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Inaugural Address

By

Dixie Tan
20 February 1989

AMIC SEMINAR ON MEDIA AND CHILD/FAMILY HEALTH

Ladies + Gentlemen,

One of the fun things in an MP's life is the opportunity of
meeting people from all sorts of sectors and learning from them.
And so I look forward to sitting amongst you during your
discussions this morning.

Everyone is a consumer of media presentations whether they wish
it or not.

Speaking as a consumer, I have found it useful to exercise
certain skills when receiving these presentations:

1. To be selective about what I wish to see or hear, so that my
life remains within my control rather than be at the mercy of
others. We are all allocated the same 24 hours in each day. It
seems important to me to choose how my day is to be spent.

   I forced my 2 daughters to choose their TV programs when
they were quite young at a time when they were developing an
addiction for the TV screen. After a little compulsion, they
realised that they had gained control over the TV. We had no
more problem with their TV watching after that.

   I think that parents have a role in teaching their children
how to choose wisely, and that decision making skills are
increasingly important in today's complex world.

2. To remember that whatever is presented in whatever fashion
is the viewpoint of one party, be it an individual, a group, a
company, or even a government. Usually, a different viewpoint
will not be presented at the same time, so that the alternate
viewpoint has to be actively sought in order that a sound and
informed opinion can be formed.

   I think this is also a necessary skill to impart to children
as they grow up - a decision making skill of a high order which
parents and teachers can inculcate by discussing news and other
topics with children in a non-judgemental way.

   In this regard, it would be helpful if the media were to
present alternate viewpoints.

3. To look beyond the obvious and to look for what is not
there. This is sometimes called reading between the lines. It
is also fun to ask silly questions, such as, "Why is Dr Mahathir
grinning so broadly one week after major heart surgery?"
Now, allow me to present a personal, biased point of view:

I am sure we agree that the human species has made unbelievable advances in technology. Up till just a few decades ago, it was unbelievable that we could see and hear someone speak from another continent, that we could be transported through the air, or that one man pressing a button could destroy a whole city.

We might reasonably conclude that our lives are different from that of our forefathers, that we ARE now different and that our needs are different.

But you know, we humans took a million years to evolve to what we are. Our systems, our reactions and our basic needs cannot be changed so quickly. Therefore, whilst the veneer of our existence is vastly different from life a few hundred years or even a few decades ago, our real selves plod along as we were a million years ago. This implies that our basic needs remain the same as they did a million years ago and that we go away from providing for these needs at our own peril.

This concept has a direct impact on provisions for Child and Family Health, which is the topic for this seminar. We must remember that health includes physical, emotional and mental health because they are interlinked. Also, if we add up the sum total of children and families, we are actually talking about the health of the whole population.

Let us begin with the child. A child is born very immature in every way. It is quite unable to feed itself or move about effectively (talk about a handicapped person!) for about 2 years. Therefore it needs a great deal of physical care and is in no position to dictate its choices.

Let us consider its food. There is no doubt that human milk is the food of choice for a human baby. It not only helps the baby to grow better, but it also prevents the acquisition of allergies which are a source of much illness during childhood and later. This is as true now as it was in the stone age, except that there were no substitutes for mother's milk then.

The baby's emotional development grows alongside its feeding arrangements. Taking milk from its mother brings the baby physically close to her for most of the time, and thereby provides for interaction and the building of a strong bond between mother and child. This bond is the basis for emotional security and self esteem which are the building blocks for a stable personality. If we examine the preconditions for a successful life, such as the ability to sustain a stable marriage, raise happy children and be well adjusted at work, a stable personality is much more important than one's IQ level or number of certificates. People who are emotionally well adjusted also have fewer physical illnesses - the connection between stress and immunity is becoming clear.
I can empathise with women who want to have both babies and career, but the facts are such that these are not very compatible, and the difficulties cannot be solved by child care centres. But let me emphasise that the incompatibility is between having BABIES and a career. It is entirely feasible to have a family, i.e. CHILDREN and a career.

Let us move to family health. In the bad old days of low technology, obtaining food took a lot of time and effort. Meat was especially hard to come by because it would take a group of hunters with spears a day or more to bring home an animal which would be shared among many families. Most of the time they relied on more easily obtained roots, stems, leaves and fruits. Now our technology and resultant wealth allows us to eat an unduly high proportion of meat and fat. The effects of this kind of diet has been seen in the advanced countries, in the form of high rates of coronary artery disease and some cancers. These diseases are also becoming very common in Singapore.

What about the mental and emotional health of families? The family is a social unit and it takes time and effort to build good communications and common values among its members. The modern lifestyle tends to take family members away from home to work, school and leisure activities. Even when they are all physically at home, they are often engrossed with TV watching or doing individual work rather than talking to each other or doing things together.

It is no wonder that marriages and families have a strong tendency to split up nowadays. The emotional health of the family is poor because the emotional health of its members is poor and their interaction is poor.

I have tried to go away from saying that we should do this or that. I have instead tried to show the areas where understanding and action are needed to improve the well being of children and families. With better understanding we will make better decisions and make a better quality of life for our babies and families.

I wish you a fruitful and rewarding seminar.

Dixie Tan
MP for Ulu Pandan