

**SPEECH BY DR AMY KHOR,
MAYOR OF SOUTH WEST DISTRICT
AND SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF THE
ENVIRONMENT AND WATER RESOURCES,
AT THE LAUNCHING CEREMONY OF THE
SINGAPORE THERAPEUTIC, ASSISTIVE & REHABILITATIVE
TECHNOLOGIES (START) CENTRE
A LOCALLY-BASED ENTREPRISE ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM (LEAP)
PARTNER AT ASSISTIVE AND REHABILITATIVE TECHNOLOGY
SYMPOSIUM (ARTS)
ON WEDNESDAY, 1 NOVEMBER 2006, 11.30 AM**

Mr Zen Koh,
Chief Executive Officer,
Singapore Therapeutic, Assistive & Rehabilitative Technologies Centre,

Dr Ang Wei Tech,
Assistant Professor,
Nanyang Technological University,

Mr Ronny Tham,
Manager,
Singapore Polytechnic Centre for Application in Rehabilitation Engineering,

Mr Michael Chua,
Handicap Welfare Association,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

First of all, I congratulate and thank the Singapore Therapeutic, Assistive & Rehabilitative Technologies (START) Centre, and its co-organizers, the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), the Singapore Polytechnic (SP), and the Handicap Welfare Association (HWA), for organizing this Assistive & Rehabilitative Technology Symposium (ARTS). “I still amazed at how creative Singaporeans are at conjuring new acronyms!”

2 The issue of a rapidly aging population is a rising concern for many. The populations in many developed countries are aging, and Singapore is no exception. Today, one out of every 12 Singaporeans is aged 65 or above. And by 2030, this ratio will become one out of five. The aging population has significant social, economic and even political implications. That is why we need to plan and be prepared well ahead.

3 Earlier this year, the Committee on Aging Issues had made several recommendations, to prepare for an aging population and make growing old in Singapore a pleasant and fulfilling experience. The Committee had made a total of 39 recommendations for the government to work with the private and people sectors to achieve 4 outcomes: To provide a range of elder-friendly housing, make Singapore a barrier-free society, provide holistic and affordable eldercare and healthcare services, and encourage seniors to lead active lifestyles.

4 Following the Committee’s recommendations, the Ministry of National Development had announced that the Housing and Development Board will be working closely with the Town Councils to make all our public housing estates barrier-free within the next 5 years. The Transport Ministry also has plans to enhance the accessibility of MRT stations, and is working with public transport operators to introduce new public buses that are step-free and wheelchair-friendly. In fact, SBS Transit had already gone a step further, introducing their first wheelchair-friendly bus earlier this year and announcing that all their buses are expected to be wheelchair accessible by 2023.

5 In the South West district we have the Community ElderCarer Program that gives our residents the opportunity to learn new skills and earn extra income. It also serves as a convenient and affordable day care avenue for families who may not have the time to take care of their elderly at home.

6 These are concrete steps which the government, private and people’s sector are taking to help enhance and develop an elderly and disabled-friendly environment. I am happy to note that the launch of the Singapore Therapeutic, Assistive & Rehabilitative Technologies (START) Centre today, is very timely and will add to the host of integrated and holistic approaches we are implementing to raise the quality of life of our increasingly graying population.

7 In addition, I was told that it is estimated that approximately 10% of the global population are living with some form of congenital or acquired disabilities, such as physically disabled, cognitively challenged, visually impaired, or hard of hearing. These disabilities may be transient or permanent. However, if we include aging-related disabilities, the number is even larger.

8 What START Centre and this symposium set out to achieve is to promote a thriving Assistive, Rehabilitative & Therapeutic (ART) technology sector that will complement policies that address the twin issues of an ageing population and the disabled. Assistive and Rehabilitative Technology (ART) is a relative new term but basically includes the development and deployment of assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices and the process used in selecting, locating, and using them.

9 Thus, it is important to develop, promote, and strengthen the Assistive, Rehabilitative and Therapeutic (ART) technology industries to cater for such growing demands. ART promotes greater independence for people with disabilities by enabling them to perform tasks that they were formerly unable to accomplish, or had great difficulty accomplishing, by providing enhancements to or changed methods of interacting with the technology needed to accomplish such tasks.

10 The strong support from the Economic Development Board (EDB) and the award of the Locally-based Enterprise Advancement Program (LEAP) grant towards START Centre is a good step forward.

11 One very good example of ART are electronic sensors such as fall detectors, thermometers, which are connected to an alarm system. These alerts can be customized to the particular person's risk profile. When an alert is triggered, a message is immediately sent to a caretaker or contact centre who can then respond appropriately. These simple devices not only help vulnerable people stay independent at home longer, they also help caregivers manage risk and help. Other good examples are Motorized wheelchairs, Intelligent Keyboards, Lifting systems, and Speech devices, etc. Some of these devices, I understand, are being showcased in this symposium as well.

12 By specialising in such ART applications to assist people with disabilities to achieve their vocational, educational and independent living goals, the START Centre helps improve the independence and quality of life of our elderly and disabled.

13 For businesses, venturing into ART should be viewed not only as a corporate social responsibility but, I submit, can be profit-driven as well. If the venture is directly proportional to the return on investment, then more investments will be made into this industry. With more investments and more startups, more high-quality and relevant products will be commercialized and the end users will ultimately benefit.

14 The ART's industry may still be in its infancy. But I believe that the growth of this industry will be progressive and very substantial in the near future as our baby boomers age.

15 The slogan for START Centre's initiative is "Start Quality Living, Independently." – and it is our most sincere hope and expectation that our nation's technology innovations will meet the needs of those with disabilities and the elderly, and will, in turn, expand opportunities for all Singaporeans to lead independent and high quality lives.

16 On this note, I wish this symposium every success. Thank you.