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SPEECH BY MR YEO CHEOW TONG, AG MINISTER FOR HEALTH AT THE  
MEDIC ASIA 87 OPENING CEREMONY AT WESTIN STAMFORD  
ON 16 APRIL 1987 AT 11.00 AM

TOWARDS EXCELLENCE IN MEDICINE

The theme adopted by Medic Asia for its exhibition and conference this year, "Towards Medical Excellence" is timely and well chosen. The subject has been the focus of much attention of late. It fits in well with my Ministry's commitment to achieving excellence in the delivery of health care in Singapore.

MEDICAL EXCELLENCE - FACTORS

Many factors must come together in the attainment of medical excellence. These include a high standard of medical practice and professionalism, good support staff and the availability of good equipment and facilities to facilitate diagnosis and treatment.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES - COST IMPACTS

You have on display at this exhibition a wide range of modern medical products. They reflect the rapid developments in medical and scientific technology in recent years. Some advancements have actually resulted in bringing down costs and making certain equipment more accessible to wider usage. The prices of the medical cameras used in endoscopic work, for example, has come down radically with the development of microchips. They have permitted the minaturisation of these gadgets at a fraction of previous costs.

However, the latest technologies often lead to new equipment that tend to be very expensive. For example, Nuclear Magnetic Resonance imagers and lithotripters are exciting and sophisticated new techniques and equipment. But they require massive capital outlays.

Medical planners must consider very carefully the needs of patients and clinicians. They must weigh the benefits offered by the new technologies against the likelihood of runaway costs. The choices are sometimes very difficult. Too cautious an approach may deprive patients of the best available cures and the highest levels of care.

Too liberal an approach may raise costs beyond the capability of patients to pay. And if the services are heavily subsidised, it may deprive development in other curative and health care areas deserving of attention.

The use of high technology equipment must therefore be judiciously complemented by standard but still eminently useful and adequate techniques. As an illustration, plain chest x-rays are still very important tools in diagnosis while CAT scans are most definitely not required or justifiable in routine examinations.

Leaving aside developments in the frontiers of technology, other trends in modern medicine also involve the medical administrator in the need for careful cost benefit analyses.

Take the trend towards the use of disposable items - for example a simple item like disposable syringes. Factors that must be weighed in the decision to use disposables include the recurrent cost of the disposable syringes, against the cost of the labour which would go into their washing and sterilisation. On the other hand, the safety aspects of using a disposable item as compared to a reused instrument must clearly be taken into consideration.

## COST CONTAINMENT

Unfortunately, financial resources are never unlimited. Cost containment is therefore always a necessity. And this is the challenge in all countries - how to deliver better medical care at lower cost. The medical profession will need to ensure that patients are not over-investigated and given unnecessary treatment. The medical administrators and managers have also an important role. They must continue to improve on the organisation and management of resources to avoid any wastage of manpower, or of equipment. One key aspect of medical care is its highly labour intensive nature. Possibilities for mechanisation and computerisation must therefore be examined wherever possible both to decrease dependence on highly expensive manpower as well as for more efficient handling of routine and repetitive tasks.

In Singapore, we are also following this philosophy. One example is my Ministry's computerisation programme, which was completed in December 1986. This has enabled us to reduce patient queues through faster registration. We can now respond more quickly to queries because patient information is readily at hand. We also get more timely billing information. And inventory control of the thousands of supply items for our hospitals and clinics has been greatly simplified and made more efficient.

I am therefore pleased to note that your exhibition features various hospital management and administration systems. Given the difficult task that the modern medical administrator faces, the conference on hospital management and administration organised in conjunction with Medic Asia 87 is also timely and appropriate.

MANUFACTURING SECTOR

In line with Government's drive to develop medical services in Singapore various incentive schemes are administered by the Economic Development Board to promote investment in the medical services sector. At the same time manufacturers of medical products are also encouraged to establish and expand activities in Singapore.

I am happy that several leading pharmaceutical companies have already taken advantage of our good infrastructure and incentives and have located modern manufacturing plants here. The latest entrant is Becton Dickinson, a major manufacturer of medical products. It recently announced its decision to invest \$90 million to set up a manufacturing base here, and to develop Singapore as a regional technology base for the company.

While manufacturers are not directly involved in the delivery of health care, their presence will stimulate more research activities and allow for the exchange of information. It will encourage the overall development of a technology base and environment conducive to fostering clinical research.

With the development of both the medical services and manufacturing sectors, and with the contribution and efforts of both public and private sectors, I am confident that together we will succeed in our quest for excellence. I wish Medic Asia 87 every success and all participants an enjoyable and profitable stay in Singapore.

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