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**SPEECH BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, ACTING MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS,
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE SINGAPORE ASSOCIATION FOR
MENTAL HEALTH FAIR ON SATURDAY, 25 NOVEMBER '78 AT 10.00 A.M.
AT THE GARDENIA ROOM, SHANGRI-LA HOTEL**

The plight of the mentally ill and the mentally retarded and those who have to care for them must be as far away from our minds at a time such as this. For most of us are fortunate not to be directly concerned with the problem. If you will however bear with me for a few moments to allow me to remind ourselves that the problem is all around us, and cries for attention.

Of the imperfections that man suffers from those who are mentally ill and those who are born mentally defective are the forgotten and neglected ones. Those who have some physical handicap, for example, those who are blind or deaf, seem to have a larger share of attention and care. Perhaps, there is greater sympathy or persons who have the handicap of the loss of eye-sight or hearing. This does not seem to be so for those born with a handicap of mental disability or one who has acquired it later in life for one reason or other.

For those with some physical disability the body's marvellous ability to compensate for a defect can largely replace the deficiency so that it is worthwhile to spend effort and money in special training and in rehabilitation. Not so evident are the benefits of medical treatment and rehabilitation of the mental defective and the person with a mental disability.

In the present state of knowledge there are few mental conditions which can be prevented. There are also few mental conditions which can be treated successfully in which the person can be returned to normal life, completely cured.

Against this background, it is understandable why parents and relatives find it so difficult to care for one in the family who is so stricken. It is a strain on their patience, and a burden on their time, energy and funds to be caring for such persons who are usually so dependent.

It is also not surprising why community leaders, social workers, Members of Parliament, when asked to assist can do no more than transfer the problem to the medical services or to the welfare services. The number of cases referred to and taken over by both those services is increasing cumulatively. The number of cases referred for Social Welfare assistance, for instance, in one year, between 1976 - 1977 increased by about 120%, from 26 in 1976 to 58 in 1977, while the number of mentally defective children and mentally ill persons remaining in the homes number 340 out of a total of 1,384 of other types of inmates (or about one in every four).

While it is admitted that little can be done to achieve cures or complete rehabilitation of these persons, most of them are trainable to a varying degree to be able to look after themselves or even do simple tasks so that they are less dependent on others.

Again, it will not be right to adopt a defeatist view of the problem by doing nothing. To await a radical break-through in treatment or prevention of mental illness will be to abandon the mentally disabled completely.

The best lead is given by the Association for Mental Health. It has not stood idly by. It has taken positive steps to provide for care of some of these persons. It has shown that something can be done even though this may only be a partial solution. The "Half-Way House" at Rochester Park for women mental patients who are about ready to return to the community is a good example. The "Oasis Club" at Toa Payoh is another.

The funds which the Association is raising at today's function will go towards these projects. They deserve all our support. I am sure that you will be generous in your giving. I wish the Association every success.

I have pleasure in declaring this mini-Fun Fair open.

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