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**SPEECH BY MR GOH CHOK TONG, FIRST DEPUTY PRIME
MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, AT THE OFFICIAL
OPENING OF THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION NEW
FACILITIES AT 21 EVANS ROAD, ON SATURDAY,
10 MARCH 1990 AT 1800 HOURS**

RETURN TO RUGGED SOCIETY

After Singapore gained her independence in 1965, the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew called on Singaporeans to work towards a rugged society. He made this call more than once in the post-independence Sixties. In fact, in 1966, at the meeting with principals of schools, he said, and I quote:

“The ideal product is the student, the university graduate, who is strong, robust, rugged, with tremendous quality of stamina, endurance and at the same time, with great intellectual discipline and, most important of all, humility and love for his community.”

How have we as a nation responded to the call to build a rugged society?

Obesity – A Problem

Not very well if we use 'obesity' as a barometer. As Minister for Defence, I see the data on the obesity of the younger male population regularly. And I must say that the trend is a disconcerting and unhealthy one. (See Annexes). In 1984, six per cent of male Primary One pupils were obese. Four years later, the figure had doubled to 12 per cent. Also in 1984, the obesity rate for male Primary Six pupils was 11 per cent. Obesity once gained is not easily shed. By the time they reached Secondary Four in 1988, that cohort added two per cent to the obese population. Now, can you guess what was the percentage of obese boys in Primary Six in 1989? It was 18 per cent, an increase of seven percentage points in five years. If we add two per cent to this cohort, it will mean that one out of five boys will be obese in Secondary Four in 1993.

Now, let us look at the data for new enlistees to National Service. From 1984 to 1989, the rate rose from six per cent to 10 per cent. In fact, obesity is the main reason why newly-enlisted National Servicemen are down-graded to non-combat fit status. Amongst the reservists, obesity is one of the two main

causes for down-grading – the other being hypertension. And the trend is upwards, both for obesity and hypertension.

For the younger female population, the problem is only slightly better, but there is no need for me to read out additional statistics to illustrate my point that we are becoming more of a flabby society than a rugged one.

The increasing trend in obesity prevalence, if left unchecked, will have adverse long term consequences for our nation, and especially on the performance of the SAF. If we are not rugged, fit and healthy, as a society, we will not be able to withstand the pressure of competition, endure the rigours of military training, and survive the heat of battles.

There is therefore a need to reverse the obesity trend and at the same time, improve the physical fitness level of our society. In short, bring about a return to a rugged society. First, get the schools to pay more attention to, and to upgrade their physical education programmes. Second, motivate the individual to keep fit. And, third, get parents to play their part.

The establishment of the College of Physical Education underlines the importance we attach to physical education. Physical education teachers will be taught Exercise Physiology, Biomechanics, Sports Psychology, Growth and Development, and Sports Medicine. They will not just undergo sports skill training. They will be taught the theory and science of physical fitness. This strong scientific basis provides the PE specialists the vital knowledge needed by them to evaluate the needs of students and make appropriate decisions to meet those needs.

The College of Physical Education is also upgrading existing PE teachers who did not have the opportunity to go through a full course. With well-trained PE teachers, they can then formulate effective PE training programmes for their pupils in their schools. In this way, they will be able to improve the physical fitness of our pupils, and impart to them knowledge and skills to help them maintain their physical condition as they grow up.

A measure of success of the College of Physical Education would be how successful we can return to a rugged society. A reducing obesity trend amongst school children would be a clear indication. Yet another indication – a longer term indication would be the combat fitness of our national servicemen and reservists.

Conclusion

Singapore has succeeded because we dare to strive for excellence. We have to be fit and rugged to meet competition to achieve excellence.

I therefore throw you this challenge – Get Singaporeans to return to the rugged society.

On this note, it is my pleasure to declare open the College of Physical Education.

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