

HEALTH IS WEALTH

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Not everyone is fortunate enough to be born perfectly healthy. Maybe there is no such thing as perfect health. Maybe that is when the Yin and Yang are properly balanced, when the body is in harmony with the surroundings. If such be the case, there is the urgent need for health promotion and for disease prevention to maintain the status quo because all mortal bodies must age. The Review Committee on National Health Policies appointed in April 1991 to review the Ministry of Health's National Health Plan for the 1990s highlighted the need for health promotion and disease prevention⁽¹⁾ as the main thrust to cost effective health care.

Adding years to life and life to years is the title of Chapter 1 of that monograph⁽¹⁾. Such a definition of good health promotion was stated first in 1986⁽²⁾. Health can be viewed in three dimensions - years to life is life expectancy; life to years is wellness and health to years is disability free days. That is why health is wealth rather than life is wealth or years is wealth. Health is a resource and this resource is in your hands. Your health is in your hands. Your health is also in your genes. What can you do about it?

In this issue of the Journal, Wong et al review health promotion and compare the models available in the United States with that present in Singapore. Tannahill's model of health promotion is quoted⁽³⁾ as that produced by the overlapping spheres of health education, prevention and health protection. We know much about health education already since there exists the Training and Health Education Department in the Ministry of Health. It has produced brochures, videotapes and other training material to help educate the young, the school children, parents, teachers, the elderly etc. It has been involved with local mass media to educate the public on specific issues like the correct use of the Accident and Emergency Departments. It has addressed consumer health concerns through a series of 55 small leaflets on Beef, Durians, Fibre, Fruits, to name a few, co-sponsored by soft drink manufacturer Yeo's, and Smart Supermarkets from 1991 through 1992 (see Fig 1).

Prevention of disease on a large scale means immunisation programs nationwide and Singapore can boast an excellent immunisation schedule and coverage for its people who by age 12 to 15 years would have received a comprehensive array of immunisations including hepatitis B and German measles vaccine. Prevention of disease also means screening although in certain situations its value has not been proven. Targetted screening at specific populations may be cost effective. Over screening may result in too many apparently healthy people

becoming sick persons overnight. There is the potential that many screening tests do not have the accuracy of separating a pathological abnormal result from what is normal variation. And therein lies the failure of medical science. It is normally not difficult to detect a gross abnormality. But what is an early abnormality if there is such a thing?

Health protection is an active business. Left to itself, the body and mind will deteriorate and degenerate. Degeneration is an integral fact of life. However, its speed need not be hastened. Many try to retard it; nobody can prevent it. To protect themselves, Singaporeans have been strongly advised to fight obesity, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and unsafe practices⁽¹⁾. The same Committee recommended three broad-based programs to attain the goal of a "Healthy Family, Healthy Nation" viz provide health education, combat obesity and detect disease early through regular medical checkups.

Wong et al⁽³⁾ give many examples of US companies' involvement in health promotion. The American companies realise that medical bills can be crippling to them and if not controlled will cripple, devastate and finally kill them. If employers foot medical bills, such bills must finally raise operating costs. Their answer is lifestyle changes - maintain health, promote health, cut down illness and decrease disability and days off work. Good health is a pre-requisite for higher productivity. So companies have helped their workforce in programs for fitness, for weight reduction, smoking cessation and stress reduction. Johnson and Johnson since 1978 have had a Live for Life program. The state of Maryland in 1981 began a Healthy People Project. Absenteeism rate crashed.

Singapore as a country has embarked on a similar course. There is no natural resource but people in this land and the Government has taken charge by spearheading the National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign which is a 10-year drive to make healthy living a way of life for all Singaporeans. On 19 April 1992, Prime Minister Goh kicked off the 10-year campaign at the opening of the \$3.5 million National Health Fair, the highlight of a month of health promoting activities. This annual month-long event will be held for 10 years.

The Prime Minister's message was "You have a personal responsibility to stay healthy." It is "Your duty to stay fit" "Health care is not the sole responsibility of the State or the employers"⁽⁴⁾. He noted that many still smoked, indulged in rich foods and did not exercise regularly. The largest employer in Singapore, the Civil Service, would take the lead to promote health in the workplace and spend \$25 million over 5 years. It aims to keep civil servants healthy through activities ranging from health assessments and counselling to exercise corners and nutrition talks⁽⁵⁾. A pilot project involving more than 35,000 employers will be launched this year. The Government will spend \$150 on each employee in the first year of the program.

