

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By Lim Siew Ming

"Mr. Yong has honoured us by his esteemed presence. As you know he will retire soon as the Minister for Health. During his term of office he has made important decisions by supporting the establishment of the Institute of Medical Specialties, calling a halt to the expansion of the government outpatient clinics and concentrating on public health measures. While there may have been differences of opinion between us, our relationship has remained excellent during his 4 years of office and I have personally always respected his dedicated sense of purpose, his forbearance and his integrity. We now bid him a pleasant time in his new appointment.

DOCTORS ROLE IN SOCIETY

Continuing, Dr. Lim said:

"Like time itself, no profession can stand still and remain static. So it is with the medical profession.

Medicine has reached a new era in Singapore. We have surgeons who specialise solely in neurosurgery, cardiovascular surgery and plastic surgery. And we have physicians entering into the new fields of industrial medicine, respiratory function and kidney dialysis with new vigour. Advances in the fields such as cytology, genetics, pharmacology, and tissue grafting are no less exciting.

"Industrialization, urbanisation and other changes of our society demand proficiency in new areas of health and traditional medicine has to widen its horizons to adapt to the changing needs of Singapore. As if these are not enough, Singapore because of her economic advance is facing a changing pattern of medical diseases and we are today having to face diseases resulting from affluence and chronic conditions.

"In the midst of the exciting medical revolution, which is simultaneously occurring throughout the world, our doctors have reacted magnificently to these new demands. And we are proud to say that last year over 100 scientific meetings and discussions were organised by the Singapore Medical Association and its affiliated societies to stimulate interest and to disseminate medical knowledge within the profession. I am also proud to announce that over 100 original research papers were published or read by our

doctors in the last year: and Dr. Gwee Ah Leng the editor of the Singapore Medical Journal, our scientific quarterly publication, tells me that the waiting time of research papers for publication in the journal is now one year.

"Despite criticisms to the contrary, doctors in Singapore are abundantly devoted to medical science and to research. What is really creditable is that most of the research projects done were accomplished without research grants and often with money from personal savings—sometimes to the dismay of an irate wife!

"The Singapore Medical Association has in fact been so encouraged by their unrelenting efforts and perseverance that the Council has instructed preliminary investigations into the establishment of a medical research fund.

"A second role of doctors is to acquaint the Government (through the Singapore Medical Association) with the attitude of the profession on medical problems. You have read about doctors' views on abortion, on the problem of dispensing, on smoking, and more recently on the question of doctor requirement in Singapore. This role is obviously important. For an association of doctors, who are the experts in medicine, in its principles and in its practice, must necessarily be the best qualified to give guidance to the government on medical matters.

Doctors must therefore be prepared, when necessary, to confront the Ministry of Health with constructive public criticism on issues affecting medical practice in our Republic. This role is essential if we are to effectively help to prevent the possibility of the policy makers of the Ministry from possibly plunging into a process of self generating bureaucratic arrogance. So it is that doctors have to face the challenge of ensuring that changes of medical practice affecting the public and professional interests are not implemented (by the Ministry) without adequate prior consultation.

"A third function of doctors is to enlighten and direct public opinion on problems of health in Singapore. You may have read about our participation when the strange malady known as "KORO" hit the Singapore male. Soon after the press conference by the Singapore Medical Association on 4th November 1967 followed by

another press conference by the Ministry of Health, the epidemic rapidly subsided.

"One of the main reasons for this Convention is to enlighten the public about Cancer—now Singapore's number one killer, and Occupational Health, which must gain importance with industrialization. It is my hope that our Medical Convention will continue as a major feature of the life of our Association, where doctors will gather together to discuss medical problems and to renew social contacts not only amongst colleagues but also amongst guests who, I hope, will continue to honour our Association by attending our future conventions.

"Finally, one thing is definite. Our doctors must not allow our Association to develop into a routine. We must organise our administrative machinery and elevate our standards to keep pace with the change of time. We must continue to replace outmoded methods and cosy stagnation with purposive ideas. We must constantly remember that we can only succeed if there is unity and if there is a sense of purpose based on realism in place of nostalgia and illusionary prestige. We must surge forward with verve, vigour and versatility."

SINGAPORE'S MEDICAL SERVICE IN THE NEXT DECADE

Looking into the future, Dr. Lim added:

"There is no doubt that Singapore is providing for its citizens one of the highest, if not the highest standard of medical care in Asia. With our limited and diminishing expenditure on health, we have to regard our present situation as a test of our ability to stand up to the burden of maintaining the standard of our medical service to justify the hopes that our citizens have entrusted us.

Logic tells us that if we are to maintain a high standard of medical service to our growing population and if our expenditure on health development in the public sector is "diminishing", there is a need not only to reappraise the present policy of free or subsidised treatment for those who can afford to pay but also to consider how the private sector can contribute more effectively towards maintaining our high standard of health care.

"If the private sector is to contribute more significantly towards maintaining our standard of health care, then there should be centralised co-ordination to avoid haphazard development. Left on its own, facilities tend to develop more

for the demands of individual doctors and not for the sick. Obviously careful analysis and intelligent planning is required. It is likely that the answer will be a complex and a controversial one. It may therefore be more appropriate for me at this stage to ask some questions rather than attempt to provide inadequate answers.

"Is there a need for the establishment of more private or semi-private hospitals?"

"How can we utilise the medical specialist manpower to the maximum?"

"Are we producing too many doctors at the University of Singapore?"

"Will this lead to underutilisation of doctors leading to frustration and a national waste of professional manpower?"

"Should medical students be taught more about common conditions seen in private practice rather than the rare syndromes found only in hospital wards?"

"Should a voluntary health insurance scheme be started?"

"What is the role of the general practitioner in our society?"

"Tolstoy once said "Certain great questions are put to mankind not that man should answer them, but they should keep on trying". The least we can do in Singapore is to try and answer some of these questions.

THE GENERAL PRACTITIONER'S ROLE

"With the development of specialisation, there is a frequent suggestion that the general practitioner's role is diminished to treating coughs and colds.

Nothing is further from the truth. For it is the skill of the general practitioner who out of a hundred patients with abdominal pain decides that a case is due to acute appendicitis or a perforated gastric ulcer. It is also the skill of the general practitioner who out of several hundred cases of fever, diagnoses a case of diphtheria or typhoid, and a life is saved. His is the skill of early diagnosis and this mastery of this difficult and exacting art can only be acquired through years of careful clinical observation. The importance of the general practitioner in maintaining the health of our society is more obvious if one appreciates that the vast majority (probably 90%) of patients are seen by him first.

Another important role of the general practitioner is treating the patient as an individual human being and not as just a case with a specific disease—the relationship of the patient's illness to his financial state, his social and personal life, his occupation and his habits. This is the role of a general practitioner which has led to the introduction of a new term for him—the personal doctor.

CONCLUSION

“In conclusion, doctors in Singapore must begin to think not in terms of what can be

gained by being a doctor, but in terms of how they can contribute to society by ensuring that our citizens will get the best that modern medicine can provide. If we are to help to solve our medical problems more positively, then we must ascertain that those in power do not digress into bylanes and labyrinthine paths. It is our inalienable duty, as medical practitioners to give strength to face up to the present medical problems and at the end help to provide our citizens in the late 1970's with a medical service which we will all be equally proud of.”
