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SPEECH BY DR ONG CHIT CHUNG, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(HOME AFFAIRS & LABOUR) & MP FOR BUKIT BATOK AT THE
SEMINAR ON "HEALTH PROMOTION AT THE WORK PLACE" AT
YORK HOTEL ON FRIDAY, 8 NOV 91 AT 9.00 AM

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Most people readily appreciate the importance of good health, for without it, the quality of life would diminish and may even come to an untimely end. However, good health is also a commodity all of us take for granted until it is lost. This is particularly true in an urban environment where people are more exposed to some unhealthy habits or

trends, such as stress, smoking, overeating, alcoholism and the lack of exercise. These contribute to increasing cases of urban diseases such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and cancer.

Hence, in a highly urbanised society, we should appreciate all the more the importance of health promotion, which has been defined as "the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health." It includes the prevention of disease, its early detection and management, and the promotion of optimal health. The World Health

Organisation (WHO) Regional Committee for the Western Pacific at a meeting in September 1991, discussed the subject of "changing lifestyles and disease", and emphasised the importance of health education and health promotion in countering diseases and promoting good health.

Health and health promotion are important to everyone. The workplace offers particular advantages for health promotion. The workers are readily accessible and there is peer support. The education of workers on health matters also facilitates the dissemination of information to

family members, and thus has a multiplier effect.

The WHO produced a publication on "Health promotion for working populations" in 1988 which discussed and gave guidelines on this subject.

Experience using the workplace as a key setting for improving health has been extensive in several developed countries. In the US, for example, many companies are sponsoring smoking-cessation programmes, as well as exercise and fitness programmes.

In Singapore too, the Shell group of companies

has a health screening programme for all its employees, 2 yearly for those 40 years old and above and 5 yearly for those below 40 years. In addition, the company has also organised a series of health talks on subjects like diet, exercise and stress. Attendance at these talks is voluntary, yet I am told the response has been very good, which indicates the interest the employees have on health matters.

At NatSteel, there has been a health promotion programme available to all employees since 1985. The programme includes activities like regular

health educational talks, competitions and exhibitions. Periodic health screening is also carried out, followed by appropriate counselling of employees whose results are not satisfactory. Participation in these programmes is voluntary, but

● I am informed that the response rate has been 100%.

Esso Singapore also has periodic medical check-ups for employees. Those below 35 years old are examined three yearly, 35-45 years two yearly, and above 45 years old yearly. Employees detected to have abnormal results are counselled by the doctor and nurse on a healthy lifestyle.

Besides the humanitarian value of improving workers' health and demonstrating concern for their welfare, employers would benefit from having healthy workers who could contribute towards greater productivity. For example, it has been shown in the US that absenteeism rates are 50% higher for smokers and 100% higher for overweight employees.

However, for health promotion programmes to succeed at the workplace, workers must be actively involved, including in the planning and implementation of the programmes. The way in which a health promotion programme is developed will vary

with the needs, conditions and interests of the particular workplace or employee group. Health promotion programmes also need to be monitored and evaluated as to their effectiveness.

Hence both the employers and the labour movement can play significant roles in creating awareness in and promoting healthy lifestyles. An increasing number of companies is employing nurses to look after the health of their workers. An occupational health nurse has an important role to play in the health education and counselling of workers. I am therefore pleased to note the

initiative of your Society of Occupational Health Nurses and the Malaysian Industrial Nurses Association in conducting this Seminar.

We know that the subject of health promotion at the workplace is an important one, with many aspects to be considered and discussed. I hope that you will have a fruitful time today and tomorrow as you deliberate this subject.

I now have pleasure in declaring this Seminar open. Thank you.