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SPEECH BY MR LEE KHOON CHOY, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE) AT THE SEMINAR ON KIDNEY DONATION, ORGANISED BY THE SINGAPORE BUDDHIST WELFARE SERVICES, AT THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON SUNDAY 4 SEPTEMBER 1983 AT 9.30 AM

I am happy to have been invited here by your Association to chair your Seminar on Kidney Donation. Your public spiritedness and concern for the less fortunate citizens of Singapore is shown by your choice of subject for discussion today.

Singapore has 200 unfortunate citizens with end-stage kidney disease dying every year. This number remains much the same every year, looking at the records at our Registry of Births and Deaths. Half of these unfortunate citizens are between 15 and 45 years old, the prime of life and economically useful to our country and, most of all, to their families.

Their lives can be saved either by hemodialysis or through kidney transplant. Hemodialysis is a cumbersome way to help the victims prolong their abnormal lives by being hooked up to a machine for several hours each day. Once he is off the hook, he is dead. The solution to the problem is kidney transplant which enables the patient to lead a normal life without having to hang on to an artificial kidney.

Dialysis is a very expensive mode of treatment, costing the Government more than \$10,000 per patient per year. If we start dialysing every one from today, in 10 years time we will be paying \$20 million to keep only 2,000 people alive and the costs will keep on escalating. We cannot afford this mode of treatment alone and must think of the next treatment, that is transplantation.

Transplantation involves getting kidneys either from living related donors or from cadaveric donors. Living related donor transplant gives good results because of the closeness of matching of blood and tissue types but the donor does not benefit from the operation except for the psychological benefit of being able to save his loved one through a personal sacrifice. Instead of operating on a normal living person, it is best to use the many available kidneys of those who die from road traffic or industrial accidents. There are at least 50 to 60 suitable cadaveric donors each year, enough to save 100 to 120 lives, for each donor has two kidneys.

The Ministry of Health and the National Kidney Foundation have worked together to publicise the idea of organ donation for the past 11 years. Returns, however, have been poor with only 6,000 people responding out of our population of 2.4 million.

The lack of response is mainly caused by religious beliefs, esoteric superstitions and out-of-date burial traditions and customs. History has shown that much of human progress and happiness was hampered by mankind's inability to drop outmoded customs, traditions and even dogmas and adapt themselves to ever-changing environmental needs and conditions.

In Singapore, with the shortage of burial grounds, cremation has become an accepted social pattern. It appears reasonable that instead of allowing kidneys to be burnt, why not allow them to be used to save human lives?

I am glad to see the Buddhist Welfare Services has taken the trouble to organise this Seminar in connection with kidney donors. There are hundreds of thousands of Buddhists in Singapore, and if the Buddhists respond your call to donate kidneys, we shall be paving the way towards solution to our present shortage of kidney donors.

I would like to quote from the Sutra of the Master of Healing in the Buddhist Scriptures which I think is relevant to such an occasion.

'When Manjusri, the Chief disciple of the Buddha was asking Bhagavan (Buddha) about the names of the Buddhas, their original vow and their boundless virtues, Buddha replied, expounding on the Twelve Great Vows of the Buddha of Medicine and said that those who remembered Buddha will 'greatly practise charity, are no longer greedy and do not regret the alms given by themselves. Yes, in time they are able to bestow upon the one who asks them even for their head, eye, hand, foot, blood, flesh and other parts of their body, to say nothing of their money and property.....'

So you see, ladies and gentlemen, Buddha foresaw blood transfusion and organ transplant and organ donation well ahead of his time. He knew the day may come when you might be asked to give part of your body. Today is such a day. So donate generously. Please go home and tell your friends and neighbours of the needs of our less fortunate citizens with end-stage renal disease. These citizens have families like ours and their families need them just as our families need us. If after we are gone, our organs can go to help someone else to live on, then we have shown our care and concern for our fellow Singaporeans.

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