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SPEECH BY DR YEOH GHIM SENG, ACTING PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE
15TH SINGAPORE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION (SMA) NATIONAL MEDICAL
CONVENTION AND SECOND MEDICAL ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST
ASIAN NATIONS (MASEAN) CONFERENCE AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL
ON SATURDAY 14 APRIL 1984 AT 2.30 PM

The Singapore Medical Association's 15th National Medical Convention this year is distinguished by being held together with the Second Conference of the Medical Association of South-East Asian Nations. We are always pleased to have our ASEAN colleagues with us and I extend a very warm welcome to them. Their presence here and their participation in the National Medical Convention will I am sure further enliven the discussions and proceedings and provide an ASEAN flavour to the whole Convention.

The theme of this year's National Medical Convention "Towards Excellence" is both well chosen and timely. We are experiencing not only in Singapore but throughout the world an explosion of medical technological advances which have considerably extended the diagnostic and therapeutic frontiers of Medicine, bringing great benefit to many patients with medical problems which in the past have been most frustrating and even depressing to deal with. The medical profession thus has at its disposal an enormously increased potential for the alleviation and even cure of suffering.

Together however with this greatly increased power must also go increased responsibility and public accountability. New and more advanced technology mean also more

opportunities for commercialisation of medicine; more and more reliance on technology and less and less time and concern for personal professional standards. There is also the increasing tendency towards depersonalization of medicine, and therefore deterioration of that vital force, the patient-doctor relationship. Technological advances, economic pressures, changing social perceptions and values, a general liberalisation of ethical principles - all these are insidious threats to the professional and ethical integrity of a profession whose *raison d'etre* is the human being and his suffering.

The pursuit of excellence can be a very costly exercise. There is almost no limit to which health institutions can spend on sophisticated equipment and technology. There is also no limit to which doctors can order more and more expensive tests for their patients. Doctors, unlike those in other professions, are also in the unique position where they not only provide the service but they also control or generate the demand for such service. The question to be asked, therefore, is whether all these tests and treatment will be of any benefit to the patient. Will it help expedite recovery and shorten convalescence, or will it lead only to an increase in the cost to the patient or to an exercise in extending life with no consideration whatsoever as to the quality of life that is being extended? Doctors are taught to save lives, they are also taught not to kill. But it does not necessarily follow that doctors should strive to keep alive if it is obvious that the quality of life will in no way be like what it used to be. Should doctors be allowed to indulge in meddling medicine and go to any lengths merely to keep patients alive whatever the reason?

In the United States today, the expenditure on health rose from 5.3 per cent of the GNP in 1960 to 10.5 per cent in 1982, and is still rising at two to three

times the annual inflation rate. Some 21 per cent of the total Medicare bill of approximately \$51 billion for 1982 was incurred in the care of patients during the last six months of their lives. Most of the expenditure went to high technology and sophisticated costly treatment in the final 30 days. The question is, can we the developing nations afford to follow the example of the West? I will not attempt to answer the question but leave it to you to ponder in your deliberations.

It is unlikely that we will be able to offer kidney dialysis to all our patients with kidney failure. Neither can we afford various forms of organ transplant and other life-prolonging operations. It follows therefore that public consciousness and attention must be drawn to the painful life and death choices that society must face and will have to make, even if not by the immediate family then by the medical attendant or the health authority.

My belief is that the maximum effort and emphasis will still have to be given to preventive care and education. Educating the public to adopt healthy lifestyles from young and to undergo regular health examinations once they reach their fifties. Pre-natal and infant care should get top priority whilst for the elderly, simple practices like having regular meals and exercise, maintaining proper weight and getting the right amount of sleep, drinking in moderation and not smoking, can do much to extend one's life for 10 to 20 years longer than those who have not adopted such lifestyles.

One last aspect of excellence I would like to mention is excellence in professional standards. All doctors, whether specialists or generalists, whether they be in private or public institutions, must in this day and age strive for excellence in their professional skills.

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This is a relatively inexpensive exercise. The simple practice of updating oneself could be achieved by keeping in touch with the latest developments from the journals, attending lectures and part-time local or overseas courses planned specifically for this purpose. I recommend these as topics of immediate relevance worthy of the attention of the Congress. It would be far better for the medical associations to get their members to agree on a voluntary programme of upgrading of refresher courses rather than to have it legislated as a condition for registration for practice.

Hence I am pleased that the Singapore Medical Association has chosen well its theme for this year's Convention and MASEAN Conference. "Towards Excellence" is a clarion call to the profession, both within Singapore and ASEAN, to look again towards its foundations and its standards. It is a reminder, loud and clear, that if the profession is to maintain its high place in the community and the respect and trust of the people it serves, it must never lose sight of its continued and unceasing quest for excellence.

I extend to you my good wishes that you will have a successful and stimulating Conference that will continue to disturb your equanimity and exercise your mind long after the Convention is over.

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