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**SPEECH BY MR CHAN SOO SEN, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(PRIME MINISTER' S OFFICE & MINISTRY OF HEALTH), AT THE
INTERNATIONAL HEPATITIS B AWARENESS WEEKEND OPENING
CEREMONY ON SATURDAY, 21 OCT 2000 AT 3.00 PM AT GREAT
WORLD CITY**

Good afternoon

Dr Richard Guan

Chairman, National Foundation for Digestive Diseases

Ms Theresa Yeo

Chairperson, Singapore Hepatitis Support Group

Members of Singapore Hepatitis Support Group

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

I am very happy to join you this afternoon at the opening of the International Hepatitis B Awareness Weekend. This Awareness Weekend is an international

event observed in many countries around the world. It is an initiative launched by the Viral Hepatitis Prevention Board, an European-based independent group of leading experts in hepatitis. I thank and congratulate the National Foundation for Digestive Diseases and the Singapore Hepatitis Support Group for organizing this event in Singapore.

Viral hepatitis is one of the most common infectious diseases in the world. It is a major global public health problem. Amongst the many types of viral hepatitis, Hepatitis B infection is a major cause of illness and death. Hepatitis B is spread by blood and close physical contacts. Newborns are at risk of infection if their mother is a chronic Hepatitis B carrier.

The World Health Organisation has estimated that there were about 350 million chronic Hepatitis B carriers worldwide. The significance of Hepatitis B infection lies in the large number of carriers of the disease who are at risk of developing liver cirrhosis and liver cancer, diseases that cause more than one million deaths every year.

The best protection against Hepatitis B infection is vaccination. Hepatitis B vaccines have been available for the last two decades. Over the years, newer and cheaper vaccines have made it possible for many countries to incorporate hepatitis vaccination into their childhood immunisation programmes. But unfortunately, there are many people worldwide who still remain unprotected.

Hepatitis B is a disease of public health importance in Singapore. It is estimated that 4% of our population are Hepatitis B carriers. Recognising this, Ministry of Health introduced Hepatitis B prevention and control programme in the early 1980s. The key component of the programme is immunisation to prevent infection by carriers of the susceptible population. The other components of the programme are surveillance, infection control precautions, screening of all blood donors and public education.

Since 1987, Hepatitis B vaccination has been fully integrated into our national childhood immunisation programme. Today, the coverage for Hepatitis B immunisation in our infants is more than 90%. Meanwhile, acute Hepatitis B infection rate has declined by 60%, from 10 per 100,000 population in 1985 to 4 per 100,000 in 1999. Liver cancer among men has also declined from 29 per 100,000 during the period 1968-1972 to 19 per 100,000 in 1993-1997. The corresponding figures among women have declined from 8 per 100,000 to 5 per 100,000 respectively for the same time frames.

However, there is no ground for complacency. While our infants are well protected against Hepatitis B, about half of our adult population has no immunity against the virus. In a blood sample survey conducted in 1998, only 38% of the 15 to 24-year-olds had antibodies that protected them against Hepatitis B.

To protect our youths, Ministry of Health has decided to conduct a Hepatitis B immunisation programme for students in secondary schools, junior colleges, centralised institutes, ITEs, polytechnics and universities. This programme will begin in 2001 and is expected to last 4 years. The blood screening test for Hepatitis B will be provided on site at the educational institutions and will be administered at no cost to the students.

Following the blood test, students requiring immunisation will be identified and immunised – also at their educational institutions – at a charge of \$25 per student for a full 3-dose course of Hepatitis B immunisation. This is the same charge for Hepatitis B immunisation at the polyclinics, and a small price for prevention of a potentially serious medical condition. I hope that the parents and schools encourage as many of their students as possible to participate in this programme.

Since its formation in 1996, the Singapore Hepatitis Support Group, under the auspices of the National Foundation for Digestive Diseases, has been active in increasing awareness and knowledge of hepatitis among carriers and their families as well as members of the general public. It provides psychological and emotional support to carriers through sharing of personal experiences among themselves. This helps them to understand, accept and better manage their condition.

The Singapore Hepatitis Support Group relies largely on the time and energy of volunteers, including healthcare professionals, Hepatitis B carriers, their families and friends to help plan, organise seminars, workshops and annual public forums. I am pleased to note that the Singapore Hepatitis Support Group is also launching its website as an additional conduit to provide information on Hepatitis B to its members as well as the general public.

I applaud the efforts of the National Foundation for Digestive Diseases and the Singapore Hepatitis Support Group. I also thank you for putting together this initiative to inform, educate and create awareness of Hepatitis B and its prevention and treatment. This Awareness Weekend provides an excellent opportunity for members of the public and health care professionals to interact, share and address their various concerns. So, I would like to wish you a fruitful and enlightening

afternoon.

Thank you.

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