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SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR HEALTH, DR TOH CHIN CHYE
AT THE NURSES' GRADUATION CEREMONY ON 28 JUNE 77
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Forecasting manpower is an exercise whose accuracy can be tested only by the test of time. Predictions can often go wrong. For example in some countries there was an expansion of teacher training during the 1960's but in the last few years departments of education have been facing a crisis as the entry of children into schools has not increased correspondingly because of unexpected declines in birth rates. Likewise for the same reason women's hospitals are finding themselves half-empty as the pressure of obstetric cases began easing off.

In planning manpower for the health services we need to monitor many variables such as changes in the demographic structure, changes in standardised morbidity ratios, introduction of new medical technology and new types of treatment, innovations or substitutes in delivery of medical care, advances in preventive medicine, impact of social legislation in stimulating demand for health care. Taken together these factors determine the costs of medical health care to the individual and to the state.

Two-thirds of the Ministry's operating expenditure are spent on hospitals and because of the labour intensive nature of hospital care 70-80% of hospital costs are due to manpower. Since nurses attend to patients round the clock salaries consumed by nurses is about 50% of hospital manpower costs.

This fact alone

This fact alone demands an in-depth review of the present system of recruiting and training nurses. There are two ways by which those who aspire to be nurses are recruited. Those who obtain 3 "O" levels are sent to the Toa Payoh Hospital Nursing School where they are trained to be assistant nurses while those who score 4 "O" levels go to the SGH Nursing School where they are trained to be staff nurses. Assistant nurses take two years to train while staff nurses take 3 years.

The defects of having two parallel streams of training are already showing.

The drop-out rate for those with 4 "O" levels was 22.6% for the classes of 1975 and 25.5% for 1976. Whereas the drop-out rate for those with 3 "O" levels was 17.2% for the graduating classes of 1974 and 20.3% for 1975. On the other hand, those who were already in service as assistant nurses and were accepted for further training as staff nurses showed very low drop-out rates of 7.5% for the graduating classes of 1974 and 4% for 1975.

The reasons for dropping out during training are many. The major reason is failure at examinations, other reasons include loss of interest in nursing because of night duties and working shift hours, withdrawal from the course for other types of studies or work. In some cases there was plain disenchantment with nursing.

It is clear that ...

It is clear that acquisition of 3 "O" levels or 4 "O" levels is not a good indicator whether a student will turn out to be a good nurse or have an aptitude for a nursing vocation. Maturity and tested experience more than offset the deficiency of one "O" level.

From this year there will be no longer a direct intake of students for training as "staff nurses". Students with 3 or more "O" levels who wish to aspire to take up nursing as a vocation will be trained first as assistant nurses. Qualified assistant nurses after some years of in-service can move upwards as staff nurses through further training ^{and examinations.} / This revised vertically integrated scheme will give opportunity to those who show potential and dedication to nursing as a vocation.

The overspecialized nurse can become underemployed or obsolescent with advances in medical technology or simply because of changes in social attitudes and mores. I had occasion last year to mention specifically that more babies are being delivered in hospitals and private clinics where doctors are at hand. The demand for midwives or bidans to deliver babies at home still exists in rural communities but as Singapore becomes urbanized home obstetrics are becoming rarer and rarer and independent midwives will soon find their services less and less in demand. This is a major reason why we are reducing the intake of students fresh from schools to be trained solely as midwives. On the other hand, midwifery, paediatrics and community health care will be taught together as a post-basic course for those who have first a general

nursing training

nursing training. The other three post-basic courses for nurses are psychiatric nursing, intensive nursing care and operating theatre nursing. The course in intensive nursing care will cover the management of cardiovascular, thoracic and renal patients. Where previously there were as many as 8 post-basic nursing courses we have now integrated them into four. The cardinal principle behind these changes in post-basic nursing is to allow the nurse to acquire greater mobility and in the end underemployment will be avoided and there will be better utilization of nursing staff.

In the Primary Health Care Services, staff nurses are being given in-service training to function as nurse practitioners. There is an increasing demand for their services as more and more aged patients and patients with chronic illnesses apply to the Home Nursing Foundation for nursing care in the home. The number of home visits for such care increased from 1,160 for 131 patients in January 1977 to 2,452 home visits for 380 patients in May.

The nurse practitioner also functions within the clinic where she provides services for ambulant patients with chronic long-term illnesses. In passing, I would like to add that gift vouchers of different denominations can now be bought from the Home Nursing Foundation at its Headquarters at Maxwell Road Outpatient Dispensary, by individuals or groups on behalf of friends and relatives.

These changes ...

These changes in the training of nurses are in keeping with changing social circumstances in Singapore. Beyond your technical skills nurses are now being asked to play a wider social role. I trust that you will respond.

Let me wish all of you who are graduating to-day success and satisfaction in the vocation you have chosen.
