



OPENING CEREMONY

AUTISM LIFESPAN WECAN (WORLDWIDE COLLABORATION

ON AUTISM NEEDS) LEARNING CONGRESS 2010

ORGANISED BY AUTISM RESOURCE CENTRE (S)

ON TUESDAY, 1 JUNE 2010

SPEECH BY MS DENISE PHUA

PRESIDENT, AUTISM RESOURCE CENTRE (SINGAPORE)

SUPERVISOR, PATHLIGHT AND EDEN SCHOOL BOARDS

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, JALAN BESAR GRC

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan

Minister, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports

Presenters and Participants of Autism Lifespan WeCAN Learning

Congress 2010 from a total of 12 countries

Fellow Board Members, Distinguished Special Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Good Morning. Thank you for taking the time to join us at this special event.
2. It is typical for speeches of this nature in Singapore to include human interest stories to showcase the success of people whose lives have been transformed by an organization. I will not be doing that in my speech today. The lives transformed are too many to mention. You saw the performance by the children just now. Some are verbal, some non-verbal. All of them made it to the stage in front of a crowd they have never met before. In the next 3 days, you will see many of them as emcees, ushers, deejays, performers and in the Live Demo classes. Some of these transformed lives will be serving you your meals and working at the worksites throughout the campus which in itself is a labour of love and a manifestation of how far we have come.

3. Origin of WeCAN

It was 10 years ago when the idea came about to bring together autism experts to build the skills and knowledge of professionals and family caregivers so they can better help children and adults

with autism. I vividly remember the idea was conceived in the living room of Anita Russell who was my son's therapist. Over a cup of coffee (had it been vodka, the outcome would have been even more outrageous), both of us shared the worrying gap between the rapid rise in the incidence of autism in Singapore and the low level of knowledge and skills on how to manage autism. Although the media glorified the role of parents in starting the first WeCAN Conference in year 2000, parents like myself and Kim Faulkner cannot take the full credit. Besides Anita Russell who was then running her successful private practice, pioneers such as Dr Lam Chee Meng from Singapore's Autism Resource Centre or ARC and Ms Patricia Cheng then from Rainbow Centre helped put the first event together, beyond their normal workload. We shared an urgency and a common purpose to equip as many family caregivers and professional staff as possible.

I remember distinctly 10 years ago, we could only name 1 to 2 Singaporean professionals who were trained for instance in Structured Teaching, an important intervention approach developed by Professor Eric Schloper, Professor Gary Mesibov and team. Today, thousands are already trained in Structured

Teaching and other key intervention approaches as a result of WeCAN's pioneer efforts in 1999 and 2000. I want to honour the pioneers, both local and overseas, for helping us even when we had no building, no funding and no backing in those early hungry years.

4. Evolution of WeCAN

- Although it might have been good for the ego, the pioneers of WeCAN team decided against the futility of creating more and more NGOs and parked its successful activities under the Autism Resource Centre as this charity's training arm. Many of the pioneers have in fact left their practice to become full staff members and still serve this mission to this day. WeCAN, now ARC's training arm is now the largest provider of autism training and consulting services for the autism community in Singapore, extending its mission to other countries in Asia. Some 17,000 training seats were taken up over the last 10 years. This year alone, some 3,500 training seats were taken up. Our consultants also provided formal training and consulting to

Thailand's Ministry of Education and the Royal Chitralada School.

- 10 years ago, our panel of autism experts was largely from overseas, this time, we will hear as well from a large number of presenters from Singapore's health, mainstream and special education sectors. The principle that 'if we are faithful with the little, we will be entrusted with more' best describes the last 10 years.
- Today's Learning Congress is another testimony of the progress made. Instead of conducting a typical hotel-based training event, the team took the risk and decided to turn our first autism school in Singapore, the Pathlight School, to a big learning lab. On behalf of the team, I ask for your forgiveness and help in the event of any administrative hiccups – the organizing committee and volunteers have done the best they can.

5. 2000 to 2010: Further Developments

A whirlwind of developments rewrote not just the landscape of autism in Singapore, but also the rest of the special needs world

here. Many political leaders such as our Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his cabinet ministers became increasingly aware and supportive of the call to address the pivotal needs of the special needs community.