The Straits Times in a special focus on The Campaign and The Health Fair stated that in nutrition, there are 2 problems. First, Real Singaporeans do not eat health food and second,

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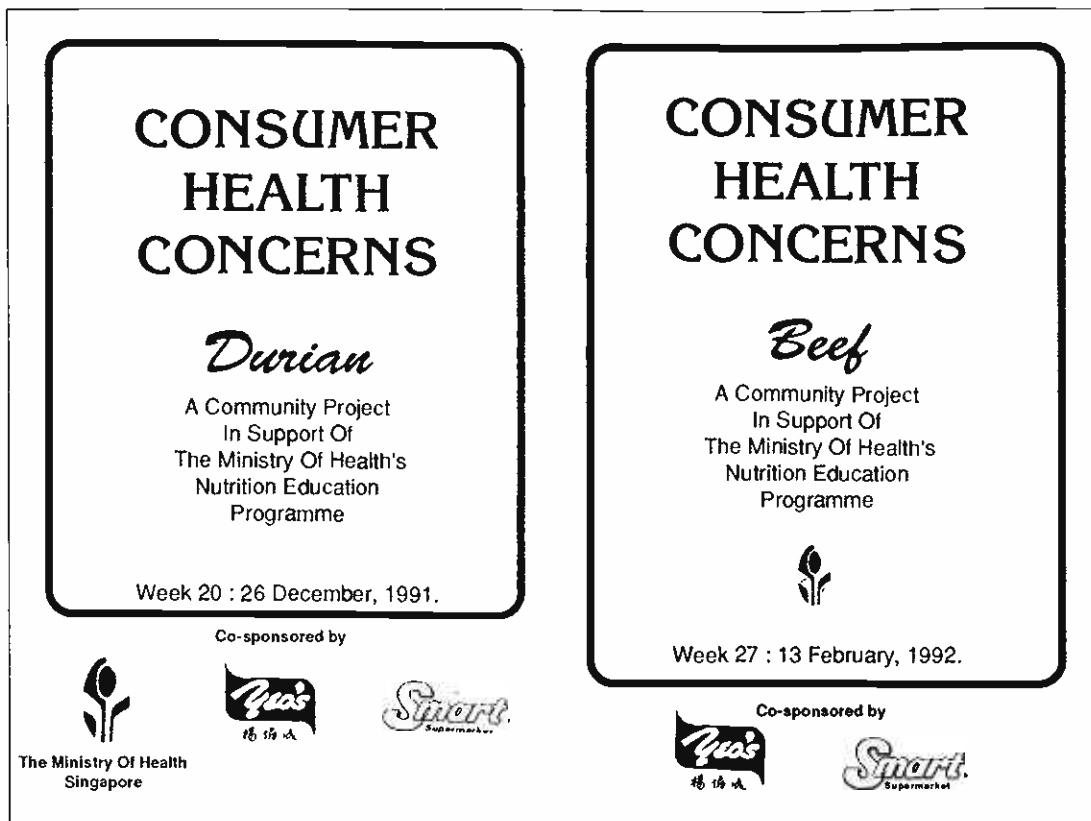


Fig 1 - 2 Specimens of Consumer Health Concerns leaflets

Real Singaporeans are Real Fat⁽⁶⁾. It also published a table on the nutritional analysis of Fast Foods and another on the daily energy requirements of Singaporean⁽⁷⁾. Further along it gave a table listing the seven golden rules for a healthy diet followed by the top 10 local foods with the most calories (eg oyster omelette, fried Hokkien prawn mee, carrot cake, Teochew kwayteow mee, Nasi Briyani)⁽⁸⁾. Not forgetting the mind, it listed criteria for good mental health⁽⁹⁾. These are: feel comfortable about yourself, feel right about other people and you are able to meet the demands of life. Who should take vitamin supplements? Healthy people eating a healthy diet do not need them⁽¹⁰⁾.

The Ministry of Health in an advertisement in The New Paper in support of the logo Healthy Life, Better Life stated "You don't have far to go to be healthy". It then listed the following easy-to-follow tips⁽¹¹⁾:

1 Easy Steps to Health

The steps right outside your door can be your first steps to fitness. Start with a flight or two, and increase the number as you grow fitter. Soon you will have both leg and lung power.

2 Take a Hike

Unwind with a leisurely stroll in the nature reserve or park. Look at the trees and flowers. Or try to spot some birds. Take a deep breath of the fresh air and fill your lungs.

3 Swim and Slim

Swimming is an exercise that anyone at any age can begin. Splash around with your kids. Float and unwind. Do laps for stamina. It is a great way to relax. And there is surely a pool near your home.

4 Run for Your Life

All you need are a pair of shorts, a T-shirt and a pair of running shoes. Start with a brisk walk, and slowly break into jogging. Soon you will see a fitter and trimmer you.

5 Just for Kicks

Round up your 'kakis" and head for the pitch for an evening of fun. You don't have to be a Maradona to run, kick, loosen your muscles and work up a sweat.

6 Two Wheels for Health

Peddalling in twos, threes, or by yourself in any of Singapore's scenic parks can be invigorating. If you don't own a bike, loan one. Never learnt to cycle, let your kids teach you. They will love it.

