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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT SHEARES AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF
THE SINGAPORE PAEDIATRIC SOCIETY CONVENTION ON FRIDAY,
18 MAY 79 AT 5.45 PM AT THE REGIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE

I am pleased to officiate at the opening of the convention of the Singapore Paediatric Society in order to highlight the International Year of the Child 1979. The United Nations quite rightly decided to set aside the year 1979 as the Year of the Child because two decades ago, in 1959, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the United Nations set forth the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. They are the right to affection, love and understanding, to adequate nutrition and medical care, to free education, to full opportunity for play and recreation, and the right to a name and nationality. Also the child should have the right to be among the first to receive relief in times of disaster, to learn to be a useful member of society and to develop individual abilities, to be brought up in a spirit of peace and universal brotherhood, and the privilege to enjoy all these rights, regardless of race, colour, sex, religion, nationality or social origin.

These concepts have been, are, and will be of great importance to all adults who care for our children, whether as parents or as professionals. In Singapore, the Declaration is of special significance because our greatest resource is people. Finally, the fate of our nation in the future will depend on the children of today and the children yet unborn.

As recently as seventeen years ago, in 1962, our infant mortality was 31.2 per thousand livebirths, which was much higher than that of Japan (26.5), of Denmark (20.1), of the United States of America (25.3), of Australia (20.4), of New Zealand (20.4), and the United Kingdom (23.1). The nutritional state of the child was relatively poor and approximately 20 per cent were malnourished. Childhood infections claimed many deaths. Yet, more babies were born adding to the health problem of the Singapore child. In 1962, there were 58,977 livebirths, a birth rate of 34 per thousand of the population.

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Yet in fourteen years, the paediatricians, obstetricians and other child health workers in Singapore have managed to upgrade child health so that in 1976, the infant mortality rate was reduced to 11.8 per thousand which was lower than that of the United States of America (17.6), the United Kingdom (16.3), Australia (16.5) and New Zealand (16.2). The neonatal mortality, namely, deaths in babies below one month of age was 8.4 per thousand, which was also lower than that of the western countries. Less than two per cent of our children are underweight due to poor nutrition. You should be proud of your achievements, but I need not remind you that success brings with it further problems, many of which are of a different kind, for example, obesity in childhood is now not uncommon.

With the reduction of the birth rate to 16.6 per thousand of the population in 1977, so that only 38,364 babies were born compared to 58,977 births in 1962, better care has been lavished on our children. Infections have been better controlled and in fact, government has taken the initiative to provide two more immunisations free, namely, measles and German measles.

However, the problem of congenital anomalies and malignancy remain. For the former, genetic counselling is of the utmost importance, and for the latter, in spite of improvement in survival rates with treatment, the final answer can only be the result of further research into the causes of malignancy and, hopefully, effective preventive measures should be forthcoming. Childhood accidents are totally preventable and yet there is still a sizeable mortality and morbidity.

Psychological problems in children are common now. This is partly due to the stage of our social evolution and to greater affluence of our people. With smaller families, parents become worried over the psychological problems of their children.

Western influence has brought some health problems such as drug addiction, and this is most likely to affect the young adolescents.

The rapid tempo of life has caused a rather pernicious behaviour of some parents, for instance, child-battering. All those involved in child care should be on the lookout for the early stages of such abnormal behaviour and take the proper corrective measures, for the child is totally at the mercy of adults, being unable to defend himself.

If we trace further back the history of Singapore, the health of the child was even worse than it was two decades ago. Very crowded housing resulted in rife childhood tuberculosis, and mortality rates were therefore much higher. The achievements in improving the child's health became all the more remarkable, and I congratulate all adults who have participated in this successful endeavour.

A child as he grows to adulthood will join the ranks of those who will be responsible for their children. Thus, health maintenance is the responsibility of everyone, and today's adolescent must remember his heritage, and actively pass it on to his children.

I notice that the programme organised by the Singapore Paediatric Society has included many topics relevant to the child, and they will be discussed. You realise that health is not just physical, and it is with pleasure I note that the unborn child, his early life, adolescence, his education and even the handicapped child and his problems will receive your attention. It is also fitting that all these topics will be preceded by Professor Wong Hock Djon's address on the evolution of child health in Singapore in the past, and the problems which will loom large in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you a most successful convention. I am sure that the beneficiary of your deliberations will be the Singapore child, and I have much pleasure therefore in declaring open the Singapore Paediatric Society Convention.
