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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 THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH, MR HOWE YOON CHONG, AT
THE TOA PAYOH HOSPITAL SILVER JUBILEE DINNER AT THE
TROPICANA RESTAURANT ON SATURDAY, 19 MAY 1984 AT 8.30 PM

We all know that unless we learn from the lessons of history, we will be condemned to repeat its mistakes. Toa Payoh Hospital is a case in point. Though 25 years is not a long time yet we can learn much from its short history. Clearly the first lesson is that for an acute general hospital to work well it must be properly and comprehensively planned. Over the years the constant need to make alterations and additions to meet urgent demands for more services at Toa Payoh Hospital must have been extremely disturbing to patients and staff not to mention the extra costs, the irritations, and the frustrations involved.

The second lesson is that it cannot be taken for granted that a particular locality and its surrounding neighbourhood will remain unchanged over one or two decades. Hence since it takes many years before a development project is completed, every hospital must think years ahead and be prepared to anticipate new demands and pressures along the way.

Thirdly there must be flexibility not only in the layout of the buildings but also in the administration and management of a hospital with perhaps provisions for expansion to accommodate changes, technological advances, and developments that cannot be foreseen.

Like most development projects at that time, the construction of the original hospital was dictated by pressures from elsewhere. No attempt was made to project future needs or to investigate possible demands. Those in authority could only respond one step at a time. So when the General Hospital was overloaded with too many chronic sick and convalescent cases that could not be discharged, the answer was to move them to a home for the chronic sick in the sparsely populated rural area of Thomson Road. This would then release much needed beds in the General Hospital for more urgent needs.

PAST HISTORY

Thomson Road Hospital for the chronic sick was completed in April 1959. It was officially declared open in May 1959. It never functioned as such. In June 1959 there was a change of Government. An acute general hospital was considered to be more necessary. Much more work had to be done to effect the conversion. Today the Hospital is still going through the process of trying to provide the services demanded. Even after years of alterations and additions it is still far from ideal or even adequate to meet pressing needs.

New problems, new demands, and new pressures kept arising as old ones were overcome. Innumerable difficulties taxed the patience if not the ingenuity of successive groups of doctors, nurses, administrative and other staff. Slowly but surely the staff of the hospital through sheer determination, and hard work managed to effect the conversion to transform the original Thomson Road Hospital for the chronic sick into an acute general hospital with the necessary range of basic facilities and services. By 1965 its name was changed; and tonight we celebrate the 25th Anniversary of Toa Payoh Hospital. In doing so, let us not forget the efforts, industry and diligence of so many dedicated people. Let us express our gratitude and acknowledge their invaluable contributions.

PRESENT PROBLEMS

Without its being so planned, Toa Payoh Hospital found itself having to serve a reservoir of more than half a million population. The problems and difficulties that keep confronting the Toa Payoh Hospital are by no means over. Even with maximum effort it could only expand to just over 400 beds. With more people moving into the surrounding housing estates of Toa Payoh, Ang Mo Kio, Thomson, Sembawang, Yishun, and other neighbouring areas it is unlikely that the present hospital can meet the health care needs of so many people. That it has done so well up to now is already an achievement!

Toa Payoh Hospital must increase its number of wards and beds. But how? There are financial and physical constraints to expansion. The layout and design of its buildings preclude major expansion. The terrain can cause engineering difficulties. Piecemeal improvements have been and are still being carried out. They will not get to the root of the problems. A comprehensive redevelopment plan very much on the lines of the SGH is the answer. But that will take 10 years or more. The pressures are immediate and fast increasing. They can render piecemeal expansion plans inadequate: doing too little too late. The Medical Director and senior officers of Toa Payoh Hospital will have to work out these difficult problems. I am sure the Ministry of Health will provide them with every assistance and encouragement.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The Ministry would like to see Toa Payoh Hospital develop comprehensively not just into another acute general hospital, but one with its own reputation and character. Clearly the existing range of health care and specialist

services should be improved and expanded. They should be augmented by carefully selected specializations or sub-specializations in fields where the hospital has favourable conditions to attain excellence. Only when Toa Payoh Hospital can establish for itself a reputation for efficiency and excellence in these particular specialist fields will it attract the best doctors and experts to work and teach in it.

The selection of the right specializations and sub-specializations is thus crucial to Toa Payoh Hospital's long-term expansion and redevelopment. This is not going to be easy. There are already many hospitals with a clear head start. To claim advantage through installing new equipment may not work either. Modern sophisticated equipment and installations are extremely costly. Technological advances and commercial promotion dictate that they be regularly replaced by newer and better models. Few hospitals can afford frequent replacements, much less the under-utilization of such installations and equipment.

One way is to excel in the quality of health care services, training facilities, intensive care and nursing attention, or in research, in efficient technical, paramedical, and other supporting services. Higher standards of efficiency and discipline, congenial working environment, plus loyal and dedicated staff of all categories can enable Toa Payoh Hospital to establish its distinctive character and reputation. Positive leadership, enlightened staff relations, and concern for all those who work for the hospital can encourage greater commitment and productivity. When doctors, nurses, and other staff who have worked, trained or gained experience at Toa Payoh Hospital become so skilled that they are highly sought after for service in other wellknown hospitals, Toa Payoh Hospital will have arrived. Many of the world's renowned hospitals have built up their reputation this way.

WIDER ISSUES

Now let me touch briefly on one issue of interest that affects all our hospitals. For some time now the Ministry of Health has been wrestling with the problem of how to improve our hospitals, to extend better terms of employment to our doctors, nurses, technical and other paramedical staff to encourage them to be more efficient and productive. Many changes, adjustments, and reorganisations of management and administrative systems have been attempted, but without much apparent success.

The Ministry has under consideration a plan to permit each hospital to have greater autonomy and independence to manage its own affairs. Each hospital being self-governing will be managed and run as a separate entity with minimum policy guidance from the Ministry. All revenues and expenditure will however have to be properly accounted for and audited. Each hospital will have its own Board of Governors, Management and Supervisory Boards. An annual block vote will be provided to cover authorized expenses and approved deficits. This drastic change calls for a new generation of Medical Directors, Hospital Administrators, and Managers. Hospitals can then compete with each other. The more successful ones will be in a better position to acquire new equipment, to attract better staff, and to pay better salaries, specialist allowances, and bonuses.

This proposal is still in the conceptual stage. Much more detailed work will have to be done before it can obtain Government approval for implementation. Toa Payoh Hospital can probably fit very well into this new plan. With good leadership, hard work, and diligence it has dealt successfully with difficult and changing situations. In the years ahead the problems will be more complex and complicated. The demand will definitely be for better

quality services and greater sophistication in equipment and technology. Toa Payoh Hospital has already established its proven track record, it should have every confidence to meet the many challenges ahead with courage, initiative, and ingenuity to achieve even greater glory in the years ahead. We all wish you every success.
