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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF
THE SILVER JUBILEE MEETING OF THE ACADEMY OF MEDICINE
INCORPORATING THE 16TH SINGAPORE-MALAYSIA CONGRESS OF MEDICINE
AT THE DYNASTY HOTEL BALLROOM, ON MONDAY, 19 JULY '82 AT 6.00 PM

When I agreed to become the Patron of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, I was humbled by the thought that, unlike my distinguished predecessor in office, an eminent obstetrician and gynaecologist, my only claim to distinction in matters medical, is that I am merely a fairly well-known patient, at the receiving end of the ministrations of doctors. And like most patients, I am sometimes fearful that dentists might occasionally pull out the wrong teeth, or surgeons excise the wrong part and, equally deplorable, excise what need not be excised.

I recall the story about the patient who, on recovering consciousness after the amputation of his leg, was told by his surgeon: "I have got both good news and bad news for you. I will begin with the bad news. I am sorry, but we have made an error. We have amputated your good leg".

"And what is the good news," enquired the patient. "The good news," replied the surgeon, "is that your bad leg is recovering".

By now you will have appreciated that I am only qualified to be a spokesman of my fellow patients in the Republic. The magnificent triumphs of medical science in the modern age overawe us, and lie quite beyond my province. I can, therefore, only attempt to give expression to the non-medical public's expectations of the men and women of medicine.

Before I do this, however, I might give you the results of the homework I had to do before preparing this address.

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Exactly 25 years ago, to this very day, 19 July 1957, 20 specialists met to form the Academy of Medicine, Singapore. Their far-sightedness is amply borne out by the size and stature of the Academy of Medicine today, a body of medical specialists dedicated to the maintenance of the highest standards of medical practice and professional ethics. The Academy is to be congratulated on its achievement during the last 25 years.

The pivot of its activities is continuing medical education and in this area, it has achieved considerable success in the large numbers of continuing medical education lectures, symposia, Chapter annual meetings and the biennial Singapore-Malaysia Congresses of Medicine, that it organises alternately with the Academy of Medicine, Malaysia. It is clearly not possible for a doctor on his own to keep abreast of the numerous developments in the several fields of medicine. I am aware that the personal ability and skill of many of Singapore's specialists are comparable to the best in the world. Nonetheless, it is very necessary and crucial to "tap" the brains of your colleagues in other countries at such meetings as this.

Besides the wide range of local activities, the Academy has also embarked on a series of exchange programmes with the United Kingdom and currently, it also offers scholarships for doctors to train in Singapore.

Historically, the Singapore-Malaysia Congresses were initiated as local meetings to allow doctors from Singapore and the then Malayan States to get together to share experiences and learn from each other. They were purely local affairs. But over the years, the meeting has grown, as it should, and I can see now that it is no longer a merely local meeting, but more regional, if not international, in scope.

Over 16 countries are represented here today and there are over 600 delegates attending. The topics that will be discussed cover a wide range and I can see you have spared no efforts in bringing together what is current in your field.

A topic that is of great interest must be the lecture on "Genetic Engineering". The potential in this field is vast - indeed almost mind-boggling. But there is probably no need to

caution you that it can also be horrific. One recalls Aldous Huxley's classic "Brave New World", which many regards as a sober warning to mankind by an exceptionally fine erudite and perceptive mind.

The Academy has achieved its aim to become the representative post-graduate medical body in Singapore. It is certainly a proud occasion for the Academy to see ten Presidents of Royal Colleges here in the same room at the opening of its Silver Jubilee meeting. The Academy deserves congratulations for pulling off such a "coup".

As Singapore becomes more sophisticated, the Academy and doctors in general must deal with the obvious problem of quality control. We have just heard that the rate of growth of medical knowledge is not just exponential but astronomical. How then can we assure the public that our doctors are competent and up-to-date? This is vital since doctors, unlike other professions, deal with people's lives, and one mistake can be the last mistake, for the patient that is. This is something that the profession has to think very hard about, and the Academy being the post-graduate medical body should be actively concerned with the maintenance of high standards in the profession. The leaders in the profession should come together and formulate a plan to ensure that our doctors satisfy minimum standards of competence, and that they should be conversant with new development in the various fields. The presence of a large number of experts and Presidents of Royal Colleges here in Singapore will make it possible to learn from their wide experience in these matters.

