

SPEECH BY: DATO' SERI DR. MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD  
( PRIME MINISTER )

EVENT: THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 5TH ASIAN CONGRESS OF PAEDIATRICS

VENUE: DEWAN MCA, JALAN AMPANG, KUALA LUMPUR

DATE: 05 AUG 1985

TIME:

Dr. Sam Abraham,  
Chairman of the 5th. Asian  
Congress of Paediatrics;  
Distinguished guests;  
Ladies and gentleman.

I am extremely honoured to be invited to declare open this 5th. Asian Congress of Paediatrics. Although I am a renegade doctor, I am still interested in forums such as this.

2. Politically the world is divided into many regions and countries but the mobility of people in our age has made boundaries quite irrelevant where diseases and health are concerned. Hence the usefulness and the need for international exchanges of information and ideas which are made possible by conferences such as this one today.

3. Malaysia has long recognised the importance of the health of mother and child. Our public health activities and rural health programmes have grown out of what used to be called infant welfare centres. Maternal and child health care has been accorded the highest priority in our health programme development, and the interest of the mother and child is always considered in all other related programmes. We have achieved a significant measure of success. I am sure our Malaysian participants to this Congress will only be too glad to share their experiences with those of you who may be interested to know more.

Ladies and gentlemen,

4. If children of the world were articulate and could express themselves, millions would be crying out why they were ever born at all. Deprived of adequate food, proper shelter and clothing, and exposed to dangerous biological and physical environment, millions die prematurely. Others, born in more affluent countries, have everything except the love that they, need for some parents in these countries have become selfish and no longer believe in the family as an institution. Millions of others are killed or maimed annually in violence or natural disasters. Helplessly these children stare wide-eyed as the adults engage in battles the

reasons for which they do not understand.

5. They are powerless against the inequities that they see around them, and they must be puzzled by the poverty and squalor in green fertile lands. They wonder why they must get their milk from bottles rather than from their mothers' breast, why even life sustaining food and water are scarce, and why adults must speed or smoke themselves to death. Looking around they cannot find very much to be happy about. Though they constitute between 40 to 50% of the total population in many parts of the world, what they see is an adult-dominated world.

6. We will find it extremely difficult to explain how these phenomena came about, or to justify the actions that we have taken. Now and again our conscience is jolted by some tragic happenings in some distant land as and when the media chooses to focus on them. Thus the famine in Africa has been going on for a considerable time while our attention was riveted on the goings on in affluent societies, their intrigues and their petty struggles. The chances are that there are many more starving children in many more places. Indeed they are likely to be in our own backyard, undramatised until there is some political gain to be had. And if there is some political gain, starvation of children can be invented. This is the tragic fact of life which no child can understand whether he is starved of food or of love.

7. Considering the sad state of the world why do we want to bring children into it?. Wouldn't it be a kindness to stop producing children?

8. The problem is that hope springs eternal in the human breast. We still think we can create a better world for our children. Besides, human beings are gregarious. We need the company of our own kind. And nothing heightens up our dull moments and our old age than the sound of children's laughter and their innocent chatter.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. Malaysia has decided to have a population of 70 million by the year 2100, that is 115 years from now. That means more than quadrupling our present population of 15 million. Knowing the misery they will be faced with, why do we want to do it?

10. The answer is that quite apart from our hopes for a better Malaysia, if not the world; apart also from our natural need for the company of our own kind, we think that the numbers will contribute towards less foreign economic and other dominations. In other words we have a political and economic need to be more populous. It is the kind of thing that doctors and sociologists abhor but we think the reasons are good enough.

11. Numbers by themselves do not mean anything. There are countries with huge population which are extremely rich and others with the same population which are distressingly poor. The well-being of a people is not dependant on their numbers. It is dependant on their productivity. This in turn is dependant on the value systems that we bring up our children to believe in.

