

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

MC.MA.42/64(HEALTH)

TEXT OF SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH, MR. YONG NYUK LIN, AT THE ANNUAL DINNER AND DANCE OF THE SINGAPORE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION AT THE ALUMNI MEDICAL CENTRE ON SATURDAY, MARCH 21, AT 9 P.M.

May I begin by saying how very pleased and honoured my wife and I are to be with you tonight, being your Annual and Dance which is considered the major social function of your association. In your invitation I noted with appreciation that your Council had expressed the desire "to help initiate an era of fruitful co-operation." Your printed 4th Annual Report (circulated to your members for Monday's Annual General Meeting) also carried another welcome statement that "your Council is of the view that the prospects for a harmonious and happier relationship between the Association and the Ministry are distinctly promising and wishes the incoming Council a fruitful term ahead."

You can imagine how relaxed and relieved I feel tonight over these statements - when four months ago, in November, 1963, as the second and more serious outbreak of Cholera began to unfold itself in Singapore, a somewhat belligerently worded letter was received from your Council alleging that the Ministry's announcements about the Cholera situation was inducing a "false sense of complacency" and that if the Ministry did not make public certain basic facts on Cholera, etc., then the Council would have no alternative but to give it due publicity!

I decided to see the representatives of your Council, namely, the three stalwarts - you, Mr. President, your Secretary and your Treasurer. You stomped into my office all a-quiver, itching for a scrap! I can now disclose that we had many heated verbal skirmishes but the long encounter proved fruitful. Your representatives did not leave my office the way they came in; they retired with dignity and appreciation of the situation.

It then became the turn of your Council to hold a stormy meeting on the matter. The end result was a press release from your Council supporting the Government's decision to launch a second mass campaign for Cholera inoculation and what was most heartening, your Council decided to recommend to its members to charge a nominal fee of \$1 when using free Government vaccine.

I greatly appreciated this responsible decision and I said so at the Legislative Assembly on December 18, 1963. This unfortunately was not reported in the English Press and I will repeat it again:

"Hansard, Col.900 - I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to the Council of the Singapore Medical Association for their co-operation in recommending to their members to charge only a nominal fee of \$1 when using free cholera vaccine from the Government during the mass inoculation campaign. I want also to express my deepest gratitude to the doctors associated with 32 private dispensaries for coming forward to assist the Government during this period. I understand that many thousands have been so inoculated under the free Government vaccine scheme. It is my hope that this welcome co-operation from our private practitioners will be extended to all fields, in order that the best possible medical service may be placed at the disposal of our people in Singapore."

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The beginning of a new era in relations between the Singapore Medical Association and the Ministry had thus begun. Although the response was only from a small section and not the whole strength of your membership, yet I was grateful for the gesture because it meant doubling the number of inoculation centres for the people during the mass campaign and helped make it a greater success.

I have spoken at length over this episode because it marked a new phase in the relationship between the Singapore Medical Association and the Ministry. The belligerent letter mentioned earlier had been treated as withdrawn to become part of the archives of the Ministry. Thus history was made.

On an occasion like this, it is perhaps expected of me to say something of what I think and intend to do for the health services of Singapore in the foreseeable future. Although I have not quite completed my series of familiarisation tours to cover all aspects of work, as far as possible, I do hold certain views now, right or wrong on the subject, and shall deal with them as briefly as I can so as not to hold up unduly both your Dinner and the Dance.

Order of Priority for Public Funds

It is my view that health services come only fourth in the order of priority for funds. I place creation of "Job Opportunities" as No. 1 priority in Singapore. This is to reduce unemployment in our midst and the provision of minimum basic necessities of life in food and clothing. That is why our Ministry of Finance has put so much energy and money to build our Jurong Industrial Complex and the establishment of a \$100 million statutory board - the Economic Development Board. As you are all aware, Jurong is coming up fast and its impact will have repercussions for the good not only of Singapore but the whole of Malaysia.

Number two priority is housing. As is well known, our Housing and Development Board has already broken the back of our housing problem but re-housing and urban re-development on a large scale must go on.

Education comes third. Here again the back of this problem can be said to have been broken but Family Planning must make its impact on future generations, otherwise the financial burdens not only for education but other social services will cripple development.

Then comes Health, in which you and I are directly concerned with. It is my view that Health development forms part of economic development and deserves to stand as number four in the queue, certainly not lower down the line.

