

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

EVENT: THE FIFTH CONGRESS OF THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN VETERINARY ASSOCIATIONS

VENUE: PUTRA WORLD TRADE CENTRE, KUALA LUMPUR

DATE: 19 OCT 1986

TIME:

Professor Dr. Omar Abdul Rahman,
Chairman of the Organising Committee;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me and my wife to be invited to this welcoming dinner and official opening of the Fifth Congress of the Federation of Asian Veterinary Associations. This gathering is a historic occasion for our country. Never has so many veterinarians from so many countries gathered under one roof in Malaysia before.

2. When I was a practicing doctor, I used to complain about not getting enough sleep. I was called up almost every night by my patients. Once I told a friend, a Doctor of Veterinary Science about my problem. He gave a big laugh. He said he chose to be an animal doctor because if he gets an emergency call at night, his prescription was simple, "Shoot the beast". Alas, doctors, medical doctors that is, cannot shoot their patients -- though I suspect that sometimes they wish they could.

3. May I, and also on behalf of my wife, say welcome to all delegates and wish you all a successful Congress.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. Man and animals have a long history of interdependence. Indeed the health and well-being of man has always been closely linked with that of his animals. Ever since the beginning of human history, man had depended heavily on animals for food, fibre, power and even for fuel. Despite the vast changes that has taken place in human fortune and circumstances over the last several thousand years, this dependence, on a global basis, has continued almost unaltered. Indeed human dependence on animals has increased. In modern times animals have come to play an increasingly important role in human recreational pleasure and as a source of companionship.

5. What form the interdependence will take in the future is subject to speculation, but I am sure interdependence will endure.

6. As custodian of animal health, veterinarians have

therefore always played a key role in human history. As a medical doctor, I am prepared even to concede that in the role of custodian of animal health, members of your profession have contributed directly and significantly also to the health and welfare of human beings.

7. About 58 percent of the world's population is in Asia and the ASEAN region is one of the most populous areas of the world. With so many mouths to feed, food production becomes a crucial issue and a major preoccupation of this region. Fortunately, the success of the Green Revolution has averted absolute shortages of staple cereals. The situation is not so with food of animal origin. While the peoples of the developed Western nations worry about the balance between red and white meat and about cholesterol intake, many of our fellow Asians suffer chronic malnutrition and protein deficiency. This is ironical because not only was the art of grain cultivation but that of animal production also had its beginnings in Asia.

8. Indeed, many basic technologies and discoveries originated in Asia, but they remained underdeveloped and inefficiently exploited. For example, the Chinese had used antibiotics, without knowing it, some 2500 years ago when they applied mouldy soya bean curd to boils and carbuncles and obtained beneficial results. They were not, however, inquisitive or systematic enough and never found out why mouldy soya bean curd had curative effects on infections.

9. On the other hand, Western scientists, beginning with Fleming, observed similar effects, that is inhibition of bacterial growth by mould, and their study of the phenomenon led to the discovery of penicillin in 1928. Again in the case of artificial insemination, it was, according to reports, first used in a crude way by the Arabs in the 14th Century. The significance was not realized and the technology remained primitive. Artificial insemination received scientific attention by Western scientists such as Spallanzani and Ivanoff in the 18th century and eventually revolutionized animal breeding in the Western world. It is only lately that artificial insemination became widely used in our part of the world.

10. Although Asia has 97 percent of the world's buffalo and 29 percent of the world's cattle population, it produces only 7.6 percent of the world's beef and 9% of the world's milk. Stated another way, Asia produces 15kg of milk per person as compared to 272 kg for the USA and 381 kg for Western Europe. This is so because the output per dairy cow is 5,637 kg in the USA, 3,337 kg in Europe, and only 669 kg in Asia. In short, despite an earlier civilization and a head start in agriculture, Asia is today far behind in food productivity.

11. What causes this anomaly? What went wrong? Is it because our peoples are reluctant to change? Is there

some thing inherently inhibitive in our cultures? One can attribute innumerable factors to the anomaly. But one thing is undeniable: that there is nothing inherently "anti-progress" in the Asian cultural heritage. I say this because there are ample examples also in Asia where rapid and vast changes have taken place. Countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have made enviable progress in areas quite remote from their cultural heritage.

12. We all realise that in order to bring about progress there must first be an attitudinal change and a heightened degree of mental receptivity. In many cases organizational changes are also required. Only then can technology be introduced, received and indigenized. In the context of rural Asia, I am of the opinion that for as long as our farmers espouse subsistence-type farming as a way of life, they cannot and they will not readily adopt new technology. This can be illustrated by the development of the poultry and swine industry in Malaysia. Meaningful development did not take place until the 1950s when farmers became prepared to change from subsistence or backyard farming into commercial ventures, even though on small scales. New breeds and scientific husbandry became readily accepted by these small commercial units which have now grown into huge modern commercial farms. As a result Malaysia is now a net exporter of poultry meat, pork and eggs.

13. Another example is artificial insemination which was introduced into Malaysia in 1963. It was readily accepted by commercial dairy farmers but not by subsistence farmers despite continuous efforts by the Government to promote it.

14. Based on this experience we have developed a strategy in animal production in Malaysia which seek to upgrade selected subsistence farmers into small commercial units by facilitating the acquisition of a bigger number of animals or by grouping them into larger units. In the case of beef production, these organised units quickly adopted the feedlot technology, recently introduced by the Department of Veterinary Services, in which confined cattle are fed entirely on palm kernel cake. From only one feedlot in 1984, we now have over 400, mainly in the form of small commercial units. I have no doubt that some of these small units will grow to become large units of several thousand heads.

15. Organizing farmers into commercial units and grouping them will also facilitate a more organised marketing system, more cost-effective delivery of services and better control of quality.

16. Let me give another example to further emphasise the point. You are all aware of the fact that biotechnology has application in animal production. Indeed it has potential to revolutionise animal selection and breeding. I refer to the well developed technology of embryo transfer, embryo splitting and embryo sexing. Local scientists have mastered these techniques, but they, the techniques, will never leave

the confines of the laboratories if there is no commercial demand for them. We cannot apply sophisticated technology so long as we have only small subsistence peasant farmers. Sophisticated modern technology can only yield benefits when applied on a large scale by commercial enterprises. If we wish to modernise farming, restructuring of the farming community is a must. That is what we are trying to do in Malaysia.

17. I realize of course that your profession is not confined to animal health and animal production only. Through your involvement in veterinary public health, you play a significant role in human public health. I know also that many members of your profession are occupied in biomedical research -- a general term given to a variety of disciplines related to the health sciences. Your contribution to the pool of biomedical knowledge is well known and from this pool has emerged techniques in disease diagnosis, therapy, surgery, prevention and control which are applicable to both the medical and veterinary professions.

18. I am told that we have here tonight veterinarians from a broad spectrum of professional activities -- academics, research workers, private practitioners, industrial veterinarians, government officers and so on. There must be many examples in your collective experience pertaining to veterinary medicine, animal agriculture, public health and biomedical sciences that have contributed to the advancement of the veterinary profession, to national economy, to human health and welfare in your own countries. The scientific sessions that begins tomorrow will I am sure be both interesting and lively. I am sure you will all benefit from the interaction. After all, experience shared is knowledge gained.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

19. I take this opportunity to thank the organisers for inviting me and my wife to be with you this evening. It is now my pleasure to declare open the Fifth Congress of the Federation of Asian Veterinary Associations.
Thank you.