

**Embargoed until delivery (19 Oct 2007 – 7.30 pm)**

**19<sup>TH</sup> SINGAPORE PHARMACY CONGRESS**  
**Friday, 19 Oct 2007 at 7.30 pm**  
**at Grand Corpthorne Waterfront Hotel**

**Speech by Mdm Halimah Yacob,**  
**MP for Jurong GRC**

Good Evening

Mr Ng Cheng Tiang  
President  
Pharmaceutical Society of Singapore General Hospital

Ms Lim Ching Hui  
Chairperson  
19<sup>th</sup> Singapore Pharmacy Congress Organising Committee

Distinguished Guests  
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. It gives me great pleasure to be here with you this evening for the opening of the 19<sup>th</sup> Singapore Pharmacy Congress. To our overseas delegates, I would like to extend a very warm welcome to our sunny island of Singapore.

2. Over the past few decades, we have seen a significant growth in the demand for better and yet affordable healthcare services and products. There are several reasons for this higher demand for quality healthcare.

- Our demographic profile has been transformed. We now have smaller family units, with growing affluence. Our society is also ageing. So we have seen changes in our lifestyle.

- More people are coming here to seek treatment. Foreign healthcare professionals also find Singapore a congenial place for them to operate.
- The pattern of diseases has also shifted, most notably with the threat of a global flu pandemic, more infectious diseases, and the emergence of multiple resistant bacteria and viruses.
- More efforts are being made to promote various healthcare products and services.

3. It is becoming a challenge for consumers and healthcare professionals alike to keep abreast of current healthcare trends. Pharmacists have a critical role in providing sound advice to how best to use medicines. So it is appropriate that the congress has picked this theme: “From Quality Medicines to Quality Healthcare”.

4. Today, we have more than 6,000 types of medicines registered with the Health Sciences Authority of Singapore. All have been evaluated for quality, safety and efficacy before being made available to the public. It is a daunting task for regulators and government agencies to ensure that the drugs are safe. Healthcare professionals have a significant role in such an exercise. Pharmacists play a pivotal role in the lifecycle of a drug – from R & D to clinical trials, registration, manufacturing and quality assurance, and supply and usage at healthcare institutions or at home.

5. In short, pharmacists are not just there to dispense medicines. In fact they operate at various stages in the development of drugs. Their sole aim is to ensure that patients get good quality drugs.

6. Obviously, healthcare products and services should only be delivered to a patient after a review of risks and benefits. At the end of the day, the outcome must be cost-effective and the patient's expectations are met. Each patient is different. Hence healthcare management must be individualised.

7. In universities, pharmacy students acquire a strong foundation in technical skills in both pharmaceutical sciences and practices. As they start work, they bring with them the knowledge that will help them produce quality medicines and deliver quality healthcare. As we move from the traditional focus on product to one of patient care, it is indeed a challenge to identify and meet the changing needs of patients in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

8. Many countries have ageing populations. By 2030, 25 per cent of Singapore's population will be older than 65. We should not lose any time in gearing our healthcare system to meet that situation. We have to prepare now on how to fund such a system, how to ensure we have the right kind of people, and in right numbers, to take care of that many elderly people.

9. Demand for healthcare will certainly rise with a greying population. So we need more healthcare services to deal with more

chronic ailments. If services fall short, there will be big problems. Prices will escalate, quality will drop and waiting times will lengthen to the detriment of the health of the population.

10. More capital and manpower are required to operate a modern healthcare system. We need to have the right numbers of healthcare professionals – doctors, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, dieticians, physiotherapists, podiatrists and medical social workers. And, more significantly, we need to get the healthcare professionals to maximise their expertise.

11. Our pharmacists have made much progress in various fronts. For example, pharmacists help patients and their families to sort out and determine what medicines they need, and what they do not need. By doing this, the pharmacists help patients to cut their medical bills while avoiding complications from mis-treatment or over-treatment. This kind of advice can be given in hospitals or neighbourhood pharmacies. No sophisticated equipment is required.

12. Self-treatment of minor ailments is becoming more popular, with people going to any pharmacy to obtain medicines to stop, say, a headache, a rash or a running nose. Pharmacists have the expertise to help such people by recommending safe and effective medicines. In many developed countries, people suffering from minor ailments visit the pharmacies, leaving the more serious cases to the doctors, thus ensuring a more effective utilisation of scarce healthcare resources.

13 Pharmacists are also involved in other activities, especially at the community level. These include health promotion and prevention of disease by getting people to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Getting people to give up smoking is one good example.

14. In hospitals, pharmacists are recognised as integral members of the healthcare team. They work closely with other healthcare providers to monitor patients and counsel them on medications they have to take. Pharmacists are also moving into specialised care. They help doctors to prescribe the right kind of medication, at the right dosage and for the right duration – and at the lowest possible cost. According to the Pharmaceutical Society of Singapore, in 2006 alone, there were at least 100,000 documented interventions by pharmacists in public sector institutions. These range from inappropriate dosage and duplication of therapy to advice on drug interactions. This check and balance is critical in ensuring an appropriate use of medicines.

15. Every hospital spends millions of dollars buying drugs annually. This will balloon out of control unless the procurement policy is rationalised. Pharmacists, working together with their medical colleagues, have helped keep drug costs down through their knowledge of various brands, and where to get cheaper but equally effective alternatives.

16. Let me cite the use of a generic drug after its patent has expired. Patients in a public hospital need to pay only 55 cents for a tablet of Nifedipine LA 60mg tablet, compared to \$1.63 per tablet for the original brand Adalat LA 60mm. This translates into a saving of \$32.40 per patient per month – or \$6.2 million in savings a year for patients in public sector institutions alone.

17. Over the years, these measures have saved the government a lot of money. They have also helped patients reduce their bills for drugs. So it is important that the government mandates the itemisation of healthcare bills. Patients will then be able to make decisions based on better information.

## **Conclusion**

18. The Pharmacists Registration Act has been amended for the first time in over two decades. This is necessary to upkeep the standards of the profession as well as meet the changing needs of patients and the healthcare system.

19. With rapid developments in pharmaceutical and biomedical research, pharmacists should continue to acquire more knowledge and upgrade their skills. Under the new Act, all pharmacists, seeking renewal of their licences, must accumulate at least 50 CPE points over a two-year period,

20. Pharmacists must embrace lifelong learning to maintain professional competence and personal growth. This is to ensure that they can continue to provide good services to patients. After all, pharmacists have a critical responsibility in helping to deliver quality healthcare to society. They are part of a multi-disciplinary team of professionals who deliver healthcare in a rapidly changing environment.

21. The future is bright for our pharmacists. Pharmacists are in great demand with a wider job scope and growth of the healthcare sector. Singapore has 1,482 registered pharmacists. The Health Ministry predicts Singapore will need 200 more pharmacists a year, not only in practice, but also in research and training. So the time is ripe for a greater focus on the work of our pharmacists. Together with the doctors and other healthcare professionals, they can help to provide an even better quality healthcare system. The recent amendments to the Pharmacists Registration Act was a move in the right direction and would also provide the impetus for change.

22. I congratulate the organising committee for putting together a comprehensive programme. I am sure all of you here will benefit greatly. Indeed our pharmacists are in a good position to make Singapore a premier healthcare hub in Asia.

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