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Information Division, Ministry of Culture City Hall Singapore 0617 TEL 3378191 ext 352 353 354 3362207 3362271

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ADDRESS BY MR HOWE YOON CHONG, MINISTER FOR HEALTH,  
AT THE TAN TOCK SENG NIGHT AT THE JADE RESTAURANT,  
HOTEL ROYAL RAMADA ON SATURDAY, 29 OCTOBER 1983 AT 7.30 PM

Few of us pay much attention to the past history of Tan Tock Seng Hospital which has kept pace in its growth with the social and economic development of Singapore for almost one hundred and forty years. No doubt conditions will change as Singapore continues to progress and Tan Tock Seng Hospital will have to change too. Tan Tock Seng Hospital began as a humble Chinese pauper hospital at the foot of Pearl's Hill in 1844. In 1860 it was shifted to the site now occupied by the Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital at the corner of Serangoon Road and Balestier Road. It was not until 1909 that it settled down in its present location at Moulmein Road.

Though the hospital had occupied different locations and been expanded far beyond what its early founders could ever dream possible, yet two major characteristics remained:-

(i) True to its early traditions, Tan Tock Seng Hospital devoted its service to the poorer sections of the population. It concentrated its efforts on diseases that afflict the poor and the under-privileged. After World War II it became the centre for the treatment of tuberculosis and respiratory diseases which were then the major killers in Singapore.

(ii) Ever since the first Medical School was established in 1905, Tan Tock Seng Hospital served as the teaching hospital from which our locally trained doctors received their clinical instruction and gained their initial experience.

No doubt these two important characteristics will be preserved even as Tan Tock Seng Hospital takes on new challenges. Some of you may feel that the development of newer hospitals like SGH and KRH which boast of more sophisticated equipment, modern buildings, and better facilities, will affect the Tan Tock Seng Hospital and make it less attractive to doctors, nurses, and other staff. The new hospitals are a sign of continued progress and advancement. We cannot hold back the clock. One way is for Tan Tock Seng Hospital to be renovated or redeveloped in phases so that eventually it will have buildings, facilities, and equipment that rival those in the new hospitals.

The quality of a hospital does not rest on its buildings, facilities, and equipment. Doctors, specialists, nurses, and other staff, their level of skills, the kind of service they provide, and their commitment to the well-being and early recovery of the patients under their care, are likely to be much more important. In this respect Tan Tock Seng Hospital's quality of dedicated service rendered with kindness, courtesy, and compassion by members of its staff is a record all of you can take justifiable pride. You should however improve on the established high standards and the excellent traditions of health care so as to earn the gratitude and admiration of more and more people.

Events have ensured that Tan Tock Seng Hospital will continue to make important contributions to Singapore. It is now a general hospital serving the densely populated eastern sector of the island. It has become a centre for neurology and neuro-surgery. Its orthopaedics department has a good artificial limb centre. New units for ENT and ophthalmology have recently been added. Soon there will be a renal dialysis unit. For as long as Tan Tock Seng Hospital remains a teaching hospital and its doctors, nurses, and other staff devote themselves to serving patients with understanding,

sympathy, and consideration, there is no reason why it cannot hold its own against even the newest hospitals. It can however do better. Its doctors and surgeons should anticipate problems and provide solutions for them. For instance in the area of gerontology and geriatric medicine, Singapore is facing many more problems and yet not enough has been done to meet them.

The medical officers, the specialists and surgeons, particularly those in the higher ranks should not rest on their laurels. The pressure of work in the field of curative medicine, treating various cases and attending to emergencies, can keep them so busy that they have little time left for research or investigation. Many doctors and surgeons are attracted to curative medicine because of its glamour and of the satisfaction of saving the lives of some very sick patient. Curative medicine can produce spectacular results and attract universal attention. Preventive medicine on the other hand does not get much publicity mileage, even though the results can be more far-reaching.

Recent events in the United States illustrate the importance of preventive medicine. American doctors and surgeons have achieved spectacular and sensational results in curative medicine and made major advancements in medical science and surgical technology particularly in the field of cardiovascular diseases. Yet over the last 10 years the dramatic decline in the incidence of heart diseases could not have been due to the successes in the curative field. Though no authoritative report has yet been published, without doubt this decline is the direct consequence of preventive measures.

The American people, young and old alike, have been urged to take better care of their health, to adopt clean and wholesome life-styles, to avoid tobacco and drugs, to pay greater attention to proper nutrition and avoid improper foods. In addition they are learning to

avoid stress and to be more relaxed. They are urged to do more physical exercises and to undergo regular medical checkups. This series of preventive measures have been followed conscientiously. People began to pay greater care to their health both at work and at home. Physical exercise routines have been added to their normal games and sports. Hundreds of people can be seen running, jogging, and cycling along the roadsides or foot-paths. Many do physical exercises in parks and open spaces. In most factories or offices with large numbers of employees, health centres or gymnasiums are provided. The promotion of "Wellness in the work-place" has been taken seriously by employers and employees alike. These health centres and gymnasiums are all well utilized not only by the workers but by members of their families as well.

Curative medicine is essential and very necessary to save lives. But sophisticated methods of diagnosis, treatment, or surgical procedures are extremely costly. They also involve much specialized manpower. Because of the emotional issues involved in each case, the tendency is to demand for more and more sophistication in curative medicine. This can only mean higher and higher costs. Often the efforts prove futile because the disease or ailment has as yet no known cure. The successes, though dramatic, affect at most a small number of people. Preventive medicine may be pooh-poohed by the local medical high-brows, but it can produce far-reaching results that affect large numbers of people. In terms of cost-effectiveness its benefits are enormous. My aim in bringing up preventive medicine tonight is to provoke many of you who are so engrossed in the busy world of curative medicine to think deeper on the long-term health and medical problems of our population. Perhaps in addition to curative medicine the doctors, surgeons, and staff of Tan Tock Seng Hospital should lead the way to more effective contributions in preventive medicine that will raise the standards of health and physical well-being of our people in the years ahead.