12. A hard-working, honest and disciplined society will prosper despite the most hostile environment. We see today many countries with little or no resources, buffeted by typhoons and earthquakes, yet prosperous and powerful. The answer lies in the value systems that the people adhere to.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

13. Paediatricians are concerned with the physical health of the children. You may even be interested in their mental health. But these are not everything. The behaviour of children and the ethical values they absorb will determine what kind of future they will have. Indeed it will determine what kind of society or nation they will live in. If their upbringing is such that they absorb all the wrong values and ideas, they may end up as burdens to the society in which they live. On the other hand if they are imbued with the right spirit and the higher values then not only will they be assets to the society, but they will help shape the success and glory of that society.

14. A few decades ago Dr. Benjamin Spock wrote a book on the upbringing of children. He believed that children must not be frustrated in any way. He believed in the independence of the tiny tots even though they act without any preconceived values and ideas. In fact they have only the knee jerk reactions to everything that happens to them.

15. The result is that whole generations grew up which give themselves up completely to their instincts. They do what they feel like doing instead of being in accord with the high values cultivated through centuries of civilisation. The family as a unit disintegrated. Indeed in many instances society disintegrated. Thus the Hippy phenomenon, co-habitations, free sex, homo sexualism and communal families. Even the advent of AIDS has not jolted them and us to the deleterious effect of the wrong values that we have tolerated and indeed by default accepted.

16. I am not about to preach. But I do think that much of the ills of the world today is due to the abdication of parents as parents in the true sense. Children are no longer being brought up with the proper training and value systems that will enable them to cope with the problems that they must face in life. And this abdication is partly at least due to the thinking among paediatricians that their role is limited to the care of the physical and mental health of the children and not their development into good citizens of a civilised society.

17. It has been shown that one M.D. writing just one book can have such a tremendous effect on the character and development of a whole nation. Cannot there be another Spock, or indeed a number of Spocks who will write books and guide families, and in particular mothers on the right way to bring up healthy children.

18. The mothers of today are a confused lot. Between their desire to discipline their children and their abhorrence of child bashing, they are completely lost. They just do not know how to handle the situation. Thus, children are likely to grow up into nothing more than adult imitations of the brats they once were.

19. Child Bashing is a hideous crime. It should not be tolerated for one moment more than we can help. But the kind of light punishment for children who have been unduly naughty should not be classed as child bashing. The slight pain they experience will remind them that they live in a world that is still based on the premise that crime brings with it punishment. It will help them adjust to the world that accepts the relationship between crime and punishment.

20. But many mothers feel that children are too small to understand. They should not be punished because they are ignorant. And so they grow up as ignorant brats to populate this world and undertake responsibilities for which they have not been prepared. Is it any wonder that we see today the children of many good families turning to drugs and crimes and a life-style that is wholly hedonistic, contributing not at all to the betterment of society?

21. These are my thoughts. I am sure there will be many who will disagree. But perhaps there will be a few who will agree and will write books that will change the attitudes of mothers and child-care. Indeed I hope there will be paediatricians who would consider changing the attitude and the role of paediatricians, to make them conscious that their role and indeed their duty goes beyond mere health care as we understand it; that paediatricians have a responsibility to help develop a child into a good citizen and an asset to society.

22. If I am not generous I would say that you have a need to atone for the wrongs done by one paediatrician to our society. But as I am generous and fair-minded I will not go so far. It would suffice if you would just give some thought to this important role that I have elaborated upon.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

23. Medical doctors do not make good politicians. They are too prone to lecture to people as they do to their patients. They think they know enough to tell everyone what they ought to do.

24. You will have to excuse me for this lecture on what you ought to do. It is merely that I am a doctor, though a renegade from the profession. I just cannot resist the opportunity to tell you what you ought to do.

25. Now that I have got this off my chest, I would like to bid you all welcome to Malaysia and to wish you a fruitful discussion on the subjects of your profession. Perhaps Asia will be better off because of your interest and your contribution. And when you tire of the papers that are presented for your discussions, do take time off to visit some of the places in Kuala Lumpur and in other parts of Malaysia. We welcome you and we wish your stay here to be not only instructive but also pleasant.

26. Now, with great pleasure I declare the 5th. Asian Congress of Paediatrics open.