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SPEECH OF MR. CHUA SIAN CHIN, MINISTER FOR HEALTH  
AT THE OPENING OF THE DENTAL HEALTH EXHIBITION AT  
THE VICTORIA MEMORIAL HALL ON TUESDAY,  
1ST APRIL, 1969, AT 1700 HOURS

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It gives me great pleasure to be able to officiate the opening of this Dental Health Exhibition. The aim of the Exhibition is not only to stimulate public interest in dental health but also to stress the importance of the care of the teeth amongst our population. This is an important part of Government's policy of raising the standard of our Public Health to higher levels.

The opening of the Exhibition also marks the inauguration of our Dental Week in which various activities will be held. An international Congress of dental surgeons from various parts of the world will be held during the week. A novel dental contest for young people with the best teeth will wind up the week on Sunday, 6th of April.

The theme of all these activities is that our teeth which nature has endowed us have to be looked after. Most people take their teeth for granted and therefore neglect to look after them. Only when they suffer a tooth-ache then they begin to take some notice but by then it is a bit too late. This simple message that teeth must be cared for has too long been neglected. Too long also has the measure of propagating the simple principles of dental hygiene been delayed. Our national dental programme has often been given second place in our Medical Service.

No dental survey has been carried out in Singapore which gives an accurate estimate of the problem. A restricted dental survey, however, is being undertaken to discover the state of the dental health of our young population within the age groups of 6 to 18. A sample survey on the young school going population will also be carried out.

However, from the medical examination of our young national service men called-up into our armed forces we discovered with some dismay that their teeth were far from satisfactory. Although it might be a fact that the teeth of our young population are no worse than those in many other countries of the world, including advanced countries, this is certainly poor comfort. Indeed, by caring for the teeth in childhood and instilling the simple habit of tooth brushing these conditions would have been prevented.

Government has, therefore, decided to move in a massive way to make up for the deficiencies. It was for this reason that in the Presidential statement at the opening session of Parliament in 1968, it was announced that the Dental Health services required to be improved and expanded and that improvement in dental health would be achieved if there was greater attention paid to dental hygiene and great stress would therefore be placed on an intensive and sustained dental health education programme to make the general public more conscious of dental health.

Lest I have painted a rather bleak picture of our dental services, I hasten to emphasise that this is not so. The build-up of our dental services at ground level although gradual, has over the years become a comprehensive and effective service which we can take pride in.

Government Dental Clinics are spread throughout the island. They number 72 - an achievement which few countries can match. In these Dental Clinics dental care is given to the following categories of our people:-

- 1) Children up to school leaving age;
- 2) Expectant and nursing mothers and infants;
- 3) The sick in hospitals - both long term and short term patients;

- 4) The poorer section of the public;
- 5) Prisoners and detainees; and
- 6) Members of our disciplined forces such as the Rank and File of the Police Force.

To man these dental clinics there are 78 dental surgeons employed by Government and this figure is about half the total number of the 166 dental surgeons practising in the whole of Singapore.

The dental services provided to school children are considered to be the most important and rewarding in promoting better teeth for the new generation and we have given it priority. The Ministry has established 50 dental clinics for school children. These include 2 large school dental centres, one at Pegu Road and the other at the Institute of Health, 44 dental clinics situated in primary schools, one dental clinic for school children at the Bukit Panjang Outpatient Dispensary, 2 clinics at the Geylang and Siglap Community Centres and lastly 3 mobile dental clinics. These 50 clinics provide systematic dental care for about 100,000 primary school children, and emergency or urgent dental treatment for all school children, secondary and primary, who require and demand such treatment. When fully staffed these clinics have a potential of giving systematic dental care to about 131,500 primary school children. Three new dental clinics were opened during 1968 and another three will be established in the first half of 1969 and another 4 by the end of the year.

Last year the total number of patient-attendances in these clinics was 317,712; 155,213 permanent dental fillings and 121,026 tooth extractions were completed. While the number of dental fillings was being increased the number of dental extractions is now slowly diminishing

and this is regarded as a good indication of progress in our school dental service over the last few years. The utilisation of school dental nurses in this service has helped to solve to a large extent the staffing requirements. It is now proposed to enlarge the existing Dental Nurses' Training School to take in more trainees. I am glad to state that the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has provided substantial aid to the school dental service in Singapore in the form of 120 sets of dental equipment over the last 6 years.

Both the hospital dental service and the school dental service are further providing dental treatment of a specialist nature to a considerable extent. Such treatment includes periodontal treatment for gum conditions, oral surgical operations and orthodontic treatment. Specialised work has also been done in conservative dentistry and dental prosthetics. By correcting the irregularities of the teeth, particularly that of our young people, the Orthodontist can help the patient to create greater resistance to diseases, clearer speech or even a more handsome appearance. This will certainly contribute to their physical as well as mental well-being.

However, much more can and will have to be achieved. The development of the Dental Service will be to improve and expand its existing services, particularly for the schools. The aim will be to offer systematic dental treatment for every primary school child. Treatment of secondary school children will follow but treatment for adults will be restricted, for the present, to pregnant mothers, and those requiring specialist treatment and emergency cases.

But emphasis will be laid on preventive dentistry. Prevention is certainly better than cure. By reducing the incidence of dental diseases such as dental caries, the

dental health problem can be reduced in size and be more easily tackled. An excellent start has been made in this direction with the launching this year of a campaign to introduce toothbrushing in all primary schools in Singapore as part of the school curriculum. By requiring school children to brush their teeth after their lunch break, the habit of toothbrushing can be instilled into every school child. Good oral hygiene such as regular brushing will certainly help to reduce tooth decay. This toothbrushing campaign may be extended to kindergartens next year.

In addition to the toothbrushing campaign it is our intention to promote dental health education to children and young adults, to school teachers and to the public at large. Recently the Ministry established a Dental Health Education Unit in the Dental Branch to work out a regular programme of dental health education for all primary schools as well as other health education activities such as exhibitions, health talks and health contests. This is to make the people more dental conscious. With a good knowledge of how to maintain oral hygiene and proper nutrition the population will be in a better position to attain good dental health. The importance of this work is reflected by the fact that UNICEF has generously donated \$35,000 worth of technical equipment to the Singapore Government for the use of this Unit.

Another important aspect of preventive dentistry in Singapore is the fluoridation of the water supply for the control of dental caries. The public water supply of Singapore has been completely fluoridated since the beginning of 1958. This Scheme has been carefully maintained year after year. An annual dental survey has been carried out since the beginning of the Scheme and figures obtained in this survey so far have indicated that the incidence of

dental caries among young children has been reduced by about 35% after 10 years of fluoridation. However, this is not sufficient and it has therefore been necessary for us to commence this year on a sustained dental health education campaign.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation for the work done by all those responsible for putting up this excellent Dental Health Exhibition. In particular, commercial firms who are taking part in this Exhibition and have made donations towards the cost are to be commended for their enterprise. I do hope more and better exhibitions will be held from time to time to bring home the message of good dental health to our people. It is now my pleasure to officially declare open this exhibition.

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