- **11 Early Intervention Centres** supported by government grants were formed. Today one of them, the **WeCAN Early Intervention Centre, an initiative of ARC**, sponsored by Government of Singapore, Singapore Pools, the National Council of Social Services, will be officially awarded **Global Accreditation** by UK's National Autistic Society, one of the largest and most respected autism bodies in the world;
- **Fixed Base Subsidies** were recently announced by Government in addition to means-tested subsidies for the lower income families served by the centres;
- **Purpose-built Special Schools** such as this (Pathlight) are now co-located next to mainstream schools for more planned integration;
- **Per-capita Funding** for students with autism in special schools were increased;

- New education models with new features such as **Allied Educators** trained in autism, and autism **Satellite Classes** in mainstream schools were also introduced;
- **3 Specialist Autism Schools** – the Pathlight School, the Eden School and the St Andrew’s Autism Centre – were set up giving a lease of life to those who are badly in need of pedagogy and curriculum that addresses the needs of students with autism;
- The Ministry of Health and the Academy of Medicine, Singapore published a set of **Clinical Practice Guidelines on Autism Spectrum Disorders** in Pre-school Children 2 months ago;
- Efforts were also made to raise the awareness and receptiveness of employers to hire people with special needs. **Supported Employment Pilot Worksites** are started in collaboration with corporate partners such as Starbucks, Mr Bean and Professor Brawn Cafe; and
- Our Guest of Honour, Minister Vivian Balakrishnan was instrumental in commissioning the **Enabling MasterPlan** for the Disabled in Singapore; a Report on **Financial Security** for the Special Needs Community ; and approved the revamp of a

one-stop disability centre to a dynamic ***Centre for Enabled Living***.

6. The Next Lap

The next lap of the autism movement in Singapore will focus on 2 primary areas.

- ***One, to raise the bar further in early intervention centres and schools up to the tertiary level so that there is a higher level of consistency in the quality of the services we provide.*** To this effect, I am pleased to announce that ARC, through the support of our local sponsors, will release a ***Portal of useful knowledge and tools to the other government-subsidised Early Intervention Centres by the end of 2010*** ;
and
- ***Two, to turn our attention to those with autism in the older age group.*** Specifically,
 - ✓ We will advocate for support services for young adults with special needs in institutions of higher learning such as the Universities, Polytechnics and the Institute of Technical Education;

- ✓ We will partner with the National Council of Social Service and serious adult service providers to build effective and scalable ***adult service models in supported employment and residential living***. It has been estimated that only 15% of adults with autism hold jobs, largely due to lack of a good appropriate education and supported employment systems. We want to buck this trend and work with partners to help as many of them as possible in job readiness and support. I have been meeting many adults with autism lately, some high-functioning and talented and some are severe. The service gaps in the adult group are many and challenging and it takes a village to close these gaps.

7. Conclusion

3 Parties can make a crucial difference to the prognosis of the lives of the people with autism and other special needs in our countries – ***Government, Service Providers and Families***.

- Government sets the tone and the legislative and policy frameworks of how society values or not value people who are different.

- Service Providers can alter the quality of life of the people with autism by raising the bar to ensure their services are of good quality and consistency. Certainly, everything that is worth doing is worth doing well.
- Lastly, Families. Those of us who are parents of children with autism must learn to overcome our grief and fear. We must determine to help develop our children to their God-given potential, whatever that may be. We must equip ourselves with the skills and knowledge to support our children and advocate for their needs. But we must balance between courage and consideration and look beyond our own needs to consider other stakeholders like neurotypical children and the service providers. We need to treat those who are serving our children with respect. To be effective advocates for our children, we must not merely demand solutions but be ready to volunteer and become part of the solution. Only then can the solutions we develop be supported, sustainable and last beyond ourselves.

8. In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I say we have run a good race in the last 10 years. As Isaac Newton said, we have seen

further only because we were standing on the shoulders of giants. Many of these giants are sitting in our midst here and still guiding us along with their passion and knowledge. But I encourage everyone who have been blessed to offer too their shoulders so that those who come after us will see further and be strengthened. We are blessed and we must bless others who come after us.

- 9.** I thank all of you on behalf of the people with autism and their families. I know they do not want pity; just an equal chance to receive a good education, a chance to work, to have friends and for some of them, a chance to have a family of their own. Thank you for journeying with us on this path less travelled.

About Autism

People with autism are generally weaker in social skills, language and imagination or can be rigid in their behaviour. About 24,000 Singaporeans are estimated to have an autism spectrum disorder, some mild and others more severe.

Once diagnosed, early and effective intervention and education can make a huge difference in the development of children with autism.

It is estimated that 10% of the autism population is estimated to possess special talents versus 1% of the typical population.