

Release No. 15/MAR  
10-1/87/03/15

87-YCT-4

SPEECH BY MR YEO CHEOW TONG, ACTING MINISTER  
FOR HEALTH, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE  
NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH WEEK AT THE MERIDIEN  
HOTEL ON SUNDAY, 15 MARCH 1987 AT 9 AM

Introduction

Singapore has made much progress in the provision of services for the mentally ill. It was not so long ago that the mentally ill could only look forward to custodial care at Woodbridge Hospital. Today, Woodbridge Hospital has taken on a new approach. Its priority now is to treat and rehabilitate patients so that they can return to the community. It aims to keep patients out of hospital for as long as possible. The public must understand that many of the mentally ill can be helped to lead a normal or near-normal life. Patients have the best chance of improving and remaining well if they are treated in the home and community environment.

Statistics

This trend towards treating and rehabilitating patients in the community is well reflected in the statistics. Over the last 10 years, about 1,000 new patients are admitted each year into Woodbridge Hospital. The total number of patients attending follow-up treatment has increased from 8,600 in 1977 to 13,000 in 1986. The total number of outpatient attendances has increased also from 60,000 to 88,000 during the same period.

## Mental-Health Programme

My Ministry recognises that the mentally-ill at different stages of the disease have varying treatment needs. We intend to complete the development of the system of integrated, easily accessible and comprehensive services for such patients. These would include inpatient, outpatient, day care and residential care at home.

Some of the treatment modalities are currently available. For example, a 24-bed inpatient unit was set up in August 1986 in Tan Tock Seng Hospital to treat milder psychiatric disorders. It is no longer necessary for such patients to be admitted into a psychiatric hospital. Outpatient treatment facilities at Woodbridge Hospital and some polyclinics have been available for many years. These include the outpatient clinic at the Institute of Health which provides both diagnostic and treatment services for children and adolescents with psychological and psychiatric problems.

### Facilities/Manpower

To ensure easy accessibility, psychiatric outpatient services will be made available in some of the new polyclinics being built or under planning. Psychiatric facilities will also be incorporated into the re-development of Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Woodbridge Hospital will also be totally redeveloped into a modern psychiatric hospital. This project will cost about \$190 million. Planning is now in progress and we hope to commence construction in 1988. The hospital is expected to be completed by late 1990.

But new and expanded physical facilities alone will not lead to higher quality care. My Ministry is now training more specialist doctors in psychiatry. Today, there are 41 psychiatrists in the whole of Singapore. By 1990, we expect to increase this to 54.

#### Family Understanding/Support

For the treatment and rehabilitation of mentally ill patients to be effective and efficient, we must have the participation, understanding and support of the family and general community. The perception of Singaporeans is still generally coloured by myths, prejudices and ignorance about mental illness.

We still have the tendency to stigmatise those unfortunate enough to suffer from mental illness. This has harmful consequences. It inhibits some from seeking treatment early, when prospects for cure and rehabilitation are better. Stigmatisation also increases the suffering and stress of those struggling to overcome their affliction, and attempting to lead a normal or near-normal life in the community. Worse, it may also lead some to take their own lives.

When you see a man hobbling around on crutches because one of his legs has been amputated, it is easy for you to sympathise with him. Similarly when you see a blind man with his walking stick. Their disabilities are clearly visible. This is not so with the mentally ill. Their disabilities are not so visible. But their distress is no less severe. Your understanding of their plight and medical conditions will greatly help in rehabilitating the mentally-ill back into society.

I am glad that in recent years, this understanding and acceptance of the mentally-ill have been improving. Many families are now better able to assist and help rehabilitate ex-patients in the home environment.

Many companies are now willing to supply contract work for our day centres. They have helped immensely in the rehabilitation of our patients. This has also made it easier to place ex-patients for employment outside the hospital.

Mental health and mental-illnesses are complex fields even for the experts. Nevertheless, I hope the organisers of the National Mental Health Week will achieve their objective of educating and informing the general public of these important topics. I am sure the participants will benefit from the seminars and workshops on minimising the adverse effects of undue stress.

May I wish all of you a successful week of deliberation and discussions.

And now, I have great pleasure in declaring the National Mental Health Week open.

---