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SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH, DR. TOH CHIN CHYE,
AT THE SECOND WORLD SAFETY AND ACCIDENT PREVENTION
CONGRESS AT HYATT HOTEL ON MONDAY, JULY 10, 1978 AT 10 A.M.

Communicable diseases were once upon a time the major cause of death. In industrialized countries today the three major causes of death are cancer, cardiovascular diseases and accidents.

Death is always tragic whether it is due to disease or accident. When God made man he did not promise immortality so death from degenerative disease is inevitable. However, death due to accidents is man-made and when accidents cause permanent disability the tragedy is even the greater. It is unpardonable because accidents unlike degenerative diseases can be prevented.

Statistics of the number of people incapacitated by accidents is a better indicator of the prevalence of accidents than mortality statistics. In the United States there were 115,000 deaths but 10,800,000 were injured from all types of accident in 1969. The economic loss was evaluated at \$22,700 million.

In Singapore the number of deaths due to accidents was 572 in 1969, 648 in 1973 and 503 in 1977. Expressed as a percentage of total deaths accidental deaths were 5.6 per cent in 1969, 5.4 in 1973 and 4.2 in 1977. Accidents are the fifth leading cause of death in Singapore among persons of all ages but the leading cause of death among persons aged 5-34 years.

It is comforting that the mortality rate due to accidents is declining but we should not be beguiled by mortality statistics. We should be concerned with the greater number of people injured or disabled in accidents.

A study of patients treated at government accident and emergency departments is revealing. In 1977 there were 96,305 accident cases. They constituted 34.1 per cent of total cases dealt with. Of those accident cases

18.3 per cent occurred at home

16.1 per cent occurred at the work site

14.3 per cent were due to road traffic

13.7 per cent were due to falls

~~5.5 per cent were incurred at sports while the remaining~~
~~32 per cent were due to a variety of causes.~~

Human and environmental factors are implicated in accidents. They need to be identified if the morbidity rate due to accidents is to be cut down. Aetiological factors in traffic accidents are speeding, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, psychological and medical condition of the driver and condition of roads. In addition to those the age of the driver is an important factor. A study of the age distribution of drivers in Austria, Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland showed a dramatic reduction in accident involvement of vehicle occupants when the driver is over 25 years of age. Experience of the driver has been suggested as the main reason for this reduction of accident risk

Consumer products generate their own share of accidents. In the United States skateboards were listed as the eighteenth most hazardous product in 1977 but jumped to seventh place in 1978. One hundred and eighty-eight thousand youngsters were treated for injuries in hospital emergency rooms last year. The main areas where fracture of the bones occur among skateboarders are the wrists and forearms, the ankles and feet. Skateboarding is a dangerous sport and protective gear such as used in ice-hockey has been advocated. The sport may not cause death but it can incapacitate. Enormous expenditure has been spent on public health measures and modern medicine to reduce morbidity due to communicable diseases. It does not make sense if we wilfully allow the incidence of accidents to increase until they now become a major cause of death and physical disability.

We need to put in as much effort into the study of factors underlying accidents as we have done in the prevention of diseases. Ignorance should be replaced by education, carelessness by caution, profit-making should be tempered with concern for the well-being of employees and consumers of products. Last but not least when persuasion fails then legislatures must be prepared to step in to protect ordinary citizens from accidents. Daredevils and the foolhardy are a class unto themselves but we should ensure that they should be controlled so that their adventurism and search for exhilaration do not inflict injuries on innocent people.