

SPEECH OF MR. YONG NYUK LIN, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE SINGAPORE CANCER SOCIETY AT THE CHINESE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AUDITORIUM ON TUESDAY, 8TH DECEMBER 1964 AT 1745 HOURS.

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It is with great pleasure that I accepted the privilege and honour to inaugurate the Singapore Cancer Society.

It was only in August, four months ago, that I had the pleasure of addressing the Symposium on Cancer of the Nasopharynx organised by the International Union Against Cancer, when I first made the call for the early formation of a local Cancer Society. This call was repeated a fortnight later, at a luncheon meeting of the Lions Club. I therefore heartily congratulate and thank the hard working members of the Organising Committee for answering that call and for today's fulfilment. You will remember that before the I.U.A.C. Symposium was held, a member of the Finance Committee of I.U.A.C. was in Singapore to help stimulate interest for the establishment of a Cancer Society. Besides seeing a number of you, he also called on me. He expressed the hope that a national Cancer Society could be established in Malaysia within a year's time. I indicated surprise why it would need such a long period for gestation and I accordingly stated that it shouldn't take that long for dynamic Singapore to get things done, and confidently forecasted that the Cancer Society would be established well before the end of 1964. It was then his turn to show surprise at my optimism and I'm glad that you have proved him wrong and that I was well justified by your enthusiasm and determination.

Singapore has fortunately overcome many of the infectious and nutritional diseases, which commonly affect tropical regions - like malaria, typhoid fever, cholera, plague, small pox, beri-beri and tuberculosis. There are no serious general epidemics now but there can be occasional outbreaks should there be a breakdown either in public health maintenance or of vigilance, as happened in recent outbreak of El Tor Cholera and Malaria.

For Singapore then, we may consider ourselves as having emerged from the dark past to become involved with "diseases of civilization" as it were. Cancers have become the No. 1 killer of our people. They account for 12% of all deaths in Singapore. Closely behind follows death arising out of Heart and Vascular diseases. The rising toll of death arising out of Accidents due to negligence on congested roads and industrialisation is also beginning to give cause for worry.

In these circumstances, therefore, we must turn our attention to these new diseases. Cancer is a disease which occurs in all people, in all countries, in all ages, and in both sexes. But there are differences in the types of cancer in each of these categories. The cancers of the nasopharynx and liver are peculiarly common in this part of the world. And in common with the experience in other countries, cancer of the lungs is also rising.

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What is the nature of cancer? "What is it that turns a healthy cell into a cancerous cell? What brings about the disorderly multiplication of such cells?" One authority's simple definition of Cancer is that they are "sick cells with new potentialities, independent of normal growth and with the power to destroy neighbouring tissues".

It is a disease which offers one of the greatest challenges to Scientists, Medical Men, and to Social Workers. Scientists to discover the fundamental basis of life and growth; Medical Men, primarily for the treatment of the disease and society for assistance in all aspects of work - in education, research, and rehabilitation of patients.

Just as our predecessors rose to the call to assist in the medical problems of their day, so we must meet our problems of today.

The latest WHO magazine, September 1964 "World Health" which is a special issue on Cancer tells us that "Cancer is not one disease but a group of diseases", and that the main weapon against Cancer is early detection. It is therefore most instructive for us to note the thoroughness at which the USSR are conducting their campaign against Cancer by requiring every woman over 30 and every man over 35 to undergo an annual oncological examination (i.e. to be examined for Cancer). In 1953, 20 million people were so examined and this accounted for nearly 10% of their population. Of course, the USSR are very well staffed with doctors, nearly 450,000 or 20 doctors per 10,000 persons. Being a communist State, all their doctors are also serving the State. In Singapore, we have only 800 doctors for a population of 1.8 million or four per 10,000 and if we take into account doctors who are actually in Government service, the ratio of doctor to population drops to less than two per 10,000!

It is against this background of our actual doctor strength in Government service that we must assess our potential to effectively tackle the Cancer problem in Singapore. At present, we have an adequate number of well qualified surgeons. We have also an adequate number of well qualified doctors to conduct radiotherapy treatment but unfortunately, our present equipment is either too old or weak. However, we intend to remedy this soon by establishing a new million dollar Radiotherapy Unit. Although there is only a token vote of \$10 in the Development Estimates for 1965, building plans are, however, in an advanced stage of preparation. The main isotope equipment for the laboratories have also been obtained - through the generous donation by the China Medical Board, and funds amounting to £43,000 or nearly \$400,000 have also been allotted in the 1965 Development Estimates, under U.K. Financial Assistance Schemes, for equipping the new Radiotherapy Centre.

At Kandang Kerbau Maternity Hospital, steps have been taken to establish the Exfoliative Cytology Unit to take cervical smears for the screening of cancer of the cervix of the womb. This will be a great service to our women folk because cancer of the cervix is among those cancers that can most easily be stopped today. It has been estimated that systematic detection of cervical smears would lead to the discovery of three or four cancers in every 1,000 apparently healthy women.

We are also proud of the fact that the Pathology Department of our University of Singapore, under the distinguished leadership of Prof. K. Shanmugaratnam is recognised by WHO as one of its collaborating international centres for research on Cancer of the Mouth and Throat.

This then is the Cancer situation in Singapore today. With the inauguration of the Singapore Cancer Society, today, a new phase begins as we shall step up our campaign for Education, Research and collection of Funds, to conquer Cancer in our midst. I therefore have great pleasure in wishing your Society great success in its work. Let us now join hands with other Cancer Societies throughout the world to wage ceaseless war against Cancer.

In conclusion, may I say that my high appreciation of your Society's work will not be limited to one of moral support alone but of close association with you for life! It is with pleasure therefore, that I now hand you my cheque for subscription, Mr. Chairman, so that I may be considered as one of the founder life members of your Society.

DECEMBER 8, 1964.

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