

**SPEECH BY PROFESSOR TAN CHORH CHUAN
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE
AT THE LAUNCH OF SAW SWEE HOCK SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
19 SEPTEMBER 2011, 9.30AM, AUDITORIUM, NUHS TOWER BLOCK**

Minister for Health, Mr Gan Kim Yong

Minister of State for Health, Dr Amy Khor

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health, Ms Yong Ying-I

NUS Pro-Chancellors

Our generous donor, Professor Saw Swee Hock, Mrs Saw and family

NUS Chairman, Mr Wong Ngit Liong and members of NUS Board of Trustees

Distinguished guests

Friends and colleagues,

Without doubt, health and public health rank high among the most critical issues of this century, for Singapore and for all nations of the world.

There will be great opportunities to advance life expectancy and quality, and to reduce illness and suffering. At the same time, we face daunting challenges in combating the epidemic of chronic diseases that is already upon us, in preventing new epidemics of infectious diseases and in managing the impact of rapidly ageing populations.

These opportunities and challenges are particularly pronounced in Asia, because of its dramatic growth and the rapid development of its health systems.

For some years now, we have been mulling over these questions and the role that NUS should play. In medicine, we have a term that is associated with the expectation of an exciting and happy event – the word “gestation”. After a long period of considering the whys and wherefores, the vision and strategies, I am very pleased that we are here today to mark the end of the period of gestation and celebrate the birth of a vitally important NUS global initiative in Public Health. The new NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health will be officially established on October 1st.

Public Health is not new to our university. In the past 60 years, we have made many outstanding contributions to education, research and the practice of Public Health in Singapore, Asia and beyond. This work has been spearheaded first by the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health (SMPH) which was set up in 1948, and which

underwent two name changes to its present one – the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health (EPH).

While the Department has consistently done excellent work, it lacks the scale and resources relative to the size and complexity of public health issues, to make the impact that we desire. The upgrading of the department into a full-fledged School, which we mark today, is therefore a major milestone.

This transformation would not have been possible without the strong support of the Government, in particular the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. We are especially indebted to Permanent Secretary Ms Yong Ying I and her colleagues for their guidance and proactive support.

Beyond the government, we are also very heartened that many members of the wider Singaporean community have also recognized the critical value that NUS could create by substantially enhancing its public health capabilities. In particular, we are very grateful for the strong and generous support of our Distinguished Alumnus, Professor Saw Swee Hock, after whom this School is named. An eminent demographer, Prof Saw was Professor of Statistics in our university in the seventies and the 1st Chairman of the National Statistical Commission in Singapore. As a leader in the field of population policy, he has written 7 books on statistics and demography. Besides being an active member of the NUS Board of Trustees, he has over the years, provided significant support to the University to fund named Professorships, Awards and Centres. Today, we recognise his most recent and very generous gift to our public health initiative, and his long-standing and distinguished record of achievement and contribution to NUS, by naming the School after him.

The Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health must aim to be a global leader in Public Health centered in Asia. It has to pursue cutting research based on the highest international standards, while helping to address public health issues critical to Singapore and Asia. It has to ensure that the novel knowledge and insights it generates is used to inform public health policy and action, for the benefit of the populations that we serve. It must also inspire and equip generations of medical and public health students with the passion and abilities to tackle the daunting challenges that confront Singapore and Asia.

To achieve these goals, I would like to suggest that the School embraces three key principles:

First, it must be unrelenting in pursuing excellence. That is, in whatever area it pursues, in education, research and service, it must do it well and preferably better than most others.

Second, it must collaborate extensively and intelligently. In particular, the School must work closely with the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, the National University Hospital,

the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and other Faculties in NUS. Being part of the National University Health System will greatly facilitate this.

Thirdly, it must be multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral in its approach. I am heartened that the School will not have any departments. Instead it will adopt a matrix organisation with disciplinary domains like epidemiology, biostatistics, health promotion and health services and policy, supporting research teams in the important disease groups such as cancer, cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, eye diseases and infectious diseases.

Finally I would like to add that being a Global leader in Public Health means that the School must actively contribute to our region and beyond. One of the most important areas is training public health professionals and academics, particularly for Asia.

I am pleased to note that the MPH programme, which was built on the predecessor Master of Medicine courses, has taken off well since its launch in 2007. It has attracted about 50 foreign students from 14 countries out of a total enrolment of about 150 so far. The School can build on this strong foundation, to grow and enhance such programmes both in scale and depth of expertise.

In closing, I would like to thank Minister Gan for gracing this occasion, Professor Saw Swee Hock, our many distinguished guests, supporters, colleagues and students. We thank you for your support, encouragement and help which inspires all of us to work with all our energy and ability to make the School a great success, for the benefit of Singapore and the wider regional communities.

Thank you.