

5th Joint Malaysia-Singapore Meeting in Ophthalmology

2nd to 3rd March 1985

Address by Dr Kwa Soon Bee

Permanent Secretary (Health)/Director of Medical Services Singapore

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy to be officiating at the Opening of this Meeting which has been organised by the Singapore Society of Ophthalmology. Of all the surgical sub-specialities, Ophthalmology is the oldest, having been established in 1934 when Dr A D Williamson was appointed the first Ophthalmic Surgeon and Physician. Prior to that, eye surgery was done by a general surgeon. Dr Williamson retired in 1957 and was succeeded by Dr Wong Kin Yip, the first local doctor to be trained in Ophthalmology. Since then, there have been a succession of ophthalmic surgeons, each serving for a couple of years as Head before handing over responsibility to another.

In spite of the early start and all the work that has been done over the past years, we are still very short of eye specialists. There are in Singapore today 35 trained eye specialists which works out to approximately one Ophthalmologist to 72,000 population. This is obviously inadequate. We hope to reduce this figure to one Ophthalmologist to 50,000 population by the year 2000. This means that we would require approximately double the number of Ophthalmologists that we currently have.

The majority of the Ophthalmologists practising in the government and private sectors today received their training at the Singapore General Hospital. Since 1970, more than 30 trainees have been selected for training, 13 of whom were selected in the last five years. We would like to select more, but there were no suitable candidates. Currently, there are 9 under training. In spite of this, the Ministry of Health finds itself extremely short of eye specialists. There are 10 eye-surgeons in government service compared to 25 in the private sector. For the year 1983, there were 3,464 admissions of eye patients into government hospitals as compared to 2,661 into the private hospitals. During the same period, 2,233 cataract operations were performed in government hospitals as compared to 1,900 in private hospitals. The disparity in workload is very obvious. I would like to acknowledge the good work performed by the staff of the Hospital. There is a need to bridge this gap between Ophthalmologists in the government and private sectors. There is a role for the eye-specialists in private practice to contribute to the public service. The Ministry currently has one Honorary Consultant and four Visiting Consultants who provide an average of 12 hours per month each. This is a small but nonetheless significant contribution by the Visiting Consultants. I would like to place on record the Ministry's deep appreciation to the Consultants for their contributions and the sacrifices they have made to provide this service. The Ministry welcomes these Consultants and acknowledges the role they are playing in helping to upgrade the standard of ophthalmic practice. We welcome any other eye specialists who are prepared to offer their services.

The Ministry of Health is committed to upgrading the skill of ophthalmic practice in Singapore.

We have also been sending our doctors for training overseas. This is part of its overall plan to provide the number of eye surgeons required to meet the needs of Singapore and the Ministry of Health. We will continue to select more doctors for training in Ophthalmology and to send those with higher degrees for further sub-specialisation. Because of the tremendous advances in Ophthalmology, there is need for our surgeons to undergo sub-specialisation training in centres in the UK, US and Australia. We have also been inviting a number of eminent specialists from overseas to work for short periods in Singapore. We will do more in this direction.

We would very much like to have a fully functioning Eye Department in another hospital. but to do it in a very small way. Perhaps, with the support from the private sector surgeons, we could significantly enhance the work of this Department by having the Visiting Consultants working part-time together with full-time Senior registrars and Registrars as a completely autonomous unit.

With the establishment of the National University Hospital, the University and the Hospital are looking into the possibility of establishing a University Department of Ophthalmology. A suggestion has also been made that the only way Ophthalmology can advance in Singapore is through the formation of an Institute of Ophthalmology along the lines of similar centres in the UK and the US. This suggestion is being studied by the Ministry.

It is in the context of the above observations that the Ministry of Health strongly supports congresses, workshops and scientific meetings such as this.

I am particularly happy to note the large participation in this joint meeting. I extend a very warm welcome to our colleagues from overseas and from Malaysia in particular. The keynote address, plenary sessions and scientific papers show a wide range of topics which should benefit all the participants. I would like to congratulate the organisers for their initiative. I would also like to thank all our guest lecturers for their contributions and to wish all the participants a rewarding and interesting meeting. I have great pleasure in declaring the 5th Joint Malaysia/Singapore Meeting of Ophthalmology open. Thank you.