

24 MAY 1964

Singapore Government
PRESS RELEASE

Information Division, Ministry of Culture, City Hall, Singapore 0617 • tel. 3378191 ext. 352, 353, 354/3362207/3362271

Release No. 22/Mar 84 - CSC-3
11-1/84/03/17

SPEECH BY MR CHUA SIAN CHIN, MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS,
AT THE SANA VAO NITE AT THE NEPTUNE THEATRE RESTAURANT
ON SATURDAY, 17 MARCH 1984 AT 8 PM

Seven years have passed since we launched Operation Ferret in April 1977. Since then we have not only brought the problem under control but also reduce it considerably. The estimated number of heroin addicts in 1977 was 13,000. At the end of 1983, it has gone down to 6,000. The infection rate has also been checked. The number of new addicts detected has fallen from 5,150 in 1977 to 746 in 1980. For the last three years, the number of new addicts detected has levelled off to an average of 600 a year.

Another significant indicator that the problem is now well contained is that fewer drug abusers below 20 years are being detected. In 1977, 2,427 or 31.4 per cent of the drug abusers arrested were below 20 years old. However, this has drastically decreased to 392 or 10.5 per cent in 1980. During the last three years, the number of drug abusers below 20 years has levelled off to about 358 or 8.7 per cent. At the same time, there was a steady shift in the age group of 25 to 29 years from 17 per cent in 1977 to 32.8 per cent in 1983 indicating that addicts who had become repeaters are maturing over the years. If we continue to be successful in our drug control programme, we should reach a stage where the drug addict population would be reduced to a small group of hardcore elderly addicts.

In the schools, it no longer poses a problem. In 1977, 175 students were detected to have abused controlled drugs. Last year, only two student drug abusers were detected. However, our drug preventive education in schools must go on so that we can continue to immunise our young against the lure of drug abuse.

Through firm enforcement action we have got rid of the drug trafficking syndicates as well as smashed the distribution network in Singapore. Drug trafficking in Singapore is now carried out by 'ant' traffickers who push only small quantities of drugs. The number of 'ant' traffickers arrested over the last three years has also decreased from 486 in 1981 to 395 in 1983. On the other hand, the price of heroin has shot up from \$35 per gramme in 1977 to \$400 in 1980 when there was poor opium harvest in the Golden Triangle for two consecutive years. This high price of \$400 per gramme has remained steady over the last four years. The high price of heroin has forced the drug addict to consume less amount of heroin.

On treatment and rehabilitation of drug addicts, besides our compulsory programme undertaken in our Drug Rehabilitation Centres (DRCs), we have also introduced a number of crucial measures to prevent ex-addicts from going back to drugs and to help them to re-integrate with society. They include the Day Release Scheme and the two-year Supervision and Aftercare Programme. These schemes have been implemented for a sufficient length of time for us to assess their effectiveness. From the statistics collected, we can now say that they have helped considerably in bringing down the relapse rate.

When the first batch of drug addicts arrested in 1977 was placed on supervision, their relapse rate, measured over two years, that is in 1979, was as high as 70 per cent. Since then, the relapse rate of addicts released from the DRCs in subsequent years has dropped considerably from 44.8 per cent in 1980, to 40.7 per cent in 1981 and to 40.3 per cent in 1982. However, the relapse rate in 1983 increased to 53.9 per cent. A closer study of this cohort of treated drug addicts shows that the higher relapse rate was due to the second and third time repeaters whose relapse rate were 59.4 per cent and 63.1 per cent.

The Day Release Scheme has been equally successful. A recent study on 1,900 treated addicts released from the Day Release Scheme and placed on supervision from Feb 80 to Feb 82 shows that their relapse rate was 39 per cent. On the other hand, during the same period, it was found that 2,174 supervisees who did not have the benefits of the Day Release Scheme had a relapse rate of 52.5 per cent. Since its inception in Sep 79, a total of 5,598 inmates have been placed on the Day Release Scheme. The scheme has been favourably accepted by both the ex-addicts and employers.

Our problem now centres on a group of hardcore addicts who have refused or are unable to give up the drug taking habit. Of the 4,086 addicts in our DRCs, 442 or 10.8 per cent are hardcore addicts who are undergoing treatment and rehabilitation for the fourth time. Most of them had already stayed in the DRC for an average period of three and a half years before their fourth admission.

We need to reduce the number of hardcore addicts who is a constant source of infection. We are segregating them from the non-hardcore addicts to prevent bad influence and contamination. They will be put through a longer stay in the drug-free environment of our DRCs. This will help them break their psychological dependence on drugs. They will be given more intensive counselling and on discharge closer supervision. Their progress will be monitored closely through their parents, relatives and employers and be subject to more surprise urine tests and checks.

Currently, there are only 1,400 Volunteer Aftercare Officers (VAOs) to about 2,500 drug supervisees. This means that only two-thirds of the drug supervisees are receiving aftercare and individual counselling. The remaining one-third of the drug supervisees do not have the benefits of aftercare and counselling. We have therefore decided to implement group counselling so that most if not all of the

drug supervisees could be counselled. However, group counselling will not replace individual counselling, which will continue to be given to as many supervisees as possible.

For a start, the scheme on group counselling would be tried out as a pilot project involving 240 drug supervisees and eight counsellors. Each counsellor will counsel a group of 30 supervisees. Before the pilot project is implemented, the counsellors will be provided with the necessary training by the Social Work Department of the National University of Singapore.

The government has taken the lead in the fight against the drug menace. But ultimately, the government's effort can only succeed if there is full community participation.

SANA has been playing an active role in mobilising community support and participation in the government's drug control programme. Since 1978, SANA has been recruiting and training VAOs from the community and the various religious organisations in Singapore. Many ex-addicts would have failed in their efforts to kick the drug habit if not for the good work done and sacrifice made by the VAOs. I would like to urge more members of the public to volunteer as VAOs. We need more VAOs to provide intensive counselling to the hardcore addicts.

I would like to congratulate SANA for organising this function in recognition of the good work done by the VAOs. May I also on behalf of the government express my appreciation to all VAOs for their valuable contribution in their work of counselling and aftercare of the drug addicts.