7 Action Stations

Fitness for all. And all for free. Give yourself a thorough workout at the fitness park. Three times a week and you will be in great shape.

8 Keep Your Distance

Alight one bus stop from your usual stop and walk the extra distance. Too far? Not really, the extra sweat and activity is worth it.

9 Eat to Live

There is no need for "health" foods, go for healthy choices. It is easy in Singapore, the Food Paradise. Cut down on fats and sweet food. Go for foods high in fibre. Wholemeal bread and cereals, fruits and vegetables are more filling but contain fewer calories and more nutrients.

10 It Can be All Fun and Games

There are endless activities at your Community Centre. From Tae Kwon Do to Taichi, cooking lessons to art classes, even day trips to the zoo or bird park. Join in, make friends and have fun. There is something for everyone.

Three local companies in Singapore provide incentives to their employees to keep fit in contradistinction to the many which provide medical and hospitalisation benefits⁽¹²⁾. The first company, Reda Pump, is a company that makes pumps for the oil industry. It rewards its employees with an extra 14 days salary for not taking medical leave. Singapore Airlines pays a

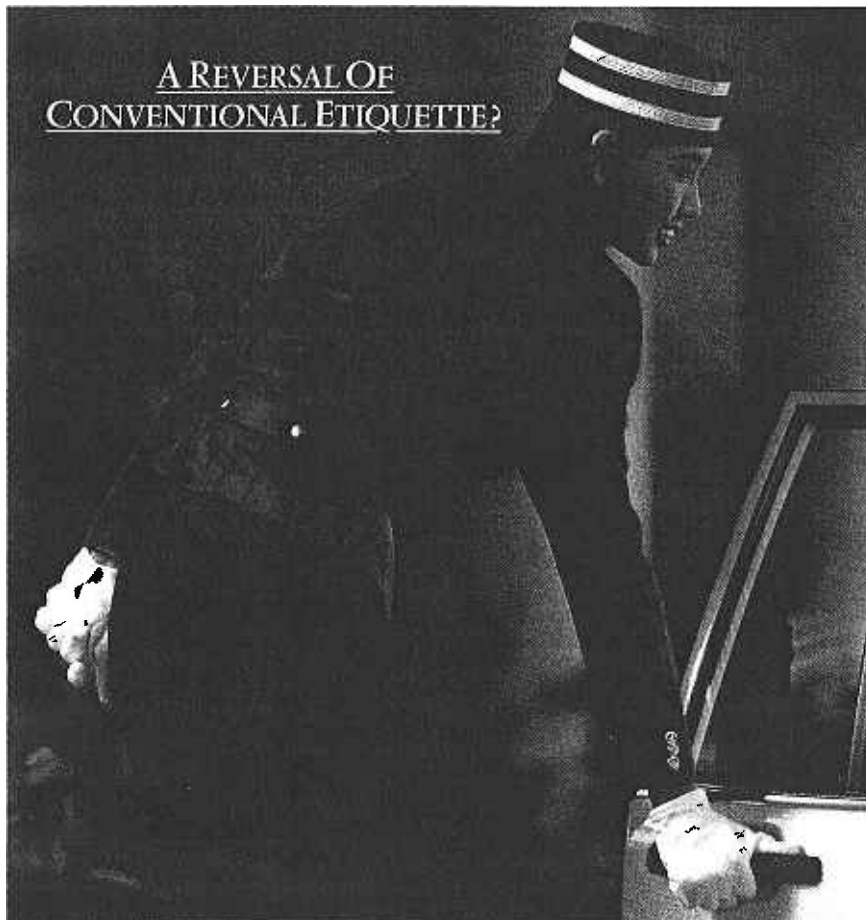
yearly bonus to employees who do not take sick leave for six days and over. Caltex Asia reimburses staff who buy fitness equipment like bicycles and squash racquets. Their message is clear - "the incentive is not meant to punish people who take medical leave. But it is to motivate people to keep healthy so that they will not fall sick and have to take MC." The result - higher productivity, a low absenteeism rate and better morale. What else have companies done? Wellness centres provide comprehensive medical checkups, an individually designed exercise regime, dietary and nutritional counselling and lectures on health issues and stress management⁽¹³⁾. One example of a residential wellness program is called Newstart which is an acronym for the major ingredients for a healthy lifestyle: nutrition, exercise, water, sunlight, temperature, air, rest and trust. And companies have paid for such programmes for their staff.

While individuals are responsible for their own health, health promotion programs will be more effective if they are focussed on specific target groups for whom specific programs and activities are organised⁽¹⁴⁾. Programs must start with the young and move on up to the elderly. May we all add more years to our life, more life to our years and more health to our

years for health is wealth and we are rich if we are a healthy family in a healthy nation.

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