It is clearly of vital importance to inculcate in our doctors, in the course of their training, the need to be safe and competent. The drive for competence, if not excellence, should be something that is evoked from within, rather than enforced by coercion. This drive must be a self-generating one throughout a doctor's career. If the Academy, in conjunction with the Post-graduate Medical School and the Medical Faculty of the National University of Singapore can achieve this, we would have come a long way. In various areas in Singapore the current talk is about quality circles and work improvement teams. These are directed at maximising the capabilities and usefulness of the

individual. These are concepts which are of equal relevance in the field of medicine.

The Academy is the only body in Singapore that is currently maintaining a register of specialists. Is there a definition of a medical specialist and if so, does it imply that once a specialist, forever a specialist? These questions should be closely examined by all concerned, bearing the public interest in mind.

The public interest also requires that thinking on this subject should embrace the total doctor population, general practitioners included.

It would be clearly unjust to indulge in a blanket denunciation of what is essentially a noble profession, merely because of a minority of black sheep. Nonetheless, some plain speaking is necessary if shoddy ethics and wrong motivations are to be curbed and eliminated, and high standards of competence and ethics are to be maintained.

Feedbacks from a few patients suggest that some specialists enter into practice with the idea that they must earn a definitive sum of money every month, and the treatment of patients is secondary. This goes against the grain of professional ethics. Doctors subscribe to the oath that the proper treatment of patients must be primary. Earnings must be subordinate to this principle.

We sometimes hear of exorbitant charges. The problem is compounded by patients who fail to enquire into the cost of surgical and medical fees before they subject themselves to specialist management.

I am distressed by isolated cases where a sincere practitioner or specialist would see a patient and advise that surgery is contra-indicated. To his horror he would see the same patient a few days later in another hospital already operated upon by another surgeon. It would appear that monetary considerations are allowed to prevail over the proper ethics of practice. Fortunately such cases are few.

Another distressing example. A patient consults a specialist or practitioner for vague symptoms. Careful and

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thorough physical examination does not suggest any condition that requires treatment, particularly surgical management. But we have dissatisfied doctor-hopping patients, who doctor-hop until they end up with a surgeon who is willing to operate. Although differences of opinion are possible and legitimate, the question that needs to be asked is whether decisions to operate ought to be taken without a second medical opinion. There is a need for an investment in educating the public on the folly of doctor-hopping and the wisdom of getting a second opinion. I am told that in the United States there is a trend where insurance companies will not pay for surgical expenses unless there is a second surgeon's opinion confirming the need for surgery recommended by the first surgeon.

The Government and people of Singapore have taken pains to strive for the maintenance and enhancement of high standards in all fields of public and professional life in the Republic. Great vigilance is therefore exercised to identify and plug loopholes in our laws, rules and regulations, to prevent the subversion and erosion of standards by persons with lesser aims and dubious credentials.

The Singapore Medical Council is a body that looks into disciplinary matters when misdemeanours are committed. The public therefore has a right to expect that this body, as would be expected of the governing councils in other professional disciplines, should consist of responsible seniors in the profession with unblemished records.

It would be unthinkable for the Singapore Medical Council to admit witch doctors as Council members. It ought to become equally unthinkable for the Council to tolerate the election into the Council of persons who have blotted their professional copy-books.

I was therefore pleased to learn that amendments to the Medical Registration Act are being considered, in order to ensure that those who seek to sit on the Singapore Medical Council are persons of unquestionable character and integrity, and of proven competence.

The organising committee of this meeting has certainly put together a stimulating programme. One can envisage that delegates who attend all the sessions will find themselves busily shuttling from one point to another over the next four days. I am relieved to know, however, that there is ample provision for relaxation in the form of social events. This aspect is equally important as the objective of the meeting is exchange of knowledge, experience and information, that can take place just as well in the relaxed informal atmosphere of a social event, as it can at lectures. I hope that the events of the next few days will meet with the expectations of the many foreign delegates who have come from as far away as the United States and Canada, and I am sure the organising committee will spare no efforts to help you in every way possible.

I have now great pleasure in declaring the Silver Jubilee meeting of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, open.

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