings and seeking to add to the flow of new ideas and new nursing practices, nurses can truly enrich their profession and improve the lives of patients under your care. I urge nurses in the region to rise to the challenges ahead, and live up to the proud traditions of the profession.