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REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE PROBLEMS OF THE AGED

A Committee on the Problems of the Aged was appointed in June 82 to study the problems that would be faced by society and the aged themselves, as the proportion of persons aged 65 and above in Singapore increases while the proportion of persons in the economically active age group declines. If present demographic trends continue, the proportion of the very young is projected to decline from 27 per cent to 20 per cent and the economically active age group from 68 per cent to 61 per cent while the proportion of aged persons is projected to almost quadruple from five per cent to 19 per cent, between 1980 and the year 2030. The political, economic and social implications of this demographic trend are significant. A larger proportion of aged persons with a smaller proportion of the economically active group would mean that there would be fewer economically active people to support the more inactive ones.

The Committee was asked to consider:

- (i) how to encourage persons aged 60 and above who were fit physically and mentally to continue to work and lead a normal, useful and active life, to discourage retirement at 60 and to create more job opportunities for older people;
- (ii) how to enable older workers whose incomes are reduced to continue to lead

a normal active life, either through earlier contributory superannuation schemes with safeguards against inflation or through savings and annuity schemes which will provide a sufficient income for older people to live independently;

- (iii) how to inculcate the need to plan for good health early and to maintain good health throughout life;
- (iv) how to foster greater filial piety and responsibility among children and relatives to support their parents and elders;
- (v) how to provide assistance and encouragement in tangible forms for more homes to be established for the aged who have no children to depend upon and who are unable to look after themselves or for those who must be placed in institutions; and
- (vi) whether legislation should be introduced to require certain religious activities to be licensed with the stipulation that they must set up homes for the aged.

The Committee is of the view that society must change its attitude towards old age. Instead of admitting the elderly to institutions under the misguided hope that the problem would end there, steps should be taken aimed at keeping every elderly individual physically and mentally fit and active, so that he can retain his normal living arrangements for as long as possible. Society has often classified

the elderly with the sick and disabled. With improved medical and health services and increase in life expectancy of 70 years for males and 73 for females in Singapore, this is no longer valid. Such myths should be done away with if injustice is not to be inflicted on the increasing numbers of older people in our society. Far from being a burden, the elderly should be recognised as possessing experience, skills, knowledge, talent and wisdom, all of which can continue to make useful contributions and can be of immense benefit to the community. It will be sinful in addition to a waste of such invaluable assets to isolate the elderly from the mainstream of society.

It is however recognised that the elderly have two major concerns, one is financial independence and security and the other is continued good health and physical well-being. The Committee has recommended that for the elderly to have a sense of financial independence, they must continue to work as long as they are physically able to do so. In this way, they can still earn a regular income. To achieve this, in addition to the changing of the attitude of society towards the elderly, the retirement age should be raised beyond the present 55 or 60 years. Older workers should also be given more employment options such as part-time work, working at home or work on alternate days, etc. The individual must be encouraged from young to save for old age. Instead of withdrawing his CPF balance in a lump sum at 55 years, the retired person should be given the option to participate in arrangements which, after settling all outstanding payments, can provide an annuity which would ensure a steady income to meet basic living needs.

Health needs increase with age. To stay healthy into old age, every individual should adopt from very young, good health habits and life styles that ensure the maintenance of physical and mental well-being throughout adult life. For the early detection of illnesses, every citizen should be

encouraged to have regular physical checks and those in middle age should go for annual health screening. The aging process can be delayed by continued mental and physical activity. Hence the mental and physical well-being of elderly persons depends very much on how actively they make use of their time. Systematic recreational programmes and activities geared to the needs and interest of the elderly should be organised by community centres and other voluntary and religious groups. To avoid isolating the elderly, such recreational activities for the elderly should be integrated, where practicable, with the activities of other age groups.

Community organisations and voluntary bodies should undertake the provision of a wide range of welfare, medical and social services to make it possible for families to accommodate and care for the weaker and less ambulant aged persons in their own homes. The well-being of an aged person can best be maintained by the love and care shown to him by his family members. Every person should exert maximum effort to preserve and strengthen the traditional family system. Through moral education, the inculcation of filial piety and the encouragement of general reverence for old age, Singapore may yet be able to surmount the increasingly difficult problems that come with a "greying population".

The Report of the Committee on the Problems of the Aged has been presented as a Blue Paper to Parliament and will be debated in Parliament.

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

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