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ADDRESS BY MR HOWE YOON CHONG, MINISTER FOR HEALTH, AT THE NURSES  
GRADUATION CEREMONY AT THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL  
ON WEDNESDAY, 28 JULY 1982 AT 11.00 AM

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Today's Graduation Ceremony is for some 690 nurses and 20 dental nurses who have worked hard to become full-fledged members of the Singapore Nursing Service. On graduation you will join the long line of predecessors who have dedicated themselves to minister to the sick and the infirm, to put service before self, and to bring relief to pain and suffering. Our nurses are the backbone of our health care services. Without nurses our medical service cannot function. Your services are essential if we are to raise our public health standards in Singapore.

Your decision to follow this calling means that you are prepared to devote yourself to serve the less fortunate in our community, and to bring assistance and comfort to those who are stricken by illness and disease. You have completed your rigorous training and can now carry out your duties on your own. Wherever you are posted, you will have to work hard. You have to put up with tedious hours, night shifts, often unpleasant working conditions, and sometimes difficult patients, their relatives and well-wishers. I am sure you will not be daunted by any of these difficulties but rather accept them as necessary challenges to your devotion to the nursing service.

Your training has provided you with skills to discharge your duties efficiently. By going about your work conscientiously and looking after your patients with sincerity, understanding, and compassion, you can get satisfaction from your work and make a success of your career. It will be a tough struggle to maintain the high standards set by your predecessors but equally the standard of nursing and the quality of health care services in Singapore have been improving year by year.

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This must be due to the total commitment of our nurses to their work and to the many opportunities that are available for further training. The prospects for advancement and promotion for those who work hard are very good indeed.

The Ministry of Health is aware of the problem of shortage of nurses. Its efforts to recruit and train more nurses each year to fill vacancies have met with limited success. A more affluent society with people who are more health-conscious will demand more health services and these create the demand for more nurses. More private hospitals and nursing homes are being established. They attract our experienced nurses to join them with better offers. Every year hundreds of our nurses leave the service for one reason or another. But for as long as the trained nurses who leave us continue to utilize their skills either in their new jobs, in their homes, or within the community, the costly training that we have provided for them will not have been lost. Hopefully it should contribute to the raising of the standards of health of our people, but the shortage of nurses will remain.

The shortage of nurses is not a problem that can be solved by simply recruiting and training more and more nurses. We must study the causes of the shortage. In our case it is clear that besides our more affluent population demanding more health services and the private sector inducing our experienced nurses to leave, there are problems of alternative employment opportunities which may attract the more adventurous. There is also the added factor of the rapid increase in the number of older people in our population.

Many older citizens who are now 60 years and above have had a very difficult life. In their younger days they earned their living through strenuous physical exertion in return for low wages. Many had suffered from malnutrition, poverty, physical neglect, and health hazards at their workplace. Many were ravaged by diseases like tuberculosis, malaria, and other ill-defined conditions. In their old age their poor physical condition could offer little resistance to illness and disease. Their demand for health care services will place an increasing load on our clinics and hospitals. Many more nurses will be needed to provide care and assistance to the elderly whose number will increase in the

next two decades. There are now more than 174,000 people over 60 years old in Singapore. They constitute 7.2 per cent of our population. The number will increase to well over 300,000 (or more than 10 per cent of the population) by the year 2000.

In another area, rapid advances in science and technology have introduced many more sophisticated methods of diagnosis, treatment, and medication into our hospitals. Today more and more physicians, surgeons, medical specialists, nurses, and other supporting staff are required to work in teams. The latest diagnostic practices and treatment systems demand highly skilled specialists in many fields including specially trained nurses. Standard procedures in our hospitals already require our nurses to be conversant with intricate equipment and sophisticated technology to provide accurate and continuous monitoring of the patient's condition, administration of medication in minute quantities, and to keep track of the slightest change in levels of clinical response. Our nurses will have many opportunities to be trained and given experience to support the specialists in surgical operations and clinical work. The constant drain on our nursing staff makes it difficult for us to nurture sufficient numbers of skilled and experienced nurses to keep pace with the rapid advances in the specialized fields.

The Ministry must study how best to recruit and train more nurses or to introduce supplementary grades of nurses to satisfy specific needs. Clearly the existing pace of recruitment and training should be intensified but in addition more nurses are needed at both the upper and lower ends of the present nursing spectrum, where the increasing demands will be most critical.

At the lower end, more nursing care and assistance are needed to minister to the increasing number of older patients in our clinics and hospitals. In this regard the demand is for more assistant nurses or nursing aides who have the proper temperament and attitude for such work. They can cover much of the routine work in the hospitals and clinics. They can relieve our trained nurses of the extra load due to many vacancies in the establishment. This will in turn permit our skilled and experienced nurses to be deployed in more important duties.

At the upper end the demand is for an increasing number of highly skilled nurses to be members of specialist teams. The acquisition of extra skills through advanced training provided in the hospitals will enable our nurses to keep in step with the sophisticated developments in the clinical fields. But the rapid turnover of nurses does not permit the training of adequate numbers to meet this increasing demand. The Ministry may have to explore new avenues of providing advanced training for this category of nurses.

Singapore must learn from the lessons of other countries. The Ministry is convinced that while curative efforts must continue in our clinics and hospitals, at the same time we must increase our efforts to educate our people on preventive measures. Our people must be encouraged to look after their own health, to adopt wholesome lifestyles and eating habits and to take measures to avoid being prey to the many modern diseases that have no cure. This is not going to be easy but the effort must be made. In the educative and preventive areas of work our nurses will play increasingly important roles. In the maternity and child health area our nurses can teach mothers to take better care of their babies and to bring up healthy, robust, and active children. In the school health service they can work closely with doctors and specialist educators to advise on physical health measures in schools, to provide every youngster with regular physical check-ups, and to teach them the value of regular physical exercise. In this manner the level of health education can be raised and our next generation can grow fit and strong.

You have a very interesting and rewarding career ahead of you. Your rewards may not be as much in the materialistic sense as in the satisfaction of a job well done. The results of your work will be far reaching and well appreciated. The high standards set by your predecessors have gained for the nursing service much respect and esteem. Your duty is to keep up these standards and to improve on them. I wish you all every success and a bright future in your chosen vocation.

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