Shortage of Trained Personnel

Having established our priorities, what do we do next when funds are provided for. To me, the availability of trained personnel is next important thing to have. Equipment and facilities are of no avail if there are no trained personnel to handle and fully utilise such facilities. Grandiose air-conditioned surgeries would have no meaning if there isn't a full team to work with. An F.R.C.S. cannot perform without the Anaesthetist, the Pathologist, the Bacteriologist, the Nurse, the Technician or the Blood Transfusion Service by his side. There must be balanced development of our health services in order to be effective. As far as possible, we should ensure that all branches of medicine should be reasonably well manned. Selection by doctors of certain fields of specialisation must be suitably countered through appropriate administrative devices. This I intend to do. As stated in a recent article in the London Sunday Observer on "Making the Most of G.P.s", we must "learn to use our doctors most efficiently", "be frugal as the Swedes" and that "our doctors

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and medical resources should be deployed intelligently by the Health Service and used discriminately by the public."

There are altogether 800 registered doctors in Singapore and although Government has an approved establishment of 453 doctors for this year (excluding Housemen), those in service (taking into account 27 on study leave) is only 361 or 92 vacancies! Yet we are expected to man, and man efficiently more than 100 institutions (11 Government hospitals, 30 Outpatient Dispensaries and 66 Maternal and Child Health Centres). With only 80 per cent of the approved establishment in hand I say that indiscriminate expansion of the health services must stop. There must be consolidation of what we have in hand. Next, we must decide how best to deploy our scarce resources to ensure maximum utilisation, to relieve those under heavy pressure before they reach exhaustion and collapse - even Comet jets disintegrated with "metal fatigue", what more human beings. Yet, in other instances, through organisation hold-up or defective planning, highly qualified personnel are atrophying because of lack of essential equipment or facilities not approved by Treasury. So I say, whilst the immediate general policy will be one of consolidation, yet certain sections can and must expand. In my opinion, expansion in the foreseeable future will be mainly confined to increase of hospital facilities but this must be co-ordinated with crash programmes for training of ancillary staff.

Upholding of Medical Ethics

There are two points on Medical Ethics which I wish to touch upon tonight. One was a result of my encounter with your representatives during the November outbreak of Cholera in which your Council expressed their disagreement with my decision to publish the list of names of the dispensaries that were prepared to charge \$1 jabs with free Government vaccine. I am very glad to see, however, in your Annual Report that this matter has been resolved by your Council with the following unanimous resolution that:

"In the matter of a national emergency, secondary professional ethics should not be held against any effort of professional participation, if such ethics were found to obstruct the implementation of a national campaign."

This is the second responsible decision for which I wish to commend you, Mr. President, and that of your council.

Next, I want to congratulate your council for bringing out the booklet on "Ethical Code" for the guidance of your members. I note from your Annual Report that your Council was concerned with the problem of recognition of sick certificates of private practitioners by the Government. But your Sub-Committee on Contract Practice has found that, in practice, members of your own profession may ignore such sick certificates and that the following interim recommendation had been made that:

"The medical certificate from a doctor other than the company doctor should normally be accepted unless the company doctor disagrees. If the company doctor disagrees, then it would be a matter of courtesy for him to get in touch with the other doctor to inform him of the grounds for the rejection of the certificate."

I am glad to see that your Association is taking great pains to ensure that a sick certificate signed by a registered doctor, should be accepted without question not only by another doctor but even by Government. Strong action must, however, be taken against

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the guilty few who do issue sick certificates for only \$2 when the person is not really sick. In this regard, I am happy to note that our Medical Council is taking a very serious view of these complaints, which is long over-due, and have been instituting a number of enquiries regarding such malpractices. In recent months, one such doctor has had his name struck off the register for "infamous conduct in a professional respect" and that three others have been let off with a warning. I fully support this move to preserve the standing and reputation of doctors practising in Singapore.

Conclusion

In conclusion, may I first express my deepest appreciation and highest regard to those members of your association who are loyally serving our people in the public service. They have ably manned the services with courage and distinction with their high sense of dedication despite many difficulties, to heal the sick and to lessen pain and suffering. As your Minister, I will endeavour to make their work more satisfying and rewarding to the best of my ability.

To the other members of your Association who are in private practice may I say that your responsibilities are no less onerous. I have no doubt that you are equally dedicated to your profession and therefore serving the people equally well. But, must you regard the Ministry of Health as something foreign? We are after all part and parcel of the Health Services to serve the people of Singapore. Instead of saying the Ministry, why not say our Ministry? If both Government doctors and doctors in private practice can carry out so many of your activities like members of a family where the Singapore Medical Association is concerned, cannot the same attitude of mind prevail vis-a-vis the Ministry? Can we also not co-operate and assist each other in providing the best available medical services for our people? That is my appeal to you and it is my confident hope that your association will give it greater meaning and purpose now that the new era has already begun so that our people can enjoy the fruits of our co-operation.

MARCH 21, 1964.

(Time issued: 1830 hours)
