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SPEECH BY MR. FONG SIP CHEE, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY,
MINISTRY OF LABOUR, ON THE OCCASION OF THE LAUNCHING CEREMONY
FOR THE OCCUPATIONAL CANCER PREVENTION PROGRAMME ON FRIDAY,
24 NOVEMBER '78 AT JURONG ROOM, SHANGRI-LA HOTEL AT 9.00 A.M.

Cancer is the second most frequent cause of death in the Western World, and is also a major cause of death in Singapore. While the aetiology in the majority of cancers is still unknown, recent research has revealed an increasing number of environmental carcinogens (cancer-causing agents), some of which are present in the work environment.

A recent major study sponsored by the USA Department of Health, Education and Welfare, showed that at least 20% of new cancer cases in the USA will come from exposure to carcinogens in the workplace. These include asbestos, arsenic, benzene, chromium and some petroleum products.

A study carried out by the Industrial Health Department in 1975 confirmed that several of the cancer-causing agents are present in certain industries in Singapore. The Ministry of Labour has made it part of its policy to protect workers from the effects of cancer-causing substances, as announced in the Ministry's Addendum to the President's address in the Parliament on 8th February 1977.

OCCUPATIONAL CANCER PREVENTION PROGRAMME

As cancer takes some time to develop, control measures must be taken early to ensure that this danger is contained, and the morbidity and mortality from occupational cancers are minimised. Otherwise, this serious hazard may increase in the years to come, undermining the health of our workforce. Thus, an Occupational Cancer Prevention Programme has been drawn up to deal with this problem.

The Programme activities would involve the following:

- 1) Drawing up Codes of Practice as a guide to industry and workers;
- 2) Health education of workers and managements against the hazard;
- 3) Environmental monitoring and control of workplaces with a carcinogen hazard;
- 4) Medical surveillance of workers exposed to the cancer hazard;
- 5) Setting up an informal occupational cancer registry.

A very important aspect of the Programme is the monitoring of the work environment to assess and identify carcinogenic substances and bringing them under control.

The Programme will cover the carcinogens in phases. The first phase, over the next two years, will concentrate on asbestos and benzene. Then, the other known carcinogens will be included, viz mineral oils, arsenic, vinyl chloride monomer (vom) and aromatic amines.

RESPONSIBILITY OF MANagements AND WORKERS

It is very important that both managements and workers are fully aware of the hazard. Hence, the importance of wide dissemination of information on the problem. Where possible, managements should try to substitute carcinogenic substances for substances not known to cause cancer. Where any carcinogenic substance has to be used, the management must ensure minimum exposure of the workers to the substance, example by isolation of the process, or enclosure of machinery where the substance is used. Carcinogenic substances must not be allowed to contaminate the workroom air, example local exhaust ventilation systems can be installed to exhaust dusts and vapours away.

Managements should ensure that workers are fully informed of any hazard which may be present and what precautions to take. Appropriate protective equipment, eg respirators, impervious gloves should be provided and it should be seen that workers use them to minimise their control with carcinogens. Managements should also arrange for periodical medical examinations of workers involved with the handling of any carcinogenic substance.

Workers, on their part, having been informed of the hazard, should co-operate fully in minimizing their own exposure, example to use the personal protective equipment provided, or to ask for them if they are not provided. Good personal hygiene is also important. They should also submit themselves to the periodical medical examinations, and see a doctor early at any time when they do not feel well.

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