Vice President Dr Wu Jiarui is in a prime position to talk about the health challenges facing China this century, suggesting solutions through merging the old with the new.

You chaired the Health Industry Forum during the 2013 Pujiang Innovation Forum. What were the most interesting topics and main outcomes from the talks and discussions?

When we selected the topics for the Health Industry Forum, we were looking at two important priorities for society. First, the ageing society, as most developed countries and also China have more and more people living longer. Everyone wants to have a long life, but unfortunately there is a price to be paid through health degradation during the ageing process. Second, chronic noncommunicable diseases are a big challenge in ageing populations for the healthcare systems of now and tomorrow. Previously, infectious diseases were the main threat to humanity, but now drugs, hospitals and vaccines in general have this problem largely under control. Due to this, and society and economies growing, people are living longer allowing biological effects to take hold. Therefore, cancer, Type 2 diabetes and neurodegenerative diseases are a growing problem worldwide. Treating chronic diseases is different from treating infection – there is no cure in general. Such diseases can be controlled, but usually life quality is severely inhibited. Hence, due to people requiring drugs and treatment for longer, this is a big issue for healthcare services and a heavy burden on governments.

Because of this new situation, we need to think about what we have to do. Most importantly, we need to change our idea of what health and disease are. Maybe we need to not only focus on cures and developing drugs for people coming into hospital, but to care for people before disease occurs. For example, before Type 2 diabetes there is a pre-diabetes stage. At this stage, the blood glucose concentration is a little higher than normal; known as impaired glucose tolerance. Recently, Shanghai hospital researchers published a paper in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) which mentioned that China has 100 million people with Type 2 diabetes, but there might be about 500 million people in the pre-diabetes stage. Of course, we still need to have drugs to treat people with clinical diabetes, but we also have to concentrate more on the pre-diabetic population, because the pre-diabetes stage can still be reversed.

At the early pre-diabetes stage, should lifestyle changes be a priority for prevention?

Traditionally, we think about pharmaceutical companies developing drugs or next-generation medicine, but these efforts should be concentrated on later-stage clinical diabetes. I think a new industry should be created that concentrates on health as opposed to disease. In China, we think three major areas could constitute such a health industry:
DIGITAL HEALTH – mobile phones can be used as sensors to detect an individual’s health status and monitor the body, and then send this information to an information platform – the so-called ‘cloud’ – where it can be managed and analysed, and then fed back to the individual or doctor to check whether their health parameters are optimal or not.

NUTRITION – in China, we believe that everything we eat has an effect on the body. Whilst fat can increase body mass index, functional foods with high levels of nutrients or other components can improve the health status of the body. From the information fed back from digital health to hospital doctors or nutrition experts, advice could be given on what types of food an individual needs to eat more or less of. The nutrition industry in China is quite big because the people already think of eating not only as a matter of survival but also as a kind of treatment.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM) – more than 2,000 years ago, a TCM bible was created and in this book the most highly regarded experts concentrated not on curing disease, but on prevention. They developed a kind of theory for prevention, using acupuncture, Chinese traditional remedies and exercise combined together. So now, we need to develop this and combine it with modern technology.

Do individuals need to take responsibility for their own health or should it be the responsibility of governments?

Healthcare insurance companies don’t care about you unless you have to visit a hospital. But when you talk about health, who cares about that? If you don’t develop a disease, it’s hard to quantify whether that’s due to your underlying good health or an intervention. The best way for governments to approach this is to encourage people to take care of their health. This has already been calculated by health experts – for every dollar you put into preventative healthcare, you save US $6 on treatment. The healthcare system is a heavy burden on society, so if governments encourage people to become more healthy, they will save money. But how can they do it? They need to work this out, and it is a big challenge for governments across the world.

As a platform to promote exchange and interaction among various Chinese and international stakeholders, how important is the Pujiang Innovation Forum to your endeavours? What did you gain from the 2013 event?

First, it is good to exchange ideas. I want to encourage people to think about the ideas I have mentioned. It is fantastic to hear different angles, and then exchange opinions to open eyes and minds. Second, if our thoughts are aligned, perhaps we can collaborate. The Forum is the ideal place for setting up such partnerships.

IN NUMBERS

IN 2012, THE elderly population was 194 million – 14.3% of the entire population.

In the same year, there were only 3.9 MILLION geriatric beds in healthcare facilities; providing for a tiny fraction of the total population.

By 2050, it is expected that the elderly population will grow to 437 MILLION people – or 30% of the total population.