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TEXT OF SPEECH BY DR TOH CHIN CHYE, MINISTER FOR
HEALTH, AT THE 31ST WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY
IN GENEVA FROM 8 TO 24 MAY 1978

(DELIVERED ON 11 MAY 1978)

The Director General has correctly reiterated the importance of Primary Health Care especially in developing countries. Delivery of Primary Health Care has to deal not only with manpower but also with the availability of nostrums that are used to treat patients. Chapter 10 of the Director General's report is therefore important and yet disappointing because it is silent on the politics and ethics of the pharmaceutical trade. Nobody can object to good practices in the manufacture and quality control of drugs, but stringent regulations on the registration of drugs can impede free trade.

A certification scheme on the quality of pharmaceutical products has been initiated by WHO but by the end of 1977 only 25 member countries have agreed to participate in the scheme. Chapter 10 of the report overlooked the point that the major producers of pharmaceuticals have attached reservations to their participation in this scheme. The two important conditions are:-

- (a) certification of a medical product by the National Authority of an exporting member state does not mean IPSO FACTO registration of the product for sale in the importing country.
- (b) The National Authority will not certify every batch of drugs that is exported for the reason that the volume of work involved makes it impractical to do so.

It is exactly because the quality of one batch of vaccine can differ from other batches that the campaign initiated by the United

~~States government to vaccinate its population against swine flu virus~~
was stalled. It was discovered that elderly patients who had been vaccinated showed neurological disorders similar to the Guillain Barre's Syndrome.

More recently Pertussis vaccine for whooping cough was found to produce brain damage in some 500 to 700 children in the United Kingdom.

In the light of legal liability by governments, manufacturers and importers monitoring for adverse reactions to drugs and vaccines and an assessment of their benefit/risk ratios must be a major task for WHO. Equally important is the speedy dissemination of such information to member states. Ministers of Health ought to receive this information first hand from WHO rather than learn of epidemics of side-effects of drugs from the mass media.

Chapter 10 is sensitive as it touches on the trading policies of developed countries which are responsible for 90 percent of the World's production of pharmaceuticals. It does not placate the suspicions of developing countries that they may be the dumping ground for unwanted drugs and placebos. For this reason the WHO expert committee is to be congratulated for producing a list of basic or essential generic drugs which public health authorities in developing countries need to use for their Health Care Services.

Last year we conducted a morbidity survey among a random sample of the population in Singapore. One important finding of the survey was that 19 percent of the population practised self-medication with drugs that are available over the counter. A knowledgeable population that is aware when to consult the physician and when to help themselves can bring down the costs of primary health care.

During the epidemic of Russian flu in Singapore in late December 1977 and early 1978, we solved the problem of over congestion at Outpatient clinics by allowing nurse practitioners to treat and at the same time instructed the public on symptoms of the disease and how they can treat themselves with aspirin or Panadol which are readily available over the counter.

The role of self-medication was discussed at a Meeting of the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific at Tokyo in 1977. It is

a point worthy of an expanded study by WHO under National Drug Policies and Management, the more so as reports from all countries indicate that the increases in the fees of medical practitioners rise faster than the general rate of inflation or the price consumer index.

After 30 years, WHO is showing the 'A' and 'W' syndrome - or 'alive' and 'well' syndrome. If the organisation will pursue with its crusade to make the third world more knowledgeable about the politics and economics of health and disease, the prognosis is that it will survive to celebrate its 150th Anniversary.

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