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SPEECH BY MR CHAN SOO SEN, PARLIAMENTARY  
SECRETARY (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE & MINISTRY  
OF HEALTH), AT THE OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE ON  
"EQUIPPING THE CAREGIVERS" ON FRIDAY, 17 SEP 99  
AT 9.00 AM AT THE THEATRETTE, LEVEL 1  
TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL, 11 JALAN TAN TOCK SENG

Dr Luisa Lee

CEO of Tan Tock Seng Hospital

Dr Lim Chan Yong

President of SAGE

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning

I am very happy to join you today at the Conference on "Equipping the Caregivers" organised for professional caregivers of older persons. I am particularly happy to see Ministry of Health, Tan Tock Seng Hospital and the Singapore Action Group of Elders (SAGE) working together to bring about this Conference. I look forward to more partnership between public, private and the people sector to work towards a better quality of care for older persons in Singapore.

All of us know that Singapore's population is ageing rapidly. Today, one in 14 Singaporeans is above 65 years of age. In 2030, it would be one in 5. Even though the older persons of the future would be better educated, more independent, and probably more healthy, there will come a time when some would require professional care. This demand will escalate as our population ages further. One of the important issues that the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Ageing Population is looking into is how to ensure the needs of older persons are adequately met by their families and their community.

While the quality and skills of professional caregivers will be important, it is important to also realise that caregiving for older persons is labour intensive. If we rely mainly on professional caregiving, the cost will be high. This is particular so if the demand for professional caregiving exceeds supply, which I believe will be the case. A more realistic model is, as far as possible, the family and the community play their roles in providing care, using professional care only when necessary. To do so, it is important that more family and community members learn about caregiving. Professional caregivers like you can play an important role training the community and family caregivers.

Other than the skills aspect, it is also important for family and community members to understand the emotional and psychological aspect of giving care. Caring for a family member or a fellow member of the community who is frail or sick can be a physically and emotionally draining experience. It is also important that the needs of the caregivers are properly catered for. We need to form Caregivers' Support Groups to help everybody find strength and relief. Together, they can share experience in caregiving. You may want to, at some future dates, organise a conference on family and community caregiving, and another one on forming and sustaining caregivers' support groups.

If neighbours can support each other in caregiving, and to 'take care of one's own old folks and then extend this to other's old folks' as Mencius' advocated, we can facilitate deep friendship and strong cohesion. Much more needs to be done towards this end. Mencius' vision is fine, but we do want the family and volunteer caregivers to be properly trained. We do have to recruit the required number of caring volunteers, and put in place support group activities. These are all big tasks. However, let's not despair. Singapore has already started to plan for and act on a more aged society when we are still young, vibrant and fit. I am optimistic

that by the time we reach 2030, we would be much more ready for a more aged population.

In order to enlarge your reach, I would like to suggest that government agencies, hospitals, voluntary organisations work with grassroots organisations to promote training of caregivers. This is an area Community Development Councils' network can be useful. Our grassroots organisations have good senior citizens' programmes. However, the programmes cater to mainly the 'well' elderly. As our society ages, there will be a stronger demand for skills to help and care for the older persons. Community Centres and Community Clubs are good locations to conduct these training, and to hold support group activities. Grassroots volunteers can be a potential source of caregiver trainees who could possibly put their skills to good use during their community work.

In this International Year of Older Persons, let us pledge to work together to prepare for a society of older persons. Provided we plan ahead, work as a community, put programmes in place incrementally but systematically, a Singapore with older population is not a scenario we need to be too fearful about. Let us hope that in another 30 years' time, we can look back at the cooperation between the public, private and people sectors and feel proud and relieved that we have faced and overcome the challenge of ageing with confidence, without losing competitiveness as a Nation.

Have a good Conference.

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