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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT WEE KIM WEE AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF  
THE NATIONAL HEART WEEK ON SATURDAY, 22 NOV 86 AT 2.30 PM

The evolution of Singapore into a modern society has brought with it changes in our lifestyles. Unfortunately, some of these changes have an adverse effect on one's health. They contribute to the development of many of today's major health problems. An example is coronary heart disease, which has been linked to cigarette smoking, excessive intake of fatty foods, a sedentary lifestyle and stress.

Unlike the United States and Australia, which have achieved remarkable reductions in mortality rates from coronary heart disease, the rates in Singapore have not declined. Today, heart diseases in Singapore rank first among the top ten principal causes of death. They account for about 25 per cent of all deaths as compared to five per cent 35 years ago.

In 1975 1,885 Singaporeans died of heart diseases. Last year 3,029 died of similar causes.

Coronary heart disease afflicts many who are still in their prime of life and whose families are relatively young. Many victims die suddenly without any warning and thus do not reach medical care. Despite all the recent advances in treatment, the mortality among immediate survivors of an acute heart attack is still high. The disease often causes severe economic hardship to the patient and his family.

Most of us are accustomed to seeking medical care only when we feel unwell. We do not see the need for preventive measures when we feel well. This attitude must change if we are to fight the top killer in the country. This is because prevention has been shown to be the most cost-effective way of reducing the incidence of the disease in the community.

As prevention of coronary heart disease involves changes in individual lifestyles, it depends heavily on the individuals being responsible for their health and well-being. However, community support, peer influence and innovative health education programmes are important factors in moulding attitudes and stimulating the desired changes to our lifestyles.

We all know that it is easier to develop good habits when one is young than to try and shake off bad habits once they have been acquired. A very good example is that of smoking. It is more important to instil into the minds of our young the harmful effects of smoking and to correct any wrong impression of the status symbol of smoking than to try and persuade them to give up the habit at a later stage. Parents and teachers can play an important role in influencing the attitudes, health habits and practices of the next generation.

Doctors, in particular general practitioners, nurses and other health professionals can provide information and the services required to promote better health and prevent disease. They can also influence changes in the lifestyles of their patients for the better. The academic and professional medical associations should draw up programmes and guidelines for their members. Community and voluntary organisations can also help.

Public forums on television, radio, and the mass media and health education exhibitions in supermarkets and departmental stores are other effective avenues.

The Singapore National Heart Association has been organising National Heart Weeks since 1972. It has been very energetic in promoting public awareness of heart disease and the measures necessary to combat it thus complementing the efforts of the Government. I would like to commend and congratulate the Association and their members for their contributions.

To beat this major killer disease needs concentrated and co-operative national effort and I would appeal to all the individuals and organisations to play their roles well, not just during the annual campaigns but every day throughout the year.

I wish the Singapore National Heart Association every success in its efforts.

I have the greatest pleasure in declaring the 1986 National Heart Week open.

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