

Launch of the NUS Virtual Institute for the Study of Ageing (VISA)

Monday, 20 April 2009, 8.45 am, University Hall Auditorium

Good morning and a warm welcome to the launch of the NUS Virtual Institute for the Study of Ageing (or VISA).

On behalf of the National University of Singapore, let me especially welcome our guests from the National Research Foundation, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, as well as from other ministries and public sector agencies and the Council for 3rd Age.

The implications and potential impact of ageing demographics are well-known to all of us. For Singapore, the importance of the issue is perhaps best summed up by the observation that presently just one in 11 Singaporeans is over 65 years of age, whereas by 2030, this proportion will have shifted to almost one in five persons.

The challenge to our country, and indeed to many of the developed countries of the world, is to ensure that this major shift in the demographic patterns does not result in a decrease in the quality of life for the aged, for their care-givers and for society generally. This is a challenge of great complexity, one that engages all levels of our society.

Research on Ageing in NUS

NUS already has more than 50 research groups drawn from the various Faculties, Schools and Centres undertaking research in various aspects of ageing. Our university is therefore uniquely positioned to provide research leadership across the wide range of disciplines and subjects in this field. The establishment of this Virtual Institute is timely, and will help to achieve greater synergies and collaboration among existing groups of researchers. Through VISA, NUS also hopes to contribute to national goals and efforts to address important issues related to our ageing population and to develop cutting edge solutions drawing from our research expertise from medicine, science, computing, engineering, social sciences, architecture and design.

Research at VISA will be carried across three overlapping themes. These are – the ageing cell, the ageing body and the ageing society. Each of these themes captures

very different aspects of ageing and each can help address the challenge of ageing in very different ways. Let me briefly elaborate on these themes.

First, the ageing cell. In this theme, researchers will work on unravelling some of the basic cellular and genetic mechanisms of ageing. They will seek answers to questions such as what happens to cells as they grow older; how do their properties change as they age; can we halt or reverse age-related changes in cells and, if so, how might this affect the ageing of human beings?

Second, the ageing body. This broad area of focus includes identifying the causes of diseases and disorders associated with ageing, such as disorders of the brain and of cognition. What are the determinants of such disorders? Why do some people suffer from such disorders, whereas others live free of these disorders? What are the determinants of good health in old age? Can we identify nutrients and diets that may help in disease prevention

Third, the ageing society. Ageing well and having good health will count should go hand in hand with the enhanced ability of society to support the elderly to live a healthy, active and independent life. Research in this theme will focus on social aspects of ageing and seek to provide answers to questions such as health financing of the elderly and who will care for the aged if they become infirm.

As can be seen, research into ageing requires an integrative, multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on the synergies of clinicians, scientists, engineers, designers, computer specialists, cognitive psychologists, sociologists and economists. VISA is well-poised within NUS to support and facilitate this process and true to its mission, seek to catalyse the development and creation of new knowledge and its application for the betterment of people and society.

The approach that VISA advocates is indeed the way of the future, and the University strongly supports this initiative. I am confident that VISA will not only be able to build on a critical mass of top-rate researchers. It also has the potential to become a magnet for the best and brightest minds in this multidisciplinary field. I look forward to the Institute playing a vital role in realizing our vision for NUS as a vibrant intellectual community, drawing on multiple areas of thought and experimentation.

In closing, let me on behalf of the University, express our heartfelt appreciation to all of you who have worked hard and supported this initiative. Your sense of purpose, passion and perseverance has led to today's launch of VISA and deserves commendation.

I wish you all the very best in your deliberations and an exciting and stimulating meeting ahead.