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SPEECH BY MR LIM CHEE ONN, NTUC SECRETARY-GENERAL AND
MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO, AT THE NURSES SOLIDARITY
NIGHT DINNER AND DANCE AT THE NEPTUNE THEATRE RESTAURANT
ON SATURDAY, JULY 25, 1981, AT 7.45 P.M.

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Life and health are among the most precious possessions of man. The development and protection of these prized assets have been the concern of many professions among which the nursing profession occupies a prominent place. By working selflessly with other professionals, nurses contribute significantly to the well-being of individuals and the good health of the whole community.

The successful practice of modern medicine no longer depends on the efforts of the most experienced or best qualified or indeed any one person in the medical team. Team work has been and will continue to be the key to further progress in the medical field, irrespective of whether it occurs in hospitals, research establishments or public health clinics. The emphasis we have given to the importance of managements and employees working as a team to pursue a common goal should therefore be well understood and appreciated by those in the medical field. In fact you would consider it unthinkable to do otherwise. For example, no cardiovascular surgeon can achieve successful operations without a team of well trained operating theatre nurses and anaesthetists to assist him. Similarly the post-operative intensive care requires the undivided attention of nurses to ensure that there is no repetition of the phrase, "the operation was successful but the patient died". There can be no doubts that nurses are important members of any health team. Who is this seemingly indispensable and ubiquitous person known as the nurse?

It is compassion and concern for others that have prompted many a young person to take up the nursing profession. However this desire to serve fellow humans is not enough to transform an ordinary person into a modern day Florence Nightingale. This interest must be accompanied by a high order of self-discipline, a deep sense of professionalism, and a relentless drive to acquire and improve one's nursing skills.

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Over the years the training of nurses has gone through many stages of evolution. This has resulted in the form of training for nurses to be as varied as it is wide. A few countries have emphasised the theoretical part of training. This approach has manifested itself in the form of the graduate nurse who has completed a formal nursing course in a university. On the other hand there are many establishments which favour the practice-oriented type of training. Each school of training will undoubtedly continue to have its own group of adherents. On our part we will need to adapt and adopt to suite our environment and meet our needs. Blind adherence to any movement, form or ideology has never been and will be a good solution for anything.

The nursing profession in Singapore has moved a long way since the first nurses appeared on the scene. There was no organised training during the early days of the profession. The trainee was sent without any ceremony or preparation to work in the wards and pick up the basic skills by following staff nurses, sisters and doctors. The raw recruit had to learn on the job, by observing what others did, carrying out instructions and helping other staff in a myriad of ways. Lectures and examinations were conducted only at intervals. Those who joined the profession thinking that nursing was an easy life were quickly shocked into reality.

In stark contrast to the apprenticeship type of training given in the early days, our nurses of today are not let loose amongst patients straight from the recruitment centre. Our School of Nursing gives every trainee a firm foundation in general nursing before she makes an appearance in the wards. Moreover our nurses are given many opportunities to train in post-basic courses, specialising in midwifery, paediatrics and community health, operating theatre, intensive care and psychiatric nursing. Where training is not available locally, our nurses are sent for training overseas in established medical centres. We have over the years succeeded in creating a corps of well-trained and dedicated nurses to meet the expectation of our populace for a high standard of medical service. What we need now are more young persons to join this noble profession as we embark on the development of Singapore into a regional medical centre.

The Nursing Registers in Singapore list more than 7,000 names. Of these 71 per cent or 5,187 nurses are working in the public sector, mainly in the Ministry of Health. The rest are employed in clinics, hospitals, nursing homes and factories in the private sector. Wherever they may be, the nursing profession pervades every facet of our daily lives for without the attention, care and concern of nurses, life can become one big worry.

Over the years nurses have specialised in new fields of work. You have enlarged your jobs to become nurse practitioners and have widened your scope of service to encompass the home. This is a step in the right direction as home nursing service complements hospital work. This not only allows for early discharge of patients but also provides the care and confidence which patients require for convalescing at home. More importantly, the work of the home nursing service promotes community interest and participation in the care of the aged sick.

With each passing year there will be a greater number of elderly persons who would require health care. Today, our geriatric population, ie persons over 60 years of age, number 173,600 forming 7.2 per cent of the population. By the year 2,000, the number would increase to nearly 320,000, forming 10.3 per cent of the population. The demand on health care and social services will inevitably increase. As it is, records show that persons over 60 years of age, although they make up only 7.2 per cent of the total population, account for 14 per cent of hospital admissions. The medical and nursing care provided under the home nursing service must therefore be expanded.

Providing nursing care in the home is not just to reduce pressure on hospital services. Supportive care provided by nurses to patients at home under the Home Nursing Foundation scheme has in many instances expedited early recovery from illnesses and has given elderly people more confidence in looking after their personal needs. This is because patients, particularly the older ones, recuperate better in the familiar surroundings of the home and with physical and moral support provided by caring relatives.

The role of the home nursing service to care for patients who are terminally ill should also be given greater attention. This approach will be much more appreciated than developing hospice care in institutions to meet similar needs.

It would be a worthwhile effort for those in the nursing profession to organise themselves and take on this task of providing home nursing more effectively. At present, apart from the services rendered by the Home Nursing Foundation (HNF) there are 110 volunteer nurses from the Singapore Trained Nurses' Association who participate in the home nursing scheme. The assistance they have been giving to the HNF has been most invaluable, but like in most volunteer services, the number of volunteers is insufficient to meet the demand for services. Something must be done to encourage more volunteers to come forward. Perhaps the union and STNA could work out a scheme with the HNF to widen the scope and extent of nursing services provided to patients at home. This I feel is the challenge before your profession and I am confident that you will rise to the occasion.