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SPEECH BY MR WAN HUSSIN ZOOHRI, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY  
(HEALTH AND CULTURE), AT THE OPENING OF NUTRITION EXHIBITION  
"EAT WISELY, STAY HEALTHY" AT THE SCIENCE CENTRE  
ON TUESDAY, 4 SEPTEMBER 1984 AT 10.00 AM

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During the last two decades, we, in Singapore, have seen considerable improvement in the quality of our living environment. Our living standards have risen and we have presently a high rate of literacy. This, together with the improvement in the health services have resulted in significant changes in the pattern of ill health and disease. In the 1940s and 50s, communicable or infectious diseases were the main cause of illness and death. Many of these diseases have now come under control. In fact, some of them like diphtheria and poliomyelitis have been eradicated. The new pattern of diseases which has surfaced is chronic degenerative conditions like diabetes, heart attacks, strokes and cancers.

In 1948, these chronic conditions contributed to five per cent of the total deaths. Today, they are the top killers. Heart attacks particularly, have shown the most dramatic increase of more than 100 per cent over the last thirty years. The incidence of these diseases is expected to increase further in the years to come. With the better standards of living, life expectancy of the average Singaporean presently at around 70 years of age will increase, people are expected to live longer, and the number of people suffering from chronic degenerative diseases is expected to increase.

The question that we should ask ourselves is, "Is there anything we can do to slow down at least the increase of chronic degenerative diseases?", "Can heart attacks and strokes be prevented?". Research has confirmed that many of the diseases which have come to the forefront in affluent communities or countries are largely the result of poor health habits adopted in childhood and practised throughout adult life. Some of these health habits include unhealthy eating habits, particularly of overeating foods high in fats and salt, cigarette smoking, lack of sufficient physical activity and the difficulty many people have in coping with stress.

Obesity, or an increase in body fat, is one of the conditions resulting from unhealthy eating habits and has become a growing concern for the Ministry of Health. A recent review of the health records kept by the School Health Services showed that 10 per cent of the Primary Six school children are definitely obese, while a further 10 per cent are borderline obese. In Primary One, 2.5 per cent of the boys and 1.8 per cent of the girls are obese. Among Secondary Four girls, who at the time of 15 or 16 years of age, are expected to be figure and beauty conscious, 9.2 per cent are definitely fat. In another survey carried out in 1979, among patients attending Government clinics, nearly one-third of them were overweight.

Studies have shown that there is a strong relationship between excessive body weight and the risk of developing diseases of the heart and blood vessels or cardiovascular diseases as they are generally known.

The next question we should address ourselves is, "Is it possible to maintain optimum weight?", or in other words, "What causes obesity?". The answer is quite simple. Obesity results from overeating and lack of sufficient physical activities or exercise. The food we eat give us energy for our basic body functions or metabolism and for

our work and exercise. So, we have on the one hand energy or food intake and on the other, energy expenditure namely work and exercise. When the energy intake exceeds energy expenditure, the excess is stored as fat in the body. If you take two or three cans of soft-drinks a day for one week, you will be consuming an excess of 4,000 calories, through which you will put on half kg of fat in your body. Physically, an excessively fat person is not a beautiful figure, his movements are slow and clumsy but the great danger is that some of the fat will be deposited in the blood vessels. This, as time goes on, will obstruct blood-flow or blood circulation and will give rise to conditions like heart attacks and strokes.

It is because of these health concerns that this Exhibition with the theme, "Eat Wisely, Stay Healthy", has been organised. The aim of the Exhibition is to motivate school children to adopt healthy eating habits, one of the lifestyles that is conducive to good health. However, merely learning about healthy eating habits is not enough. We need to put what we learn into practice. To encourage the practice of healthy eating behaviour, constant reinforcement and good example is important. We can achieve this if principals, teachers and parents can work hand-in-hand in the promotion of healthy eating habits in the young, thereby ensuring optimal health. It will be a waste of valuable human resources if Singaporeans are prematurely incapacitated by diseases which can be prevented through eating wisely.

On this note, I declare the Exhibition open.